



TIAA-CREF Institute

# Geopolitics: A World Tour

A Summary of Remarks by Adm. Michael Mullen,  
Former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff





## About this Work

Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, took campus leaders at the Forum for the Future of Higher Education's 2015 Aspen Symposium on a geopolitical world tour as he shared his views about the state of affairs around the globe. Mullen's remarks touched on Vladimir Putin, Iran, ISIS, Pakistan, North Korea, China, and the Pope, among others. We share his deeply-informed observations here so as to increase understanding of world affairs on the part of those responsible for steering our nation's campuses toward an increasingly uncertain and unpredictable future.

TIAA-CREF is a long-time partner of the Forum for the Future of Higher Education, and supports the Forum's annual Aspen symposia as well as its collaborations with the Council on Foreign Relations and the Brookings Institution.

## About the TIAA-CREF Institute

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## Executive Summary

Drawing from deep experience over a 43-year military career that spanned the globe and culminated in service as the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff under both President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama, Admiral Michael Mullen shared his views about the geopolitical state of the world. Vladimir Putin is at the top of Mullen's geopolitical worry list, followed by Iran and then, after a significant gap in terms of concern, ISIS, which Mullen believes is a somewhat temporal phenomenon. With respect to issues more closely tied to the domestic realm, Mullen said that his biggest worries are the high level of U.S. debt, the low quality of "zero-to-12" education, and our political polarization and paralysis. Another issue Mullen cited—one that straddles the international and domestic realms—is cyber security, which he believes poses an existential threat to the United States, in that cyber attacks have the potential to change our way of life.<sup>1</sup>

### Key Take-Aways

- Putin is at the top of Mullen's geopolitical worry list. His actions in the Ukraine have been extraordinarily bold and he will keep going until someone slows him down. Yet despite the high stakes, no one in the United States has a relationship to speak of with Putin.
- Next on Mullen's geopolitical worry list is Iran. If the hardliners prevail in Iran in the long run, the likelihood of Iran achieving nuclear capability, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to at least three or four more countries in the Middle East, and the escalation of conflict in the region all rise sharply.
- After Putin and Iran, and a significant gap in the level of concern, is ISIS. Mullen believes that ISIS is a temporal phenomenon that will burn itself out. However, ISIS is being fueled primarily by a lack of hope on the part of the young people who join its forces, and that lack of vision of a future must be addressed.
- The most dangerous country in the world over the long-term is Pakistan, according to Mullen. Pakistan has far more nuclear weapons than many other countries, including North Korea. It's a politically corrupt, failing country with an economy in shambles.
- Mullen believes that the region of the world that could blow up most quickly is the Korean Peninsula. North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un is very young and inexperienced. And he appears willing to starve his people rather than tone down his belligerence.
- The biggest domestic threat to U.S. national security is the federal debt, according to Mullen. Despite some economic analyses that downplay the issue, he believes that at some point the debt is going to have a huge effect on what we can accomplish as a nation.
- Mullen warned that cyber security poses an existential threat to the American way of life. U.S. leaders need to know more about security threats than they do about any other threat to our nation's future, so that they can act to prevent a cyber 9/11.
- Mullen would be willing to reduce the size of the Army such that the next time the president of the United States makes a decision to go to war, it would require a call-up of up to half a million young people from all over the country. Only then would that grave decision spur the honest debate that should happen before those who serve are sent off to war.

1. This summary reflects Admiral Mullen's remarks made at the Forum's Aspen Symposium held in June 2015 and do not reflect developments and events since that time.

Any opinions expressed herein are those of the presenter, and do not necessarily represent the views of TIAA-CREF, the TIAA-CREF Institute, or any organization with which the presenter is affiliated.

## Geopolitical Concerns

### Vladimir Putin

Vladimir Putin is at the top of Mullen's geopolitical worry list. Mullen described Putin's roots as a KGB officer during the Cold War, deeply affected by the United States' victory as Russia's high military expenditures and economic decline led to its capitulation in the arms race. In contrast to how the United States helped both Germany and Japan following their defeats in World War II, the United States gloated over its Cold War success despite the dire straits that Russia was left in. Putin will never forget that, Mullen warned.

When Putin was first elected president in 2000, Russia was at the cusp of huge economic growth fueled primarily by high oil prices. His popularity soared as Russians enjoyed vastly improved employment prospects and income levels. Mullen noted that Putin is young and he expects him to be in power for a long time to come. Mullen assumes that Putin—who extended the presidential term of office from four to six years—will be reelected in 2018, and suspects that he will change the law so that he can be reelected to a third six-year term, which would begin in 2024, if he so chooses.

Mullen described Putin as a strategist who understands one thing—that is, dealing from a position of strength. His actions in the Ukraine have been extraordinarily bold and, indeed, the Russian leadership has discussed the tactical use of nuclear weapons in Europe. Mullen warned that should nuclear weapons—which have been greatly reduced by the START treaties—be brought back into the picture, we will enter a new version of what we thought we left behind at the end of the Cold War. It would be a tragedy, Mullen said, if we somehow get back to that position.

### Today's World Leaders

Mullen is deeply concerned about today's world leaders: the two people moving the needle most in the world today are Putin and Xi Jinping of China. It's a short list, to which Mullen would add, to his own surprise, Pope Francis. The United States and the world need leaders able to navigate the incredibly complex and difficult times we face and, more specifically, who are able to deal with Putin.

Mullen believes that the West and the United States have not been strong enough with respect to Putin. And despite the high stakes, he noted that no one in the United States has a relationship with Putin. Even in the darkest days of the Cold War we had relationships and were talking to the Soviets through several back channels. Not so today. If we get Putin wrong, Mullen believes that we will drive him to a relationship with China. The two countries share a 2,600-mile border. They have a long history of discontent with each other, but if they figure out a way to come together it will be difficult and

dangerous for the rest of the world—particularly as China's economic engine continues to emerge.

So, Putin needs to be figured out and addressed. He will keep going until someone slows him down. He has a vote at the U.N. Security Council table—the United States and the rest of the world cannot address the geopolitical issues looming now in Iran and Syria, for example, without Putin.

### Iran

Next on Mullen's geopolitical worry list is Iran. Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism and is responsible for the deaths of many Americans in Iraq. Iran's civilization extends back thousands of years, and Westerners too readily forget that the Iranian people tend to believe that they have a place in history to live up to. An epic struggle is under way now for Iran's soul: the hardliners see an Islamic Republic theocracy as a catalyst for regional hegemony and a return to an empire of sorts; the reformists, on the other hand, would like to see Iran move back into the community of nations, remaining strong but also more responsible regionally and more responsive to the needs of its people.

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Whether Iran's President Rouhani, a reformist, is the right person to bring Iran back into the international arena is an important question. He clearly has been given permission by the Islamic Republic Supreme Leader Khamenei to negotiate the Iran nuclear deal. With regard to the deal, Mullen urged a "distrust but verify" approach: any deal needs to include comprehensive inspections, and we need to figure out a way to make sure the Iranians don't cheat, because they will if they can.

If the hardliners prevail in Iran in the long run, the likelihoods of Iran achieving nuclear capability, the proliferation of nuclear weapons to at least three or four more countries in the Middle East, and the escalation of conflict in the region all rise sharply. A nuclear armed Middle East would be far worse than today's Middle East, which is bad enough. On the positive side, more than half of Iran's population is 30 years old or less; young Iranians tend not to be overly fond of the regime and in many ways are inclined toward the West. Whether Rouhani can remain in power and win the next presidential election in 2017 will depend largely on his ability to continue to satisfy the electorate's demands for change.

## ISIS

After Putin and Iran, Mullen said that there's a significant gap in his worry list, down to ISIS. He believes that ISIS is a somewhat temporal phenomenon, one that eventually will burn itself out. Acknowledging that ISIS has aspirations to harm the United States that cannot be ignored in the short-term, Mullen focused on the deeper causes of ISIS and the longer-term struggle that will have to occur on many levels to help bring nations into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. He said ISIS is being fueled primarily by young people's lack of hope in the Middle East and elsewhere. That's what drove the protests in Tahrir Square in Egypt, and Mullen personally has seen the same void in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. These countries have been controlled by oppressive governments that have snuffed out the future for their youth.

The struggle to bring hope to those young people could take decades, Mullen warned. Success will depend on economic and moral support and diplomacy—in short, soft power, which Mullen strongly advocated. He urged that all economic and diplomatic avenues be pursued as part of a carefully conceived strategy that military power would be just one part of. Mullen noted that the U.S. military has taken on tasks in Iraq and Afghanistan such as economic reconstruction and political development—often described as “nation building”—and said that the State Department could do that work best, and should receive the funding needed to do those jobs well.

## Global Hot Spots

The most dangerous country in the world over the long-term, Mullen said, is Pakistan. Pakistan has far more nuclear weapons than many other countries, including North Korea. It's a politically corrupt, failing country with an economy in shambles. And there's a level of hatred that exists in the region that is very difficult for those of us in the West to fathom.

The region in the world that Mullen believes could blow up most quickly is the Korean Peninsula. North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un is very young—just 32 years old—and inexperienced. He was trained by his father and grandfather, who held power before him, and is carrying on their oppressive regimes. He appears to be completely willing to starve his people rather than tone down his belligerence. Mullen believes that, contrary to some opinions, Beijing and Xi Jinping exert little control over Kim Jong-un. He also noted that the South Korean-Japanese relationship appears to be at an all-time low; South Korea is now closer to China than it is to Japan; and China would prefer that the United States not be involved in the region. Yet, Mullen said, that region is a significant world economic center that could rapidly destabilize—and so the United States cannot afford to not be there.

## Domestic Concerns

The biggest domestic threat to U.S. national security is the federal debt, according to Mullen. Despite some economic analyses that downplay the debt level, he believes that at some point the debt is going to have a huge effect on what we can accomplish as a nation. Next on his list of domestic concerns is the deterioration of the U.S. “zero-to-12” education system. If we can't get that right, we're compromising our national competitiveness and future prospects. Third on his list is the political paralysis in Washington, preventing good governance—and with little hope for resolution in the near term.

## Cyber Security

Cyber security—a concern that straddles both the geopolitical and domestic realms—poses an existential threat to the American way of life. Mullen pointed out that cyber attacks could shut down our electrical grid, financial systems, and shipping centers for sustained periods. He described a war game exercise he once ran that simply blocked the port of Los Angeles, which receives approximately 20% of the goods that come by sea into the United States (95% of all goods that enter the country come by sea). Two weeks into that simulation, the country was paralyzed as people attempted to stockpile food and other goods, supplies diminished, and panic set in.

U.S. leaders need to learn more about cyber threats than they do about any other threat to our nation's future, according to Mullen. They need to develop an understanding of the technology that makes such threats possible so that they will be able to effectively address the issues by adopting the right policies, allocating the necessary funds, and hiring well-trained specialists to stop the threats.

*U.S. leaders need to learn more about cyber threats than they do about any other threat to our nation's future. . . a sense of urgency [is key] so that the nation won't have to endure a cyber 9/11 before it generates the laws, policies and resources needed to prevent it.*

Mullen believes that the United States is most vulnerable to cyber threats in the commercial realm, particularly in light of the ongoing theft of U.S. intellectual property on the part of China—an issue that President Obama needs to continue to raise with Xi Jinping. Mullen judged that the federal government is better off than the commercial realm, but still is vulnerable. He was

more confident about the military being shielded from cyber threats, but expressed a sense of urgency so that the nation won't have to endure a cyber 9/11 before it generates the laws, policies and resources needed to prevent it.

## Bridging the Civilian and Military Divide

The military's all-volunteer force comprises just one half of one percent of the American population. Today's volunteers are being drawn from fewer and fewer places—and increasingly from the red states, where the military has a far greater presence than in other parts of the country.

## Links of Interest

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Jeff Chu, "How America's Top Military Officer Uses Business to Boost National Security," *Fast Company*, May 2010.  
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## About Michael Mullen

Admiral Michael Mullen was Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff from 2007 to 2011, serving as the principal military advisor to President George W. Bush and President Barack Obama. Prior to that he served for three years as Chief of Naval Operations, the Navy's highest ranking officer. As Joints Chiefs chairman, he spearheaded repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell policy governing service by gay and lesbian people in the U.S. military. Mullen is currently an adjunct professor in the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton and is a member of the National Academy of Engineering. He is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy, earned a masters degree in Operations Research at the Naval Postgraduate School, and completed the Advanced Management Program at Harvard Business School.

Bases in the Northeast, for example, have been shutting down, leaving relatively few military families in the region.

To help bridge the civilian and military divide, Mullen would be willing to reduce the size of the Army such that the next time the president of the United States makes a decision to go to war, it would require a call-up of up to half a million young people from all over the country. Only then, Mullen says, would that grave decision spur the debate that should happen before those who serve are sent off to war. An honest debate about our nation entering into war is the least our sons and daughters deserve.