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Key international developments for 2014



open briefing
the civil society intelligence agency

In December 2013 and January 2014, analysts from the Open Briefing intelligence unit reviewed the key international developments likely to occur over 2014.

Included in this briefing are ten of these developments. They are not offered as a 'top 10' list but all warrant serious attention over the next 12 months:

1. **Russian** military build-up in the Arctic.
2. Maritime territorial disputes in the **East China Sea**.
3. A stalled **Myanmar** transition.
4. A pivotal year in **Afghanistan**.
5. Careful optimism over **Iran's** nuclear programme.
6. The opportunities presented by **Iraq's** economy.
7. An uncertain future in **Syria**.
8. Instability in **Nigeria**.
9. Efforts to contain the fighting in **Central Africa Republic**.
10. Civil unrest in **Angola**.

Russian military build-up in the Arctic

In a meeting with the Russian Ministry of Defence in December 2013, Vladimir Putin asserted that one of Russia's top priorities for 2014 will be the protection of its economic, political and security interests in the Arctic. The president ordered a military build-up in the region this year, including the formulation of new military units and infrastructure. Putin has spoken in the past of Russia's need to increase its military capacity in the Arctic but this was his most direct statement yet.

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Russia increased its manoeuvres in the Arctic over 2013. In September 2013, the Commander-in-Chief of the Navy, Admiral Viktor Chirkov, announced that Russia would resume a permanent military presence in the Arctic. In a symbolic move, the Russian Navy sent a task group of 10 warships (headed by the flagship of the Northern Fleet, Peter the Great), as well as nuclear-powered icebreakers, along the Northern Sea Route – a shipping lane between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, running along Russia's Arctic coast from the northern port city of Murmansk to East Asia.

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In the later months of 2013, Russia began rebuilding Soviet-era infrastructure in the Arctic, including the Temp airfield on Kotelnny Island near the city of Norilsk and the urban facilities in Tiksi, Naryan-Mar and Anadyr. The Russian Army also reinstated a military base in the Novosibirsk Archipelago (also known as the Siberian Islands), which had been abandoned in 1993. On 10 December 2013, the Minister of Defence, Sergei Shoigu, also stated there are plans to 'create a group of troops and forces to ensure military security and protection of the Russian Federation's national interests in the Arctic in 2014'. In 2014, Russia looks set to continue reinstating other northern airfields, such as Tiksi and Severomorsk, and bases on the New Siberian Islands and Franz Josef Land Archipelago.

Russia's primary interest in the Arctic is economic. Experts believe that the land holds 15% of world's undiscovered oil and 30% of the world's undiscovered natural gas, as well as deposits of gold and platinum. The Arctic also offers maritime transport via the Northern Sea Route and the potential for foreign investment in Russian Arctic projects, such as the plan to construct floating nuclear-power stations in the ocean to allow Gazprom to access the oil and gas reserves. The increased Russian military presence is also likely a reaction to the competition it faces from Arctic neighbours Norway, Canada and Denmark to gain access to Arctic natural resources. Furthermore, in May 2013 the United States announced that it would invest \$8 billion in Arctic projects, emphasising that it would not be left behind in the race for the region's natural resources and sea routes.

Maritime territorial disputes in the East China Sea

Global media focussed their attention on maritime territorial disputes in the East China Sea throughout 2013. The editorial line often drew on 1914/2014 analogies and pointed to the possibility of pre-World War I dynamics revisiting the world a century on. The stakes are high and nationalistic sentiment palpable. Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe appears to be testing the resolve of the United States and other regional allies to support Japanese security with his uncompromising posturing and intentional inflaming of Sino-Japanese relations. Beijing and the People's Liberation Army have responded in kind and there are obvious risks of miscalculation.

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The region can probably expect more fishing-boat proxy confrontation, nationalistic activism, assertions of aerial and resource sovereignty and island nationalisation in 2014. However, it is possible that both Abe and Chinese President Xi Jinping, while revelling in nationalistic identities, are more preoccupied with securing domestic economic ascendancy.

The theatre of diplomatic confrontation in both the East and South China seas is more a portal into the active reconfiguration of regional security alliances and an arena to test the strength of such relations. 2014 is a year to watch how or whether Indonesia and India, post national election, engage in regional security dialogues and how ASEAN forums respond to East and South China Sea confrontations.

A Stalled Myanmar Transition

It is hard for the international community to not get caught up in the fairy-tale prospect of Myanmar swiftly breaking from almost five decades of military rule and rapidly recapturing the regional economic dynamism of pre-1950 Burma. The political reform, the dialogue between President Thein Sein and the leader of the National League of Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, the removal of sanctions, increased foreign investment and slow progress on ceasefires with armed ethnic forces show unprecedented promise. Sein's reformist agenda could possibly steer Myanmar away from insecurity and economic stagnation and onto a path of prosperity and human development.

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However, despite the positive overtures of reform, there are concerning signs that a devastating mixture of intercommunal violence, resource conflict and ethnic conflict could be reignited in the eastern and western peripheries of the country. Sectarian violence in Rakhine (Arakan) State, conflict over land grabs and illegal expropriation, sporadic violence in Kachin State and strong anti-Chinese sentiment in relation to large infrastructure projects indicate that Myanmar's transition path remains a long road to travel.

A pivotal year in Afghanistan

2014 will be a decisive year for Afghanistan. Three key factors will come together over the next 12 months that will shape the future direction of the country: the election in April, the change of mandate for US-NATO forces at the end of the year and the renewed relative autonomy of Afghanistan's security forces, economy and administration.

The April elections will lead to a change of government, as President Hamid Karzai is not eligible for a third term. It is highly likely that the election period will be surrounded by a climate of heightened insecurity, as the Taliban have pledged to wage a terror campaign to derail the electoral process. However, recent trends suggest that the Taliban are likely to shift the focus of their attacks. In previous elections, much emphasis had been put on intimidation tactics to prevent the public from voting, which proved ineffective and there was a large turnout at polling stations. As a result, it is very probable that the Taliban will instead focus on targeting and killing election officials, as evidenced by the September 2013 assassination of Amanullah Aman, the Chief Election Officer of Afghanistan's Kunduz province.

31 December will mark the end of NATO's mandate in Afghanistan. However, talk of a withdrawal is misleading, as that troop levels will not drop to zero after 2014. Instead, a shift in NATO's mandate will occur with operation Resolute Support, which will include troop reductions and shifting responsibilities. The scope of this shift will be highly dependent on the capabilities of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to take over law and order in the country. Continued involvement in Afghanistan by the United States and its allies is highly likely due its strategic importance for regional stability; there are concerns over neighbouring Pakistan's stability and the security of its nuclear arsenal, as well as the threat posed by al-Qaeda and like-minded terrorist groups operating from Pakistan.

Afghanistan's prospects as a country governed by the rule of law will rely highly on the political and security developments that will be taking place in 2014. Of utmost importance is the rebuilding of the Afghan economy and the training of Afghanistan's administrative officials. Autonomy from international donors will be essential for the country's sustainability. Without qualified administrators and an economy based on domestic sources of growth, Afghanistan is highly likely to face dangerous institutional issues. Such issues would likely weaken the Afghan state, favour corruption and increase popular sympathy toward the Taliban.

Careful optimism over Iran's nuclear programme

The decade-long standoff over Iran's nuclear programme continued to intensify in 2013, bringing the spectre of military conflict closer than ever to reality. However, December saw the surprise six-month interim agreement between Tehran and the P5+1, whereby Iran would circumscribe the scope of its fuel enrichment activities in exchange for limited sanctions relief. The results of consecutive presidential elections in Washington and Tehran undoubtedly paved some of the way towards this moment; with a more moderate government under President Hassan Rouhani now at the helm in Tehran, the prospects heretofore appeared more promising than not.

In 2014, focus will inevitably be centred on the outcome of the interim nuclear agreement and progress towards permanent resolution. The optimism is such that Western companies are already looking for trade opportunities and may even be getting ahead of the agreement. The risk this poses by undermining the existing sanctions regime has been evoked by Israel's political elite, alongside threats of unilateral military intervention, which remains possible but considerably less now than it was a year ago. Rouhani's diplomatic offensive vis-a-vis the West is being extended to Iran's Arab neighbours in the Persian Gulf, though on the whole these efforts could still be waylaid by the more conservative elements of Iran's body politic, particularly the security establishment.

But the nuclear issue is not all. In 2014, Iranian foreign policy conduct in arenas including Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, Lebanon and especially Syria will remain salient and directly linked to Tehran's reading of its own strategic environment. If a genuine detente between Iran and the West is to take shape over the longer term, Washington and its allies for their part will very likely need to tackle other longstanding issues with repercussions not only on the Islamic Republic's national security but also on its collective identity, regime legitimacy and independence.

The opportunities presented by Iraq's economy

At first glance, the prospects for Iraq over 2014 seem rather grim if focusing on recent security trends, but the country's economic potential should not be underestimated.

The United States once praised the hard-won security gains that were made as a result of General David Petraeus's leadership in Iraq. The 2007 troop surge and the implementation of the 'clear-hold-build' approach enabled the US and Iraqi governments to temporarily put an end to the fully fledged civil war that was unfolding at the end of 2006. This was accompanied by national efforts and programmes to foster gradual reconciliation between disaffected Sunni Iraqis, Kurds and their Shia counterparts who have dominated the government since the ousting of Saddam Hussein (for example, the Sunni Awakening and the Song of Iraq programme).

Those gains have been challenged by a mix of local militancy, dysfunctional governance and spill-over effects from the civil war in neighbouring Syria. 2013 was marked by the highest levels of violence recorded in Iraq since 2008, with at least 9,500 civilians killed. Moreover, 2013 ended with the Christmas day bombing of Baghdad's Christian district of Dora by suspected Sunni militants. Then the new year began with the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant taking control of the city of Fallujah and the provincial capital Ramadi. The sectarian violence is first and foremost a sign of dysfunctional and insufficiently inclusive governance, which has left some parts of Iraq prone to control by non-state actors who are filling a power vacuum.

Recent security trends should not completely overshadow the bigger picture of Iraq's future development.

However, recent security trends should not completely overshadow the bigger picture of Iraq's future development. With its GDP doubling since 2003, hence surpassing pre-war trends, and an economy growing at more than 8% annually, oil-rich Iraq's investment potential has been extremely attractive to international companies, despite security concerns. After decades of isolationist policies and international sanctions under Saddam Hussein, followed by more than a decade of war and sectarian violence, Iraq's economy might present opportunities for development. Large companies such as ExxonMobil, Deloitte and Citigroup have recently made moves to open offices or increase their activity in Iraq. While the Kurdish north has long been attractive to foreign companies, other provinces of Iraq are now also being considered. This is not limited to the energy sector and extends to banking, construction, communications and other services. If not effectively addressed, however, Iraq's security issues might eventually impede on business and investment, as companies might not be inclined to incur sustained additional costs for the security of their personnel.

An uncertain future in Syria

The Syrian government still holds its ground against the armed opposition three years into a civil war that has claimed over 100,000 lives and displaced nearly 10 million. In 2013, already split among the secular, Islamic and Jihadists, the opposition suffered still further divisions within each camp, including between al-Qaeda affiliates Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant. 2013 also witnessed a very public shift in discursive emphasis towards the use of chemical weapons. While this serendipitously forced Bashar al-Assad's agreement, enshrined in Security Resolution 2118, to relinquish Syria's chemical stockpile under Russia's aegis, it nonetheless drew attention away from the thousands of deaths occasioned by conventional weaponry each passing month.

2014 began with the Geneva II conference, but even convincing the opposition to attend caused the latter to come apart at the seams. Syria still enjoys the backing of Russia, in addition to that of Iran and Hezbollah. But three years of attrition means that rather than Assad it is now Moscow, and to an extent Tehran, who are in charge. Furthermore, while alliances continue to shift in opposition-controlled Syria, spheres of influence have emerged, with territory broadly divided along government, Sunni, Jihadist and Kurdish forces. Indeed, the Kurds, internally divided as even they are, have carved out a veritable state in all but name and are defending it exclusively with Kurdish fighters.

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It is hard to predict which way the wind will blow, but barring forceful intervention on one or both sides, 2014 is likely to witness either protracted armed conflict or a negotiated settlement embraced by all parties, including the current government. Whether Assad himself stays on is perhaps the million dollar question.

Instability in Nigeria

It is highly probable that the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, will announce his intention to run for re-election in 2015. He is highly likely to be selected as the People's Democratic Party (PDP) candidate, despite his party experiencing a significant loss of support and high-profile defections in 2013. This is because he still holds favour among the bulk of the southeast, South-South and Middle Belt, and he alone possesses the financial and technical resources to mount a successful presidential campaign. Conversely, the newly formed All Progressives Congress (APC) has yet to confirm their presidential candidate. Although the APC has incorporated the largest party in the southwest, it is largely comprised of northern politicians, undermining its mass appeal by rekindling memories of the alliances which marked the last phase of the civil war.

As Nigeria prepares for the 2015 presidential election, escalating tensions between those from the north and southeast/South-South are highly likely to increase the degree of ethno-religious manipulation by political elites. The violent clashes which marked late 2013 are likely to become increasingly fierce throughout 2014, undermining political stability. These will be echoed in parliament by northern attempts to impeach the southern president.

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The Islamic insurgency in the north of the country will almost certainly continue, and it is possible that northern politicians seeking to destabilise the president will exploit it. In the Middle Belt, intercommunal clashes are also likely to become more frequent. In the southeast, as the APC battles for political supremacy, and is able to win over potential defectors, such as Rivers State Governor, Rotimi Amezigh, it is possible that political rhetoric could reignite the regional insurgency. In the Niger Delta, support for President Jonathan is likely to harden. This widespread tension is almost certain to result in a national dialogue conference. It is increasingly probable that the federal government will be forced to concede to demands from the Niger Delta in order to constrain violence and insurgency, with concessions in oil revenue allocation affecting the national budget.

Efforts to contain the fighting in Central Africa Republic

The Central African Republic (CAR) epitomises the challenges faced by landlocked countries in a difficult neighbourhood. It shares a border with five countries, of which four have experienced civil war since independence. It is ranked ninth on the Failed States Index for 2013 and has consistently been in the top 20 over the past decade. CAR lacks reputable institutions or a sense of national unity. Sixty nine different languages are spoken among the country's 4.5 million inhabitants. It is also one of the most unequal countries in the world, with the second lowest life expectancy on the planet.

French soldiers are almost certain to remain in the Central African Republic for the entirety of 2014, accompanied by an evolving African Union (AU) force. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is likely to recommend an upgrade in the deployment from the present AU-badged unit to UN blue helmets in March. It is highly probable that further troops from France, the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS) and AU countries will be required to halt the fighting. EU foreign ministers have pledged to send an additional five hundred troops; it is likely that the majority will come from France, with others from the Baltic, Scandinavia and Central Europe.

The appointment of Catherine Samba-Panza as interim president is likely to positively contribute to uniting a range of actors in the search for a political settlement. However, Séléka and Anti-balaka are informal militia without clear leadership, and therefore it is unlikely that she will be able to end the civil war until late in 2014 at the earliest. Even if the fighting stops, it is highly unlikely that elections will take place in February 2015, as France has advocated, due to the need to update the voter register in the northeast of the country, from where the Séléka militia draw their support.

Civil unrest in Angola

It is probable that the recent spate of protests by unemployed urban youth in Angola will continue to intensify during 2014. The police will respond to street protests with increased levels of coercion, while the government will further restrict fundamental freedoms. Nevertheless, activists will continue to take to the streets, recruit new members to their ranks and strengthen their alliances with the major opposition parties, CASA-CE and UNITA. This will serve to deepen the divisions between those who have profited from the post-war prosperity and those excluded from the peace dividend.

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It is possible that UNITA will resort to using inflammatory rhetoric concerning the failure of the post-war political settlement, enabling it to regain the allegiance of the Ovimbundu ethnic group from central Angola, which had been closely aligned to the party during the civil war. If the party were able to count on support from the largest ethnic group, consisting of 35-40% of the population, together with disaffected urban youth, the opposition would pose a serious threat to the ruling MPLA's hegemony. While this may not lead to a resumption of the civil war, it would destabilise the country and give the government further cause to postpone the local elections.

Despite suffering from cancer, President José Eduardo dos Santos will be dissuaded from standing down in 2014. He will, though, spend increasing amounts of time overseas receiving treatment. As a result it is likely that he will become increasingly disconnected from the scale of the domestic unrest, undermining executive decision-making and potentially exacerbating the response to protests.

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