

World Knowledge Forum 2012

Political Risks Outlook 2013

Thursday, October 11, 2012

"We obviously live in interesting times, and I don't think there is any question that 2013 will be a continuation of those interesting times," announced Christopher Hill, Dean of the Josef Korbel School of International Relations at the University of Denver and former Ambassador to Iraq, at this year's 13th annual World Knowledge Forum in Seoul.

Joining Mr. Hill in the panel discussion were Walter Lohman, Director of the Asian Studies Center at the Heritage Foundation; Joschka Fischer, former Minister of Foreign Affairs and Vice-Chancellor of Germany; and Shen Dingli, Executive Dean of the Institute of International Studies at Fudan University. As they sat down to discuss the increasing political and security risks on the global stage in the upcoming year and beyond, the panelists unanimously agreed that the Middle East – specifically Syria and Iran – would be of the greatest concern to world leaders.

The panelists focused heavily on security concerns stemming from Iran's nuclear ambitions. Despite economic sanctions and intense international pressure, Iran has shown no willingness to abandon its nuclear program. If Iran succeeds in converting its uranium reserves into a weapons stockpile, the consequences would be severe.

"If Iran gets a nuclear missile, [that would be] the final assault on the Nuclear Proliferation Treaty structure," warned Mr. Hill. He suggested that other countries, specifically Turkey, would feel increasing pressure to obtain its own nuclear weapons, thus starting a dangerous arms race.

Mr. Hill then commented on the possibility that Washington's diplomatic approach for dealing with Iran will result in an impasse. He cited two reasons for these failures. The first is the perception, shared by many other Western nations, that Iran is not serious in its intentions to stop the development of its nuclear program. The other is that the U.S., Britain, France, China, Russia, and Germany are taking an increasingly pessimistic view that a diplomatic approach will lead to a permanent solution. Borrowing a term from American Football, Mr. Hill summarized the discussions with Iran as a "three-and-out approach."

In light of these difficulties, the panelists discussed whether military action should be the way to go. While Mr. Dingli recognized that "Obama would not exclude [a military] option," he noted the possibility that Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology is for peaceful, rather than for military, purposes.

Mr. Hill also mentioned that a military option is available, although he acknowledged that such an endeavor is fraught with risks. "Anyone who thinks that it would be easy knows nothing about military operations," warned Mr. Hill, before summarizing the U.S. chances of winning such a conflict as a "throw of the dice."

Mr. Fischer was quite vocal in his opposition to any military conflict. "Is there a military option? I doubt it," he argued, stating that any military option that relied heavily on air strikes would only delay Iran's efforts, not stop them, going so far as to suggest that armed conflict could even accelerate Iran's nuclear program. "The outcome of an ill-conceived military conflict will be a shortcut to Iranian military nuclear power." He reiterated his opposition by stating, "once you start shooting, you never know what the outcome will be."

Mr. Lohman also warned of the potentially disastrous consequences of armed conflict with Iran. "Any attack on Iran would have an extraordinary destabilizing effect," adding that "Muslim communities all over the world would react very strongly."

Another area of concern at the forum was what Mr. Fischer referred to as the increasingly violent "hegemonic conflict" taking place in Syria. Echoing Mr. Fischer's concerns, Mr. Hill lamented that "Syria is, like many struggles in the Middle East, a war of annihilation."

Mr. Fischer further warned of the "terrible humanitarian costs" that would ensue if a stronger international effort was not taken to oust the Assad regime. Most of the panel attributed the international impasse to China's continued use of its UN veto power against imposing stronger sanctions on the Assad regime.

Mr. Hill noted that neither current Syrian President Bashar al-Assad nor the various rebel groups could be viewed as good or bad. Mr. Fischer echoed this concern by stating that taking sides in the Syrian conflict is like choosing between "worse and worse."

Referring to the security risks in the Middle East, Mr. Lohman said that "the U.S. will be involved in the Middle East for decades, no matter who is President." Mr. Fischer concluded the discussion on the Middle East by issuing a stark warning to the U.S. and other Western allies. "We risk, in the end, of turning the Arab Spring into an anti-Western, Muslim movement."

Although the specter of instability in the Middle East cast a pall over the room, the panelists also spent some time discussing security risks in other parts of the world.

Mr. Dingli warned that the current territorial dispute between China and Japan was "not just rhetoric," that there was a real risk that the dispute will result in "a dangerous reality."

On a more positive note, an audience member asked Mr. Hill during the Q&A section to discuss any security concerns that may arise between the U.S. and China. "I think that's a relationship that's too big to fail," he responded.