

Taking a Look at the World After November

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On Nov. 6, either Barack Obama or Mitt Romney will emerge victorious after an exhausting electoral race, setting the wheels in motion for the coming four years. An ocean away, on Nov. 8, more than 2,000 members of the Chinese Communist Party will gather in Beijing. About a week later, the members of the Politburo Standing Committee will walk out in hierarchical order, preparing to take charge of a growing country of 1.3 billion people.

The leaders of the world's two largest economies are changing. So is the world itself. The Middle East, in particular, is experiencing a moment of intense transformation. While reconstruction — both literal and figurative — is commencing in some parts of the region, countries like Syria are aflame. Others, such as Iran, with its moribund revolution, have never ceased rumbling. Amidst a crumbling economy, the country remains belligerent, using its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah, to launch at least one successful drone flight above Israel and reportedly initiating recent cyber attacks.

As a result, relations among regional actors remain tense. After his speech at the United Nations appealing for a "red line" on the Iranian nuclear program in the spring or summer of 2013, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called an early general election, which could potentially give him a strong mandate for action against Iran. Egypt, meanwhile, is finding its own equilibrium, both domestically, drafting a new constitution, and in terms of foreign policy.

Then there is Turkey, straddling Europe and the Middle East. An emerging economy poised to become a regional power, it has exchanged fire with its neighbor to the south, Syria, and has called on its NATO allies to bolster its security.

This is part of the changing panorama that new world leaders will inherit in the Middle East — a region in which the U.S. has been deeply involved. After nearly a decade of draining military engagement, the U.S. combat mission in Iraq concluded in 2010, and the combat mission in Afghanistan is set to end in 2014.

The next American president will also inherit a country with a markedly changed geopolitical perspective. Technological advances and innovation have begun to turn the longstanding dream of energy independence into a reality. Whereas extraction of America's extensive reserves of natural gas was previously thought to be unfeasible, technologies such as hydraulic fracturing ("fracking") have ushered in a shale-gas revolution.

Indeed, the U.S. is on the cusp of energy self-sufficiency. Last year, for the first time in 15 years, less than one-half of the oil consumed in the U.S. was imported. Annual growth in shale-gas production has increased from 17 percent between 2000 and 2006 to 48 percent between 2006 and 2010. By 2035, shale gas is projected to account for roughly one-half of total U.S. energy production.

The repercussions of this revolution will not be only economic. Politically, reduced reliance on foreign oil may allow the U.S. to concentrate on its foreign-policy shift toward Asia.

But it is not only the new U.S. leader who will inherit a changed world. Across the Pacific, the days of record-breaking economic growth in Asia — a key component of social and political stability — may be coming to an end.

Indeed, events in China in recent months have revealed internal unease. Though nationalist sentiment directed against external foes tends to divert attention temporarily from internal turmoil, the country's serious domestic problems need to be addressed. China's economy and politics, ideologically transformed in all but name, will soon need to be adapted to address rising social inequality.

Despite global economic headwinds, China's leaders will surely remain focused on maintaining and boosting growth, in order to lift more Chinese out of poverty and avert social unrest; they are also certain to continue monitoring the oil-rich Middle East. After years of relying on America's presence in the region, playing an advantageous waiting game, China's next leaders may embrace a more active role. And, because China's reputation in the region is untainted by a legacy of imperialism, they may be in a rather advantageous position to do so.

Meanwhile, the European Union is struggling with its own demons. Despite the EU's need to focus inward while weathering the global economic crisis, the Union must not abandon its neighbors to the south. It is crucial to engage with the southern Mediterranean region as a critical meeting point — a place of political, economic, and energy cooperation. In this respect, the EU's most valuable tools are its signature, Nobel Prize-winning model of multilateral dialogue and soft power.

Next door, Russia, too, must respond to new vulnerabilities stemming from changing global conditions. The Kremlin continues to support Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, maintaining a strict aversion to military intervention and seeking to defend its strategic interests, including its naval base in the Syrian city of Tartus. That stance has translated, most obviously, into repeated vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions aimed at ending a conflict that has already produced tens of thousands of victims.

International inaction on Syria is bad news not only for the country's people; it is also eroding the legitimacy of one of the world's most important multilateral institutions. Given that the issues of Iran and Syria are closely connected, internal division among the Security Council's five permanent members (the U.S., China, Britain, France and Russia) could be extremely damaging to the search for a solution to Iran's nuclear-enrichment drive. That is reflected in the current stalemate in talks between them (plus Germany) and Iran.

Too much is at stake, which is why all possible tracks for a negotiated outcome must be pursued. Whether or not recent rumors of bilateral U.S.-Iran talks prove true, such initiatives should be welcomed. While the big players remain preoccupied with their internal changes, the region continues to smolder. The main question now is whether the leaders who emerge in November will be firefighters or fire starters.

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