

THE DIPLOMATIC BRIDGE TO SOMEWHERE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

✖ Ten days after the election, I wrote what turned out to be, at the time, a somewhat controversial piece on the meaning of the hints by Obama that Hillary Clinton might be his Secretary of State.

Indeed. But what strikes me is that, if Obama really has made the offer to Clinton, he may have in mind not just the obvious skills (and potential detriments) that Hillary Clinton could bring to the job, but also making a bold play for mid-east peace and specifically the Israeli/Palestinian component of it.

George Bush has never paid more than lip service to honest brokerage of real peace and rapprochement between Israel and the Palestinians. Even the supposedly vaunted "Roadmap" was nothing but rhetorical roadkill on delivery, and his efforts have gone downhill since then. Condi Rice has been useless at best on the issue, and Dick Cheney, well, enough said there.

Now that office has been assumed, both Barack Obama and his agent, Hillary Clinton, have been methodical in their moves affirmatively and diplomatically on the mid-east foreign policy front; however they have been aggressive and far more enlightened than the Bush/Cheney regime. And, let's be honest, this is not something that could be done precipitously or overnight. I am critical of Obama on several domestic fronts, but as to foreign policy, with the possible exception of Afghanistan, there is some healthy credit due. Here are just a few of the signs.

From the LA Times:

In her trip through the Middle East and Europe last week, Hillary Rodham Clinton was warmly received in most places by audiences who are fascinated by the life of the former first lady – and delighted that George W. Bush resides once more in Texas.

She was applauded vigorously by reporters at a news conference in Egypt, a highly unusual gesture from Arab journalists toward a U.S. official. Officials of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, some of whom felt shut out by the Bush administration, grilled her in a private meeting on the Obama administration's intentions, then applauded as well.

Love-fests aside, Clinton moved with a speed few expected on her second voyage as secretary of State. Billed as no more than a modest "listening tour," Clinton's trip offered the most complete picture yet of how the new administration hopes to overhaul American relations with the world.

Clinton took steps toward possible new relationships with Syria and Iran that could redraw the map of the Middle East. She declared herself committed to plowing ahead to build a separate state for Palestinians, despite widespread skepticism about the prospects for such a project.

Indeed there does seem to be dedicated activity and it looks like obtaining additional stability and dialogue with the region in general, and Syria and Iran specifically, will be the warm up to full on tackling of the Israeli/Palestinian problem. The New York Times reports on the engagement of Syria:

"We look forward to making progress in achieving results in the bilateral

relationship and in terms of regional issues," said the envoy, Jeffrey D. Feltman, the acting assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs, who was visiting Syria with Daniel B. Shapiro, a senior director at the National Security Council.

The United States has long wanted Syria to drop its support for the militant groups Hezbollah and Hamas, which have undermined Middle East peace efforts. The United States also hopes to peel Syria away from its alliance with Iran, and would welcome Syrian help on Iraq, Lebanon and inter-Palestinian reconciliation.

The Syrians want a strong American hand in Middle East peacemaking to help them regain territory they lost to Israel in the 1967 war. Improvement in bilateral ties also could result in easing economic and diplomatic sanctions imposed by Washington.

The Obama administration's decision to send Mr. Feltman and Mr. Shapiro to Syria is the most significant sign yet that it is ready to improve relations with the Syrian government after years of tension. The two met Saturday with the Syrian foreign minister, Walid al-Moallem.

A useful first step with Syria, and necessary after the Bush policy of arrogance, belligerence and abandonment. The same cautious entry to Iran is underway as well. From Reuters/Haaretz:

Iran said on Saturday it would consider a U.S. invitation to take part in a meeting on Afghanistan and it was ready to offer any help to its neighbor.

U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said on Thursday that President Barack Obama's government intended to invite

Iran to an international conference on Afghanistan planned for this month.

"If America and European countries and others need to use Iran, they should give us (the invitation). We will review it with the approach that we are ready to offer any help to Afghanistan," Iranian government spokesman Gholamhossein Elham told a news conference.

Obama, in a turnaround from Bush administration policy, has said the United States wants to engage Iran on a range of issues. The conference invitation would be the start of diplomatic initiative to Tehran.

These are small steps in each instance, but powerful in the change of tone and willingness to engage. The signal is unmistakable that there are rational adults back in charge of American foreign policy. Not all is golden on the foreign front – Obama seems a little wobbly on Afghanistan/Pakistan, he needs to engage much more in Latin America and, of course, the festering sore of the I/P issue hovers over all. Still, all that said, it is quite refreshing to see the increased attention being paid, and efforts at engagement made, by the Obama team in the short time they have been in office. It is a foundation to build on.