

# Five Issues for 2011

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It is likely that by the time 2011 winds down, the major international affairs questions dominating the news will include issues that seem distant in the first week of the year. Every year brings surprises, unforeseen wars, natural disasters and the like, but it is also possible to look with some confidence towards the New Year and identify some foreign policy issues, or questions, that are likely to become more important during the year.

**Afghanistan**-For the Obama administration, Afghanistan will continue to be the most critical foreign policy issue. This will be a significant year for U.S. AfPak policy because the drawdown of troops from the war is supposed to begin this summer. There is, of course, no guarantee that this will happen as the administration may extend the deadline, seek to finesse the deadline or simply ignore it altogether. If the drawdown begins as scheduled, it will be a significant shift in American policy signaling the beginning of the end of one of the longest wars in American history. If there is no significant drawdown, the war will take on a character of permanence which will raise numerous difficult questions and challenges for the U.S.

**China**-It is widely assumed that 2011 will see a continuation of China's rise to global superpower status as Chinese economic strength and influence around the world continues to grow. While this may indeed be the case in the New Year, it is also possible that China's uninterrupted rise to power will begin to face some complication in 2011. This might be the year that China's overheated economy, environmental degradation, civil unrest and lack of freedom combine to create problems for that country. While widespread instability is extremely unlikely in the immediate future, a continued smooth ascension to power, while possible, should not be taken for granted.

**Climate Change**-Climate change will almost certainly remain a very important issue for the entire planet in 2011. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that any significant breakthroughs will occur in addressing this problem. An increasingly affluent global population will probably drive more, fly more, use more air conditioning and generally continue to use natural resources at an accelerated pace. Moreover, the Republican majority in the U.S. House of Representatives will create an obstacle to any attempt to address this issue in the U.S. Predictions will remain dire and timelines increasingly urgent. Some people will ride bikes more, drive less and watch their use of plastic and other wasteful products, but the overall picture will probably not change other than that another year will go by without seriously addressing the problem.

**Iran**-For several years, the U.S. has raised concerns about the possibility of Iran attaining nuclear weapons and of increasing Iranian influence in the region. This concern has been echoed by a number of regional allies who currently compete with Iran for

influence. During each of the last three or four years Iran has moved closer to getting these weapons, U.S. rhetoric has become more heated, and nothing has been done by the U.S. It is certainly possible that this stalemate will continue for another year, but this is less likely as the reality of a nuclear armed Iran in the not too distant future becomes more clear. 2011 might be the year when the U.S. stops treating Iran like the weather, talking about it a lot, but not doing anything.

**Democratic Backsliding**-It is notable that as 2010 was coming to an end a fraud-ridden election in Belarus was met with global silence. By 2010, democracy seemed at best to have stagnated, but more accurately, to have been in retreat in much of the world. There was very little good news regarding democracy. Semi-authoritarian regimes tightened their grip on power in much of the world, newer democracies experienced increased backsliding and institutional weakness and even advanced democracies like the U.S. saw a level of extremism and anger which is not healthy for a democratic system, continue to develop. If this trend continues, not only will fewer people enjoy freedom and the right to govern themselves, but global political alignments will change, forcing the U.S., for example, to make some difficult decisions about our overall foreign policy.

There are numerous other issues which will be very important in 2011, but how these five play out in the New Year will have great bearing on the future. A 2011 that sees Iran move closer to nuclear weapons, the U.S. recommit to the war in Afghanistan and increased democratic backsliding, for example, will lead to a very different future than if Iran is dissuaded from seeking nuclear weapons, the U.S. genuinely winds down the war in Afghanistan and democracy, once again, moves forward.