**America & the World: The Challenges Ahead**

As we head toward a new decade, President Obama and the nation face a wide range of challenges around the globe

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**CHINA**   
How the United States and China work together, compete economically, and use their diplomatic and military influence around the world will all play a critical role in shaping the most important international relationship of the 21st century.

China is now America's second-largest trading partner (after Canada), and its exports fill American store shelves; about 80 percent of the goods sold at Wal-Mart are made in China. But many Americans believe China doesn't play by the rules when it comes to trade, and they fear that thousands more U.S. jobs will be lost to China, which has a huge, low-wage workforce. Such fears put pressure on Washington to at least consider protectionist measures.

As China becomes a more powerful global playeráit's expected to overtake Japan this year and become the world's second-largest economy, after the U.S.áthe U.S. will also need Beijing's help in dealing with nuclear threats in North Korea and Iran.

The U.S.-China relationship is complicated by tensions over Tibet, Taiwan, human rights, China's rigid controls on the Internet and free speech, and China's role as the chief financier of U.S. debt. When President Obama visited in November, his remarks on one of the key issues, free speech, created a stir.

"I have a lot of critics in the United States who can say all kinds of things about me," he said. "I actually think that that makes our democracy stronger, and it makes me a better leader because it forces me to hear opinions that I don't want to hear."

**CLIMATE CHANGE**   
Climate change, also known as global warming, is one of the most complicated and controversial problems facing the world today. Agreeing on a treaty to address the problem was the goal of last month's meeting of 200 nations in Copenhagen.

Most scientists say that failure to curb the greenhouse gases that are warming the planet will at some point have disastrous consequences. For example, melting arctic and antarctic ice sheets could raise sea levels and lead to widespread coastal flooding. Melting glaciers, especially in the Himalayas, could jeopardize water supplies for billions of people in Asia. But the enormous amount of money required to address these issues, the impact of any greenhouse gas restrictions on an already-shaky world economy, and disagreement over which measures make the most sense is making it even harder to take action.

The U.S. is currently the second-largest emitter of greenhouse gases, after China. The Obama administration has been pushing a cap-and-trade system to limit greenhouse gas emissions, but so far the measure is stalled in the Senate.

**AFGHANISTAN & IRAQ**   
As the U.S. winds down its military presence in Iraq, it is ramping up its involvement in Afghanistan.

Last June, U.S. forces withdrew from Iraqi cities, and President Obama has said the U.S. will withdraw its combat forces most of the 115,000 troops currently thereby August, and all remaining troops by December 2011. Since the U.S.-led coalition invaded Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein in 2003, more than 4,300 U.S. troops have been killed in Iraq, thousands more have been injured, and tens of thousands of Iraqi civilians have died.

Violence in Iraq, including U.S. casualties, has significantly declined since former President Bush sent an additional 20,000 troops to Iraq the surgeáin early 2007.

But the situation in Afghanistan, where the U.S. and its allies have been fighting since 2001, has been deteriorating. President Obama announced plans in December to send another 30,000 U.S. troops to join the 68,000 already there.

Obama has long maintained that Afghanistan, where Al Qaeda planned the 9/11 attacks, and not Iraq, is the front line in the war against terrorism, and that since the ouster of the Taliban in late 2001, the war there has not been given the attention and resources it requires.

The biggest fear is that Afghanistan, where more than 900 U.S. troops have been killed, may be an even tougher challenge than Iraq, particularly with neighboring Pakistan providing sanctuary for insurgents. The Afghan government of President Hamid Karzai, who was returned to office in a disputed election in August, is widely considered corrupt and ineffective.

The U.S. doesn't want the Taliban, which imposed its radical version of Islam on Afghanistan and gave Al Qaeda sanctuary when it ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, to regain control. The real question is whether the Afghan government will be able to take over after U.S. and NATO troops leave, starting in 2011.

**NUCLEAR THREATS**   
One of the biggest challenges facing the Obama administration is the possibility of Iran and North Korea, both autocratic regimes hostile to the U.S., becoming nuclear powers.

Iran has been at odds with the U.S. since the 1979 Islamic revolution, but relations have become more tense in recent years. Iran's hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has threatened to "wipe Israel off the map," and Iran supports Hamas and Hezbollah, radical Muslim groups that the U.S. considers terrorist organizations.

But the greatest concern is Iran's nuclear program, which has been condemned by the United Nations and the international community. While Iran claims its nuclear efforts are for peaceful purposes, U.S. officials say Iran is trying to develop a nuclear weapon, and that it may be close to achieving that goal. In September, Iran test-fired missiles with sufficient range to strike Israel, American military bases in the Middle East, and parts of Europe.

To prevent that, the Obama administration is working with U.S. allies and the United Nations to assemble a package of tougher economic sanctions against Iran, including a cut-off of foreign investment in its critical oil and gas industry.

The challenge with North Korea one of the world's most isolated, repressive, and economically stunted nations could be even tougher. Four years ago, North Korea exploded its first nuclear weapon, so the Obama administration's task is to lure North Korea back to negotiations with South Korea, China, Japan, Russia and the U.S. and ultimately to persuade the country to give up its nuclear arms.

Further complicating matters, North Korea's autocratic ruler, Kim Jong Il, may be in poor health, and a power struggle over his successor could be brewing.

That also raises questions about who's actually in control of the country's nuclear program and the safety of the thousands of U.S. troops who have been stationed on the dividing line between Communist North Korea and South Korea since the end of the Korean War in 1953.

The U.S. and the international community have been trying to persuade North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons with promises of desperately needed economic aid. Despite these gestures, North Korea has defiantly conducted several missile tests in the last few months.

Another issue of grave concern in Asia is the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal. As Pakistan's increasingly fragile government battles an insurgency by Islamic militants along the border with Afghanistan, there are fears that Al Qaeda or the Taliban could get their hands on Pakistan's nuclear weapons, and use them to attack the West. Pakistan's leaders insist the weapons are safe, but American officials aren't so sure. the middle east

The prospects for peace in this war-torn region are cloudy at best: Israel's Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, is skeptical of the chances for peace with the Palestinians, and the Palestinian leadership is sharply divided, both geographically and politically. The more moderate Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, oversees the West Bank. But Gaza is controlled by Hamas, a radical Muslim group responsible for suicide bombings in Israel and considered a terrorist organization by the U.S. and the European Union.

Israel took control of the West Bank and Gaza during the Six-Day War in 1967. When Israel withdrew its troops and settlers from Gaza in 2005, Hamas began firing rockets at, and killing, civilians in Israel. Israel responded with a three-week offensive that began in December 2008 to stop the rocket fire, attacking Hamas targets and Gaza's infrastructure, and killing 1,300 Palestinians.

The U.S. has long supported a two-state solution in which Israel would exist alongside a Palestinian state in most of the West Bank and Gaza. The key issues to be resolved include what to do about Israeli settlements in the West Bank, Palestinian refugees, and the status of Jerusalem, which both Israelis and Palestinians claim as their capital.

"Everyone is running around in circles trying to rebuild this process, to find some way to start it up again," a senior Israeli official says. "No one knows if it is possible."

**TERRORISM**   
Since the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001, there hasn't been another terrorist attack in the U.S., but several top Al Qaeda figures remain at large, including its leader, Osama bin Laden, who is believed to be hiding in the lawless region along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. Today, there are an untold number of other terrorist groups, not all with connected with Al Qaeda, who are bent on targeting Westerners, and Americans in particular.

To counter these threats, Washington has spent billions improving U.S. securityáeverything from more extensive airport screenings to beefing up the capabilities of the F.B.I at home and the U.S. intelligence agencies that operate abroad.

President Obama has also been trying to improve America's image in the Muslim world. That's one of the reasons he's closing the Guantánamo prison for terror suspects, which Obama says served as a recruiting tool for terrorist groups. That decision led to the controversial announcement in November that 9/11 mastermind Khalid Shaikh Mohammed will be put on trial in federal court in New York.

**RUSSIA**   
In the last decade, Russia has become increasingly assertive in its relationship with the U.S. and the world.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, a third of its empire broke away. A smaller, economically devastated Russia was in the 1990s unable to play the major role on the world stage it had when the Soviet Union shared superpower status with the U.S. There was little Russia could do as its former republics and Eastern European satellites grew closer to the U.S. and Europe.

But in the last decade, Russia's economy boomed, and oil revenues soared with the price of oil. (Russia is the world's second-largest oil producer, after Saudi Arabia.) Feeling confident, Russia began acting more assertively on the world stage. The recession, which has hit Russia hard, hasn't yet dampened its bluster.

At home Russia has become increasingly autocratic. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin relinquished the presidency in 2008 to Dmitri Medvedev, but Putin is still widely believed to be the real power behind the scenes.

Obama needs Russia's cooperation in two key areas: Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union fought a devastating and unsuccessful war from 1979 to 1989, and Iran.

"For Russia, Iran is a very good bargaining chip," says Vladimir Sotnikov of the Center for International Security in Moscow. "And that is why, for now, I don't think that Russia is going to be ready to wholly support major new sanctions."

**Answer each question below using a piece of evidence (quote) from the article to back up your opinion.**

Which one of the issues above do you think is the most serious for our country? Why?

Do you think the USA is trying to do an impossible job in dealing with all of these issues at the same time? Why?

Which issue above will be impossible to deal with in your lifetime? Why?