

GREAT DECISIONS 2017

Topic Descriptions

Speakers may emphasize their own research and experiences
in these areas for a deeper understanding of the issues

WorldQuest 2017 Questions may come from the GD Book or Speaker Presentations

January 14: Nuclear Security

Professor Aaron Karp, Director of Model UN, Political Science and Geography, Old Dominion University

Nuclear nonproliferation was a top priority for the Obama administration. While the Iran Deal was a diplomatic victory toward this end, major threats persist from both state and non-state actors. Countries like North Korea, Russia, and India and Pakistan continue to challenge nonproliferation efforts. The possibility that terrorists will carry out an attack using a “dirty bomb,” made from captured nuclear materials, looks increasingly real. In a fractious world, which way forward for U.S. nuclear security policy?

January 21: U.S. Foreign Policy and Petroleum

Mr. Greg Priddy, Director, Global Energy and Natural Resources, Eurasia Group

What is the effect of U.S. petroleum security on foreign policy? For 45 years, the country has alternated between periods of energy security and insecurity, sometimes able to wield petroleum as a useful instrument of foreign policy, sometimes not. Despite the so-called “energy revolution,” the U.S. today is by no means disentangled from foreign dependence and global trends. In order to be successful, policymakers must recognize both petroleum security circumstances and patterns in the relationship between petroleum and foreign policy.

January 28: Latin America's Political Pendulum

Dr. Francis Adams, Chair and Professor, Political Science and Geography, Old Dominion University

The pendulum of Latin American politics is swinging rightward once again. Yet as the “pink tide” recedes, the forces of change have more to do with socioeconomic than ideology. Dramatic economic and political crises have coincided in countries like Brazil and Venezuela. Still, the final result for Latin America may be the emergence of centrist, pragmatic modes of governance, and with them, opportunities for the U.S. to improve relations. The new administration must look beyond the neoliberal model of the 1990s, and develop an approach to relations fit for the 21st century.

February 04: Prospects for Afghanistan and Pakistan

Mr. Sarwar Sultani, Ph.D. Fulbright Fellow from Kabul, Afghanistan, Old Dominion University

Major internal conflict has plagued Afghanistan for four decades. The U.S., for its part, has conducted military operations in the country nearly continuously since 9/11. Today, war with the Taliban persists, and tensions between the U.S. and Pakistan have gradually deteriorated. As his time in office drew to a close, President Obama limited further withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan. The incoming administration has a choice: will it maintain the status quo, completely reverse the Obama administration drawdown or withdraw completely? Does the U.S. face a no win situation in Afghanistan and Pakistan?

February 11: Saudi Arabia in Transition

Dr. Debra Sushan, Assistant Professor of Government, William and Mary

As Saudi Arabia struggles to adjust to the drastic decline in oil revenue, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman attempts to boldly transform the country and shift more power to the younger generation. At the same time, many countries such as the U.S. point out the lack of democracy, women's rights and human rights in Saudi Arabia, and blame its promotion of Wahhabism, an extremely conservative version of Islam, for creating jihadists. Bipartisan criticism of Saudi Arabia is rising in Congress. Both countries need each other, but they are at a crossroads in bilateral relations.

February 18: Trade and Politics

Dr. David Earnest, Professor and Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies, Old Dominion University

The U.S. political mood toward trade has gone sour. One need look no further than the 2016 presidential contest for the popular narrative: trade means that China wins, at America's expense. But do the numbers support that conclusion? The metrics used to gauge economic strength—Gross Domestic Product and balance of trade—have not kept up with the realities of modern manufacturing. Obtaining an accurate picture of U.S. economic stature requires a critique of those numbers. Only then can the U.S. develop appropriate policy solutions for the challenges at hand.

February 25: Conflict in the South China Sea

Dr. Nong Hong, Executive Director and Senior Fellow, Institute for China-American Studies, Washington, D.C.

The South China Sea is a locus of competing territorial claims, and China its most vocal claimant. Beijing's interest has intensified disputes with other countries in the region in recent years, especially since China has increased its naval presence. Despite rising international pressure, including an unfavorable ruling by the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea, China staunchly defends its policies in the region. Preventing tensions from boiling over is a matter of careful diplomacy.

March 04: The Future of Europe

Dr. Clay Clemens, Chancellor Professor of Government, William and Mary

The outcome of the United Kingdom referendum on EU membership sent shockwaves across the globe. It even caught British voters by surprise. The European Union has helped secure peace in Europe for the past 70 years. Now it faces an uncertain future. Amid a refugee crisis, lingering financial recession and the constant specter of terrorism, unity seems more imperative than ever. But the Brexit vote underscores the complexities of integrating an extremely diverse continent. What will post-Brexit Europe look like, and how can U.S. foreign policy adapt?