

# Bloomberg Businessweek

## Obama's Right: The World Isn't Falling Apart

By Charles Kenny

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At a recent fundraising event, President Obama suggested we should all calm down about global security threats: “The world has always been messy. In part, we’re just noticing now because of social media and our capacity to see in intimate detail the hardships that people are going through.” Despite the crises in the Middle East and Ukraine, he said, “I promise you things are much less dangerous now than they were 20 years ago, 25 years ago, or 30 years ago. This is not something that is comparable to the challenges we faced during the Cold War.”

You might be a little confused by this message from the commander-in-chief. After all, some of his deputies have framed the state of the planet a little differently. Former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently [suggested](#) America was in “a very complex, dangerous world,” and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey intoned that “the number and kinds of threats we face have increased significantly.” Just a few weeks ago, Nancy Lindborg, an assistant administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, [argued](#) that “we are probably at a near-historic level of humanitarian need right now.”

As it turns out, both the president and Lindborg are broadly right: Despite the implosion of the Middle East over the past two years, the U.S. is still in a far better national security situation than it was 25 years ago. At the same time, the demand for American humanitarian assistance may never have been higher—in part because the end of the Cold War means aid can be mobilized to help in more places. And that suggests a logical response: Shift our global efforts, and related budgets, away from using military tools and toward humanitarian ones.

Compare the challenges of today with those of 1989, a quarter-century ago. For all of the jubilation of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union was still a unified country. Iran and Iraq were less than a year out from one of the bloodiest conflicts of the past 60 years. Saddam Hussein was a year away from invading Kuwait, the trigger for the Persian Gulf War. The unwinding of the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan signaled the start of that country’s civil war. U.S. troops invaded Panama, and ongoing civil wars occupied countries including Angola, Ethiopia, Lebanon, Mozambique, Sri Lanka, and Sudan. The Shining Path was

fomenting terror in Peru, while the Medellín cartel was on a rampage. And the Chinese army fired upon its own citizens, massacring thousands in and around Tiananmen Square. Nobody at the time thought the world was in a period free of international strife, and many would probably have swapped 2014's challenges for their own.

Russian President Vladimir Putin may boast that his tanks could occupy Ukraine's capital of Kiev in two weeks if he wanted—but he's not following through on that threat. In 1956 the Soviet army invaded Hungary and occupied the capital Budapest, with no pretense and little restraint. Sixty years later, the Russian army is tiptoeing across a border 1,000 kilometers (622 miles) to the east, declaring all the while it isn't even doing that.

Putin leads a country that has a gross domestic product of just more than \$2 trillion—that's about the same as Italy's. Russia's military expenditure in 2013, at [\\$91 billion](#), compares with a combined expenditure of France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the U.K. of more than \$200 billion—or with the U.S. at \$682 billion.

And there's no successor to the Soviet Union in terms of an armed threat to the West. Back in the heyday of the Cold War, the Pentagon used to publish [Soviet Military Power](#), a glossy pamphlet designed to demonstrate the country's overwhelming conventional superiority against NATO and scare up some more dollars for new cruise missiles along the way. The tradition has yet to be revived with a *Chinese Military Power*, perhaps because it would be risible to suggest that the country possesses anything more than the ability to project power in its home region. China's military spending is less than a quarter of the U.S.'s.

Regarding weapons of mass destruction, the risk of accidental nuclear war during the Cold War was constant—and we [frequently](#) came [very close](#). In 1989 there were [58,336](#) (PDF) nuclear warheads stockpiled worldwide, compared with only 10,215 warheads today. Not that the remaining weapons would be insufficient to pulverize the planet, but the declining numbers are a symbol of a broader de-escalation of the threat. With U.S. assistance, Russia has concentrated its stockpile of weapons in fewer locations that are better protected, for example. And only four countries (the U.S., the U.K., Russia, and France) actually keep warheads on missiles or at bases with operational launchers.

It's true that India and Pakistan have joined the nuclear weapons club since the Cold War (bringing total membership to eight), North Korea has tested devices, and Iran will perhaps restart its weapons program if [international talks](#) fail. This may have marginally increased the overall threat of a nuclear device being detonated in anger even while the risk of total global thermonuclear annihilation has declined.

On the other hand, a series of three [Nuclear Security Summits](#) over the last four years have brokered agreements on reducing stocks of fissile material, improving the security of nuclear installations, and strengthening the International Atomic Energy Agency and international oversight capacity. And there's simply no evidence that any terrorist group has come close to stealing or constructing an atomic bomb.

The threat of conventional global terror remains subdued, as well. Al-Qaeda central is largely defeated, according to official estimates, reduced to [fewer than 200 people](#) (PDF). Muslim extremists have been responsible for one-fiftieth of 1 percent of the homicides committed in the U.S. since Sept. 11, according to John Mueller of Ohio State University and Mark Stewart of the University of Newcastle. The total number of people killed worldwide by Muslim extremists outside of war zones from the Sept. 11 attacks through 2011 was between 200 and 300 a year, they suggest. And the global death rate from terrorism away from the war zones of Afghanistan and Iraq [roughly halved](#) from 1989 to 2007, says Harvard University's Steven Pinker.

There may have been an uptick [in terror incidents and fatalities](#) over the past couple of years, according to Department of State data, although as the methodology behind the estimates have changed, it's hard to know for sure. More certain is the number of U.S. civilians killed in terrorist incidents worldwide in the last few years: just [42 from 2010 to 2012](#), according to Benjamin Friedman at the Cato Institute. That's less than a quarter of the number of Americans who die from [bee, wasp, and hornet stings](#) every three years.

Looking at conventional wars, in 2013, [33 active conflicts](#) in the world caused at least 25 battle-related deaths, according to researchers at Sweden's Uppsala University—considerably down from more than 50 conflicts in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War. And last year there were [seven wars](#) (conflicts leading to more than a thousand deaths) ongoing. That [compares with 13](#) (PDF) in 1989. The new millennium remains the most peaceful period in terms of the number of armed conflicts since the 1960s. And full and declared interstate wars remain extremely rare—there were none last year.

It isn't just the number of conflicts that's near a historic low, but also their level of lethality. According to [data](#) from Uppsala, more than 21,000 battle-related deaths occurred last year (about 40 percent of which took place in Syria). But that's worth comparing with the longer trend. The first decade of the 21st century saw an average of about 35,000 battle deaths a year; the average for the [second half of the 20th century](#) was closer to 165,000. Some of that decline is because of [improved battlefield health care](#) (PDF), but it also reflects a lower overall level of violence.

None of this is to downplay the immense suffering of people caught up in a number of intensely violent and obscenely indiscriminate conflicts around the globe. The United Nations' 2013 [global estimate](#) for the number of refugees and "internally displaced people"—those forced from their home but still living in the same country—is more than 50 million. Among the 12 million refugees, about 40 percent were Afghans and Syrians. Syria also had 6.5 million internally displaced people; combined with Colombia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Sudan, the four countries accounted for about one-half of the world's internally displaced population. The internal displacement number is the highest recorded by the UN—although, the numbers go back to only 1989. The number of refugees is the highest since 1992 (the postwar peak was about 18 million) and is considerably higher than during any period prior to the mid 1980s.

To return to USAID's Lindborg, one reason for the unprecedented need for humanitarian assistance is the unprecedented reach that such efforts have today. Think of the conflicts of the late 1980s—there was no way a large-scale humanitarian operation backed by the U.S. could

have been undertaken to help victims of the Iran-Iraq war, or in Afghanistan. It's the comparative lack of global geostrategic rivalry that makes efforts at peaceful, or peacemaking, collaborative response more feasible.

The twin factors of reduced danger to the U.S. and increased capacity to respond to humanitarian crises suggest an obvious conclusion. We should be reducing the amount we spend on military and security preparedness and funneling some of the savings into greater humanitarian efforts. At the moment, the U.S. aid budget for international disaster assistance is about [\\$1.8 billion](#) (PDF)—about a quarter of 1 percent of defense spending, or 0.2 percent of the [increased expenditure](#) (PDF) on domestic “homeland security” since Sept. 11.

By reducing the budgets for the Pentagon and the Department of Homeland Security, the U.S. could siphon a small fraction of those savings into doubling our disaster relief efforts. The goodwill created might even help preserve the country's run of increased security into the long term. Perhaps Mr. Obama could float that idea at his next fundraiser.