

Obama Signals a Shift From Military Might to Diplomacy



By MARK LANDLER: November 25, 2013

WASHINGTON — The weekend ended with the first tangible sign of a nuclear deal with Iran, after more than three decades of hostility. Then on Monday came the announcement that a conference will convene in January to try to broker an end to the civil war in Syria.

The success of either negotiation, both long sought by President Obama, is hardly assured — in fact the odds may be against them. But the two nearly simultaneous developments were vivid statements that diplomacy, the venerable but often-unsatisfying art of compromise, has once again become the centerpiece of American foreign policy.

At one level, the flurry of diplomatic activity reflects the definitive end of the post-Sept. 11 world, dominated by two major wars and a battle against Islamic terrorism that drew the United States into Afghanistan and still keeps its Predator drones flying over Pakistan and Yemen.

But it also reflects a broader scaling-back of the use of American muscle, not least in the Middle East, as well as a willingness to deal with foreign governments as they are rather than to push for new leaders

that better embody American values. “Regime change,” in Iran or even Syria, is out; cutting deals with former adversaries is in.

For Mr. Obama, the shift to diplomacy fulfills a campaign pledge from 2008 that he would stretch out a hand to America’s enemies and speak to any foreign leader without preconditions. But it will also subject him to considerable political risks, as the protests about the Iran deal from Capitol Hill and allies in the Middle East attest.

“We’re testing diplomacy; we’re not resorting immediately to military conflict,” Mr. Obama said, defending the Iran deal on Monday in San Francisco. “Tough talk and bluster may be the easy thing to do politically,” he said earlier that day, “but it’s not the right thing for our security.”

Still, diplomacy is a protracted, messy business with often inconclusive results. It is harder for a president to rally the American public behind a multilateral negotiation than a missile strike, though the deep war weariness of Americans has reinforced Mr. Obama’s instinct for negotiated settlements over unilateral action.

White House officials suggest that the president always planned to arrive at this moment, and that everything that came before it — from the troop surge in Afghanistan to the commando raid that killed Osama bin Laden — was cleaning up after his predecessor.

“In 2009, we had 180,000 troops in two wars and a ton of legacy issues surrounding terrorism,” said Benjamin J. Rhodes, a deputy national security adviser. “So much that was done out of the box was winding down those wars. We’ve shifted from a very military face on our foreign policy to a very diplomatic face on our foreign policy.”

Much of that diplomacy has been on public display in the hypercaffeinated travels of Secretary of State John Kerry, who, in addition to his work on Iran and Syria, has persuaded the Israelis and Palestinians to resume peace negotiations. A few hours after sealing the nuclear deal in Geneva, he flew to London for talks on the Syria conference.

But some of the crucial dealings have occurred in the shadows. In March, administration officials said, Mr. Obama authorized a small team of senior officials from the White House and the State Department to travel secretly to Oman, the Arab sultanate, where they met face to face with Iranian officials to explore the possibility of a nuclear deal.

The cloak-and-dagger was necessary, the officials said, because it allowed the United States and Iran to discuss the outlines of a nuclear deal without fear that details would leak out. Cutting out others eliminated the competing agendas that come with the six negotiating partners engaged in the formal Geneva talks.

But the disclosure that the United States and Iran had been talking privately angered France, which registered its displeasure two weeks ago by warning that the proposal then being discussed was too lenient and that it would not accept a “sucker’s deal.”

For all of Mr. Obama’s emphasis on diplomacy, analysts noted that the United States often depends on others to take the initiative. In the case of Iran, it was the election of Hassan Rouhani as president, with his mandate to seek a relaxation of punishing sanctions.

In the case of Syria, it was a Russian proposal for President Bashar al-Assad to turn over and destroy his chemical weapons stockpiles, an option the White House seized on as a way of averting a military strike that Mr. Obama first threatened and then backed off from.

"The C.W. deal made the Iran diplomacy much more viable and attractive to the administration," said Vali R. Nasr, the dean of the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and a former Obama administration official. But he added, "Neither in Syria or Iran is there an ambition for something larger."

Mr. Obama has called for Mr. Assad to give up power. But his diplomatic efforts on Syria have done little to bring that about, and next month's conference in Geneva is likely to demonstrate that far from negotiating his departure, Mr. Assad is digging in.

Similarly with Iran, the administration is adamant that it is negotiating what amounts to an arms-control agreement in response to a specific security threat. A broader opening to Iran — one that could make it a partner on regional issues like Syria or Afghanistan, or even open its political system — seems far-off.

In a speech to the United Nations General Assembly in September, Mr. Obama listed his priorities in the Middle East as Iran, Syria and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Promoting democratic principles, while still important, was no longer an overriding interest.

That more pragmatic approach was on display this month when Mr. Kerry visited Egypt, where the military-backed government is prosecuting its ousted president, Mohamed Morsi, and cracking down on his Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Mr. Kerry emphasized continuity with Egypt's generals and said little about their brutal tactics.

For Mr. Obama, all of this may matter less than resolving the nuclear threat from Iran, an achievement that would allow him to reduce America's preoccupation with the Middle East and turn to another of his foreign-policy priorities, Asia.

"This was a president who was elected on the promise to wind down two wars responsibly," said Bruce O. Riedel, a former administration official who is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. "He can now also say he has avoided a third war."

Before he can be sure of that, though, Mr. Obama faces the treacherous task of negotiating a final agreement. This time, the administration will have to do the bargaining with its partners, and it faces vocal skepticism from Israel and members of Congress.

"The Iran talks are a four-ring circus," said R. Nicholas Burns, a former under secretary of state who coordinated Iran policy during the Bush administration. "This is going to be among the most complex and difficult diplomatic cases ever."

"We're trying to deal with very difficult, cynical countries through different means," said Mr. Burns, who now teaches at Harvard, where he has started the Future of Diplomacy Project. "But the public is weary; they want us to work things out without fighting."
