By George Friedman

During the 2008 U.S. presidential campaign, now-U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said that like all U.S. presidents, Barack Obama would face a foreign policy test early in his presidency if elected. That test is now here.

His test comprises two apparently distinct challenges, one in Afghanistan and one in Iran. While different problems, they have three elements in common. First, they involve the question of his administration's overarching strategy in the Islamic world. Second, the problems are approaching decision points (and making no decision represents a decision here). And third, they are playing out very differently than Obama expected during the 2008 campaign.

During the campaign, Obama portrayed the Iraq war as a massive mistake diverting the United States from Afghanistan, the true center of the "war on terror." He accordingly promised to shift the focus away from Iraq and back to Afghanistan. Obama's views on Iran were more amorphous. He supported the doctrine that Iran should not be permitted to obtain nuclear weapons, while at the same time asserted that engaging Iran was both possible and desirable. Embedded in the famous argument over whether offering talks without preconditions was appropriate (something now-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton attacked him for during the Democratic primary) was the idea that the problem with Iran stemmed from Washington's refusal to engage in talks with Tehran.

We are never impressed with campaign positions, or with the failure of the victorious candidate to live up to them. That's the way American politics work. But in this case, these promises have created a dual crisis that Obama must make decisions about now.

Iran

Back in April, in the midst of the financial crisis, Obama reached an agreement at the G-8 meeting that the Iranians would have until Sept. 24 and the G-20 meeting to engage in meaningful talks with the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany (P-5+1) or face intensely increased sanctions. His administration was quite new at the time, so the amount of thought behind this remains unclear. On one level, the financial crisis was so intense and September so far away that Obama and his team probably saw this as a means to delay a secondary matter while more important fires were flaring up.

But there was more operating than that. Obama intended to try to bridge the gap between the Islamic world and the United States between April and September. In his speech to the Islamic world from Cairo, he planned to show a desire not only to find common ground, but also to acknowledge shortcomings in U.S. policy in the region. With the appointment of special envoys George Mitchell (for Israel and the Palestinian territories) and Richard Holbrooke (for Pakistan

and Afghanistan), Obama sought to build on his opening to the Islamic world with intense diplomatic activity designed to reshape regional relationships.

It can be argued that the Islamic masses responded positively to Obama's opening — it has been asserted to be so and we will accept this — but the diplomatic mission did not solve the core problem. Mitchell could not get the Israelis to move on the settlement issue, and while Holbrooke appears to have made some headway on increasing Pakistan's aggressiveness toward the Taliban, no fundamental shift has occurred in the Afghan war.

Most important, no major shift has occurred in Iran's attitude toward the United States and the P-5+1 negotiating group. In spite of Obama's Persian New Year address to Iran, the Iranians did not change their attitude toward the United States. The unrest following Iran's contested June presidential election actually hardened the Iranian position. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad remained president with the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, while the so-called moderates seemed powerless to influence their position. Perceptions that the West supported the demonstrations have strengthened Ahmadinejad's hand further, allowing him to paint his critics as pro-Western and himself as an Iranian nationalist.

But with September drawing to a close, talks have still not begun. Instead, they will begin Oct. 1. And last week, the Iranians chose to announce that not only will they continue work on their nuclear program (which they claim is not for military purposes), they have a second, hardened uranium enrichment facility near Qom. After that announcement, Obama, British Prime Minister Gordon Brown and French President Nicolas Sarkozy held a press conference saying they have known about the tunnel for several months, and warned of stern consequences.

This, of course, raises the question of what consequences. Obama has three choices in this regard.

First, he can impose crippling sanctions against Iran. But that is possible only if the Russians cooperate. Moscow has the rolling stock and reserves to supply all of Iran's fuel needs if it so chooses, and Beijing can also remedy any Iranian fuel shortages. Both Russia and China have said they don't want sanctions; without them on board, sanctions are meaningless.

Second, Obama can take military action against Iran, something easier politically and diplomatically for the United States to do itself rather than rely on Israel. By itself, Israel cannot achieve air superiority, suppress air defenses, attack the necessary number of sites and attempt to neutralize Iranian mine-laying and anti-ship capability all along the Persian Gulf. Moreover, if Israel struck on its own and Iran responded by mining the Strait of Hormuz, the United States would be drawn into at least a naval war with Iran — and probably would have to complete the Israeli airstrikes, too.

And third, Obama could choose to do nothing (or engage in sanctions that would be the equivalent of doing nothing). Washington could see future Iranian nuclear weapons as an acceptable risk. But the Israelis don't, meaning they would likely trigger the second scenario. It is possible that the United States could try to compel Israel not to strike — though it's not clear whether Israel would comply — something that would leave Obama publicly accepting Iran's

nuclear program.

And this, of course, would jeopardize Obama's credibility. It is possible for the French or Germans to waffle on this issue; no one is looking to them for leadership. But for Obama simply to acquiesce to Iranian nuclear weapons, especially at this point, would have significant diplomatic and domestic political ramifications. Simply put, Obama would look weak — and that, of course, is why the Iranians announced the second nuclear site. They read Obama as weak, and they want to demonstrate their own resolve. That way, if the Russians were thinking of cooperating with the United States on sanctions, Moscow would be seen as backing the weak player against the strong one. The third option, doing nothing, therefore actually represents a significant action.

Afghanistan

In a way, the same issue is at stake in Afghanistan. Having labeled Afghanistan as critical — indeed, having campaigned on the platform that the Bush administration was fighting the wrong war — it would be difficult for Obama to back down in Afghanistan. At the same time, the U.S. commander in Afghanistan, Gen. Stanley McChrystal, has reported that without a new strategy and a substantial increase in troop numbers, failure in Afghanistan is likely.

The number of troops being discussed, 30,000-40,000, would bring total U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan to just above the number of troops the Soviet Union deployed there in its war (just under 120,000) — a war that ended in failure. The new strategy being advocated would be one in which the focus would not be on the defeat of the Taliban by force of arms, but the creation of havens for the Afghan people and protecting those havens from the Taliban.

A move to the defensive when time is on your side is not an unreasonable strategy. But it is not clear that time is on Western forces' side. Increased offensives are not weakening the Taliban. But halting attacks and assuming that the Taliban will oblige the West by moving to the offensive, thereby opening itself to air and artillery strikes, probably is not going to happen. And while assuming that the country will effectively rise against the Taliban out of the protected zones the United States has created is interesting, it does not strike us as likely. The Taliban is fighting the long war because it has nowhere else to go. Its ability to maintain military and political cohesion following the 2001 invasion has been remarkable. And betting that the Pakistanis will be effective enough to break the Taliban's supply lines is hardly the most prudent bet.

In short, Obama's commander on the ground has told him the current Afghan strategy is failing. He has said that unless that strategy changes, more troops won't help, and that a change of strategy will require substantially more troops. But when we look at the proposed strategy and the force levels, it is far from obvious that even that level of commitment will stand a chance of achieving meaningful results quickly enough before the forces of Washington's NATO allies begin to withdraw and U.S. domestic resolve erodes further.

Obama has three choices in Afghanistan. He can continue to current strategy and force level, hoping to prolong failure long enough for some undefined force to intervene. He can follow

McChrystal's advice and bet on the new strategy. Or he can withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan. Once again, doing nothing — the first option — is doing something quite significant.

The Two Challenges Come Together

The two crises intermingle in this way: Every president is tested in foreign policy, sometimes by design and sometimes by circumstance. Frequently, this happens at the beginning of his term as a result of some problem left by his predecessor, a strategy adopted in the campaign or a deliberate action by an antagonist. How this happens isn't important. What is important is that Obama's test is here. Obama at least publicly approached the presidency as if many of the problems the United States faced were due to misunderstandings about or the thoughtlessness of the United States. Whether this was correct is less important than that it left Obama appearing eager to accommodate his adversaries rather than confront them.

No one has a clear idea of Obama's threshold for action.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban takes the view that the British and Russians left, and that the Americans will leave, too. We strongly doubt that the force level proposed by McChrystal will be enough to change their minds. Moreover, U.S. forces are limited, with many still engaged in Iraq. In any case, it isn't clear what force level would suffice to force the Taliban to negotiate or capitulate — and we strongly doubt that there is a level practical to contemplate.

In Iran, Ahmadinejad clearly perceives that challenging Obama is low-risk and high reward. If he can finally demonstrate that the United States is unwilling to take military action regardless of provocations, his own domestic situation improves dramatically, his relationship with the Russians deepens, and most important, his regional influence — and menace — surges. If Obama accepts Iranian nukes without serious sanctions or military actions, the American position in the Islamic world will decline dramatically. The Arab states in the region rely on the United States to protect them from Iran, so U.S. acquiescence in the face of Iranian nuclear weapons would reshape U.S. relations in the region far more than a hundred Cairo speeches.

There are four permutations Obama might choose in response to the dual crisis. He could attack Iran and increase forces in Afghanistan, but he might well wind up stuck in a long-term war in Afghanistan. He could avoid that long-term war by withdrawing from Afghanistan and also ignore Iran's program, but that would leave many regimes reliant on the United States for defense against Iran in the lurch. He could increase forces in Afghanistan and ignore Iran — probably yielding the worst of all possible outcomes, namely, a long-term Afghan war and an Iran with a nuclear program if not nuclear weapons.

On pure logic, history or politics aside, the best course is to strike Iran and withdraw from Afghanistan. That would demonstrate will in the face of a significant challenge while perhaps reshaping Iran and certainly avoiding a drawn-out war in Afghanistan. Of course, it is easy for those who lack power and responsibility — and the need to govern — to provide logical choices. But the forces closing in on Obama are substantial, and there are many competing considerations in play.

Presidents eventually arrive at the point where something must be done, and where doing nothing is very much doing something. At this point, decisions can no longer be postponed, and each choice involves significant risk. Obama has reached that point, and significantly, in his case, he faces a double choice. And any decision he makes will reverberate.