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December 27, 2011

An Upbeat View of America's 'Bad' Year

By IAN BREMMER AND DAVID F. GORDON

Among global big thinkers, never a bashful crowd, the notion of a United States in decline has become conventional wisdom. In late 2011, this narrative has crescendoed, with experts arguing that China has surpassed the United States economically, Niall Ferguson declaring that we are at "the end of 500 years of Western predominance" and The National Interest proclaiming "the end of the American era." Even the National Intelligence Council's coming Global Trends 2030 study reportedly assumes an America in decline.

As 2011 draws to a close, the U.S. military's exit from Iraq and challenges in Afghanistan along with American vulnerability to the European crisis provide further confirmation of the decline narrative.

We agree with some of these views. The United States has neither the willingness nor the capability to provide the kind of global leadership that it has provided in the past several decades, and other countries are increasingly less willing to follow America's lead.

But the conventional wisdom obscures as much as it reveals. Specifically, the declinists overlook the inconvenient truth that global power is relative. And comparing America's year to that of our present and potential adversaries paints an interesting picture: 2011 was not the year when the United States fell off the wagon. Instead, a look back at the past 12 months suggests that U.S. power is more resilient than the narrative of inevitable decline portrays.

Take Al Qaeda, our most consistent adversary (by their definition and ours) since the 9/11 attacks. Despite some severe missteps, we have in 10 years degraded Al Qaeda's capabilities to the point that they are having difficulty mounting attacks against significant targets. In 2011, the United States killed Al Qaeda's most effective propagandist, Anwar al-

Awlaki; its operating chief, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman; and of course its founder, chief executive and spiritual leader, Osama bin Laden. Moreover, the Arab Spring undercut the notion that political change in the Middle East requires the violent jihad that Bin Laden spent his career espousing.

The fight against extremist Islam is an impossible one in which to declare success. Yet the fact remains that while Al Qaeda began the War on Terror with a horrific assault on the foremost symbols of U.S. economic and military power, it leaves 2011 effectively leaderless, rudderless and reduced to boasting about kidnapping defenseless U.S. aid workers.

Iran's leaders also exit 2011 in worse shape than they entered it. Early in the year, they viewed the demise of Middle Eastern potentates as accelerating their rise to regional dominance. Turkish anger over the Mavi Marmara incident continued to draw Ankara closer to Tehran. Saudi anger at the perceived lack of U.S. support for Egypt's Hosni Mubarak seemed to threaten a permanent rupture in the U.S. relationship with a key ally, and Iran assumed that it would be the beneficiary of declining American influence in the Arab World.

But the Arab Spring has unfolded very differently. Iran's closest, most vital, and in some ways only Arab ally, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, ends the year leading an embattled, isolated regime facing a combination of civil war and economic sanctions that his government is unlikely to survive. Iran's relationship with Turkey has deteriorated sharply, and, along with Saudi Arabia, Ankara has in fact drawn closer to the United States. Indeed, the nascent U.S.-Turkey-Saudi troika is one of the most important but least noticed trends of the past few months.

Combined with another year without nuclear weapons - the program apparently thwarted significantly by covert operations - and a tightening vise of economic sanctions, these events have left Iran's leaders disoriented. After years of growing consensus, Iran's elites are now increasingly fragmented and at one another's throats.

Moreover, Tehran spent the past few months engaged in a stunning series of blunders: plotting with Mexican drug dealers to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the United States and allowing regime supporters to storm the British Embassy in Tehran, the combination of which has re-energized global efforts to squeeze Iran financially. The assumption that Iran is the emerging regional power has shattered.

China, which most of the declinists identify as America's greatest future rival, has likewise had a difficult 2011. With U.S. willingness to lead receding, the international spotlight has fallen on Beijing. And on every issue - the euro zone crisis, climate change and rebalancing the global economy - China has declined to take the lead, to criticism and dismay at home and abroad.

Beijing has failed to reconcile rising domestic nationalism with assuaging its neighbors' increasing alarm over Chinese economic sustainability and strategic hegemony. China's miscalculations in Northeast and Southeast Asia have allowed the United States to reassert traditional alliances in the region (with Japan and South Korea), establish new beachheads (placing a permanent U.S. Marine Corps presence in Australia), and create a process and institutions (the Trans-Pacific Partnership) for a balanced Asia-Pacific regional architecture, rather than one dominated by the Middle Kingdom.

Compared to this, 2011 has not been a bad year for America. It is a stretch to call the Iraq war a victory, but the endgame in the Afghan quagmire is slowly coming into focus. And for all our fiscal problems, global funding has to flow somewhere, and our capital markets are still unparalleled. China won't internationalize the renminbi, the euro is fragile and gold is not a country. As a result, the dollar remains the world's reserve currency, and U.S. Treasury bills the global financial safe haven.

This will inevitably change in the long term, but not for quite some time.

The unipolar moment is over. But for 2011 at least, the world order has remained the United States and the rest.

Ian Bremmer is president of Eurasia Group and author of "The End of the Free Market: Who Wins the War Between States and Corporations?" David F. Gordon, former director of policy planning at the State Department, is head of research at Eurasia Group.