

## Dithering over Syria

*Horrors in Syria expose wishful thinking at the heart of the president's foreign policy*



Recent history shows that the 21st century is an age of interdependence. That was what Barack Obama told students in Cairo soon after taking office in 2009, in a speech intended to heal rifts with the Muslim world and start restoring America's image after the mistakes of the Bush years.

America has learned that problems must be tackled with the help of others, Mr Obama humbly reported. He offered examples of global ties that bind. When one nation pursues a nuclear weapon the risks rise for all nations, he said in a nod at Iran. When violent extremists operate in one stretch of mountains, people can be endangered across an ocean. When innocents in Bosnia and Darfur are slaughtered, that is "a stain on our collective conscience". Interdependence, the president suggested after a pause for applause, is what it means to share the modern world.

Few foreign-policy doctrines survive much contact with reality. But four years later, events are conspiring to undermine Mr Obama's Cairo pieties with unusual precision. An estimated 70,000 Syrians have already been killed in two years of civil conflict with the Assad regime. Enough of the dead are innocents to stir all but the most brutish conscience. America's response, though, has been a study in minimalism, an approach set from the top, with Mr Obama worrying that the robust intervention urged by many aides and allies might only make things worse.

By way of a legal and moral backstop, Mr Obama has said for some time that the use of chemical weapons in Syria would cross a "red line" and prompt American action. Yet after reports that sarin, a ghastly nerve agent, had been used on civilians, Mr Obama said on April 30th that he would not rush to judgment. Before making decisions about "America's national security", in his revealing phrase, the president called for more clarity about how and by whom such weapons had been used. Then, he declared with lawyerly dispassion, "there are some options that we might not otherwise exercise that we would strongly consider."

It is true that the president faces only bad choices in Syria. But he is partly to blame. While America and its allies have dithered over calls to arm more moderate wings of the opposition or to impose no-fly zones, the most alarming militants have grown in clout, including fighters who have sworn fealty to al-Qaeda. In a cruel echo of his Cairo speech, Mr Obama must now choose between tolerating conscience-staining massacres and intervening at the risk of empowering violent extremists. Completing his misery, cavilling over chemical weapons in

Syria places in peril Mr Obama's credibility when he warns Iran not to pursue nuclear weapons—a blunder that in turn would raise the nuclear stakes for other countries, just as he observed four years ago.

A standard critique of the president's foreign policy is that he is cautious to a fault, placing more weight on the costs of action than of inaction. There is something to that. The shadow of Iraq, the conflict that Mr Obama scorned as George W. Bush's "dumb war", lies across his decision-making, especially when weighing intelligence about weapons of mass destruction. Libya left its mark, too. Though Mr Obama gave military help to Libyan rebels against Muammar Qaddafi, averting threatened massacres, scars were left by the murder of America's ambassador and three aides, and reports of loose weapons flooding the wider region.

But caution is not the only problem. When pondering the sad gap between present realities and Mr Obama's plans for the post-Bush era, what comes to mind is how much wishful thinking was involved. In the light of Syria's horrors, Mr Obama looks guilty of overconfidence, and of arrogantly believing that by being cleverer than Mr Bush he could avoid traps that plagued him.

The 2009 Cairo speech was part of a series of set-piece foreign policy addresses by Mr Obama. A recurring theme was that Mr Bush, by his clumsiness, led America into unnecessary dilemmas. Outlining counter-terrorism plans, Mr Obama condemned the Bush administration's "false choice" between constitutionally guaranteed freedoms and security, breezily promising to close the prison camp at Guantánamo Bay (a promise as yet unkept) and adhere to the rule of law. Collecting the Nobel peace prize he was weirdly awarded for getting elected (and for not being Mr Bush), Mr Obama even rejected the need to choose between foreign policy realism and idealism. The trick, he told the assembled worthies of Oslo, is to avoid a clash between the narrow pursuit of interests and an endless campaign to impose American values around the world.

### **Declaring a choice false does not make it so**

Events are now exposing Mr Obama's hubris. It was smart to re-engage with the world. In his own pithy phrase, a lesson of the Bush years was that "not talking does not work". But it was cocky to assume that smartness would magically be rewarded. Team Obama insists that virtuous circles lurk behind every corner, removing the need for painful trade-offs. A less bossy America will find it easier to promote core moral beliefs, it is argued. By shunning unwise foreign entanglements, Mr Obama will be free to focus on nation-building at home. Exposed to the tough love of a less attentive America, other nations will have to think harder about their security. Used less, America's power will be the greater, Mr Obama argued in Cairo, quoting Thomas Jefferson.

Alas, it is not in the gift of politicians—even American presidents—to choose their own trade-offs. True, Syria's horrors are not Mr Obama's fault. The blame lies with Bashar Assad and the callous intransigence of such outsiders as Vladimir Putin's Russia. But the slaughter still mocks Mr Obama's pieties about interdependence, and his glib plans for win-win diplomacy. Balancing American interests and values is hard. Right now, in Syria, he is advancing neither.

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