

New year brings new crises in the world

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Published Tuesday, January 2, 2007

As John Edwards shovels muck alongside the "have-nots" of New Orleans' Ninth Ward to make Hurricane Katrina a campaign issue, world events conspire to set a different agenda for the presidential race of 2008.

Call it the "other global warming": The steady simmer of foreign policy conflicts that threaten to boil over into full-blown crises.

To paraphrase the 1992 Carvillian mantra that kept candidate Bill Clinton focused on the issues that would win him the White House, in 2008, the war-room white board might well read: "It's foreign policy, stupid."

Here are three countries and three questions at the periphery of public debate today that could come to command attention in the run for 2008. And we're not talking about Iraq, Iran or North Korea.

- Will Japan go nuclear? Christmas Eve news stories out of Tokyo report the existence of a secret government white paper titled "On the Possibility of Developing Nuclear Weapons Domestically." Though government spokesmen immediately spiked the rumor, the concern remains: How will Japan respond to a nuclear-armed North Korea?

But doesn't the post-World War II Japanese Constitution put strict limits on Japan's military? Yes, but it quite sensibly allows for self-defense - which, for all its studied non-comment on the secret nuclear study, is one hypothetical the Japanese government is quite happy to clarify: Nuclear weapons can be considered a means of self-defense. How would China view a nuclear Japan - and what stance should the United States take toward the nuclear angst of its chief Asian ally?

- Will Turkey go nuclear? As North Korea's bomb changes the security calculus in Asia, so, too, Iran's nuclear pursuits are changing minds in a nation that sits on the fault line between Europe and the Middle East.

"Will Turkey Join the EU ... Or Go Nuclear?" That's the question in the current issue of Foreign Policy journal, exploring the implications of Turkish fears of a nuclear Iran - and Europe's fears of a majority-Muslim Turkey. The European Union - working to assimilate 10 new member nations from 2004 with new additions Romania and Bulgaria in 2007 - lacks the appetite to fold in 70 million Turks, contributing to Turkish concerns that it will remain an outsider in two regions, too "European" - read: secular - for an "Islamified" Middle East, and too "Middle Eastern" - read: Islamist - for Europe. As isolation breeds insecurity, acquiring a Turkish nuclear arsenal might seem a sound insurance policy.

John Kennedy famously worried that a failure to stem nuclear proliferation would result in world with 15 to 20 nuclear-armed nations. His fear did not come to pass - in the 20th century. All bets are off for the 21st.

If the first two questions are whether Turkey and Japan will go nuclear, the third question is:

- Will Putin go at all? Mark your calendars for March 9, 2008. No that's not Super Tuesday in the American presidential primaries. It's the day Russian voters go to the polls to elect a successor to current president Vladimir Putin, barred by his country's constitution from another term in office.

It's possible Putin will formally stand down while putting forward a Potemkin-candidate behind whom he can still pull the strings. Or it might be that Putin will make a more frontal assault on Russia's brittle democracy, parlaying terrorist acts into allegations that Russia's democratic constitution is inadequate to the task of preserving national security. There's political precedent for that: In the wake of the 2004 Beslan school attack by Chechen terrorists, Putin abolished direct elections of all federal governorships.

This much seems clear: Whether Russia remains democratic in form, it will be autocratic in fact. Instead of an opening to the West, we see a Russia in retreat - a riddle wrapped inside a nuclear-armed enigma.

Bring Iraq, Iran and North Korea back into the picture, and it becomes harder to keep the 2008 electoral focus on the minimum-wage debate, prescription drug prices or education policy.

Gone are the days when the first George W. - George Washington - cited our "detached and distant situation" with an ocean between Old World and New to warn against entangling alliances. In our global village of bytes and bits and porous borders, of lengthening missile flight range and shrinking target radii of Circular Error Probable, retreat from the world's woes is wishful thinking.

With the ball dropped to ring out the old and ring in the new run for the White House, whoever prevails in 2008 had better be ready to take on a world of troubles.

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