



Insight

John Kerry's Honeymoon Tour

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Newly-installed Secretary of State John Kerry recently returned from his first foreign trip, which was described as a “listening tour.” During the eleven-day, nine-nation swing through Europe and the Middle East, Kerry got an earful about U.S. policy toward Syria, Egypt, and Iran, while signaling increased U.S. attention to Europe. In a sense, Kerry’s honeymoon trip exhibited “something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue.”

Something old. Kerry began the trip in his old stomping grounds. He had spent a good deal of his childhood in several countries of “Old Europe” where his father was a U.S. diplomat.

This time, Kerry grappled with the fruits of an old Syria policy. Kerry stopped in Rome for a meeting with Syrian opposition members – a meeting they nearly boycotted due to frustration with the West’s tepid support. Kerry did his best to paint new assistance, \$60 million in non-lethal aid to the Syrian opposition as well as food rations and medical kits for Syrian opposition fighters, as a bold new policy. Unfortunately, more non-lethal aid will not accomplish what Kerry rightly states as necessary to end the bloodshed: to “change” Syrian President Assad’s “calculation” about his future.

To be fair, stagnant U.S. policy on Syria is not Kerry’s fault; as Senator he was more favorable towards arming the rebels and establishing safe zones. Last month it was [revealed](#) that Kerry’s predecessor, Secretary Clinton, also supported lethal assistance for the rebels, as did Defense Secretary Panetta, CIA Director Petraeus, and Joint Chiefs Chairman Dempsey. However, President Obama overrode the advice of his national security cabinet members, limiting the U.S. to non-lethal assistance only. The effect has been to bolster both Assad and [jihadist elements](#) in the opposition, including those who recently took a number of UN peacekeepers hostage in the Golan Heights region. Our old approach just isn’t working.

Something new. Kerry not only invented a new country on the eve of his trip – a slip of the tongue that produced “Kyrzakhstan,” – but also signaled a possible change of focus for U.S. foreign policy.

When Secretary Clinton took over at State, before the upheavals of the Arab Spring, she managed a strategic shift toward East Asia dubbed the “Asia pivot.” Her first foreign trip sent her to Japan, Indonesia, South Korea, and China. During his confirmation hearing, Kerry expressed skepticism about the U.S. military build-up in

Asia – a key element of the pivot – and chose a different world region for his first official travel.

It seems Europe may be getting new attention from the Obama administration. In Germany, Kerry promised to push for a U.S.-European Union free trade agreement, an initiative which has been gathering steam of late. The [pact](#) would represent the biggest trade deal in history and could boost the economies of both regions by 1.5 to 2 percent. Obama's record on free trade has thus far been less than compelling, so a major U.S.-EU trade deal would certainly mark new terrain for the administration.

Something borrowed. Kerry's meetings with leaders from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman focused on the civil war in Syria as well as their perennial concerns about a nuclear Iran. In fact, Kerry's trip coincided with yet another round of negotiations over Iran's nuclear program, which once again ended with an agreement for additional talks. Meanwhile, Iran's centrifuges keep spinning.

Obama has succeeded in efforts to increase dialogue with Iran, strengthen the international consensus, and even impose crippling sanctions. But these steps are falling far short of the ultimate goal, which is stopping Iran's nuclear progress. Clearly, the Obama administration's Iran policy is on borrowed time.

Something blue. The erudite Kerry is the first blue-blooded Secretary of State the U.S. has had in quite some time. He may feel at home in Europe, but his experience in Egypt was nothing if not awkward.

U.S. policy toward [Egypt](#) is a matter of being between the devil and the deep blue sea. In their first free elections, the Egyptian people chose the Muslim Brotherhood, a group with a troubling ideology, a questionable commitment to democracy, and an inability or unwillingness to protect fundamental human rights. Yet Egypt remains a strategically important country and the Brotherhood have not turned their backs on the U.S.-Egyptian relationship, or the Israel-Egypt peace treaty for that matter.

The Obama administration's Egypt policy has been criticized for too closely aligning with the Muslim Brotherhood. Consequently, many of Egypt's liberal activists refused to meet with Kerry during his trip. Protesters wielded [signs](#) depicting Kerry in an Islamic beard, or calling him a Brotherhood member. Kerry tried until he was blue in the face to convince Egyptians of American [neutrality](#): "I make it particularly clear today on behalf of President Obama and the American people that we come here as friends for the Egyptian people, not for one government, or one person or one party or one ideology but for the Egyptian people." But he failed to articulate any substantive change in U.S. policy that would put such concerns to rest.

As a Francophone like Kerry might say, "Sacrebleu."