



Kishore Mahbubani

November 18, 2013

[Share](#) [Clip this](#) [Print](#) [Email](#)[f Share](#) 2[T](#) Tweet 6[FT Comments](#) 5

AMERICA • FOREIGN POLICY • MIDDLE EAST • WORLD

## Time for Obama to deploy his cunning in the MidEast

Sadly, the political correctness that has swept western societies has smothered an appreciation of the virtues of cunning. Yet it was cunning that enabled the west to dominate the world. The only way 100,000 British troops could hold down 300m Indians was to use cunning tactics such as divide and rule. Today, as the west seeks to manage its decline gracefully as well as protect its long-term security, the deployment of cunning has grown ever more imperative. And, if the west could deploy cunning once more, it could enhance both its own and global interests. Here is one simple cunning plan US President Barack Obama could try.

First, he should even more enthusiastically endorse Hassan Rouhani's plan to solve the dispute over Tehran's nuclear programme. At a small private lunch with New York luminaries, the Iranian president spelt out a simple deal. First, Iran should, as a matter of principle, be allowed access to peaceful use of nuclear energy. This is a right it has under the nuclear non-proliferation treaty (NPT). Second, in a reciprocal gesture, Iran would allow the International Atomic Energy Agency full access to all its nuclear plants to prove it has no nuclear bomb.

Mr Rouhani was being very cunning in proposing such a deal. As he told the New York luminaries, none of Iran's neighbours now threatens Iran. George W Bush had eliminated the two threats to the country: the Taliban and Saddam Hussein (leading a prominent Indian journalist to comment mischievously in private that the former US president had in effect become the Mahdi for whom the Iranian Shia had long been waiting for to save them). Mr Rouhani made a simple but indisputable point: a nuclear bomb would only enhance Iran's insecurity. By contrast, the absence of a bomb would allow the nation to emerge naturally as the dominant power in the Gulf: its sheer size would deliver this happy result.

If Mr Obama could be equally cunning and embrace Mr Rouhani's "no nuclear bomb" plan, he could gain a big geopolitical victory: peace between Israel and Palestine. How? By embracing the proposal, he would drive the leaders of

Israel and Saudi Arabia to desperation. Indeed, he has already done so by talking to Mr Rouhani. Now he should ensure both countries realise that, to balance Iran's growing influence, they have no choice but to co-operate with each other. There is only one problem preventing co-operation: Palestine.

Fortunately, King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has developed a viable two-state-solution plan that he passed to New York Times journalist Thomas Friedman in February 2002. The Palestinians should also become cunning and actively push this plan, along with one further cunning dimension: acceptance of total demilitarisation of the Palestinian territory. Why? Palestinian weaponry cannot match Israeli weaponry. But the Palestinians have an even bigger trump card: of all the Arab societies, they have the greatest capacity to modernise. The fundamental reason for the acute despair in the Arab world is that it has not one (repeat, not one) modernised Arab society to inspire it, in the way Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore inspired and uplifted Asian societies. Only Palestine has the potential to become a Singapore — by replicating the best practices of Israeli civilian society, just as Singapore has replicated some of the best practices of Japanese civilian society. And if this, in turn, inspires modernisation and development in the Arab world, both Israel and Saudi Arabia would then have created the critical mass to balance the weight of Iran in the Gulf.

To achieve this outcome, one other party has to deploy cunning: the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. So far it has been sincere but boneheaded in its defence of Israel. By creating an “iron shield” of absolute security for Israel in the short term, it is generating absolute insecurity in the long term by preventing the country from making the careful and sensitive pragmatic adjustments that any small nation has to make with its neighbours. This is why Lee Kuan Yew, former prime minister of Singapore, once said that Singapore had learnt from Israel how to acquire military superiority and had also learnt how not to use it.

If modernisation and development sweep the region, it will also change the local chemistry. This is the reason Myanmar is not suffering the woes of Syria: regional chemistry influences its military leaders. And this would be the ultimate cunning result if Mr Obama cunningly embraced Mr Rouhani's plan. It would also lead to the gradual transformation of Iranian society. No, it would not lead to the sudden collapse of the theocratic regime; this a futile wish on the part of the west. But yes, it could lead to Iran gradually opening windows to the world. Slowly, it would be nudged into its destiny: to become a great civilisation once more by replicating the opening-up undertaken by China and India. Many Iranians are asking the obvious question: if we were once as great as these Asian civilisations, why are we falling behind?

The moral is clear and simple. The politics of the Middle East and the Gulf region remain byzantine. Detailed technical plans, such as the one the west has been proposing in recent talks in Geneva, will get nowhere. Mr Obama must display unusual cunning and just say “yes” to Mr Rouhani. This will trigger changes that will benefit the west and the world. A little bit of cunning goes a long way.

*The writer is dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore. His latest book is ‘The Great Convergence: Asia, the West, and the Logic of One World’*