



## JIM HOAGLAND

Contributing Editor, *The Washington Post*

**Dominique Moisi, Special Advisor at Ifri**

Igor was telling us that there were two Russias. Jim Hoagland, are there two Obamas? Sometimes, when one looks at the foreign policy of the US, it seems that the President is divided between two instincts. You had a moderate voice in the case of Carter, Cyrus Vance and a less moderate voice in Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the President was moving between advisors. Obama is surrounded by advisers that are supposedly like him, but he is two people – he seems to be shifting between a moralist instinct and a very prudent instinct. What are your answers?

**Jim Hoagland, Contributing Editor, The Washington Post**

President Obama listens to one voice, his own. He listens to argument; he wants to hear every argument there is against what he has decided and not announced, and then pursues what he already decided. You raise an interesting and important point, and that is leadership and its style. It has its consequences, and one of the President's shortcomings is that he does not look far enough ahead at the consequences of what he does.

I remember in the first days of the administration talking to one of Obama's fellow leaders after a *tete-a-tete* meeting about this new American president, and this leader made a very interesting point: "George W. Bush wanted to be liked, whereas Obama does not care. He does not care what the others think." We have seen that played out again and again in an administration that has had more success in some ways in dealing with its adversaries than its allies. It has certainly reached out far more toward its adversaries than to some key allies, and that has consequences. It fails to build up a reserve of personal relationships that can be called on in moments of crisis and difficulties. I would say that Obama's reserve tank is surprisingly low for the leader of the country which is still the world's leading economic power. You can argue about how long that will continue to be; I do not think you can argue that the US is still the world's leading military power. That is the nature of the American condition today.

It is really important to focus on a sentence he said recently, when he said that he ends wars and does not start them, and that clearly is what he wants to be remembered for as the President. Obama sees American power abroad, and this is the crux of the matter, as a glass half-empty, that is, it is a wasting asset, a declining power, although still very powerful, that has to be managed carefully. I was struck by Igor Yurgens saying that Russia has to run faster to stay in place. That is very much Obama's view of the US and what he has to do as well, because many of his decisions seem to be inconsistent with what he says at the beginning, and all presidents do that. It is the effort, essentially, of a status quo power, maintaining a certain status quo, and that is the meaning of what he did on Syria. He took an opportunity to get out of something he seemed to have promised to do, to buy time and perhaps let events rescue him from bombing Syria, which he did not want to do.

What he opted for is a solution that maintains the status quo in many ways; it legitimises Assad, it keeps Assad in place to carry out the chemical weapons agreement, and effectively abandons the opposition and the rebellion; certainly there will be no significant American support on this chemical weapons question. Similarly, it is true that the deal with Iran, if there is more than an interim agreement, will legitimise the status quo, that is, to keep Iran as a nuclear threshold state. There has been an implicit understanding between the US and Iran for some time that if Iran did not exceed threshold in nuclear development, the US would not strike Iran and would try to prevent Israel doing so. This interim agreement is one that almost automatically renews itself at the end of six months, and I can see a position where it is extended one more time and then once more after that, rather than going through all the problems a final deal creates. That would be an extension of the status quo as well.

Regarding Ukraine, the American absence on it is striking, and again it is a major part of the status quo mentality. Whether or not America could dramatically affect the Ukrainian situation is for Obama a very open question.