

November's Diplomatic Harvest

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MADRID – Jihadism is flourishing. Tensions with Russia are flaring. Agreement between Iran and the “E3+3” (Britain, France, and Germany from the European Union, plus China, Russia, and the United States) remains elusive, with domestic politics in all of the negotiating partners introducing additional complexities into an already complicated process. US President Barack Obama, having suffered a severe midterm election defeat, must now deal with a Congress under full Republican control. In the eurozone, economic growth remains anemic, causing leaders to look inward.

One could easily conclude that the world is being sucked into a vortex of instability. But the past month featured some hopeful moments, and pausing to study them is imperative to avoid succumbing to pessimism.

Concluding a deal with Iran on its nuclear program remains an unfinished item of global business. The negotiations in Vienna failed to produce a deal that is critically important to both regional and global stability. But the atmosphere is positive: Iran fulfilled its obligations under last year's interim agreement, and the E3+3 showed a willingness to end sanctions. The deadline to finalize negotiations has now been extended to June 2015.

The West has a unique window of opportunity. Achieving a deal is essential to avoid a new – and potentially catastrophic – conflict in the Middle East. Negotiation and diplomacy are the only way to resolve the Iranian nuclear question in the long term and to normalize Iran's critical role in regional security.

There were several other promising developments in November. The new European Commission took office on November 1, launching its mandate with a plan to boost public and private investment by €315 billion (\$392 billion) over the next three years. Similarly, in Brisbane, the G-20 approved a package of economic measures to boost

global economic growth by 2.1 percentage points by 2018. Moreover, the 20 leaders endorsed the Global Infrastructure Initiative, which will create a Global Infrastructure Hub to serve as a knowledge-sharing platform for governments, the private sector, development banks, and international organizations.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit in Beijing featured several important agreements as well. At the top of the list is the announcement of a US-China bilateral climate deal, which helps to smooth the path toward the crucial United Nations Climate Change Summit (COP21) in Paris next year. If India were to adopt a similar stance, hope would grow stronger still.

The UN's Green Climate Fund, meanwhile, has been boosted with additional financing pledges – another critical stepping stone on the path to Paris. The Fund, financed by developed countries, is designed to help developing countries meet the costs of mitigating and adapting to climate change. The US has now pledged \$3 billion, with Japan promising \$1.5 billion, augmenting previous pledges by France and Germany – funding that is essential to ensure developing countries' fruitful participation at COP21.

The EU is also looking forward to Paris, following the European Council's approval of the European Commission's 2030 framework for climate and energy policies. Targets have been set for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, increasing the percentage of renewables in Europe's energy mix, enhancing energy efficiency, and promoting electricity interconnection among member states.

China and the US reached another bilateral deal at the APEC summit, which will serve to unblock the World Trade Organization's Information Technology Agreement and thus eliminate tariffs on information and communication technology. The Obama administration has estimated that, once applied, this agreement – which was frozen for a year as China sought to protect its domestic industry – will increase annual global GDP by \$190 billion.

At the same summit, Chinese President Xi Jinping announced steps toward a 17-member Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific (FTAAP). Such trade cooperation could provide a much-needed boon to diplomacy in a region that is under perpetual geopolitical strain. Meanwhile, the US-backed Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) also

moved forward in Beijing. Though the two projects are commonly viewed as rivals, owing to China's absence from the TPP, the initiatives could be complementary. If strategic vision prevails and points of convergence are found, stability in Asia could be strengthened significantly.

The same is true of the Middle East, where an unscheduled meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council in November brought some unexpected good news: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates committed to return their ambassadors to Qatar after an eight-month absence.

In Tunisia, meanwhile, the technocratic government that had taken charge for several months was replaced democratically. In a parliamentary election at the end of October, the secular Nidaa Tounes (Call of Tunisia) party scored a victory over the Islamist Ennahda (Renaissance). One month later, Tunisians went to the polls to elect a president for the first time since President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali was removed in 2011.

Tunisia remains a beacon of hope in the region. The emergence of a coalition government shows that the damaging winner-take-all paradigm of Middle East politics can be broken, and that power can be shared. The Arab world should take note.

In Jerusalem, mounting tension over holy sites has highlighted the difficulty of moving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process forward. With an escalation in violent attacks in the city – a sacred place for both sides – the conflict has taken on a more religious face. And, given this context, the Israeli government's legislative proposal to define Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people – thereby giving preference to the state's Jewish identity over its democratic character and endangering minority rights – is especially pernicious.

Today, more than ever, I believe the peace process could take a new turn if the EU officially recognized Palestine – whose interim institutions it continues to support. The effectiveness of such concerted action was on welcome display in November. We should strive to maintain the momentum.

