

The New Middle East Policy of the Obama Administration¹

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Abstract: Due to its decisive role among domestic and foreign policies of the US, the new Middle East policy of the Obama Administration has received extensive attention. So far, the new policy has not finally taken shape. Judging from Obama's campaign speeches and the viewpoints of senior officials of the Obama administration, we may notice the following characteristics of the new policy: highlighting multilateral cooperation; emphasizing contact and dialogue; advancing simultaneously for a comprehensive resolution. These characteristics can also be seen in withdrawing troops from Iraq, deploying more troops in Afghanistan and the US efforts for, promoting the Middle East peace process and resolving the nuclear issue in Iran. The Obama Administration attaches great importance to the Middle East issue and has a strong desire to resolve it first. However, the new policy has palpable flaws and defects. The Middle East issue will be a huge test for the Obama administration.

Key Words: Obama; US; Iraq; Afghanistan; the Middle East Peace Process; Iran

The moment when he took office, President Obama found himself faced by many urgent tasks, including one crisis (the financial crisis), two wars (the Iraq and the Afghan wars) and three hot-spot issues (the nuclear issues in Iran and the DPRK, and the Middle East peace process). The task of leading the US out of the financial crisis as soon as possible is basically an internal affair while the rest five tasks are fundamentally foreign affairs, four of which center on the Middle East.

During his presidential campaign Obama once promised that he would devote himself to promoting the peace process in the Middle East after taking office. On January 21, 2009, his first working day as the president, Obama called leaders of Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Jordan to show his determination of advancing the cease-fire in Gaza and his decision to promote the peace process between Israel and Arab countries. The next day Obama appointed special envoys for the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan. In early March Ms. Clinton paid a visit to the Middle East. All of this shows the Obama administration's great concerns and eagerness to solve the Middle East issue. Obama's new Middle East policy has drawn wide interest around the world for its vital role among both the current internal and foreign affairs of the US. Although the new policy has not fully taken shape, its general framework and thinking can be seen in Obama's campaign speeches and the

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governing practice of the Obama administration over the past several months.

I. The Core and Characteristics of the US New Middle East Policy

“Change” or “reform” was Obama’s campaign slogan and one of the key elements for his victory. The eight years of Bush administration plunged the whole world and the US into a problematic situation, which hurt the image and reputation of the US badly. With the American people calling for changing the situation, the “change” slogan of Obama met closely with the people’s wishes for changes. Many times Obama criticized in his presidential campaign the Middle East policy of the Bush administration, saying that he would not follow that policy. In fact, however, it is unrealistic to expect the Obama administration to adopt a Middle East policy that is totally different from that of the Bush administration. The truth is that the candidates from both the Republican and Democrat candidates as a part of the US presidential campaign, would make a point of criticizing the policies of the former administration and perhaps even make some commitments against their will so as to please the voters and thus get more votes. What is more important, foreign policy serves the strategic goals of the country since it is made while the later are decided according to the core interests of the country. The US is no exception. Within a certain historical period of time the core interests of the US will remain just the same, that is to say, its strategic goals are relatively stable and its supportive foreign policy will also remain basically unchanged. Changes will occur, however, in the ways and means of realizing and safeguarding these strategic goals and core interests.

What remains “unchanged” in the new policy is as follows: First, to guarantee the security of the US remains one of the core national interests. Obama inherits the theory that “terrorism is the biggest threat to the security of the US” from the Bush administration. Therefore, anti-terrorism and, in particular, preventing terrorists from obtaining massive destruction weapons will continue to be significant parts of Obama’s Middle East policy except that the focus of anti-terrorism will shift from Iraq to Afghanistan. Obama has not used the Bush slogan “war on terrorism” since becoming the US President. Second, to maintain the leading role of the US in the world is in accord with its core interests. The Obama administration will not change this strategic goal or give up its leading role in solving the hotspot issue in the Middle East. Additionally, many traditional fundamental principles of the American government will remain unchanged. For instance, its partial position towards Israel, its effort to isolate and contain Hamas and its insistence to prohibit Iran from possessing nuclear weapons and not ruling out the use of force to solve the nuclear issue in Iran will all remain unchanged.

However, the Obama administration will implement rather different specific steps from those of the Bush administration to achieve these goals. First of all, the Obama administration will discontinue the unilateralism of the Bush administration; instead, it will turn to multilateral cooperation with its allies and

relevant countries, attaching importance to the roles of international organizations especially that of the UN. It has been proven by Obama's upgrading the permanent representative of the US to the United Nations to the cabinet level as it was in earlier US administrations. In an article published in *Foreign Affairs*, Obama said that "America cannot meet this century's challenges alone; the world cannot meet them without America."³ At the hearing of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations held on January 13 to become Secretary of State, Hilary Clinton reiterated Obama's point of view. She added that the foreign strategy of the new American government is none other than making more friends but less enemies and relying more on the UN. Second, unlike the Bush administration which often preferred military force to diplomatic means, the Obama administration is more inclined to adopt contact and dialogue. At the above-mentioned hearing, Ms. Clinton said that the first choice of the US in resolving the nuclear issue in Iran would still be diplomacy.⁴ Third, the Obama administration will not neglect the peace process in the Middle East as the Bush administration did; it will actively participate in the process in the first place. Obama believes that the hotspot issues in the Middle East are interwoven and interactional. Therefore, he will relate the advance of the peace process in the Middle East to the solution of the nuclear issue in Iran and the anti-terrorism war and solve them altogether.

The above analysis tells us that the core of Obama's New Middle East Policy remains unchanged, i.e., consolidating the leading position of the US in the Middle East and safeguarding its interests in this area and yet its ways and means are bound to change. Thus the characteristics of the new policy can be summed up as follows: first, highlight multilateral cooperation; second, emphasize contact and dialogue; third, advance simultaneously for a comprehensive solution.

II. Iraq Pullout: Getting In Carelessly and Getting Out Carefully

The Iraq pullout was not only one of Obama's campaign promises and following US-Iraq agreements before the end of the Bush administration, but also one established part of Obama's new Middle East policy. The reasons and considerations of the redeployment are as follows: one, the war in Iraq, triggered for no apparent good reason, damaged the image and reputation of the US very badly while redeployment of US troops from Iraq may help repair its image and reputation; two, the six-year-long war in Iraq drained the US of many of its material and human resources, causing ever louder domestic calls for the withdrawal of American troops; three, Obama believes that the civil war in Iraq cannot be tackled by military means and pullout is the best way to compel the Iraqi government to find a political solution; only Iraqi leaders can bring peace and stability back to Iraq;

³ Barack Obama, "Renewing American Leadership," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2007, <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/20070701faessay86401/barack-obama/renewing-american-leadership.html>.

⁴ *Xinhua Daily Telegraph*, January 15, 2009.



four, the Obama administration holds that it should adopt a foreign policy of solving the Iraq issue through peaceful and multilateral efforts, which may help realize its interest for Iraq oil with no need of occupying the country for the situation in Iraq is likely to improve considerably when the relations between powerful countries are stable and the neighboring countries are helpful; five, UN authorization for US military action in Iraq expired at the end of 2008 so the withdrawal of US troops is imperative; six, the Iraqi government shows increasing independency and concern for the reaction of various domestic forces and neighboring countries, suggesting that US troops should not stay in Iraq for a long time or even permanently; seven, withdrawal of troops from Iraq will enable the US to refocus on those neglected vital problems which should be given high priority, for instance, the Afghan issue, the Palestine-Israel issue and the nuclear issue in Iran; eight, Obama believes that the major anti-terrorism battlefield is not Iraq but Afghanistan and the focus of anti-terrorism must be shifted from Iraq to Afghanistan.

As a matter of fact, the Bush administration had already reached an agreement with the Iraqi government that US combat troops would pull out of Iraq's cities by June, 2009 and the rest would all leave Iraq by the end of 2009. Obama pledged during his campaign that all combat troops of the US would withdraw from Iraq within 16 months after his taking office. On February 27 Obama announced that combat troops would withdraw from Iraq within 18 months. However, given the sophisticated situation in Iraq, the Obama administration may not strictly observe the withdrawal timetable. Instead, it will proceed with caution and decide the pace and rhythm of troop withdrawal in accordance with the development of the situation. Obama stated, "I have proposed a responsible, phased redeployment of our troops from Iraq. We will get out as carefully as we were careless getting in."⁵ The redeployment must be "responsible" and "phased" so as to maintain stability in Iraq; Iraq, if it goes out of control at this time, would turn all the previous labor of the US to nothing. Therefore, stability in Iraq forms a prerequisite for US troops to withdraw smoothly from Iraq.

Bush's sending more troops to Iraq or the surge once enhanced the security in Iraq to a large extent. However, whether Obama's troop withdrawal from Iraq today will undermine the security in Iraq or not is still a question.

III. Sending More Troops to Afghanistan: Repeating the Mistakes of Iraq?

After 9/11, 2001, the US regarded terrorism as the biggest threat to its national security and global interests and the Middle East as the origin and hard-hit area of terrorism. Anti-terrorism became an important part of US global strategy and especially its Middle East policy, upon which the Obama administration and the Bush administration see eye to eye. Their difference lies in that the Bush administration saw

⁵ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: AIPAC Policy Conference, Washington DC, [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/04/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_74.php\(2008-06-04\)](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/04/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_74.php(2008-06-04)).

Iraq as the major battlefield of anti-terrorism while the Obama administration argues that Afghanistan is actually the frontline of the anti-terrorism war and terrorists must be fought where terrorism has taken its deepest roots.

Obama advocates shifting the focus of the “anti-terrorism” war from Iraq to Afghanistan also because the situation in Afghanistan is much worse than that in Iraq. After the outbreak of the Iraq war, the US paid the most attention to Iraq but left the security affairs in Afghanistan to NATO forces in which it played a major role. In the first place, the political reconstruction of Afghanistan seemed to have the potential much more smoothly than that of Iraq. However, the situation in Afghanistan started to deteriorate after 2007. Instead of being eliminated, the Taliban seemed to be coming back to life in Afghanistan. Armed attacks increased by 33% inside Afghanistan in 2008 and Taliban attacks caused 155 deaths of American soldiers garrisoned in Afghanistan, the highest levels of the seven-year war. The war has caused 2118 deaths of Afghan civilians, up 40% over 2007.⁶ In January, 2009, the Taliban launched suicide bomb attacks on the German embassy in Kabul. On February 11, 2009, the Taliban attackers stormed several governmental institutions in Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan and once occupied the Ministry of Justice building. The AFP called this one of “the boldest” terrorist attacks ever on Kabul by the Taliban. It was due to the deteriorating security situation that the Afghanistan election was forced to delay until August, 2009. Under such circumstances, Obama announced on February 17 that the US would send an additional 17,000 American troops to Afghanistan so as to “stabilize a deteriorating situation in Afghanistan.”

Obama’s sending extra troops to Afghanistan faces the following challenges. One, the media is rather controversial about the new deployments. In the latest Washington Post-ABC News poll, barely more than a third, 34 percent, said the number of US military forces in that country should be increased. About as many would opt for a decrease (29 percent) or no change at all (32 percent).⁷ In Afghanistan, public opinion is even more unwelcoming. In a recent ABC-BBC-ARD poll of Afghans, just 18 percent said the United States and NATO should increase their troop levels, and more than twice that number, 44 percent, wanted fewer outside forces. Two, the domestic financial crisis has a great influence on both the number of troops and the amount of military spending. Three, if sending more troops fails to improve the security situation in Afghanistan or leads to greater US troop casualties the war-weariness and even anti-war emotions in the US might resurge soon again. As a result, Obama’s this new policy would encounter strong resistance. Four, extra troops mean that the logistic needs of American troops in Afghanistan might double. However, the Khyber Pass in Pakistan, a vital transportation route for NATO supplies, is often under attack and, what is worse, Kyrgyzstan announced its intention to close down the American

⁶ Karen De Young, “More Troop Headed to Afghanistan,” *The Washington Post*, February 18, 2009, p.A01.

⁷ Ibid.



Manas airbase, a major logistical and refueling hub supporting international troops in Afghanistan, another heavy blow for Obama's new deployments planning. Five, in regard to sending more troops to Afghanistan, with the coordination of the allies of the US, some US allies declared that they will not send more troops to Afghanistan and some said that they would withdraw their troops from Afghanistan once their mandate expires. Without the coordination of its allies, the effect of Obama's sending additional troops would be balanced out. In respect of their actions, the troops of some allies are only willing to engage in peacekeeping in the north but unwilling to fight against the Taliban in the south, which is also one reason for the somewhat passive situation of the US in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration hopes that sending more troops to Afghanistan would also bring about an important effect just as that in Iraq. Some American military sources and experts, however, argue that sending more troops to Afghanistan is at best a tourniquet, which can address symptoms but not root causes of the conflict with the Taliban. At the height of the Russian occupation in the 1980s, there were once 150,000 Russian troops fighting in Afghanistan. As known to many, the invasion ended as a total failure. On February 9, 2009, *Newsweek* published "Afghanistan: Obama's Vietnam", an article that points out that the wars in Afghanistan and Vietnam look disturbingly alike and hints that Afghanistan could be another Vietnam for Obama. Some also believe that the errors of Iraq are being repeated and magnified in Afghanistan.⁸

What is more important, some root causes of the chaos in Afghanistan cannot be eradicated simply by military means. First of all, the Afghan government is neither totally honest nor efficient. The Karzai government is unable to control the regional warlords; it has little control of the country as a matter of fact. Corruption is particularly rife in this regime. Perhaps the weakness of the Karzai government is an important political factor that results in the revival of the Taliban. The Afghanistan election will be held in August, 2009. Karzai emphasizes that he wants to remain president. In addition, it is obvious that he has few competitors and the US has no proper candidates to replace him, either. Secondly, drugs have been plaguing Afghanistan and drug trade is a primary income source for the Taliban. *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2006* published on September 2, 2006 by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime shows that both the cultivation and production of opium reached a record high in 2006 and opium supply took up 92% of the total global supply.⁹ Finally, the Afghanistan society suffers from poverty and backwardness. Tribes form the basic units of the social structure in the vast countryside and mountainous areas. These tribes govern on their own with the tribal elders as the real rulers. The unemployment rate in these areas amounts to 80% and the average living cost per person per day is less than one dollar. The

⁸ Simon Jenkins, "The errors of Iraq Are Being Repeated and Magnified," *The Guardian*, November 19, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/nov/19/iraq-afghanistan-withdrawal-brown-obama>

⁹ UNDOC, *Afghanistan Opium Survey 2008*, p.6, http://www.unodc.org/documents/crop-monitoring/Afghanistan_Opium_Survey_2008.pdf.

illiteracy rate in Afghanistan has reached 70%, three times higher than that in Iraq. Poverty, unemployment and illiteracy are root causes of the social disturbance of Afghanistan and also the hotbed of the Taliban.

It is an important mission in one or two terms of the Obama administration to eliminate the potential recovery for the Taliban and complete the transformation of the Afghan society. Therefore, Obama also has indicated that he would adjust the strategic goals of the US in Afghanistan. He believes that it would be a relatively realistic possibility for the US to shift its strategic goal in Afghanistan from building a democratic and prosperous Afghanistan to building a relatively stable Afghanistan that has no international terrorists and poses no threat to the security of the US and the West as a whole.

The Afghan government once stated its willingness to negotiate with the Taliban. On February 8, 2009, Karzai reiterated at the 45th Munich Security Conference that he wishes to reach a negotiated settlement with the moderate group of Taliban. Someone proposed, "Rather than pour in more troops and escalate the war, Obama should encourage President Hamid Karzai in his attempts to reach a negotiated settlement with the Taliban, in order to draw them away from al-Qaeda, even at the price of offering them a share in government."¹⁰ Yet this requires Obama to make significant adjustment to his strategy for Afghanistan. Without the permission of the American government, it would only be Karzai's wishful thinking on his part to reach such a settlement.

IV. The Middle East Peace Process: Advancing on Different Tracks All at Once

The peace process in the Middle East includes the Palestinian-Israeli, Israeli-Syrian, Lebanon-Israeli and Arab-Israeli tracks. In pushing the peace process, the Obama administration seeks to advance on all four tracks and aim at key breakthroughs.

Early after taking office, President Bush clearly stated that he had no personal interest to get involved in the peace process in the Middle East or invest enormous resources of his government into the peace process. Like his predecessor President Clinton, he did not engage in promoting the Arab-Israeli peace process until the last year of his term. On June 4, 2008, Obama pledged at the AIPAC Policy Conference that he would take an active role, and make a personal commitment to do all he could to advance the cause of peace from the start of his Administration.¹¹ Nevertheless, the Obama administration will meet with many obstacles and challenges if it really intends to push forward the peace process.

Above all, its pro-Israel position weakens its role as the middleman of the

¹⁰ Patrick Seale, "Obama and the Arabs," *Middle East Online*, [http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/opinion/?id=28979\(2008-11-28\)](http://www.middle-east-online.com/english/opinion/?id=28979(2008-11-28)).

¹¹ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama: AIPAC Policy Conference, Washington DC, [http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/04/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_74.php\(2008-06-04\)](http://www.barackobama.com/2008/06/04/remarks_of_senator_barack_obam_74.php(2008-06-04)).



peace process; its fairness and trustworthiness is doubted. In 2000, Obama criticized the Clinton administration for its unconditional support for Israel, calling for the government to take an “impartial” stand in terms of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Not surprisingly in terms of the election for the presidency, Obama’s standpoint has obviously become pro-Israel over the past three years. On many occasions he stressed that the beginning point of US Middle East policy should be the security of Israel, “Our starting point must always be a clear and strong commitment to the security of Israel, our strongest ally in the region and its only established democracy.”¹² Of particular note is the speech he delivered at AIPAC Policy Conference on June 4, 2008. In his speech, he repeated six times that “America maintains an unwavering friendship with Israel, and an unshakeable commitment to its security.” Some critics say that this speech of Obama is more militant than all previous democratic presidents since Truman. In his speech, Obama skirted round a major obstacle in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process, the Jewish settlements. Obama did not require the demolition of built settlements; he simply advised Israel to refrain from building new settlements. What disappointed and irritated the Palestinians most was Obama’s statement about the position of Jerusalem. In his speech, Obama said, “Jerusalem will remain the capital of Israel, and it must remain undivided.”¹³ It should be noted that in 1980 when the Jerusalem Law of Basic Laws of Israel prescribed that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel the UN announced, according to the international law, that this law was “invalid and useless”. None of the previous American governments directly admitted that Jerusalem is the capital of Israel. The American embassy in Israel has been located in Tel Aviv. The issue of Jerusalem is one of the toughest problems during the Palestinian-Israeli talks. Israeli occupation and annexation of Eastern Jerusalem has never been recognized by the international community including the US.

Second, the Obama administration, in order to push the Palestinian-Israeli peace process has to tackle another obstacle and challenge, the rightist forces of Israel. The Obama administration supports the two-state solution as the only way to solve Palestinian-Israeli conflicts but Prime Minister Netanyahu has shown little no interest in the two-state solution at all.

In addition, the Obama administration also faces another tough problem, i.e., there is no unified government in Palestine, which is divided into the West Bank controlled by Fatah and the Gaza Strip controlled by Hamas. As the cross-faction disputes in Palestine are too great to resolve, unity is no more than a gesture. Obama’s policy is fairly firm, that is to say, he supports the moderate Fatah and suppresses the radical Hamas. On March 3, 2009, Secretary of State Clinton, on her visit to the Middle East, said that if Hamas refused to recognize Israel, the American government would not cooperate with any Palestinian government that accepts Hamas. Under the circumstance that neither isolation nor military attack

¹² Pierre Tristam, “Barack Obama’s Middle East Policy,” <http://middleeast.about.com/od/usmiddleeastpolicy/a/me071202a.htm>

¹³ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, op. cit.

can devastate Hamas, it is unrealistic to exclude Hamas in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. Without its participation, the peace process would always be vulnerable and any Palestinian-Israeli peace agreement signed without Hamas' support would have no importance. Therefore, some propose that the Arab Union should negotiate with Israel on behalf of Palestine so as to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict because the agreement reached between Israel and the Arab Union would be more valid and lasting than an agreement between Israel and Palestine. In face of such agreements, Hamas would have only two choices: defy them against the Arab Union (including Syria) or observe it to transform Hamas into a non-armed party.¹⁴ It remains unknown whether the Obama administration would take this proposition into consideration or not.

In my view, the Obama administration will push the peace process in the Middle East by advancing on various tracks, namely, promoting the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks and, at the same time, pushing Syria-Israel and Lebanon-Israel peace talks and the normalization of the relations between the Arab world and Israel. Perhaps the Obama administration will take alleviating the US-Syria relation and pushing the Syria-Israel peace talks as a breakthrough in the peace process of the Middle East. The visit to Syria by Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman and White House National Security Council Middle East chief Daniel Shapiro on March 7, 2009, sent the world a clear message of such a possible agreement between the US and Syria. Under the mediation of Turkey, Israel and Syria have conducted indirect negotiation and Syria also showed the wish for improving its relations with Israel and the West. In his congratulatory telegraph to Obama, President Assad of Syria said that he "hopes dialogues can successfully overcome the difficulties that hamper the peace, stability, prosperity and development in the Middle East."¹⁵ The American efforts for promoting Israel-Syria talks can help weaken Iran's influence on Syria and subdue Syria's intervention in Lebanon. Meanwhile, it can alleviate the hindrance on Palestinian-Israeli peace talks. There are fewer disputes between Syria and Israel than those between Palestine and Israel and the former are also much easier to handle. Therefore, the peace settlement between Syria and Israel may be reached earlier than that between Palestine and Israel. Once Syria and Israel make peace, the peace settlement between Lebanon and Israel would be much easier. In this way, the peace settlement between Syria and Israel and that between Lebanon and Israel would then pave the way for the normalization of the relation between the Arab world and Israel. If so, the Palestinian-Israeli peace talks would also be promoted in return.

V. Nuclear Issue in Iran: Dialogue and Pressure

Believing that the US policy on Iran is the key to the predicament in the Middle East, Obama has placed an emphasis on the nuclear issue in Iran in his

¹⁴ Mohammad Yaghi, "A Palestinian View," *Australia/Israel Review*, vol. 33, no. 12, Dec. 2008, p.13.

¹⁵ Michael Rubin, "Syria Can't Be Flipped," *Australia/Israel Review*, vol. 33, no. 12, Dec. 2008, p. 14.



Middle East policy. Unlike the Bush administration, the Obama administration advocates direct talks with Iran. Obama pledged in public that he would negotiate with Iran through “personal diplomacy.”

It would be not difficult for the US to conduct talks with Iran. Both parties would like to conduct talks during the Bush administration but, unfortunately, they could not agree on the “prerequisites”. The US requested that Iran suspend its uranium enrichment before the talks while Iran insisted that there should be no such prerequisites and anything could be discussed without such prerequisites. As neither would compromise, the predicament remains. Now Obama has cancelled the prerequisite and thus paved the way for direct talks between the US and Iran.

The major tool that the Obama administration uses to deal with Iran is not just “dialogue” but “dialogue and pressure” or “carrot and stick”. “Carrot” refers to “meaningful inspiration, including lifting sanctions and integrating into the international community politically and economically,”¹⁶ giving up the idea of “change in governments”, resuming and improving the relation between the US and Iran. If Iran does not cooperate, the US will wave the “stick” and use it on Iran. Besides pushing the United Nations Security Council to pass new and more severe sanction resolutions against Iran, the Obama administration will also “work with Europe, Japan and the Gulf states to find every avenue outside the UN to isolate the Iranian regime – from cutting off loan guarantees and expanding financial sanctions, to banning the export of refined petroleum to Iran, to boycotting firms associated with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard.”¹⁷ During his presidential campaign, Obama once said, “we should take no option, including military action, off the table, sustained and aggressive diplomacy combined with tough sanctions should be our primary means to prevent Iran from building nuclear weapons.”¹⁸ Ms. Clinton also mentioned that the US would seek reinforcement sanction measures again if Iran was not active enough in solving the nuclear issue. So far, the sanctions have not had much effect on Iran. However, with the falling oil prices and the increase of sanctions, Iran’s patience on sanctions might run out and sanctions may bring about their expected effect at that time.

Another tool that the Obama administration uses to contain Iran is to reduce the American reliance on foreign oil by pushing the international oil prices down to a stable and low level. “We must free ourselves from the tyranny of oil. The price of a barrel of oil is one of the most dangerous weapons in the world. Petrodollars pay for weapons that kill American troops and Israeli citizens. And the Bush administration's policies have driven up the price of oil, while its energy policy has made us more dependent on foreign oil and gas. It's time for the United States to take real steps to end our addiction to oil,” Obama argued.¹⁹

While Obama emphasizes talks with Iran, he has never ruled out the use of

¹⁶ Remarks of Senator Barack Obama, op. cit

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Transcription of remarks by Senator Barack Obama, [http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/Barack_Obama_-_AIPAC_Policy_Forum_2007.pdf\(2007-03-02\)](http://www.aipac.org/Publications/SpeechesByPolicymakers/Barack_Obama_-_AIPAC_Policy_Forum_2007.pdf(2007-03-02)).

¹⁹ Ibid.

force. He said "...no doubt: I will always keep the threat of military action on the table to defend our security and our ally Israel. Sometimes there are no alternatives to confrontation. But that only makes diplomacy more important. If we must use military force, we are more likely to succeed, and will have far greater support at home and abroad, if we have exhausted our diplomatic efforts."²⁰

Although Iran would not accept any prerequisite the US set for negotiation, Iran showed its willingness to talk to the US. As a matter of fact, Iran put forward various propositions for peace but all of these propositions were turned down by the US. When the US triggered the war in Afghanistan Iran showed its support and cooperation, including offering Afghan troops military expenses and \$750 million for the rebuilding of Afghanistan. In 2002 and 2003 Iran showed its interest in carrying out extensive dialogue with the US. Bush, however, labeled Iran as part of the "axis of evil." Iran showed a tough attitude on the nuclear issue. As an answer to American sanctions, Iran protested with military rehearsals, missile tests, and tough diplomatic statements. At the same time, Iran repeated that it was ready to talk to the US at any time and ease the strained relationship with the US. Iran has tried to maintain this opposing but not totally hostile relation with the US so as to wait for a turning point.

Upon Obama's victory, Ahmadinejad, President of Iran sent Obama his congratulatory letter immediately, saying that he strongly hoped that the new US government could adopt moderate policies towards Iran. Few of the ordinary Iranians are hostile against the US and many of them are unhappy with their country being isolated. Isolation, they have said, reduces their income, hurts their self-respect and influences the future of their children. The hard line religious leaders, even Khamenei himself, cannot afford to ignore the public's wishes and opinion. Some hardliners criticized Ahmadinejad for going too far in making agitative anti-US and anti-Israel speeches. In January 2008, Khamenei said, "If one day our relation with the US proves to be favorable for Iran I'd be the first to support it."²¹ Former Iranian Ambassador in London Hossein Adeli said, "The only opponents of dialogue with the US are hardliners in the conservative camp. ... The mainstream of the conservatives favors dialogue with the US, as long as they conduct it themselves."²²

The economic situation of Iran also has an influence on the position of the Iranian government. In early November, 2008, 60 Iranian economists called for the government to change its policies, saying the "tension-making" foreign policy of Nejad has scared away foreign investment and caused great damage to the economy. They also said that the current sanctions, as weak as they are, have cost

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Joint Experts' Statement on Iran Recommends Sweeping Changes to US Policy, http://www.dailystar.com.lb/article.asp?edition_id=1&categ_id=2&article_id=97803.

²² Jonathan Steele, "Obama Must Build Coherent Middle East Policy and Forge New Ties," *The Guardian*, November 9, 2008, p. 9.



Iran billions of dollars by forcing it to use middlemen for exports and imports.²³ The economic reasons may force Khamenei to allow the new president some flexibility so as to repair the relation with the US and reduce the harm that the international isolation does to the economy.

Actually Iran's requirements for the US are reasonably simple: lift the sanctions, give up the request for Iran "government change", improve the security environment of Iran and realize the normalization of the relation between Iran and the US. The nuclear plan is perhaps one sort of means by which Iran strives to fulfill this goal.

Whether the Obama administration could force Iran to abandon its nuclear plan through direct and tough diplomacy or Iran could achieve its goals through dialogue is determined by how the US and Iran interact.

VI. Conclusion

The Middle East has high expectations from the Obama administration. However, it is unrealistic to believe that the US new Middle East policy could change the present situation in the Middle East as soon as possible. The reasons are as follows: First of all, although the basic framework and thinking of Obama's new Middle East policy has been established, the government has not completed its first year. Its new policies have not undergone the test of practice and new problems may occur because of unpredictable elements in implementation. Therefore, there will be some revision and adjustment to the new Middle East policy. Second, although the Middle East policy is the key part of the foreign policy of the Obama administration, the cardinal task of the Obama administration is to solve the domestic financial crisis at the moment. No doubt the US investment of energy and money on the Middle East will be influenced by the financial crisis. Third, the inherent complexity of the Middle East issue, together with the interwoven and interactive factors, forces and problems in this area, makes it more difficult to solve. The Obama administration believes that the key to the Middle East issue is to solve the issue in Iran. Focusing on the issue in Iran, the US hopes the smooth resolution of the Iran issue could promote the other issues in the Middle East. However, the Iran issue would have a negative impact on other issues once it came to a dead end and vice versa. Fourth, Obama's new Middle East policy has obvious flaws. For instance, it proposes being "impartial" in solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict but takes an explicit pro-Israel position in terms of its security while demanding that the Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory be discontinued; it firmly requests Iran to give up its nuclear plan but makes no comment on the nuclear weapons of Israel. Fifth, the US efforts for solving the Middle East issue especially the issue in Afghanistan and the nuclear issue in Iran can not succeed without the support of the international community and, in particular, the support of Russia. The US needs the Russian support on the Middle East issue which concerns vital interests of the US. Then the US has to

²³ Orde Kittrie, "How to Put the Squeeze on Iran," *Wall Street Journal*, November 13, 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122654026060023113.html>.

compromise on those problems concerning the vital interests of Russia such as the eastward expansion of NATO, the deployment of missile defense systems in Eastern Europe and reducing strategic weapons, which involves the adjustment of the global strategy of the US. Is the Obama administration ready, then? All in all, the Middle East issue will be a severe test for the Obama administration.

