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## The Art of Strategic Thinking

A Comment

### Abstract

Strategic thinking is called for, indeed indispensable, for good decision making when charting the course of a nation in the social, political, military and economic domains. Only a few are inclined to look beyond the events, the choices and their immediate outcomes, into the “Großen Zusammenhänge”: the intricate interrelationships, the deep-rooted motivations and the long-term consequences. This perspective also requires a keen interest in the divergent cultures of the players that is usually associated with extensive experience.

Strategic thinking comes “naturally” to some more than to others. It can be developed and perfected through education, training and experience, but it takes talent to be done exceptionally well. Cognitive science may help in understanding and perfecting it, but in its higher forms it is an art, beyond professional competence.

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## Propensity, Characteristics and Training

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Strategic thinking is called for, indeed indispensable, for good decision making when charting the course of a nation in the social, political, military and economic domains. Only a few are inclined to look beyond the events, the choices and their immediate outcomes, into the “Großen Zusammenhänge”: the intricate interrelationships, the deep-rooted motivations and the long-term consequences. This perspective also requires a keen interest in the divergent cultures of the players that is usually associated with extensive experience.

Strategic thinking comes “naturally” to some more than to others. It can be developed and perfected through education, training and experience, but it takes talent to be done exceptionally well. Cognitive science may help in understanding and perfecting it, but in its higher forms it is an art, beyond professional competence.

Most people may have other cognitive skills, such as attention to detail, an inclination for empathy or human communicability that may be equally indispensable for other important tasks (social workers and police detectives come to mind). They are not necessarily less qualified or less educated; they are rather “wired” differently. They are often fascinated with detailed “hard facts,” preoccupied with the collection of evidence and data and draw little or no intellectual satisfaction from “zooming out” to see a broader picture. When it comes to monitoring human behavior they are interested in the individual more than in the dynamics of the collective, often delegitimizing “sweeping generalizations” let alone “cultural profiling” even when empirical data prove a clear pattern.

The most effective team for major national projects rests on a combination of many dedicated persons who are at their best when they are focused on detailed execution of a policy, a few with propensity to strategic thinking to chart the course and determine the priorities of the enterprise and a decision maker who can provide the infrastructure that will make it politically viable.

Strategic thinkers have structural problems when they try to communicate with people who do not share their gift and training. Their perception is often counter intuitive, since most people tend at best to focus on the first move and its immediate consequences, while they look at the whole chessboard and the alternative outcomes of the game and tournament. Even those who are inclined to see the broader picture are often ideologically or culturally committed to the extent that installs at the input socket of their database a filter that keeps out disturbing information and amplifies evidence that confirms their predisposition.

Strategic thinking can be applied to a variety of endeavors from the construction of a bridge to the national security of a great power. In the first case the collapse of the bridge in an earthquake proves the strategy adopted to secure the project at a quake of this magnitude wrong. When it is applied to human affairs, however, decision makers experts and laymen alike are usually immune to the arguments of strategic thinkers, since mostly there are not, and cannot be, universally acceptable “rules of evidence” to prove who is right. This is not only true at the time when the decisions are made, but often even after the consequences become evident. The argument over the quality of the decision is only shifting to the identification of specific consequences with specific decisions and to the costs and benefits of alternative policies. What determines the political outcome of the argument over the quality of the decisions depends infinitely more on the political manipulation skills of the individuals and the elites who are engaged in this argument, than on the substance of the matter.

The ultimate test of strategic thinking is the medium and long term proven effectiveness of its policy products. Academics tend to be mesmerized by the elegance of the analytical construction. Practitioners are often allured by the immediate benefits and the seemingly low costs. Strategists must see beyond that myopic perspective, minimizing the negative “unforeseen consequences” that are visible to the strategically focused eye. They must, and very often have proved that they can, identify today in an environment of profound uncertainty, what good historians will conclude a generation or two later.

Professional and dedicated educators can help in training people in this field. The talent of potentially great strategic thinkers, as that of great musicians, writers and sportsman, can be enhanced. Some who are not aware of their unique gift should be encouraged to develop it. However talented they are, they need good editors and good coaches. Decision makers and top officials need professional advisors and assistants. For these education and training can make a major difference in their performance. Training for an effective role in this field, particularly when it relates to national security, should focus on four components of strategic thinking:

Incorporating in the preliminary strategic calculus all relevant considerations. This requires awareness to historic precedents and a measure of informed imagination. It can be taught through a systematic discussion of many case-studies, with special emphasis on “soft” and cultural considerations that were often overlooked but proved to have had a major impact.

Identifying the center of gravity. This is by far the most elusive and the most difficult to teach. When the crucial decisions are taken, only two or three vital priorities must be chosen, at the expense of other important considerations that will, at least partly, be sacrificed. This choice is the most closely associated with inspiration and leadership.

Adjusting to the changing strategic environment. This is relatively easy to explain and teach, yet extremely difficult to stick to when temptation knocks. In times of crisis the strategic calculus often changes quickly and significantly, sometimes due to well-considered actions taken to meet the initial challenge. Keeping up an appropriate response requires not only careful monitoring and adjustments, but also combatting the alluring tendency to 'fall in love' with one's own successful decisions that are no longer effective.

Considering the medium-term and long-term consequences. This always has a speculative component and can only be conclusively judged in historic perspective. What is required here is a keen awareness to the innumerable cases of unintended consequences, with a warning to newcomers not to rush in where seasoned statesmen fear to tread.

## The Cultural Trap

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In the field of national security it typically comes down to expectations concerning human behavior and therefore to culture. These are very rarely quantifiable or even measurable. Identifying the point where inducement, anxiety or any mix thereof will affect group behavior is not an exact science. Calculating a few steps ahead the strategist must consider a complex matrix, relying heavily on experience and intuition. This becomes even more challenging when foreign policy or radical groups are concerned, because an alien culture plays a major role in defining their priorities and determining their behavior and courses of action accordingly. This is difficult enough when one is responding to challenges emanating from his own culture, and is immeasurably more problematic when an alien set of values is concerned.

Not only do educated Westerners tend to assume that the core of their own value system must be universal (often considering a departure from this assumption "racist"). Non-Western actors often miscalculate, either because they misperceive Western qualms as lack of determination or because they escribe their own motivations to their Western opponents. This may be the case, perhaps somewhat less frequently, also within Western and other societies.

Often even a combination of a propensity for strategic thinking and a professionally sound reading of another culture's priorities and motivations can be disrupted by ideological impediments. This is particularly true in Western liberal societies that are challenged by post-colonial individuals, minorities or nations sometime referred to as belonging to the "Third World". When the Western elites are guilt-ridden because of the colonial and racist past of their ancestors, some conclusions will often be considered taboo, even when they are substantiated by the combination of cultural studies, experience and empirically collected data concerning patterns of political behavior. In this political

climate, the strategic analyst is well aware that anything less than flattering conclusions, expectations or proposed policies concerning these cultures will be labeled “racist”. Even if he does not share such a simplistic dogma, he is cognizant of the costs of deviating from it. A well-established culture of analytical denial inevitably breeds policy recommendations that have constantly proven ineffective or counterproductive.

The ultimate taboo in Western liberal circles is to suggest that nonwestern post-colonial societies may not share “our” values or objectives even “under the skin”. From the essentially true assumption that all humans seek to improve their lives and offer a better future for their children, they leap to the conclusion that “a good life” is perceived similarly or even remotely comparable by different cultural communities. They refuse to accept that even when some of the ingredients thereof are similar, a profoundly different order of priorities between these ingredients is what often makes the two cultures all but incomparable. Whereas the quest for human dignity, for instance, is common to diverse cultures, a profoundly different perception of honor will set them dramatically apart. The perceptions of what considered honorable for women and members of their families is a good example on the social level, but there are also extremely important differences with major political implications concerning what is and is not open for compromise, the sanctity of the life of an individual, the legitimacy of targeting innocent civilians etc.

The way to secure both at the same time - a responsible analysis of the behavior of groups and nations on the one hand and avoiding unsubstantiated characteristics of individuals belonging to these collectives on the other, is to recognize a few obvious points of departure. First, that the best and the worst qualities are to be found among the individuals of every human collective. Second, that these qualities are reflected in norms and behavior, including political norms and behavior of the collective. Third, that the prevalence of given norms and modes of behavior can vary dramatically between different cultures. Forth, that even profound differences of a given time and place between these cultures are not “essentialist” and not immutable. It follows that not only the analysis of different cultures, but also the expectations and effective policies vis-à-vis each one of these cultures requires a diverse calculus.

## **Four Test Cases – from Eisenhower to Obama**

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The qualities of strategic thinking can best be tested and demonstrated by a strategic discussion of major policies with the benefit of hindsight concerning their medium and long term consequences, with some references to relevant cases where the historic jury is not out as yet. The conduct of American presidents during the Cold War and after, setting their policies in a critically important and dangerous region into the calculus of the global scene is a particularly promising field of study. The

Middle East presented during the Cold War the greatest threat of instigating a super power confrontation. Since the Cold War it constitutes the prime breeding ground of global terrorism and one of the most dangerous regions for the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The main actor in the region since WWI is the United States, joined from the mid-1950s to the late 1980s by the Soviet Union. Lately Russia made a minor comeback, China is so far a relatively remote potential and Europe is trying play on the margins. The experience of four American presidents is particularly appropriate for this study: Presidents Eisenhower, Nixon (with Henry Kissinger), Carter, and Obama.

### **The Strategic Game Changer in the Mid-1950s**

It was only in the mid-1950s that the Middle East became one of the most important arenas for East-West global competition and one of the most dangerous in terms of Super Power confrontation. The game changer was the charismatic leadership of Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser. The evident failure of the attempts that started before Eisenhower's first term in office (1953-1956) to incorporate the Middle East in the Western containment structure vis-à-vis the Soviet Union was bad enough. But nothing prepared Eisenhower for Nasser's revolutionary move in 1955 affecting the balance of power on a global scale. Nasser not only rejected these attempts and any bilateral understanding with the US and orchestrated an effective Arab opposition to the American (and British) sponsored "Baghdad Pact".

But Nasser's most devastating anti-Western move came earlier - in September 1955, when he concluded a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union. This not only threatened to overturn the regional balance through unprecedentedly large shipments of modern arms to Egypt. It also undermined substantially the global strategy the US constructed in the most formative years of the Cold War to protect Europe and secure the critical energy needs of the Western alliance. Kissinger described it years later succinctly and accurately "a daring move to extend soviet influence into the Middle East...in effect 'leapfrogging' the cordon sanitaire which the United States had constructed around the Soviet Union, confronting Washington with a task of having to counter the Soviets in areas heretofore considered to be safely within the Western sphere".<sup>1)</sup> Nasser's provocations persisted. In 1956 he forced Jordan out of the Western sponsored alliance, recognized the communist regime as the sole legitimate representative of China and nationalized the Suez Canal.

### **The Eisenhower Administration**

Eisenhower started out with a profound misconception of the post-colonial global reality, making a devastating mistake in 1956 that cost the Western alliance and the Middle East almost two decades of major trouble in the region. He nevertheless learned from his mistake and at least managed to prevent the overall collapse of the West and its regional allies.

Eisenhower's tragic strategic mistake was not in disregarding the global significance of the regional challenges to the West. It was rather a profound misunderstanding, so typically American, of an interrelated cluster of political realities: the post-colonial cultural context, the national priorities of the so called "Non-Aliened" Arabs and Nasser's appeal to "the Arab Street". He understood that Nasser needs to be dissuaded from sticking to his radical anti-Western policies; Eisenhower assumed, however, that Nasser and his followers have a deeply felt but limited grievance against the British imperial legacy, suspecting them of trying to perpetuate their de facto control of Egypt while only misreading American policies as a mere extension of Western colonial practices under a new guise. Eisenhower believed that such dissuasion can be achieved through a combination of dissociating the US from British policies, highlighting the lack of America's own colonial legacy, explaining the dangers of atheistic communism to Muslims and massive aid for national development. (Some even expected that post-colonial liberation movements will be inspired by the American experience).

In the mid-1950s Britain and France were no longer global powers, but could still draw on the strategic thinking heritage of their imperial past. They understood that Nasser's radicalism threatens vital Western global interests and cannot be appeased. They had a good understanding of the cultural obsession of the "Arab Street" disciples of his messianic movement "from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Persian or Arab] Gulf" with humiliating the Western powers. The old ex-powers also understood the radical Arab unlimited grievance against their global camp including the US. They understood that Nasser was seeking to benefit from both super powers - from the Russians because his anti- American policies served their interest, and from the Americans, because they did not understand what was going on and believed they can appease him. They also understood that to stop Nasser's radicalism from spreading and causing the collapse of all Western positions and pro-Western regimes in the region, Nasser needs to be defeated and humiliated. For this they went to war in November 1956 hoping to topple Nasser.

Eisenhower could have focused on deterring the Soviets from direct involvement in a region that had at that time Western orientation, like the West stayed out of 1956 Hungarian crisis. Had he done so Nasser would not have become for more than a decade the radical's super hero, even had he stayed in power. Eisenhower, instead, decided to break and humiliate his closest NATO allies, hand the radicals their greatest ever victory, and hand the Middle East to the Soviet Union on a silver platter. Not only did he not convince the radicals that America is their real hope against the neo-colonial ambitions of the old powers, he convinced them that they can pursue an anti- American policy and benefit from the inability in Washington to reward their allies and punish their worst enemies. This legacy not only facilitated Western retreat, profound instability and enormous suffering in the Middle East until the early 1970s, it also undermined NATO and the Western alliance like no other event.



The only redeeming asset Eisenhower can claim is that he partially recognized the counterproductive effect of his first term Middle East policy when it tragically and dramatically backfired. This became evident when the major Western strongholds in the region either tumbled or were saved on the verge of collapse shortly after the 1956/57 American debacle. While the Hashemite regime in Amman was rescued by a US backed direct British involvement in Jordan and Lebanon's Camille Chamoun government survived after the marines landed in Junieh as part of the "Eisenhower Doctrine", even that late awakening did not save Nuri al-Said in Baghdad and the Iraqi Western linchpin fell to the radicals and into the Soviet orbit.

Since then and until the early 1970s the region was dominated by anti-American regimes, while pro-Western forces were pushed into a defensive position and often had to support radical policies to appease their own "street". It was only after the humiliating defeats of Nasser and the persistence of a profoundly different American policy that Arab elites realized that the 1956 precedent does not guarantee an everlasting US commitment to support America's worst enemies. Even the initially misguided policies of the Carter administration and the incredibly incompetent approach of President Obama did not have such a long lasting and dramatic negative effect.

### **The Nixon (and Kissinger) Administration**

A profoundly different strategic perspective - correctly reflecting the regional realities and artfully set in the global objectives of the United States in the Cold War - was brilliantly articulated by Secretary Kissinger and forcefully perused by President Nixon. Before this administration took office in 1969 president Johnson already stepped away from Kennedy's appeasement of Nasser and rejected Nasser's attempt to louse the US into a repeated "1957 scenario" - Nasser's own term for his preferred handling of his 1967 defeat in the Six Day War - of America, selling its Israeli ally down the drain to benefit its Egyptian and Soviet enemies.

The new factor in the Nixon era was Nasser's gamble of drawing the Soviet Union into massive involvement in his "War of Attrition" (1969-1970) against Israel. This was designed to bring about a lose-lose choice for the US, between acquiescing in a defeat of Israel by the unlimited resources of the Russian Super Power on the one hand, and the danger of a potential global confrontation on the other, if America opts to directly counterbalance the Soviet threat. In the summer of 1970 Nixon not only proved that he understood exactly what was at stake regionally and globally, but also that he could play "chicken" as well as, if not better than Brezhnev.

But the ultimate display of strategic artistry came only in the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when Kissinger and Nixon combined a demonstration of resolve vis-a-vis the Soviet threat at closing stages of the war,

with the masterful exhaustion of the opportunities in its aftermath. When they realized that Israel failed to deliver the fast and decisive victory they hoped for in the beginning of the war, they swiftly switched to a strategy designed to construct a delicate balance where both Israel and Egypt will critically depend on American support for their most vital interests. In doing so, they essentially pushed the Soviet Union out of its most important strategic asset outside Eastern Europe. By saving Egypt from a humiliating military defeat and promising Israel a good chance to take an American-sponsored Egypt out of the Arab-Israeli military balance, Kissinger constructed a win-win-win deal with Golda Meir and Anwar Sadat. This deal left the Russians with one of their worst defeats in the Cold War. This policy, enhanced by the 1975 Interim Agreement that Kissinger secured during the short-lived Ford presidency, ushered in a new era of American predominance in the Middle East, reversing the negative trend since the mid-1950s.

### **The Carter Administration**

Jimmy Carter came to the presidency a short while after these achievements were secured, with a much more ambitious “comprehensive” strategy of regional peace encompassing the Soviet Union, Syria and the PLO. The international conference Carter envisaged would not only have presented Israel with impossible dictates, but also given the most radical Arabs the veto power over the separate Israeli-Egyptian deal that was designed specifically to undermine their bargaining position. Carter’s strategy would also have offered Russia a golden opportunity to torpedo Kissinger’s monumental success in turning Egypt from Soviet to American orientation. This ill-advised strategy was the product not only of supreme incompetence but also of a half-baked North-South ideology of the president that tried to appease post-colonial radicals and cater to their quest for “historic justice”.

What saved the day was Sadat’s courage. He immediately realized Carter’s policy will ruin Egypt by pulling it back to the path of subservience to the irresponsible radicalism that ruined the region and brought his own people to the edge of hunger. He did not embark on a major war, stopped by Kissinger on the brinks of an Egyptian massive defeat, and has undertaken a dramatic political risk in defying everything Nasser stood for by teaming with the Americans, only to have everything ruined by a naïve amateur. Sadat realized that only a supremely dramatic gesture can make Carter and the American people “an offer they cannot refuse” to abandon the unattainable fantasy of a comprehensive regional peace and revert to the realistic Israel-Egyptian course. His gesture of real peace with Israel was indeed histrionic and forced Carter into what became in fact a separate deal between Egypt and Israel at the expense of the PLO, the radical Arab states and the Soviet Union.

In negotiating the deal he initially negated Carter exhibited great determination, skill and ingenuity. He consistently tried to introduce the PLO into it, but persevered even after he realised that both

parties only wanted a Palestinian fig leaf for their essentially stand-alone and separate agreement. Finally Carter came to play the proverbial Balaam (Bil'am) role in the Bible (Numbers 22-24) who was sent (by King Balak of Moab) to curse the Israelites and ended up blessing them. Be that as it may, the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty (1979) dramatically changed the balance of power in the Middle East in favour of Israel and the United States. It served as the main pillar of relative Middle Eastern stability on the regional level for the last four decades, in spite of massive civil wars and relatively minor Arab-Israeli armed confrontations.

## **The Iranian Challenge**

President Obama came to power in 2009 when the next major challenge loomed in the Middle East. It is true that two American presidents - Bush senior and junior - considered Saddam Hussein a major threat, and there was an important grain of truth in it. However, Saddam was nothing like Nasser's or the Iranian challenges that were actively and successfully seeking regional hegemony affecting the global balance far beyond the Middle East. Bush senior went to a carefully limited war in Iraq and Kuwait because after the collapse of the Soviet Union he could do so without concern to the response of the other Super Power. Bush junior, in a world horrified by 9/11 stayed in Iraq after defeating Saddam harbouring a fantasy about bringing democracy to Arabs and Muslims as an antidote against the radicalism that hit the US.

Iran is different. It is independently capable, scientifically and technologically, to build a nuclear arsenal, to weaponised warheads and to develop the required advanced delivery systems. It is active in subverting pro-Western regimes all over the region, it has a very strong hold in Iraq, indirectly controls Lebanon, invested enormous resources to establish itself in Syria, seriously threatens Saudi Arabia from Yemen and in a different way from Bahrein, is active in East Africa, assists and arms Palestinian radical movements and keeps a global terrorist infrastructure that spans as wide as North and South America Europe and East Asia.

## **The Obama Administration**

Unlike President Eisenhower, who changed course in his second term when he realized that his strategy backfired, and unlike President Carter, who was forced, at the peak of the Cold War to abandon his ideological and political preference, President Obama stuck to his and still believes it saved the region and the world from a terrible alternative. His commitment to a coherent ideology that was reflected in his global and regional policies seems deeper-felt and more systematic than that of his predecessors. With his Third World background, his social activist experience and his liberal social circle, Obama came to the presidency when the failure to bring democracy to the Middle East and the enormous waste of American resources were already evident. He was willing, even eager, to fight

“terrorists” even “terrorism” on the operational level. Obama, however, refused to identify the radical political culture that bred, glorified and rewarded the terrorists. Much more important, he also refused to identify, let alone seriously confront, the radical Middle Eastern regime that successfully engaged in elevating the use of massive violence from the individual and sub-state level to a bid for regional hegemony backed by a soon to be constructed nuclear arsenal.

With the traumatic experience of Iraq (and Afghanistan) Obama was understandably determined to avoid another war against a Muslim country, not only because of the prohibitive costs in lives and money, but primarily because of the near certainty of the counter-productive consequences. This reluctance was vindicated with the disastrous outcome of the Anglo-French operation in Libya, where Obama avoided taking a leading role. His decision not to massively engage the US in an attempt to determine the fate of Syria, though controversial, can make good sense even to those who do not regard it strategically justified.

Obama’s strategic problem was not his understandable reluctance to engage in war or in hopeless nation building of other cultures neither in his empathy with Third World perspectives. It was with his unwillingness to provide the indispensable American leadership for the maintenance of the world order that not only served the US and its allies since WW II but also maintained a relatively stable global environment for all. In the Middle East this abdication of responsibility was reflected in denial of the decisive role of the Iranian regime in undermining the major structures in the region and of the potentially devastating consequences far beyond the Middle East of its acquisition of a nuclear arsenal. The systematic denial of the magnitude of the threat was later reflected in both the lack of urgency and lack of gravity of the American response.

For a long time in the beginning of his presidency Obama was willing to do very little to deter Iran from pursuing her nuclear ambitions. It was only when he realized that Israel may take independent military action that he became serious about counter measures, and even then only through economic sanctions and covert actions. When the sanctions were effective and gave him considerable leverage, he waited until Iran completed all it wanted concerning the enrichment capabilities and made do with an agreement that froze for a limited time its implementation. The agreement excluded precisely what the Iranian military project needs while the advanced enrichment capabilities are already secured and protected - the ballistic delivery systems that only make sense with a nuclear warhead and the weaponizing process in military installations that are not under control. If no dramatic action is taken soon contrary to Obama’s policy, then by the time the “sunset clause” kicks in, in the middle of 2020s, Iran will become a legitimate nuclear power.

What is even worse than the specifics of the nuclear deal is Obama's acquiescence with the Iranian bid for regional hegemony at the expense of all the allies of America in the region. This may not have been the conscious preference of the president, but what counts strategically is that this was certainly what all these allies strongly felt. Obama at least went along, if not indirectly encouraged the removal of Mubarak's regime after forty years of serving American interests and stabilizing the region. He legitimized the Muslim Brothers regime and turned a cold shoulder to the most important pro-American change in the region - Sisi's takeover in Cairo. He initially befriended another Muslim Brother and supporter of Hamas, President Erdogan, hostile and considered dangerous in different degrees by Egypt, Jordan, Israel, Saudi Arabia, most Gulf countries and the Kurds. Obama named Erdogan in 2011 alongside the leaders of Britain, Germany, India and South Korea as one of five world leaders with whom he had forged a bond of trust.

Obama was also obsessed throughout his presidency with the Palestinian issue, constantly undermining Israel's position and blaming her even when the Palestinians rejected American proposals and Israel accepted them. He persisted with that obsession even when the "Arab Spring" events demonstrated the negligible impact of this issue on regional stability. During the crisis over the Russian occupation of Crimea and the invasion of the Ukraine, his Secretary of State had 39 meetings on the Palestinian issue. Obama not only failed to support America's most important regional allies in recognizing the Iranian regime as their critical, sometimes even existential, threat and enemy. He even clearly alluded that he considered Iran as part of the solution, not of the problem. No wonder he did not even strongly encourage, let alone effectively support, the "Green Revolution" when mainstream Iranian massively protested against the Mullahs. When Obama left the white house, regardless of the policies and character of his replacement, one could not miss the sigh of relief not only in Cairo, Riad, Jerusalem and Amman, but also from Tokyo, Kyiv, Prague, Warszawa, and Riga. In Tehran and Pyongyang there was cause for concern.

## Strategic lessons

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There is one flaw in the strategic calculus that can explain the three failures of American policy discussed here - that of the first term Eisenhower presidency before he realized his mistake and adopted the Eisenhower Doctrine that of Carters initial preference before Sadat forced him to change course and that of Obama he never acknowledged. They all failed to understand radicalism in general and its Middle Eastern variety in particular. They all, admittedly, looked at the overall regional and global picture, tried to adjust to the changing international scene and to bring into their calculus the long range interests of the US. But they fell into the cultural trap - they failed to identify the core motivation of the radical leaders in the Middle East, fathom the humiliation of the elites in the region and recognize the power of the yearning for greatness that appealed to their people.

Because they watched Middle Eastern radical leaders again and again act pragmatically, these American presidents and their advisors assumed that Nasser, Assad, Saddam Hussein, Arafat, Erdogan and Khamenei are essentially pragmatists. They not only forgot that all radicals mostly act pragmatically even in a relentless pursuit of radical objectives. They also assumed that the obvious senselessness of their shortcut quest for instant glory and greatness is obvious to these Middle Eastern leaders, infatuated elites and mesmerized people. They believed that a combination of “speaking softly” in the language of inclusion, recognition, assistance and appeasement with the occasional “small stick” will do.

Eisenhower tried it with Nasser and failed. Even when he partially learned his lesson he could only prevent the total collapse of Western positions and left Nasser practically in regional control for another decade. Following Johnson’s initial contribution, Nixon and Kissinger extinguished Nasser’s political hegemony with the (partially Israeli) Big Stick, and proceeded to institutionalize the new reality by “speaking softly” to an Egyptian president that was prepared to abandon the radicalism of his predecessor. Carter short lived attempts to bring the Soviets and the radical Arabs back through the window after they were thrown out of the door failed when a genuinely pragmatist Sadat abandoned even the rhetoric of radicalism and bravely disavowed the radicals. Obama denied the cultural background of radicalism and tragically confused between the very impressive Iranian society on the one hand and the radical and barbaric regime that is plaguing the country and the region for almost four decades, on the other. The first does indeed instill hope provided the second is defeated.

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**Endnotes**

1) Kissinger Henry, *Diplomacy* (Touchstone, Simon & Schuster, 1994) pp. 522-523.