

Predictions for security in 2011

Few can accurately predict the nuances of international security. Anyone predicting 12 months ago the advent of printer cartridge bombs on planes, North Korea bombing South Korean territory or improvised bombs being planted in Times Square or Stockholm may have found an incredulous audience. But these all happened. In this edition, we ask some experts where they see next year's developments.

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http://www.nato.int/docu/review/2010/Security_2011/What_where_who_security/EN/index.htm

What, where and who will be important in security in 2011?

Take three questions about what will be major security issues next year. Ask four experts and commentators. Collate the results. And what you have is a varied insight into how different groups, ages and nationalities see the next 12 months unfolding. We present the results here.

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Which area (either geographical or thematic) do you feel will pose the biggest security threat in 2011?

There are two major topics that will continue to rise on the security agenda in 2011 which pose very different kind of threats (one is a “traditional threat”, the other a “new threat”) and must be dealt with differently. One topic could fit into the “rogue nuclear regimes” category, with a particular attention to the evolution of domestic and regional situations in Iran and North Korea, but also following closely what is happening in Pakistan regarding the safety of their nuclear sites. The other major topic is cyber security, as we were recently reminded by Wikileaks. We are only starting to measure and understand how vulnerable we are to cyber attacks, where those attacks come from (states or small groups), and what their potential targets can be. On the one hand, the nuclear threat appears more significant: it can trigger arms race, facilitate nuclear proliferation, destabilise fragile regions or even, worse case scenario, lead to nuclear escalation. On the other hand, there is a chance that the situation remains more or less stable on that front whereas we can be certain that cyber attacks will not stop and their scale and frequency could even increase, with consequences yet to be evaluated.

Who do you feel will play a pivotal role in foreign relations in 2011?

In a global environment increasingly characterised by interconnectedness and multipolarity, almost no issues can be dealt with unilaterally. In this respect, the US will have to share the burden of global stability with a growing number of actors, including emerging powers (e.g. China) in the context of most issues, but also with leading powers (e.g. Brazil or Turkey) regarding some specific issues, and even – at times – with regional organisations (e.g. the EU).

China and Russia will both play a pivotal role regarding the two threats mentioned above (nuclear and cyber). This role could be positive (for instance if China and Russia engage constructively with the Korean peninsula and Iran respectively) or more negative (for instance in the case of more cyber attacks emanating from China and Russia – note that whether those attacks are commanded by the government is not really the issue here).

Will security and international relations be better or worse by the end of 2011 - and why?

The continuous decline of American hegemony (in terms of relative power and in terms of absolute legitimacy) is certainly a worrisome trend for international security. Indeed, the US is no longer the lonely superpower, but increasingly shares global power with emerging actors (although it still dominates mostly international affairs). This has at least two foreseeable consequences on international security: 1) the US will act as the global benevolent superpower less often than before (because it simply does not have the luxury to do so anymore, its international policy having now shifted to a new mood, more competitive and less altruistic) which will inevitably render the resolution of global issues more complicated; and 2) given that the US cannot (or does not want to) act as the “global cop” anymore, who will do it? When there is no one to deter regimes or groups from pursuing their evil plans, or to bring order back in times of crisis, then chaos is unleashed and can proliferate quickly at local levels or, worse, to entire regions.