

BREAKING NEWS: Jan-Feb Issue of The National Interest Out Now

Ten Illusions Shattered in 2011

Another year has come to an end. It was tough taskmaster for the illusions and pretensions that permeate international affairs. At least ten were knocked asunder in 2011.

Afghanistan. Washington and its European allies are dedicated to keeping combat troops in Afghanistan through 2014, after which they hope to sustain a democratic, centralized Afghan state allied with the West. Such a state has never before existed. Why make the effort? The answer I received from both American and Afghan officials on a recent trip to Afghanistan was to prevent the return of al-Qaeda.

It is a strange argument—terrorists have never had much trouble finding sanctuaries. The killing of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan destroyed any remaining illusion that Afghanistan is necessary for al-Qaeda. Now come [reports](#) that the organization in Pakistan has been largely destroyed and elements are moving to Africa—without an American or NATO occupation of Pakistan.

America. The United States remains the world's most powerful and influential nation. But its credibility suffered badly in 2011. America's political system, once viewed as a model to emulate around the world, looks decidedly inferior.

Although on many issues the two major parties differ only modestly—almost always favoring more expensive and expansive government—these days they rarely make a pretense of cooperating, even when the national government's financial future is at stake. While other countries are making tough budget decisions and rethinking traditional social benefits, U.S. politicians refuse to even debate issues like Social Security and Medicare. Not that this stops American officials from jetting around the world, [lecturing](#) the Europeans and others on economic policy.

Balkans. Long touted as a success of Western military action and diplomacy, the Balkan region remains a source of instability. The United States and European Union never made any pretense of objectivity, adopting as policy “the Serbs always lose.” The West worked to break up polyglot states dominated by Serbs but insisted that Serbs remain in polyglot states dominated by others. Human-rights abuses by allies—brutal ethnic cleansing in the Krajina by Croats and ethnic Albanians in Kosovo—were largely ignored.

Still, after the 1999 war against Serbia the allies left ethnic Serbs in Kosovo’s North free to maintain their ties with Belgrade. Last year NATO forces, known as KFOR, [violated](#) their legal mandate by attempting to force ethnic Serbs living north of the Ibar River to submit to Pristina authorities, which they have never accepted. The allies injured Serb civilians while destroying roadblocks erected to prevent the passage of Kosovar officials to the border with Serbia. So much for America’s and the Europeans’ commitment to democracy and self-determination.

China. Much has changed with the collapse of communism. The death of Mao Zedong unleashed the People’s Republic of China as a potential new superpower. Since then, many observers have predicted that Beijing soon would sweep aside America in its rise to world domination.

That turned out to be another illusion destroyed in 2011. The PRC’s economy continued to grow, but fears of inflated property prices, dubious bank loans and angry social unrest increased even faster, and a skewed demography led some to question whether China would grow old before it grew rich. Beijing continued to wield sharp elbows internationally, stirring its neighbors to cooperate with America and increase their military procurement. Even nations allied with the PRC, such as Burma and Zambia, drew back from China’s embrace. India, too, [is rising](#) and is none too friendly to the PRC. China still seemed likely to end up as a *Weltmacht*, but global dominance [looked further away](#) than once assumed.

Egypt. For many American policy makers, democracy has become the *idée fixe* for U.S. foreign policy. The death of a couple hundred thousand civilians, like in Iraq, is viewed as a small price to pay for an election. As Madeleine Albright [declared](#) in a similar context, “We think the price is worth it.”

However, voting has never been enough to create a liberal society. Consider the discrimination, repression and violence evident in “democratic” Iraq. And consider Egypt. Whether real democracy will result is yet uncertain. But even if it does, Christian Copts and other religious minorities [face](#) a far more dangerous future. The prospect of a distinctly illiberal society accompanying revolution in the name of democracy is why some Syrians continue to support the al-Assad regime.

European Union. For decades, the continent’s political, intellectual and business elite has dreamed of a united Europe. But there never was much popular support for the European Project. The Eurocrats even had to [deny](#) most Europeans an opportunity to vote in order to pass the so-called Lisbon Treaty, which consolidated power in Brussels.

Despite that “success,” the Eurocrat dream cratered last year. Far from becoming the world’s third force to compete with China and the United States, the EU found itself promiscuously tossing euros at the euro zone in an attempt to save the monetary union. Increasingly [desperate summits](#) were held to approve increasingly expensive bailouts.

While the Eurocrats insisted on closer political relations, the national publics turned ever more skeptical. By year’s end, the EU appeared more likely to crack up than morph into a quasi nation-state.

Nonproliferation. One of Washington’s bedrock policies is nonproliferation—for countries that it doesn’t like, anyway. Israel is never mentioned, India is now accepted and Pakistan is necessarily tolerated. However, Iran and North Korea are high on Uncle Sam’s nasty list. In principle, Washington favors negotiation, but the prospect of peacefully diverting pariah regimes from a nuclear course essentially disappeared in 2011.

Until last year, Libya was highlighted as a great success story. Dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi traded his nuclear program for acceptance by the West. However, the moment he was vulnerable, the West launched a campaign of regime change under cover of humanitarian intervention. The North Koreans gleefully took note of Qaddafi’s foolish decision to negotiate. No other government in America’s gun sites is [likely to yield](#) the one sure deterrent to attack.

North Korea. With the official end of communism in the Soviet Union and effective end of communism in China, North Korea was one of the few remaining bastions of Marxist-Leninist ideology. Indeed, one had to go back to Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China or Hoxha’s Albania to find an equally pure form of totalitarianism.

Last year, however, the so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea demonstrated that it was more monarchy than communist dictatorship. In 1994, power passed from DPRK founder Kim Il-sung to his son, Kim Jong-il. Three years ago, the latter [began preparing](#) to transfer power to his son, Kim Jong-un. With Kim Jong-il’s recent death, the attempted succession is in full swing. Like the Ottoman Empire, multiple family members are involved, including brother, aunt and uncle. The younger Kim [might not end up reigning](#) in reality, but he is likely to remain the front man for whatever leadership emerges.

Obama Administration. There was a time when liberal Democrats purported to be advocates of civil liberties and international peace. President Barack Obama cultivated this image when he ran in 2008. Although candidate Obama said little of note on these issues, he let voters extrapolate from his early and prescient opposition to the Iraq war.

However, after taking office Obama largely adopted the policies of the Bush administration. Other than promising to close the prison at Guantanamo Bay, he sounded little different than his predecessor. But the prison remains open, and he twice increased troops levels in Afghanistan.

Last year, the president started his own war against Libya, where even his own defense secretary admitted that the United States had no vital interests at stake. Moreover, the conflict was [ostentatiously illegal](#), criticized by administration legal officials. The president also [sought to extend](#) America's military presence in Iraq, putting him at odds with his original opposition to the war. By the end of 2011, it was hard to tell the difference between neoconservatives and liberal hawks.

Republican Party. During the Cold War, conservative presidents such as Dwight Eisenhower, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan tended to be practical realists. All took diplomatic steps to resolve confrontations with communist regimes. All were criticized by the Right for choosing peace.

That commitment to prudence has largely disappeared from Republican leadership ranks. This year only Ron Paul, Gary Johnson (who has been excluded from most of the debates) and Jon Huntsman (to a limited degree) resisted the neoconservative perpetual-war consensus. Über-hawks like [Rick Perry](#), [Michele Bachmann](#), Newt Gingrich and Mitt Romney are not recognizable as traditional conservatives.

May you live in interesting times, runs the Chinese curse. We are living that life today. At least some of our fears died in 2011.

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