

WINDS OF CHANGE

Quite often transitory times in international relations leads one to refer to the “winds of change” perspective taking hold on the course of events unfolding. Too often the reference turns out to be a miscalculation of events unfolding.

With the benefit of a little hindsight, the arrival of Barack Obama in January this year as President of the United States has certainly ushered in a period of change, much more dynamic than most of us were expecting, especially when it comes to American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Following his international address on a major Arab satellite channel shortly after taking office, President Obama’s visit to Turkey earlier this year was the first major stepping stone in what is emerging as a cleverly thought out policy action plan to re-engage the Arab world. The visit to Turkey underlines the crucial role that this country plays in contemporary international relations, especially as a bridge between different civilizations.

The re-think in strategic objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan has allowed the Obama administration to draw a line under the previous Bush administration’s unpopular policies towards this region of the world, and to offer a new start with all allies and foes in the region.

The impressive international address at Cairo University in June 2009 allowed President Obama to articulate clearly what opportunities the United States championed in the Middle East. The positive tone was struck by emphasizing that opportunities would be forthcoming if the people’s of the region wanted such an outcome. The dictum “power to the people” has thus been the main motif of what Obama has been campaigning in favour of since become President.

Obama’s address in Cairo is certain to go down as one of the all time greats when it comes to influencing regional and international relations. Every issue raised and every aspiration highlighted was directed towards the hundreds of millions of people that continue to live in a retarded world where such benefits that are taken for granted by so many of us, are not available to them.

The seven international tensions that Obama focused on in his address cover all of the major issues that have resulted in a major disconnect between different regions of the world, especially the American and Muslim world. These include, violent extremism, the Arab-Israeli conflict, the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the promotion of democracy, women’s equality, religious freedom, and economic development.

The timing of the Cairo address and the emphasis on the above pertinent points has unleashed a clear momentum of change that is already manifesting itself across the streets of the Arab world. The outcome of the Lebanese election is a clear example of such an

outcome with a pro-western coalition emerging as victorious. The reaction to the election result in Iran is another example of the forces of change blowing across the Middle East. A large proportion of the citizens in Iran have seen what alternative lifestyle awaits them with a more liberal and moderate government at the helm, and they have clearly demonstrated they are prepared to fight for such an alternative option.

The acknowledgment of Israel that a two-state solution is the only viable way forward when it comes to Israel and Palestine, is also the result of immense American pressure to re-start comprehensive peace talks in the Middle East.

Of course the winds of change that are blowing do not guarantee that all will be resolved peacefully across the Middle East. While change is certainly inherently a positive step, it should also be expected that with change will come turbulence, instability and probably bloodshed. But the price paid is also certain to result in a more positive future for all citizens of the Middle East region. This is the overriding goal that must be kept in mind as the next few months of change continues to emerge.

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