

A Year of Uncertainty - Asymmetric Challenges to U.S. National Security in 2012

At the end of 2010, few could have predicted the monumental stories of 2011: the deaths of Osama bin Laden and Muammar Qaddafi, the Arab Spring, or S&P's downgrade of America's credit rating. While no one can predict what events will change the world in 2012, there's no question that the national security landscape has changed dramatically.

Unprecedented upheaval around the world has shuffled U.S. policy priorities, requiring the U.S. to reassess foreign relations and the allocation of soft power resources, while preparing for potential new threats that volatility inevitably brings.

"Is there a global tipping point for frustration? Everywhere, it seems, people said they'd had enough."¹ *Time* magazine's Person of the Year, The Protester, symbolized the struggle of populations worldwide that rallied against failed leadership, policies, and institutions. There was no greater example than the Arab Spring, which brought down dictatorships across North Africa and motivated the disenfranchised in other Middle Eastern nations. As the next spring approaches, however, progress has been pre-empted by instability and further repression.

In Egypt, the caretaker military regime shows few signs of relinquishing power, inflicting deadly force on frustrated pro-democracy protestors who have returned to Tahrir Square. Parliamentary elections in November saw a huge turnout, with the Muslim Brotherhood's Freedom and Justice Party winning more than 36% of the vote and Islamist parties winning about two-thirds.² However, local and international observers noted the elections "lacked transparency and were marred by widespread fraud and rigging."³ Egypt's economy has also suffered; tax revenues have shrunk, debt has risen, and tourism is down by 90%.⁴ Neither the Egyptian military that now controls the economy nor the victorious Islamic parties have the experience or credibility to govern or rebuild the country. Meanwhile, former president Hosni Mubarak's trial continues with a verdict expected by January 25, the revolution's anniversary.

The deaths of Muammar Qaddafi and his sons marked a new era of optimism for Libya, but the "fall of the government has kicked up tribal rivalries and exposed a vein of religious extremism."⁵ Until oil production resumes, the National Transitional Council's (NTC) difficulty in finding stable sources of income will also undermine their ability to address Libya's critical security issues. The growing cash crisis also contributes to ongoing arms proliferation. For example, the inability to pay guards leaves weapons depots unsecured. "Any loss of faith in the NTC could fractionalize the country and exacerbate an already serious security situation."⁶

Protests in Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen, were met with brute force, as the countries' ruling elite fought the Arab Spring momentum. While protests have virtually stopped in Bahrain as a result, the country's

¹ Rick Stengel, "Person of the Year Introduction," *Time*, December 14, 2011, http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2101745_2102139,00.html.

² John Leyne, "Egypt elections: Cairo protesters clash with army," *BBC News*, December 16, 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16223523>.

³ Associated Press, "Egyptian elections: opposition alleges fraud" *The Guardian*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/nov/29/egyptian-opposition-alleges-election-fraud>.

⁴ John Bradley, "The terrifying truth behind the so-called Arab Spring," *Daily Mail*, December 20, 2011, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2076355/The-terrifying-truth-called-Arab-Spring.html>.

⁵ Marc Fisher, "Arab Spring yields different outcomes in Bahrain, Egypt and Libya," *Washington Post*, December 20, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/arab-spring-yields-different-outcomes-in-bahrain-egypt-and-libya/2011/12/15/gIQAY6h57O_story.html.

⁶ Spencer Butts, "Libya's First Hurdles," *ISW in Brief*, November 10, 2011.

royal family realizes their long-term survival will require reform. The opposite is true in Syria, where President Bashar al-Assad's violent campaign against the opposition continues despite worldwide criticism and the Arab League's observer mission. The United Nations (UN) estimates over five thousand people have died in Syria since March.⁷ Protests and bloodshed continue in Yemen despite plans for a transfer of power and elections.

In a region marked more by more disarray than democracy, only Tunisia – where the Arab Spring began – has made genuine progress. The country has a new president and prime minister, an elected Constituent Assembly, and an interim constitution. Tunisia's smaller and more homogenous population, as well as a professional military uninterested in political power, made it more likely to transition than its fractious neighbors. However, as one Tunisian activist pointed out, "We are still in the middle of the revolution, it is not yet finished - you must realise that we cannot build democracy in one day."⁸

As unexpected as the Arab Spring was, few anticipated that the "spirit of dissent would spur Mexicans to rise up against the terror of drug cartels, Greeks to march against unaccountable leaders, Americans to occupy public spaces to protest income inequality, and Russians to marshal themselves against a corrupt autocracy."⁹ Since Tunisia, dissent has taken on a whole new meaning, as well as new security and policy implications.

Although planned for over year, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq also creates potential for upheaval in that country. Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, who served as the last commanding general for U.S. forces in Iraq, "predicted that the threat from the Sunni extremist organization al-Qaeda in Iraq could grow as militant groups jostle to fill the vacuum that the departing Americans leave behind. Shiite militias backed by Iran will also seek to assert their capabilities."¹⁰ Fears of destabilizing sectarian violence erupting after the departure of American troops were confirmed in late December when sixteen bombings in mostly Shiite neighborhoods of Baghdad killed at least 69 people and injured another 200. Iraq had already been dealing with charges by the Shiite government against Sunni Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi for running hit squads targeting government and security officials.¹¹

While a number of countries grapple with recreating themselves, every country faces challenges from the lagging world economy. As Christine Lagarde, head of the International Monetary Fund, noted in December, "There is no economy in the world, whether low-income countries, emerging markets, middle-income countries or super-advanced economies that will be immune to the crisis that we see not only unfolding but escalating."¹² Experts point to a potential Euro zone recession and weakening economies in China, Brazil, and India. The most optimistic outlooks call for sluggish growth, but any new challenge, such as a banking or credit crisis in Europe, could set everyone back.

⁷ Joe Sterling, Rima Maktabi and Mohamed Fadel Fahmy, "Syrian opposition cites regime 'acts of genocide'" *CNN*, December 21, 2011, http://www.cnn.com/2011/12/21/world/meast/syria-unrest/index.html?hpt=hp_t3.

⁸ Ruth Pollard, "A year of hope and bloodshed," *Sydney Morning Herald*, December 17, 2011, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/a-year-of-hope-and-bloodshed-20111216-1oyvy.html>.

⁹ Stengel, op. cit.

¹⁰ Liz Sly, "U.S. commander, Gen. Lloyd J. Austin III, predicts turbulence in Iraq," *Washington Post*, November 21, 2011, http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-commander-predicts-turbulence-ahead-in-iraq/2011/11/21/gIQAPVE4hN_story.html.

¹¹ Associated Press, "Clerics blame Iraq politicians for bombings" *CBS News*, December 23, 2011, http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-202_162-57347744/clerics-blame-iraq-politicians-for-bombings/.

¹² Martin Walker, "Walker's World: 2012 looks grim," UPI, December 19, 2011, http://www.upi.com/Top_News/Analysis/Walker/2011/12/19/Walkers-World-2012-looks-grim/UPI-87081324294200/?spt=hs&or=an.

Beyond the shorter-term financial impact, a faltering global economy may exacerbate existing socio-economic vulnerabilities. For example, two major factors behind the Arab Spring were growing income disparity and rising unemployment among each country's younger populations. These problems were also highlighted this past October in the UN's International Labour Organisation's (ILO) 'social unrest' index. The ILO further "noted that in over 45 of the 118 countries examined, the risk of social unrest is rising, with particular signs of tension in the EU, the Arab region and to a lesser extent Asia."¹³

The global economic crunch also magnifies significant challenges for U.S. national security. For example, the Super Committee's failure to reduce federal spending by \$1.2 trillion meant that by January 2013 the Pentagon could face another \$600 billion in cuts in addition to \$450 billion reduction already being enacted. "Pentagon officials and hawkish lawmakers say nearly \$1 trillion in cuts would create a 'hollow force' that might struggle to carry out some missions."¹⁴

If spending compromises aren't made in 2012, the Budget Control Act (BCA) will mandate automatic reductions for the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS), Defense (DoD) and Energy. Homeland Security, encompassing the Border Patrol, Secret Service, Transportation Security Administration, and Coast Guard, would particularly feel the strain. While Homeland Security is already stretched due to increasing logistical needs and expanding missions, the BCA would mean 7.8% reduction in DHS' budget. Even without the automatic cuts, "the BCA constraints are such that we have to assume that we are going to be living in a budget freeze environment for 10 years. Some mission changes will inevitably result in that."¹⁵

Short-term budget woes, however, are just the beginning. Admiral Michael Mullen, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in 2010 that "The single-biggest threat to our national security is our debt."¹⁶ Over the long-term, the federal debt threatens to crowd out investment in the U.S. military, may leave the U.S. vulnerable to economic coercion, and diminish U.S. investments in soft power. That the economic consequences of debt may undermine U.S.'s global standing and influence, as well as military power, is a legitimate concern and a major challenge for the next administration.

World leaders will face significant challenges in 2012. However, the more important question may be "which leaders?" Russia, France, Mexico, South Korea, Turkey and the U.S. are just some of the 24 countries with presidential elections slated for 2012. In terms of global security, the timing of these transitions couldn't be worse. "As political leaders play to their domestic galleries, they will surely take more nationalist and parochial positions on the big international issues. That is worrying because 2012 will be a year demanding intense international co-operation to cope with a deteriorating economic climate. The result could be serious damage to the underpinnings of globalisation."¹⁷

¹³ Larry Elliott, "Jobs crisis threatens global wave of social unrest, warns ILO," *The Guardian*, October 31, 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/oct/31/jobs-crisis-global-social-unrest-ilo>.

¹⁴ John T. Bennett, "Year-Ahead Tipsheet: Budget cuts will again dominate defense debates in 2012," *The Hill*, December 19, 2011, <http://thehill.com/blogs/defcon-hill/budget-appropriations/200225-year-ahead-tipsheet-budget-cuts-will-again-dominate-defense-debates-in-2012>.

¹⁵ Stew Magnuson, "Budget Woes May Force Homeland Security To Cut Missions," *National Defense*, January 2012, <http://www.nationaldefensemagazine.org/archive/2012/January/Pages/BudgetWoesMayForceHomelandSecurityToCutMissions.aspx?PF=1>.

¹⁶ Travis Sharp, "The Sacrifice Ahead; The 2012 Defense Budget," *Center for a New American Security*, February 2011, http://www.cnas.org/files/documents/publications/CNAS_DefenseBudget_Sharp_3.pdf.

¹⁷ "Hey, there's still a world to run; Global leaders will be preoccupied by politics at home. That augurs ill for globalisation," *The Economist*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21537036>.

Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, faces a serious challenge from the Socialist opposition in France. Sarkozy and Germany's Angela Merkel, have been at the forefront of the European Union economic crisis. Meanwhile, few see Vladimir Putin failing in his quest to regain the post he held from 2000-2008. However, recent parliamentary losses by Putin's United Russia party and street protests against his unquestioned rule this past fall indicate that Putin and Russia have a turbulent road ahead. The most important election, however, is for U.S. president and Congress, made even more compelling by its late November date. The partisan race will be long, contentious and expensive, but observers worry that "the election of 2012 will leave America more or less where it started: stuck in an economic slump, bitterly divided politically and worried about its diminishing stature...around the world."¹⁸

Some of the most influential changes in leadership in 2012, however, will have nothing to do with elections. In October, China will appoint Xi Jinping the General Secretary of the Communist Party. Xi, a 58-year-old engineer, "is married to a flamboyant People's Liberation Army songstress, will take power at a critical time for China, when the durability of its export-dependent economy and autocratic polity is being tested by a European financial crisis abroad and social and technological upheaval at home."¹⁹

The death of North Korea's Kim Jong Il created another leadership vacuum. Kim Jong Eun, the dictator's youngest and untested son, will take over as the country's leader. However, Kim Jong Eun's inexperience may be behind the announcement that he will share power with an uncle and the North Korean military. In any case, "The abrupt absence of a leader in one of the world's most unpredictable nations — though it wasn't entirely unexpected, given Kim's visibly declining health in recent years — sent a chill through Northeast Asia's corridors of power."²⁰ Kim Jong Il's death also put on hold American plans "to give food aid to North Korea in exchange for steps toward denuclearization."²¹

These emerging political, economic and leadership challenges only add to ongoing and evolving U.S. and global security concerns. U.S.-led coalition forces will likely remain in Afghanistan until 2014. The nuclear question looms large in Pakistan and Iran. Iran rang in the new year by claiming it produced its first nuclear fuel rod and then proposing new talks on its nuclear program.²² As sanctions hit the Iranian economy, Tehran also increased its rhetoric with threats over U.S. aircraft carriers in the Gulf region. Cyber Security, energy security, and protection of critical infrastructure have all become high national security priorities. The breach of computers at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce by Chinese hackers in December only exemplifies the new breed of traditional and modern security threats.

Playwright Eugene Ionesco once wrote that, "You can only predict things after they've happened." It is not difficult, however, to foresee more economic uncertainty and political unrest around the world in 2012. Even with so much at stake, U.S. national security policy may have to be an uncomfortable combination of preparing for the most likely scenarios and "wait and see" positions. Whatever happens, the only certainty is uncertainty. And that may be the biggest threat of all.

¹⁸ "Hopeless and changed; What a difference four years make," *The Economist*, November 17, 2011, <http://www.economist.com/node/21536990>.

¹⁹ Peter Foster, "China, the year ahead," *The Telegraph*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/8958432/China-news-2012-the-year-ahead-as-Hu-Jintao-steps-down.html>.

²⁰ Krista Mahr, "Kim's Death: Jitters in Northeast Asia," *Time*, December 19, 2011, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2102776,00.html#ixzz1h1KRM0k6>.

²¹ Howard LaFranchi, "Did Kim Jong-il death ruin breakthrough deal on North Korea nukes?" *Christian Science Monitor*, December 21, 2011, <http://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Foreign-Policy/2011/1221/Did-Kim-Jong-il-death-ruin-breakthrough-deal-on-North-Korea-nukes>.

²² Mark Memmot, "Iran Test-Fires Missile, Claims To Have Made Nuclear Fuel Rod," *NPR*, January 2, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2012/01/02/144574321/iran-test-fires-missile-claims-to-have-made-nuclear-fuel-rod>.