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New world order arrives in Middle East and West is playing catch-up

Here in Canada and in Europe, while the news has been all about Tunisia, Egypt and Libya for weeks, our political leaders carry on regardless, blithely debating the size of our prisons or whether to subsidize sports arenas, while the world is being reshaped.

By Brian Lee Crowley

In the Middle East disappearing dictators signal the collapse of another piece of the Cold War's architecture, more than two decades after the fall of the Berlin Wall sealed the fate of Communism and the Soviet Union. This is no mere historical oddity, however, for the unpredictable result may well profoundly reshape our world.

Anyone younger than about 35 knows the Cold War only as an historical fact, like Confederation, the American Civil War, or the French Revolution. It forms no part of their direct experience.

Yet to the preceding generation it was the defining fact of world politics. On the management of the conflict between two opposing camps everything depended—right down to the survival of humanity.

Because the consequences of direct conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union were unthinkable, much of the superpower rivalry was carried out by proxy regimes, as one side or the other sought to extend its reach or to parry a thrust from the other side.

American governments were shaken to their foundations by the "loss" of a country like China or Cuba to the other side in the global chess game. Wars were fought against communist insurgencies, sometimes successfully, as in Malaysia, sometimes unsuccessfully, as in Vietnam.

Crucially to the events unfolding in the Middle East, the value to the West of client regimes was not their internal politics, but rather their willingness to stand against the spread of the ideology and the economic system of the other side. The Eastern Bloc was not constrained by niceties such as the rule of law, democratic freedoms, or respect for minorities. What was needed was people with the stomach to carry out a very nasty conflict.

Brutal regimes in some of the world's most unstable places were the result, including in the Middle East. Despots who could guarantee at least neutrality or at best homes for military bases and the ruthless rooting out of insurgents, could almost always find a superpower patron. Such despots, including Egypt's colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, could often play one side off against the other, finely

calibrating their military and diplomatic stance to win military and economic support from the west or the east, depending on circumstances.

But the yearning for freedom and self-determination of the people in these countries never went away, for these things are deeply rooted in the human spirit. They could, however, be driven underground by brutal regimes with the military and economic backing of faraway superpowers who cared little for the price paid in local misery for the prize of global stability.

The end of the Cold War knocked away the system's main prop: the West's rivalry with the now defunct Eastern Bloc. The system has limped on, especially in the Middle East, but for more diffuse and less compelling reasons of American foreign policy: protecting Israel, containing Iran, battling Muslim extremism, maintaining orderly oil markets and ensuring the free flow of trade along some of the world's most crucial maritime routes.

Rather than playing an active role in managing the transition of these previously despotic regimes toward more openness, democracy and the rule of law, however, America has throughout the events of the past few weeks looked increasingly like a flustered first-time spectator at a soccer match: unsure who to cheer for and unclear on the rules of the game.

Apparently dimly aware that the regime falling in Egypt, for example, has been a pillar of its own Middle East policy but wishing to appear supportive of popular demands for reform, the Obama administration has achieved the worst of all possible worlds. On the one hand, they have signalled to their traditional friends, in the House of Saud and elsewhere, that they are fair-weather friends. On the other hand, their tepid support for legitimate popular demands and limp response to outrages such as Libya's Colonel Gaddafi's bombing of protesters have left the revolutionaries with the clear impression that America is not their friend either.

Nor has President Barack Obama been able to use his much-vaunted rhetorical skills to rally his fellow Americans and the rest of the western alliance to a common understanding of the events sweeping a region crucial to the world's peace and well-being. Here in Canada and in Europe, while the news has been all about Tunisia, Egypt and Libya for weeks, our political leaders carry on regardless, blithely debating the size of our prisons or whether to subsidize sports arenas, while the world is being reshaped before our eyes. The consequences for good or ill may be momentous, especially if the Egyptian revolution goes wrong. High-minded democrats are not the only ones who may end up occupying newly vacant presidential palaces.

If ever there was a moment for inspired leadership in Western nations, this is it. But apparently no one is minding the shop.

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