

The New Year always provides an opportunity for both introspection and speculation. So it seems a good time to consider what the big stories are likely to be this year.

Some of the five major stories I have listed below are obvious, hangovers from 2014. Others are not. But, as my list makes clear, there is always room for optimism amid the messiness, despair and incoherence – and a realization that progress is often uneven and frustrating.

In each case, I've tried to include a possible surprise or two that could shift the current situation out of its malaise.

What do you think? Do these match your top five? It'll be interesting to compare at the end of the year.

The greater commitment of ground troops in Iraq and Syria.

President Obama keeps promising not to do so, as part of a zero tolerance policy for American casualties. His joint chiefs keep telling him, however, that he has to commit more forces if he wants a victory, one he would like before he departs from office.

Meanwhile, the number of official "personnel" in "Syraq" keeps inching up, from 300 to 3,000. And this figure doesn't include many of those subcontractors, specialists and advisers who aren't dressed in battle fatigues, about which we have no accurate numbers.

The likelihood is that the war will drag on, putting greater pressure on Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, and resulting in greater domestic strife in those countries.

Possible surprises? More militant attacks in Europe result in some European governments committing ground troops and the war intensifies. Even bigger surprise? Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party does unexpectedly badly in Israel's March election. A new coalition of Labor and centrist parties assume power – and changes the map of peace negotiations as it

halts development in the West Bank. Gaza-based [Hamas](#) then refuses to negotiate and the [P alestinian Authority](#) 's Mahmoud Abbas enhances his position once again as the “representative of the Palestinian people.” A grand coalition is formed that isolates and weakens ISIS.

The situation with Russia will become more acute before there is any relief.

Putin is under no domestic pressure to relieve the pressure on the average Russian – yet. Indeed, he seems to revel in defying Europe and the Americans, even as his economy slips into a deeper recession.

Any pressure on Putin to negotiate with America and Europe on Ukraine is more likely to originate from gentle suggestions from his wealthy friends rather than any limited street protests. Then again, we've seen powerful leaders across Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa succumb to unanticipated pressure before. So let's hope that Putin can find a way to “declare victory” before the Russian people suffer too much.

A possible surprise? The nationalist [Right Sector](#) makes further electoral progress in Ukraine, becomes increasingly militant, and the conflict expands beyond the current war zones in Luhansk and Donetsk. An even worse surprise? The Arctic becomes the new focal point of friction between the US and Russia as both seek to consolidate their rights in the region. Russia, by the way, is much better prepared to do so than the US at the moment. So look for greater expenditures on this issue in the Pentagon's next budget.

Immigrants and asylum seekers will keep coming – to Europe and beyond.

And they will do so in record numbers as they flee the conflicts in Libya, the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. They will also likely die in record numbers. Last year it is [estimated](#) that nearly 3,500 refugees died trying to attempt the crossing to Europe, while another 200,000 were rescued. These mortality rates are less unusual than is commonly assumed, stretching back over a decade.

But now the spotlight is increasingly on the behavior of the EU. It has gloated that it is a global “force for good” for a decade, even winning the Noble Prize to reinforce that claim. Yet, [Fronte](#)

[X](#) - the EU's extended border patrol force - cut back the number of vessels designed to patrol the Mediterranean under Operation

[Triton](#)

in late 2014 when it replaced the former operation run by the Italian government. Patrolling in this case really means rescuing distressed immigrants in sinking boats. This cutback has resulted in untold numbers of refugees drowning in the last three months, although we mostly get to hear about those who are rescued.

Frontex has received offers from [15 EU member states](#) to provide technical equipment and border guards. The EU will have to bolster its patrols if its international reputation is not to be permanently tarnished. But what it really needs is more ships, and a streak of humanity.

A possible surprise move? President Obama offers US humanitarian assistance in patrolling the Mediterranean.

On the brighter side, the US enhances its ties with Latin America.

Vice-President Joe Biden's impromptu [meeting](#) with Venezuelan president Nicholas Maduro (at the inauguration of Brazil's president) has followed on the heels of the US's rapprochement with Cuba. Together they appear part of a well-orchestrated diplomatic offensive by the US to wrestle back influence from China.

Focused on the Middle East and Africa, the US has sorely neglected what it regards as its own backyard for the last decade. China has filled this vacuum with aid and [loans](#) to the continent's major oil producers, notably Brazil and Venezuela. As a result, the US's influence has declined. In an effort to shore up a major hemispheric trade agreement that excludes the Chinese, President Obama is busy restoring those ties. It is a job made easier for him by the decline in oil prices, a rapid change that has made these countries again reliant on external aid and American trade.

A surprise: President Obama convenes a meeting of Latin American leaders in Washington and announces a breakthrough in a trade agreement, one that the Republican leadership reluctantly has to support.

On the really brighter side, 2015 becomes a banner year because

the West reaches a deal on nuclear weapons with Iran and on proliferation with North Korea.

Okay, I admit these are unlikely. In fact, a real stretch. But as someone who lived through the fall of the Berlin Wall, and more modestly the recent reforms in Myanmar, I have learned never to discount the possibility of positive developments on the upside. While the morass in which we find ourselves seems never-ending, the fact is that things are getting better – at least when you look at the statistics.

2014 did not turn out to be the quagmire of 1914. We didn't start any major interstate wars, and the number of people lifted from extreme poverty in Africa and Asia kept [improving](#) . So while it never hurts to be pragmatic, there may be hope for humanity yet.

And finally...

The biggest story of the year may never make the front pages of the foreign news section – the resurgence of the US dollar.

It spent 2014 steadily strengthening against the Euro and strongly rebounding against all of Asia's currencies. A strong dollar was generally regarded as part of the tripod of US power during the Cold War, the others being America's nuclear capacity and the global influence of its corporations. Parity with the Euro is still widely considered unrealistic. But so was a [5%](#) US growth rate, as recently as a year ago.

A strong dollar has its advantages and disadvantages for Americans: cheaper imports and less competitive exports. But any global crisis is only likely to strengthen it further as the currency of last resort. A strong dollar once again giving the US significant leverage over global affairs, even if reporting on that story remains confined to the financial news.

Simon Reich does not work for, consult to, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this article, and has no relevant affiliations.

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