By Reva Bhalla

The Obama administration is only one and a half months into the job, but between pressing "reset buttons" with the Russians, reaching out to the Europeans, talking about reconciling with the Taliban, extending invitations to the Iranians and rubbing elbows with the Syrians, this is already one of the most diplomatically active U.S. administrations in quite some time.

During the campaign, now-President Barack Obama made the controversial statement that he was prepared to speak to adversaries, including countries like Iran. This position was part of a general critique by Obama of the Bush administration,

which Obama said enclosed itself diplomatically, refusing to engage either adversaries or allies critical of the United States. Now, Obama is sending emissaries across the globe to restart dialogue everywhere from Europe to the Middle East to South Asia to Russia. For Obama, these conversations are the prelude to significant movement in the international arena.

From a geopolitical perspective, that people are talking is far less important than what they are saying, which in turn matters far less than what each side is demanding and willing to concede. Engagement can be a prelude to accommodation, or an alternative to serious bargaining. At the moment, it is far too early to tell which the present U.S. diplomatic flurry will turn out to be. And of course, some of the diplomatic initiatives might succeed while others fail.

Nevertheless, as the global diplomatic offensive takes place, we must consider whether Obama is prepared to make substantive shifts in U.S. policy or whether he will expect concessions in exchange for a different diplomatic atmosphere alone. Since Obama and his foreign policy team are too sophisticated to expect the latter, we must examine the details of the various conversations. In this case more than others, the devil is very much in the details.

Russia

The Obama administration has made clear to Russia its desire to reset its relations with Russia, with Clinton even presenting a red "reset button" as a gift to her counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, on March 6 at a NATO summit in Geneva. But the Russians want to clarify how far the Americans really intend to rewind the tape. The 2004 Orange Revolution and NATO's reach to the Baltics crystallized Moscow's fears that the United States intends to encircle and destabilize Russia in its former Soviet periphery through NATO expansion and support for the color revolutions. Since then, Russia has been resurgent. Moscow has worked aggressively to reclaim and consolidate its influence in the Russian near abroad for its long-term security while the United States remains preoccupied in its war with the jihadists.

The Russians are pushing for a grand deal that guarantees a rollback of NATO expansion to Georgia and Ukraine, scraps plans for U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD), maintains some

semblance of Russian nuclear parity in post-Cold War treaties, and ensures Western noninterference in a region that runs from the Baltics down through Eastern Europe and across the Caucasus and Central Asia -- what Russia views as its rightful sphere of influence. Only then can Russia feel secure from the West, and confident it will remain a major player in Eurasia in the long run. In return, the Russians theoretically could make life easier for the Americans by cooperating with Washington against Iran and increasing support for U.S. operations in Afghanistan through the expansion of an alternate supply route -- two key issues that address the most pressing threats to U.S. national security interests in the near term, but which may not be entirely worth the strategic concessions Moscow is demanding

of Washington.

So far, the Obama administration has responded to Russia's demands by restarting talks on the START I nuclear armaments treaty in exchange for Moscow allowing U.S. nonmilitary goods bound for Afghanistan to transit Russia and Central Asia. The Russians responded by permitting some supplies bound for Afghanistan to pass through the former Soviet Union as an opening toward broader talks. The United States then privately offered to roll back its plans for BMD in Central Europe if Russia would pressure Iran into making concessions on Tehran's nuclear program. But the Russians have signaled already that such piecemeal diplomacy will not cut it, and that the United States will need to make broader concessions that more adequately address Moscow's core national security interests before the Russians can be expected to sacrifice a relationship with a strategic Middle East ally.

At the Geneva NATO summit, Clinton upped the offer to the Russians when she signaled that the United States might even be willing to throw in a halt to NATO expansion, thereby putting at risk a number of U.S. allies in the former Soviet Union that rely on the United States to protect them from a resurgent Russia. This gesture will set the stage for Obama's upcoming trip to Russia to meet with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, but the Russians will be watching closely to see if such gestures are being made for the sake of public diplomacy or if the United States really intends to get down to business.

Europe

In Europe, Obama is dealing with allies rather than adversaries, but even here his administration's work does not get any easier. The willingness of Obama to talk with the Europeans far more than his predecessor is less important than what Obama intends to demand of NATO, and what those NATO members are capable of delivering.

A prime example is how Washington is requesting the Europeans to commit more NATO forces to the war in Afghanistan now that the United States feels ready to shift gears from Iraq. Despite their enthusiasm for Obama, the Europeans are not on the same page as the Americans on NATO, especially when it comes to Afghanistan. The U.S. argument for strengthening NATO's commitment to Afghanistan is that failure to do so would recreate the conditions necessary for al Qaeda to rebuild its ability to carry out transcontinental attacks against the West, putting both European and American cities at risk. But the Europeans (for the most part) view a long-term war effort in Afghanistan without a clear strategy or realistic objectives as a futile drain on

resources. After all, the British -- who currently have the largest European contingent in Afghanistan -- remember well their own ugly and drawn-out efforts to pacify the region in three brutal wars in the 19th and early 20th centuries, eac

h won by Afghan tribesmen.

This disagreement goes beyond the question of Afghanistan to a long-standing debate over NATO's intended security mission. NATO was formed during the Cold War as a U.S.-dominated security alliance designed to protect the European continent from internal and external Soviet aggression. Since the end of the Cold War, however, NATO's scope has widened, with only limited agreement among members over whether the alliance should even be dealing with the broader 21st century challenges of counterterrorism, cyberattacks, climate change and energy security. More important, NATO has pushed up against Russia's borders with its expansion to the Baltics and talk of integrating Georgia and Ukraine, worrying some states that they may need to bear the burden of Washington's hardball tactics against the Russians. Germany, which is dependent on Russians for energy, has no interest in restarting another Cold War. The French have more room to maneuver than the Germans in dealing with a powerful

player like Russia. But the French can only work effectively with the Russians as long as Paris avoids getting (permanently) on Moscow's bad side, something U.S.-dominated policy of trying to resurrect NATO as a major military force could bring about.

Before taking any further steps in Afghanistan, the Europeans, including those Central and Eastern Europeans who mostly take a hard-line stance against Moscow, first want to know how Obama intends to deal with the Russians. Even with the Poles going one way in trying to boost NATO security and the Germans going the other in trying to bargain with Russia, none of the European states can really move until U.S. policy toward Russia comes into focus. The last thing the Poles would want to do is to take an unflinching stance against Moscow only to have the United States cancel BMD plans, for example. Conversely, the United States is unable to formulate a firm policy on Afghanistan or Russia until it knows where the Europeans will end up standing on NATO, their commitment to Afghanistan and their relationship with Russia. Add to this classic chicken-and-egg dilemma a financial crisis that has left Europe much worse off than the United States, and the gap between U.S. and European i

nterests starts to look as wide as the Atlantic itself.

Iran

Talking to Iran was a major theme of Obama's campaign, and the first big step in following through with this pledge was made March 5 when Clinton extended an invitation to Iran to participate in a multilateral conference on Afghanistan, thereby recognizing Iran's influential role in the region. There is also an expectation that after Iran gets through elections in June, the United States could move beyond the multilateral setting to engage the Iranians bilaterally.

The idea of the United States talking to Iran is not a new concept. In fact, the United States and Iran were talking a great deal behind the scenes in 2001 in the lead-up to the war in Afghanistan

that toppled the Taliban and in 2003 during the precursor to the war in Iraq that toppled Saddam Hussein. In both of these cases, core mutual interests brought the two rivals to the negotiating table. Iran, facing hostile Sunni powers to its west and east, had a golden opportunity to address its historical security dilemma in one fell swoop and then use the emerging political structures in Iraq and Afghanistan to spread Persian power in the wider region. The United States, knocked off balance by 9/11, needed Iranian cooperation to facilitate the Iraq and Afghanistan invasions to uproot al Qaeda and intimidate al Qaeda state-sponsors into working with Washington.

U.S.-Iranian relations have been rocky (to say the least), but have reached a point where it is now politically acceptable for both openly to discuss U.S.-Iranian cooperation on issues related to Iraq and Afghanistan, where the Iranians hold influence and where the United States is still engaged militarily.

Iran knows that even with the United States drawing down from Iraq, Washington will still maintain a strategic agreement with Baghdad that could be used as a launchpad for U.S. designs in the region as it works to protect Sunni Arabs from Iranian expansionist goals. At the same time, Washington has come to realize that its influence in Baghdad will have to be shared with the Iranians given their geographic proximity and clout among large segments of the Iraqi Shia.

Though U.S. and Iranian interests overlap enough to the point that the two cannot avoid working with each other, negotiating a power-sharing agreement has not come easily. In Iraq, Tehran needs to consolidate Shiite influence, contain Sunni power and prevent the country from posing a future security threat to Iran's western frontier. In addition, the Iranians are looking for the United States to recognize its regional sphere of influence and accept the existence of an Iranian nuclear program. The United States, on the other hand, needs to defend the interests of Israel and its Sunni allies and wants Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions (or at least place real curbs on its nuclear program) and end its support for militant proxies. Though Washington and Tehran have made some progress in their diplomatic dialogue, the demands of each remain just as intractable. As a result, the U.S.-Iranian negotiations start and stop in spurts without any real willingness on either side to fol

low through in addressing the other's respective core demands.

In reaching out to Iran over Afghanistan, the Obama administration is now trying to inject more confidence into the larger negotiations by recognizing Iran as a player in Kabul in return for intelligence sharing and potential logistical cooperation in supporting the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan. But as much as Iran enjoys the recognition and shares an interest in preventing jihadist spillover into its territory, the Iranian regime is not about to offer its full cooperation on an issue as big as Afghanistan as long as the United States avoids addressing issues that the Iranians deem more central to their national security interests (e.g., Iraq.) Complicating matters further at this juncture is Iranian displeasure over U.S. talk of speaking to the Taliban, a long-time enemy of Tehran that the Iranians will fight to keep contained, but with which the United States needs to engage if it has any hope of settling Afghanistan.

The Taliban

Obama told the New York Times in a March 6 interview that the United States is not winning the war in Afghanistan, and that in addition to sending more troops, his strategy for the war might include approaching elements of the Afghan Taliban. While he acknowledged that the situation in Afghanistan is more complex, he related the idea to the successful U.S. strategy of reaching out to Iraqi Sunni nationalists to undercut the al Qaeda presence in Iraq.

The idea of negotiating with the Taliban to split the insurgency has been thrown around for some time now, but just talking about talking to the Taliban raises a number of issues. First, the United States is fighting a war of perception as much as it is fighting battles against die-hard jihadists. So far, Obama has approved 17,000 additional U.S. troops to be deployed to Afghanistan, but even double that number is unlikely to convince Taliban insurgents that the United States is willing or even capable of fighting this war in the long run. The Taliban and their allies in al Qaeda and various other radical Islamist groups are pursuing a strategy of exhaustion where success is not measured in the number of battles won, but rather the ability to outlast the occupier. Considering that Afghanistan's mountainous, barren terrain, sparse population centers and lack of governance have historically denied every outside occupier success in pacifying the country, the prospects for the Un

ited States are not good in this war.

Talk of reconciliation with the Taliban from a U.S. position of weakness raises the question of how the United States can actually parse out those Taliban members who can be reconciled. It also raises the question of whether those members will be willing to put their personal security on the line by accepting an offer to start talks when the United States itself is admitting it is on the losing side of the war. Most important, it is unclear to us what the United States can actually offer these Taliban elements, especially as Washington simultaneously attempts to negotiate with the Iranians and the Russians, neither of which want to live next door to a revived Taliban and both of which must cooperate with the United States if Washington is to be able to fight the war in the first place.

Syria

After exchanging a few words with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem in Egypt on March 2, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton dispatched two emissaries in what was the highest-level U.S. delegation to Syria in four years. The March 7 visit came on the heels of a British announcement that London will be resuming talks with Hezbollah's political wing -- a move likely made in close coordination with the Americans.

The Americans want Syria to end its support for militant proxies like Hezbollah and stop interfering in Lebanese affairs. But Syrian dominance over Lebanon is non-negotiable from the Syrian point of view. Lebanon historically has been Syria's economic, political and military outlet to the Mediterranean basin, allowing Syria to play a prominent role in the region. If Damascus is not in control of Lebanon, then Syria is poor and isolated. Even though the Americans and the Syrians are holding talks again, it is still unclear that Washington is willing to accept Syrian

demands regarding Lebanon. And unless the United States is, these talks are guaranteed to remain in limbo.

That said, there may be more to these talks then meets the eye. Instead of rushing to cater to Syrian demands over Lebanon, the United States is probably more interested in using the Syrian talks (largely a Turkish-backed initiative) to send a positive signal to Turkey -- a resurgent regional power with the ability to influence matters in the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Balkans. Turkey is beginning to throw its weight in the region around again, and will have a major say in how the United States interacts with states that Ankara perceives are in the Turkish sphere of influence (Syria and Iraq, for example). The United States will need Turkish cooperation in the months and years ahead, particularly as it reduces its military presence in Iraq and attempts to deal with another resurgent power, Russia. It comes as little surprise, then, that one of Obama's first major trips abroad will be to Ankara. Rather than revealing any true U.S. interest to accommodate t

he Syrians, the U.S. diplomatic opening to Syria is more likely a gesture to the Turks, whose agenda for the Middle East includes reshaping Damascus's behavior through negotiations with the United States and Israel and containing Iran's regional ambitions.

Back to Reality

Obama has put into motion a global diplomatic offensive fueled by a dizzying array of special envoys designed to change the dynamic of its relations with key allies like the Europeans and adversaries like the Russians, the Taliban, the Iranians and the Syrians. This diplomatic blitzkrieg may spin the press into a frenzy. But once we look beyond the handshakes, press conferences and newspaper headlines and drill down into the core, unadulterated demands of each player in question, it becomes clear that such a diplomatic offensive actually could end up yielding very little of substance if it fails to address the real issues.

This is not a fault of the administration, but the reality of geopolitics. The ability of any political leader to effect change is not principally determined by his or her own desires, but by external factors. In dealing with any one of these adversaries individually, the administration is bound to hit walls. In trying to balance the interests between adversaries and allies, the walls only become reinforced. Add to that additional constraints in dealing with Congress and the need to maintain approval ratings -- not to mention trying to manage a global recession -- and the space to maneuver becomes much tighter. We must also remember that this is an administration that has not even been in power for two months. Formulating policy on issues of this scale takes several months at the least, and more likely years before the United States actually figures out what it wants and what it can actually do. No amount of power delegation to special envoys will change that. In fact, it cou

ld even confuse matters when bureaucratic rivalries kick in and the chain of command begins to blur.

Whether the policymakers are sitting in an Afghan cave or in the Kremlin, they will not find this surprising. As is widely known, presidential transitions take time, and diplomatic engagements

to feel out various positions are a natural part of the process. Tacit offers can be made, bits of negotiations will be leaked, but as long as each player questions the ability of Washington to follow through in any sort of "grand bargain," these talks are unlikely to result in any major breakthroughs. So far, Obama has demonstrated that he can talk the diplomatic talk. The real question is whether he can walk the geopolitical walk.