

AMERICA AT RISK MEMO

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Protect America from What?

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A North Korean long-range ballistic missile launch into the Pacific Ocean, Russian threats of a preemptive strike against U.S. missile defenses in Europe, the Syrian regime's continuing violence on protestors, and Taliban terrorist attacks in Afghanistan are just a few of the recent events that should serve to remind us that we are living in uncertain times internationally.

The unfortunate fact is that the world remains a dangerous place, replete with states and non-state actors that hold—or could hold—America and its global interests at serious risk. It is therefore without question that we ignore these national security challenges at our peril.

Middle East/North Africa

Perhaps no part of the world is as unsettled as the Middle East and North Africa. In many ways, what

has been called the “Arab Spring” has now become the “Arab Winter,” with the political, economic, and security future of states such as Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Yemen of continuing concern. The possibility that other regimes in the region, including some friendly to the United States, might crumble into short-term or long-term anarchy is another striking—and chilling—threat.

With few exceptions, there is no shortage of worry about the rise of anti-American, post-revolutionary governments in some of these countries as well as concerns about continued cooperation with the United States on important issues such as peace in the Middle East or counterterrorism. Lawless, ungoverned spaces are a particular counterterrorism concern, as they may provide safe havens for terrorist groups to plan, train, and operate.

The future of Syria is an open question, but the survival of the Bashar Assad regime will almost certainly be detrimental to U.S. interests. Damascus is sure to attempt to wreak revenge on those states which opposed it during these tumultuous times, no doubt using its favorite tool—terrorism—to exact a price. Syria's ties with Iran and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction,

especially nuclear capability, are sure to be enhanced as well.

Nor is Iran making us any safer. It continues to pursue a nuclear program that almost everyone is sure has as its goal the building of an atomic bomb. Not only does it refuse to stop enriching uranium to levels beyond what is needed for nuclear reactor fuel, as the international community has repeatedly requested, but it is now enriching it in a facility in the side of a mountain on a military base, undermining Tehran's case that its program is peaceful—and civilian. Compounding concerns is the likelihood that if Iran goes nuclear, others in the region will do so too.

Tehran is also developing the means to deliver a nuclear weapon at long distances. Indeed, publicly available U.S. intelligence estimates

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Protect America
Month

Providing for the Common Defense in the 21st Century

The Heritage Foundation's Protect America Month focuses on defense spending in the 21st century. America still faces serious threats in the world and now is not the time to weaken our military through defense budget cuts.

assess that Iran could have an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the United States by 2015—a few short years from now. Tehran already can reach all of the Middle East and parts of Southeastern Europe with its existing ballistic missile arsenal.

Terrorism

While we should be heartened that the death of al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden is now a year in the past, it would be foolhardy to write off terrorism as a threat. Even though counterterrorism efforts taken over the past decade or so have made it harder for terrorists to pull off sensational 9/11-like attacks, the United States remains in the crosshairs of such determined al-Qaeda-affiliated groups as al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), based in Yemen. AQAP has already been fingered for a number of plots and attacks directed at the United States, including the attempt to bring down a plane over Detroit on Christmas Day, 2009, as well as serving as the motivation for the 2009 shootings at Fort Hood.

Beyond AQAP, officials express concern about Somalia-based al-Shabab and a new East African terrorist group called Boko Haram. Of course, the deepest worries revolve around an individual or individuals, already resident in the United States, who are then recruited and radicalized over the Internet to conduct terrorist attacks here. Since 9/11, the United States has been subject to some 50 terrorist plots. While we are fundamentally safer today than we were on 9/11, we are still *not* safe.

South Asia

There are major challenges to our security in South Asia too. Terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the little-known but highly dangerous Haqqani Network seek to take and hold territory in Afghanistan, supported by staging grounds in Pakistan's tribal areas. While the Obama Administration is directing the total withdrawal of American combat troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2014, the worry is that after U.S. and Coalition forces leave the country, it once again may become a terrorist safe haven as it was before 9/11.

Instability in Pakistan is also good cause for insomnia. Not only has the country been a hotbed of Islamist extremism, but there is also continuing anxiety about the physical security of its nuclear weapons arsenal. Trouble reports indicate that Pakistan is also expanding its nuclear stockpile, possibly doubling it in the years to come.

East Asia

Perhaps no issue is more important to the United States' strategic future than the direction of China's rise. With the political, economic, and military power it is amassing, Beijing will have the raw potential to be either a stabilizing or a destabilizing force in the international system. Regrettably, the choice is largely China's.

Needless to say, there are reasons to be nervous on the security side. China is becoming a significant military power in Asia, but especially when it comes to power-projection forces, perhaps most notably its navy. Beijing has sent its first aircraft

carrier to sea, with several more expected to be built after the first undergoes sea trials. China also has an ambitious submarine and surface shipbuilding program, making it the largest navy in Asia outside of the United States.

China is also involved in a major modernization of its missile and strategic forces. It has developed a unique land-based ballistic missile that appears to have the capability to hit moving, sea-based targets such as an American aircraft carrier. Beijing has also moved from a silo-based ICBM force to one that is now road-mobile, making it more flexible and survivable. Reports conclude that China has also built 3,000 miles of underground tunnels, known as the "Great Underground Wall," to support and deny detection of the movements of its mobile nuclear forces. Beijing has sent its nuclear forces to sea for the first time in ballistic missile submarines, improving the responsiveness and value of its strategic deterrent. China's cyber-warfare, cyber-espionage, and counterspace capabilities are also not to be ignored.

North Korea remains a wild card—and a dangerous one at that. The recent long-range ballistic missile test is just the latest in a string of provocations from Pyongyang. Over the last two years, it has sunk a South Korean warship, shelled a South Korean island, and hatched a plot to assassinate the South Korean defense minister.

The accession of a new, young, and inexperienced North Korean leader late last year could portend more provocations as he attempts to signal strength to both domestic and international audiences. In addition to the

missile test, another nuclear weapons test is expected this year. These nuclear and missile tests improve North Korea's ability to target the United States—not to mention that successful tests increase the attractiveness of secondary proliferation to the likes of Syria, Iran, and others.

Russia

And what about Russia? It is fair to say that Russia has readjusted its foreign policy orientation from one that was Western-friendly to one that is increasingly nationalistic—even anti-West—and intent on reasserting Russia as a global great power. This orientation is likely to be intensified under the leadership of once-again President Vladimir Putin. Moscow will attempt to be an increasingly significant player in international politics, and while cooperation is possible, there will be issues of critical importance on which Russia will *not* align itself with American interests. Moscow might also make the Arctic an area of military competition.

While progress on an announced major military modernization is

uncertain, Russian arms sales to such countries as China, Syria, Iran, and Venezuela are troubling and clearly aimed at complicating America's security situation in a number of regions. Political support for the likes of Iran, Syria, and North Korea at the United Nations also complicates efforts to deal with their wayward behavior.

Latin America

In addition to the drug-cartel violence in Mexico and Central America and the concerns about Venezuela's future direction, there is growing apprehension about increasing Iranian engagement in Latin America, particularly by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Not only might Iranian ties with the region help it evade international punitive economic sanctions over its nuclear program and allow it to assist its ally Hezbollah in the region, but they could also give Iran a platform for acts of terrorism, as witnessed in the recently foiled Qods Force plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States in Washington, D.C.

Conclusion

Considering all of the above—in addition to threats that have not yet presented themselves fully—this clearly is no time for American complacency about the global security environment. It is clear that we require a strong defense, a vigorous foreign policy, and proactive international leadership to protect and advance American interests against a litany of challenges and threats.

As history has shown time and time again, the consequences of not actively providing for our national security are axiomatic. Wishful thinking in the face of an increasingly uncertain world is no basis for any national security policy—especially an American one.

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