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## 2013: The World

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Distinctly Catholic

If you want to feel depressed, think about the foreign policy challenges that face the nation in the next four years. Most of the debate in the coming weeks will be about the suitability of the three men selected by President Obama to lead his foreign policy team: Sen. John Kerry, former Sen. Chuck Hagel, and John Brennan. But, the deeper question is not how they will perform, but what options the US faces in the coming years no matter who is serving the President.

As ever, the Middle East is a cauldron of potential difficulties, but the difficulties are different from what they were when President Obama first took the oath of office four years ago. For years, the principal challenge was seen to be the conflict between Israelis and Arabs. But, as Jackson Diehl pointed out yesterday in the *Washington Post*, the more serious conflicts now are between Arabs. In Egypt, the Islamist movement led by President Morsi faces challenges from those who aspire to a more secular, liberal democracy, and both sides face the challenge of an economy that is stalled and inadequate to Egypt's large and growing population. In Syria, the killings continue and even if Assad were to be driven from power tomorrow, the struggle between Sunni Muslims and the Alawites and their Shiite allies could continue. The putative state of Palestine is divided between Hamas which rules in Gaza and the more moderate Palestinian Liberation Organization led by Mahmoud Abbas on the West Bank.

For decades, the Gulf Arab states Jordan and Egypt under Mubarak, used the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to deflect attention from their own failures and problems. In the years ahead, the danger is that the internal conflicts in the post-Arab Spring countries will encourage their new leaders to trot out the same pony: blame Israel, deflect criticism, rally the people in the streets to protest Israel rather than rising food prices.

Ironically, the Gulf states especially find themselves in geo-strategic alliance with Israel as both face a

grave threat from Iran. The mullahs seem hell bent on acquiring a nuclear weapon, which in turn will send officials from Qatar and Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf nations to Pakistan in hopes of acquiring nuclear weapons. The arms race between the U.S. and the Soviet Union squandered resources for decades and kept the world on the edge of disaster, yet both states were, in foreign policy terms, essentially conservative and could be counted on to pull back from the brink unless circumstances forced them over. There is no such reliance on the essential conservatism of the unaccountable regimes in Iran and Arabia.

Pakistan, which as mentioned already has a nuclear arsenal, seems always to be in danger of becoming a failed state. As the U.S. pulls out of Afghanistan in the coming years, will the young men trained by the Taliban decamp to Pakistan and try and destabilize that regime? Kashmir is always a gas leak waiting for someone to strike a match. The mind recoils from the potential horror of any Pakistani-Indian conflict in the nuclear age.

If anyone can guess the intentions of the regime in North Korea, they should win a prize. Now led by the young, untested Kim Jong Eun, who is turning 30 today, the nation of North Korea is not a nation in the common sense of the word but a prison camp with a flag. Perhaps the new leadership will embark on liberalization measures, at least in the economic sector, as China has done. This could help alleviate the crushing poverty that afflicts the people but, continuing the China metaphor, it is no guarantee of political freedom for the oppressed people there.

And, what to make of China? They have just undergone a leadership change that suggests they are becoming an essentially conservative regime like the old Soviet Union, intent on maintaining their power above all else and, just so, unlikely to embark on any new variation of the Cultural Revolution. We look back to the fall of the Soviet Union and see the finger of inevitability, but before the wall came down in 1989, popular uprisings were smashed in 1956, 1968 and again in 1981. And, lest we forget, while the wall was coming down in 1989, the Chinese authorities were massacring their own people in Tiananmen Square. There is no guarantee that liberalization in China will be smooth and inevitable. The one thing we do know about China is that its power will grow and grow in the coming years and that it is not averse to embracing the most oppressive regimes on the planet, from Sudan to Iran, to enhance that power.

Europe's problems are more economic than political. I wish the U.S. was more willing to use its influence in the IMF and World Bank to urge less draconian austerity programs in Greece, Spain and other struggling countries. Those countries need to adjust their social welfare systems to be sure, but both also need to find ways to confront the endemic tax evasion that has plagued them. A little economic stimulus would go a long way towards alleviating the pain their populations are feeling and help put them on the path to growth, without which no amount of austerity will help.

In our own hemisphere, which continues to receive far too little attention from Foggy Bottom, there are winds of change, some of them hopeful, some more foul. Castro can't live forever and it is doubtful Chavez will live out the month, and the change at the top could bring new possibilities and hope for the people below. In Mexico, the people rejected the ideological cousin of Castro and Chavez at the polls, thank God, but Mexico faces enormous problems, many of them linked to America's disgusting appetite for drugs. I have beat this drum before, but if you or anyone you know uses drugs, you are contributing to the slow killing of the Mexican nation. Shame on you. How horrifying to think that we Americans spend so many billions on border security and immigration enforcement but relatively little on drug treatment. We are tying the tourniquet below the wound.

Is all that depressing enough? One wonders why anyone would want to be Secretary of State or head of the CIA in such a world. The challenges are everywhere, the difficulties enormous, and American power is constrained in ways it was not before. Drones will not get us out of these many messes. And, yet, we

think back to Munich, to the Cuban Missile Crisis, to the crushing of the Prague Spring, to the suppression of Solidarity in Poland, to the killings in Tiananmen, to Darfur ? the list of human misery is endless ? and nonetheless we realize that like an alcoholic who, as his life falls apart, discerns hope in a Higher Power, throws himself in self-surrender on the mercy of that Higher Power, and emerges reborn from his soul sickness, the world somehow manages to survive, beaten down and bloodied to be sure, but breathing. I do not know if Mr. Kerry will make decisions I like, nor if Mr. Hagel or Mr. Brennan will. But, I know this. We need to pray for them all because the challenges they face could scarcely be more comprehensive and ominous.

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