
RUSSIA AND CHINA RUSH TO FILL MIDEAST VOID LEFT BY OBAMA

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It was meant to be a farewell visit by a cherished friend heading for retirement. Instead, Barack Obamas visit to Saudi Arabia Tuesday and Wednesday turned into an unwanted call by an uninvited guest at an inconvenient time.

It started at the airport, when Saudi King Salman sent one of his nephews to greet the US president on arrival in Riyadh. The gesture was specially telling because the Saudi monarch had spent much of the day personally welcoming other leaders at the airport. It ended not much better: forced smiles, unconvincing statements of solidarity.

It was typical of what has become the Obama Doctrine: dropping old allies in the hope of turning adversaries into new friends.

Needless to say, the gamble has failed.

None of Americas old adversaries, be it the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt or the Khomeinist mullahs in Iran, have become allies of the United States. At the same time, some old allies of Washington have started looking for new allies in unlikely places as Moscow and Beijing. Some others have simply decided to sit Obama out in the hope that the next US administration would correct at least some of his mistakes.

The Arab League, a group of 22 nations that began as British initiative in 1945, is little more than an irrelevant ghost. For almost a year, and despite exceptionally attractive pay and conditions, it couldnt even find a new secretary-general. It couldnt even find a safe city to hold a summit.

Similar problems exist with the Gulf Cooperation Council, a grouping of pro-West petro-monarchies set up in 1981 with support from the Reagan administration and designed to counterbalance both Khomeinist Iran and Iraq under Saddam Hussein.

However, partly because of Obamas confused and confusing tactics, the GCC, too, has ceased to exist as an effective element of regional stability.

The heads of two of the six members states, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, were absent from last weeks summit, ostensibly for health reasons.

It is now clear that Iran has managed to wrest Oman away from the GCC. Oman hosted almost two years of secret negotiations between Tehran and the Obama administration and now regards itself as a third, albeit smaller, element in a triangle with Washington and Tehran. Last year, Tehran all but imposed a treaty on Oman demarcating the borders of the two nations in the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea while obtaining the right to use Omani ports by Irans rapidly expanding navy that is projecting power all the way to the Mediterranean. Many Arabs believe that Oman wouldnt have done so without Obamas tacit approval.

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Another GCC member, Qatar, is trying to tone down its high profile of the last decade. It had helped broker Obamas alliance with the Muslim Brotherhood, in the process gaining a much bigger say for itself. The collapse of the Brotherhood in Egypt and Obamas imminent departure have deprived Qatar of the main ingredients of its strategy. It has tried to compensate partly by trying to woo Iran, angering the Saudis in the process.

To some extent, Kuwait, too, has tried to hedge its bets, including by keeping a line open to the Syrian despot Bashar al-Assad and the mullahs of Tehran.

All in all, the only GCC members still sticking together in a firm way are Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, and both are deeply suspicious of Obama.

The absence of US leadership has also led to confusion among NATO and other allies. Turkey is playing its own game, often in direct contrast to that of the US in Iraq and Syria.

Britain and France are competing against one another for future influence in Libya, including by sending separate military missions to the fragile government in Tripoli.

Egypt is spending the cash it gets from US buying fighter-bombers from France and other weapons from Russia.

Israel, too, is trying to diversify contacts as symbolized by this weeks visit to Moscow by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, a *bête noire* of Obama.

Pakistan is taking the US cash but looks to China as its main protector. while rival India is allying itself with Russia and Iran to gain influence in Afghanistan and Central Asia.

Trying to put the American absence to good use, Russia is rebuilding its network in the Middle East and strengthening its position in the Caucasian isthmus between the Caspian and the Black seas. On May 11 it will organize a referendum for South Ossetia, a region annexed from Georgia, to formally become part Russia, a repeat of the Crimean scenario.

In October another referendum in Abkhazia, also annexed by Russia in its invasion of Georgia in 2008, will lead to the absorption of that strategically located piece of real estate.

Russias next target is the oil-rich south Caucasian Republic of Azerbaijan. Last month, Russia used a three-day war over the enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, disputed between Armenia and Azerbaijan, to test Washingtons resolve to continue as guarantor of status quo.

Washingtons lethargic reaction showed Moscow, and its allies in Tehran, that Azerbaijan may be as defenseless as Georgia was when the Russia snatched 25% of its territory.

Azerbaijans president, Ilham Aliyev, has tried to make the best of a bad situation by rushing to Tehran and Moscow signaling readiness to distance himself from Washington.

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Obama says he is practicing 21st century diplomacy. Maybe. But others, notably in the worlds most unstable and dangerous zone, everyone else is engaged in 19th century diplomacy of the deadliest kind.

Kaynak/Source: