



PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

The “Greater” Middle East:  
The New Geopolitical  
Environment and Its  
Implications for Obama  
Administration Policies

*By Hillel Fradkin*

Hudson Institute



# The “Greater” Middle East: The New Geopolitical Environ- ment and Its Implications for Obama Administration Policies

By Hillel Fradkin

*President-elect Obama faces serious geopolitical challenges in the Middle East, Central, and South Asia—a region best described as the “Greater Middle East.” The immediate policy objectives of the President-elect—to withdraw our forces from Iraq and to redouble our efforts in Afghanistan—dictate that near-term policy will be sharply focused on two countries: Iran and Pakistan.*

*In Pakistan our clearest objective should be to give as much support as possible to the new government. In Iran, the new administration looks likely to make a renewed effort to negotiate nuclear issues. In the case these negotiations fail—and they probably will—the Obama administration will have to immediately undertake a wide-ranging review of new strategies to deal with a nuclear Iran.*

**A**s President-elect Obama implied in his remarks after the Mumbai terrorist attacks, a new geopolitical and strategic environment in the Middle East and South Asia has emerged. The president-elect’s appreciation and recognition of this new reality, and the serious challenges it will present during his administration, will have a major impact on U.S. concerns and policies in the coming years. This holds especially true if the president-elect follows through on his



## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

declaration to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq and redouble efforts in Afghanistan to win the war against the Afghan Taliban and defeat al Qaeda.

The new geopolitical environment and framework we now see grew from powerful linkages within and between regions, particularly the Gulf region and Central and South Asia. These linkages have produced a geographic zone best described as the “Greater Middle East,” which stretches from the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and the Arab Middle East through the Persian Gulf area to embrace Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and, now, at its furthest extreme, India.

Two major events in 1979 created the environment for the zone’s formation: the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Subsequent events such as the Afghan Jihad, and its base in Pakistan, and several wars in the Persian Gulf, including the 8-year Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s, the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the first Gulf War, continued to expand the zone.

The first strong linkages between the Gulf Region (or Middle East) and Central and South Asia grew from the extensive support the Arab Gulf countries, especially Saudi Arabia, gave to the Afghan Jihad and to Pakistan. Newly intensive relations between Arab and South and Central Asian Muslims resulted, and al Qaeda formed thereafter. At the same time, the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf Wars catapulted the Gulf region into permanent crisis. The first Gulf War created linkages among the Gulf and South and Central Asia, and they, too, began to operate through al Qaeda. Bin Laden, al Qaeda’s leader, railed against the presence of American forces on Saudi soil and declared his opposition to the Saudi regime. Ultimately, he masterminded the September 11 terrorist attacks.

**A**s we know, this “Greater Middle East” zone and its interconnections already present an array of serious challenges to American interests and policy. The most recent developments show that during the next four years, two countries, Iran and Pakistan, will require the overwhelming majority of attention from U.S. policymakers.

President-elect Obama has announced that he will prioritize the prosecution and successful conclusion of our military actions in Afghanistan and the prevention of terrorist attacks, and he has rightly observed the key to these ambitions appears to lie in part, if not in whole, across the border in Pakistan, where both the Afghan Taliban and Al Qaeda enjoy safe haven. Achieving these goals requires the active cooperation of the Pakistani government.

There is good reason to be confident on this front. During the past year Pakistan has undergone a significant change as it reestablished civilian rule with a new democratically-elected government. As the government realized that that the primary threat to Pakistani security derived from the radicalization of Pakistan, rather than

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

its rivalry with India, it has sought a dramatic change in policy with important benefits for U.S. interests in Afghanistan. Despite the brief time this policy has been in effect, it has produced some notable successes, including much closer cooperation between the U.S. and Pakistani forces in northwestern Pakistan.

These very successes, however, have further exposed the dangers Pakistan itself presents. The terrorist attacks in Mumbai, which were designed to derail the new cooperation by reinvigorating Pakistani-Indian tensions, bring this into sharp relief. Since both countries have nuclear weapons this is a dire situation, as is the possibility that a nuclear-armed Pakistan could fall into chaos. The crucial importance of the problems of Iran and Pakistan and the related problem of Afghanistan suggest that other concerns, including the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, may fall on the administration's priority list.

In the case of Pakistan, the central goal of our policy is very clear, almost startlingly so: the survival of the present government and the continuation of its present course. This offers the best hope of achieving the president-elect's objectives in Afghanistan. It also offers the best hope of avoiding the radicalization of the Pakistani government and its policies or the chaotic breakup of the country—or both.

**T**he U.S. must also give priority to the prevention of a full-scale war between India and Pakistan. Currently, the U.S. is regarded by both as the best, and practically speaking, the only, available broker of peace. But to maintain that role and achieve its end will require intense and delicate diplomacy, especially toward Pakistan, where the government is exposed to the charge that it is only serving American interests. Where possible, the U.S. needs to support and encourage policies of the Pakistani government that intend to reassert its authority over the whole country, especially the northwest frontier area, and reverse the lingering dynamic of radicalization. This will also require the cooperation of the Pakistani military, as well as its continued acceptance of civilian rule.

In the case of Iran, our most immediate objective is preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapons, which would create new dynamics, such as a regional nuclear arms race, for which there is no precedent and no established policy instruments. Since the summer of 2003, we have mainly pursued this objective through negotiations led by our European allies, and alternatively with a sanctions regime. Unfortunately, this approach has failed to yield any results.

The president-elect has also announced his intentions to give negotiations with Iran another chance on an “unconditional” basis. An initiative yet to be defined is certain to be taken. Iran, however, has already declared that our main objective—the end or suspension of its nuclear program—is not open for discussion. Indeed,

## PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION

since the election, it has increased its own stated “conditions” for negotiations of any important kind in such a way as to suggest that it will reject any negotiations in the near term.

The central remaining option is military action. The U.S. is unlikely to take this course. It is possible that Israel, which now regards Iran’s nuclear program as an existential threat, might take action. But Israel will also operate under many restraints which reduce, if they do not eliminate, this possibility.

It’s likely Iran will possess a nuclear weapon, and perhaps several, by the end of 2009. In this case, the new administration will have to proceed on a two-fold basis: negotiations that aim to restrain Iran, and, ultimately, preparations for the likelihood that effort will fail. ■

PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NEW ADMINISTRATION



# HUDSON INSTITUTE

HUDSON INSTITUTE IS A NONPARTISAN  
POLICY RESEARCH ORGANIZATION  
DEDICATED TO INNOVATIVE RESEARCH  
AND ANALYSIS THAT PROMOTES GLOBAL  
SECURITY, PROSPERITY, AND FREEDOM.  
FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT  
HUDSON INSTITUTE, VISIT OUR  
WEBSITE AT [WWW.HUDSON.ORG](http://WWW.HUDSON.ORG).

1015 15TH STREET, N.W.  
SIXTH FLOOR  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20005  
TEL: 202-974-2400  
FAX: 202-974-2410  
[WWW.HUDSON.ORG](http://WWW.HUDSON.ORG)