

Worldwide Threat Assessment*

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This year's threat assessment illustrates how dramatically the world and our threat environment are changing. Threats are growing more interconnected and viral. Events that at first seem local and irrelevant can quickly set off transnational disruptions that affect US national interests. It's a world in which our definition of "war" now includes a "soft" version. We can add cyber and financial to the list of weapons being used against us. And such attacks can be deniable and non-attributable.

So when it comes to the distinct threat areas, our statement this year leads with cyber. And it's hard to overemphasize its significance. Increasingly, state and non-state actors are gaining and using cyber expertise. They apply cyber techniques and capabilities to achieve strategic objectives by gathering sensitive information from public- and private-sector entities, controlling the content and flow of information, and challenging perceived adversaries in cyberspace.

These capabilities put all sectors of our country at risk, from government and private networks to critical infrastructures. We see indications that some terrorist organizations are interested in developing offensive cyber capabilities and those cyber criminals are using a growing black market to sell cyber tools that fall into the hands of both state and non-state actors.

This year we include natural resources as a factor affecting national security, because shifts in human geography, climate, disease, and competition for natural resources have national security implications.

Many countries that are extremely important to US interests, which sit in already volatile areas of the world, are living with extreme water and food stress that can destabilize governments. This includes Afghanistan and Pakistan in South Asia, Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and Libya in the Arab world, and many other nation-states across Africa and in our own hemisphere. Water challenges include not only problems with quality and quantity but with flooding. Some countries will almost certainly exert leverage over their neighbors to preserve their own water interests. And water infrastructure can be considered a viable target for terrorists.

In the United States, Germany and Japan, less than 15 percent of household expenditures are for food. In India and China, that figure climbs to more than 20 percent. In Egypt, Vietnam and Nigeria, it rises to greater than 35 percent. And in Algeria, Pakistan and Azerbaijan, more than 45 percent of household expenses are just for food.

* *Editor's Note: This piece is excerpted from testimony presented by James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, to the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence on March 12, 2013.*

Terrorists, militants and international crime groups are certain to use declining local food security to gain legitimacy and undermine government authority. Intentional introduction of a livestock or plant disease could be a greater threat to the United States and the global food system than a direct attack on food supplies intended to kill humans. So there will almost assuredly be security concerns with respect to health and pandemics, energy and climate change. Environmental stresses are not just humanitarian issues. They legitimately threaten regional stability.

On the issue of terrorism, the threat from core al-Qaeda and the potential for massive coordinated attack on the United States is diminished, but the global jihadist movement is a more diversified, decentralized and persistent threat. Lone wolves, domestic extremists and jihadist-inspired groups remain determined to attack western interests, as they have done most recently in Libya and Algeria.

The turmoil in the Arab world has brought a spike in threats to US interests. The rise of new governments in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, along with ongoing unrest in Syria and Mali, provide openings for opportunistic individuals and groups. In these and other regions of the world, extremists can take advantage of diminished counterterrorism capabilities, porous borders and internal stresses, most especially a high proportion of unemployed young males.

Weapons of mass destruction development and proliferation are another major threat to US interests. North Korea has already demonstrated capabilities that threaten the United States and the security environment in East Asia. It announced last month [in February] that it concluded its third nuclear test, and last April it displayed what appears to be a rogue mobile intercontinental ballistic missile.

We believe North Korea has already taken initial steps towards fielding this system, although it remains untested. It also used its Taepo Dong-2 launch vehicle to put a satellite in orbit in December, thus demonstrating its long-range missile technology. These developments have been accompanied with extremely aggressive public rhetoric toward the United States and the Republic of Korea.

Iran continues to develop technical expertise in a number of areas, including uranium enrichment, nuclear reactors and ballistic missiles, from which it could draw if it decided to build missile-deliverable nuclear weapons.

These technical advancements strengthen our assessment that Tehran has the scientific, technical and industrial capacity to produce nuclear weapons. This makes the central issue its political will to do so. Such a decision will reside with the supreme leader, and at this point we don't know if he'll eventually decide to build nuclear weapons.

The United States and our allies are tracking Syria's munitions stockpiles, particularly its chemical and biological warfare agents, which are all part of a large, complex and geographically dispersed program. Its advanced chemical weapons program has the potential to inflict mass casualties.

It adds to our concern that the increasingly beleaguered regime, having found its escalation of violence through conventional means inadequate, might be preparing to use chemical weapons against the Syrian people. Besides regimes' use, nongovernmental groups or individuals in Syria could also gain access to such materials.

Let me now briefly address regional threats around the world. Some nations in the Middle East and North Africa are making progress toward democratic rule, but most are experiencing levels of violence and political backsliding. Islamic actors have been the chief beneficiaries of the political openings, and extremist parties in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco will probably solidify their influence this year.

After almost two years of conflict in Syria, the erosion of the regime's capabilities is accelerating. We see this in its territorial losses, military manpower and logistics shortages. The regime's aggressive violence and the deteriorating security conditions have led to increased civilian casualties. This sort of violence too often accompanies major political upheaval being perpetuated by elites trying to assert or retain control. This violence and economic dislocation have led to more than two million Syrians being displaced, both internally and externally.

In Iran, leaders are exploiting the unrest in the Arab world to try to spread influence abroad and undermine the United States and our allies. However, Tehran faces a worsening financial outlook since sanctions were implemented in 2012 on its oil exports and central bank.

Iran continues to be a destabilizing force in the region, providing weapons and training to Syrian forces and standing up a militia force there to fight the Syrian opposition. Iran's efforts to secure regional dominance, however, achieve limited results. And the fall of the Assad regime in Syria would be a major strategic loss for Tehran.

In Iraq, sectarian tensions are rising between the majority Shia and minority Sunni. Last year we saw a rise in vehicle and suicide bombings by al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). However, AQI almost certainly lacks the strength to overwhelm Iraqi security forces, and Iraq is producing and exporting oil at its highest levels in two decades.

Moving to South Asia, the Taliban-led insurgency has diminished in some areas of Afghanistan but remains resilient and capable of challenging US and international goals. The coalition drawdown will have an impact on Afghanistan's economy, which is likely to decline after 2014.

In Pakistan, the government has made no concerted effort to institute much-needed policy and tax reforms, and the country faces extremely challenging prospects for sustainable economic growth. On a more positive note, this past year the Pakistani armed forces continued their operations in the federally administered tribal areas, or FATA, which have been safe havens for al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Pakistan also saw fewer domestic attacks from the militant group of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP).

Across Africa, violence, corruption and extremism will threaten US interests this year. We've seen strides in development in some areas, and Ghana here is noteworthy. And international efforts have combined with domestic support to bring more stability to Somalia. But we still see unresolved conflict between Sudan and South Sudan, extremist attacks in Nigeria, the collapse of governance in northern Mali, and persistent conflict in Central Africa, especially in the Great Lakes region.

China is supplementing its more advanced military capabilities by bolstering maritime law enforcement to support its claims in the South and East China Seas. It continues its military buildup and its aggressive information-stealing campaigns.

Russia will continue to resist putting more international pressure on Syria or Iran and will continue to display its great sensitivity to missile defense.

Closer to home, despite positive trends toward democracy and economic development, Latin America and the Caribbean contend with weak institutions, slow recovery from devastating natural disasters, and drug-related violence and trafficking, which, of course, is a major threat to the United States.

On another aspect of transnational organized crime, roughly 20 million human beings are being trafficked around the world, an issue in which we've increased our efforts to support law enforcement. Virtually every country on the face of the earth is a source, a transit point or a destination for human trafficking, and some fall in more than one category.

In sum, given the magnitude and complexity of our global responsibilities, strong, persistent and reliable intelligence capabilities have never been more important or urgent.