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From: [REDACTED]

To: jhendel@upi.com, [REDACTED]

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TWO MISSION IMPOSSIBLES

by

Harlan Ullman

May 17th, 2011

During World War I and the height of the German U-Boat campaign in the Atlantic that was sinking scores of ships and killing thousands of civilians, the great American humorist Will Rogers was asked for his solution to ending the submarine threat. Rogers replied “boil off the oceans” realizing the impossibility of his advice. When chided for such nonsense, Rogers responded that he was only a “policy man.” Carrying out that policy was in the preserve of others.

That anecdote is relevant to this column. Despite the raid to kill or capture Osama bin Laden that achieved the former two weeks ago, international events have not been going well for the United States and the Obama administration. While Senator John Kerry’s visit to Islamabad this past weekend defused many issues, U.S.-Pakistani relations remain fragile. Anti-Americanism had soared over what most Pakistanis decried as a violation of territorial sovereignty with most Americans incredulous that bin Laden could have lived in open sight for several years without support or aid from inside Pakistan. How the next chapter in this saga ends is far from certain. But the ending may not be happy unless both sides remain allies and friends.

In North Africa and the Middle East, the Arab spring is rapidly chilling into a winter of discontent. In Egypt, the Muslim Brotherhood with a notorious history and uncertain loyalties plans to run a candidate for president. Sectarian conflict with Muslims killing Coptic Christians has broken out. And outside aid critical to bringing jobs and economic growth to Egypt is still pending.

In Libya, there is a growing schism between British Prime Minister David Cameron and President Barack Obama over the limited application of American military power to force Colonel Moammar Qaddafi from office. Within the UK, HM Treasury is already complaining that in an age of fiscal austerity Britain cannot afford the costs of this military engagement for an extended period. And in Afghanistan, Cameron has turned down certain American operational requests whether for pique over Libya or the consequences of an empty billfold.

In the Gulf, Saudi Arabia is expressing great unhappiness with American policy and has not so subtly signaled that Riyadh will follow a more independent policy given its perception of

Washington's many failures emanating from the ill-conceived Iraq war that have empowered Iran to pressuring the Saudis not to take a stand in supporting Bahrain and deploying forces to help the ruling family. Riyadh also believes the Obama administration has mishandled the Arab spring and its veto of the UN Resolution censuring Israel over expanding illegal settlements into East Jerusalem robbed Washington of any objectivity in Saudi eyes in bringing peace to the Middle East.

President Obama plans to make a major speech on the Middle East Thursday. However, the resignation of former Senator George Mitchell as special envoy to the Middle East is a further sign of the intractability of the Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the absence of either flexibility or imagination in shaping positive outcomes. That conflict further fuels Iranian ambitions as well as Jihadi-inspired terrorism in the region. And this is without any discussion of Syria, Yemen and a multitude of other hot spots.

Granted the proverbial three wishes, two could be immediately cashed to deal with among the greatest dangers to regional and global stability---the Indo-Pakistan and Arab-Israeli-Palestinian conflicts. If New Delhi and Islamabad could be brought closer to a rapprochement, the effects would be profound and relatively instantaneous. The threat of a potential nuclear collision over another Mumbai-like terrorist attack could be eliminated. Solutions to Afghanistan could be found. And through India, Pakistan could find an economic engine of growth through trade and passage that is essential to coping with the woeful standard of living confronting too many Pakistanis.

Similarly, an enforceable and just peace among Israel, Palestine and the Arab world surely would strike a blow against terrorism and radical Islam as certain as a bullet ended Osama bin Laden's life. That would require, of course, resolution of previously impossibly divisive issues such as right of return; recognition of Israel; disposition of Jerusalem; and renouncing of violence by all parties. Sadly, the chances of either of these wishes taking root are perhaps less than Will Roger's solution to the U-Boat crisis.

With elections in the United States and other major countries set for 2012, it is clear that domestic politics will put any major foreign policy initiatives on hold. But someone, in both American political parties, must be thinking about what happens in 2013 and beyond.

This is not 1968 and a Nixon who would go to China moment. Ironically, the times today may be more dangerous. While wishes are not solutions, if there is to be a more peaceful and stable globe, the path must through tackling these two missions impossible.

Harlan Ullman is Chairman of the Killowen Group that advises leaders of government and business and Senior Advisor at Washington, D.C.'s Atlantic Council.

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