



No more global sheriff

Gideon Rachman

America's rivals will test the resolve of the "sole superpower"

From the Persian Gulf to the South China Sea, global security is underpinned by American military power. In 2014, however, doubts will grow about America's willingness to continue in its role as global policeman. That will embolden China and Russia, as they seek to challenge American domination of the international political system.

The Syrian crisis of late 2013 highlighted America's reluctance to get involved in new military interventions. It was not just the hesitation with which Barack Obama approached the question of punitive strikes against the regime of Bashar Assad. It was also the fact that, as the events unfolded, it became evident that Congress was even more sceptical than the White House about the argument for military action—and that the public was firmly against. The episode underlined that, in America's current mood, all foreign interventions (particularly those in the Middle East) will be treated with great caution. The biggest reason is war-weariness, after 12 years of fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. Mr Obama now wants to concentrate on "nation-building at home". That chimes with the public mood.

An economic squeeze has hardened this attitude of neo-isolationism. America has already made deep cuts to its defence budget, which will kick in over the next decade. This trend will be confirmed in 2014 when the Defence Department publishes its Quadrennial Defence Review. America has been the world's largest economy since the 1880s. Before long, indeed by 2020 according to *The Economist*, China is likely to claim this title. Some American strategists have argued that America should respond to the "rise of the rest"—and China in particular—by making it clear, through diplomatic and military means, that America has **no intention of**

relinquishing its global leadership role. But the Syrian drama, allied to the president's talk about nation-building, has sent a much more equivocal message.

The big question in 2014 is how far America's rivals decide to test the resolve of the "sole superpower". The international military force, of which America is easily the biggest member, will complete its withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2014. There is a risk that, in the aftermath, the resurgent Taliban will make military gains. In Henry Kissinger's phrase as the Vietnam war wound down, America will hope for a "decent interval" between withdrawal from Afghanistan and any subsequent disintegration of the political system left behind.

Options off the table?

In the Middle East, America will try to exert influence through diplomacy. It will push for a political solution in Syria and explore whether Iran's new president, Hassan Rohani, is amenable to a nuclear deal. But America's leverage will suffer from the perception that its military power is "off the table". Although the official line remains that "all options" are open in the effort to thwart Iran's nuclear programme, the Iranians may conclude that the threat of an American assault is receding. Iran, however, will still be concerned by the increasingly effective economic boycott—and by the possibility of Israeli strikes.

Outside the Middle East, America's main geopolitical rivals remain China and Russia. Both will be emboldened by the suggestion that America's "red lines" are blurring. China may risk an even more confrontational stance towards Japan in the dangerous dispute over the uninhabited islands that they both claim in the East China Sea. The Chinese government, which has been taking an increasingly tough line in territorial disputes with all its neighbours, will be unyielding throughout 2014.

Vladimir Putin's Russia is also behaving with growing confidence on the world stage. Russia is determined to reassert a sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union and the Middle East. Neighbours that displease the Kremlin, including Georgia and Ukraine, will be leaned on even harder in the coming year. Mr Putin will also seek to build upon his adept diplomacy during the Syrian crisis, with two aims: building international resistance to the deployment of American military might, and securing a central role for Russia in global politics.

All of these developments point to a more risky global political scene in 2014. America—protected by two oceans—will be relatively shielded from these risks. It will be other parts of the world where the new security environment is put to the test. ■

Just possibly...

Snowdenesque **intelligence leaks** are made by whistleblowers in other major military powers.

A new vaccine spells the beginning of the end of **malaria**.

Buddhist extremism replaces *jihad* as the main worry of security agencies in some regions.

2014 IN BRIEF

Russia assumes the rotating presidency of the G8 group of countries

Gideon Rachman:
chief foreign-affairs
columnist,
Financial Times