

Ten most significant world events in 2025



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R E C A P

Anyone hoping that 2025 would provide a break from what was an exhausting 2024 on the world stage came away disappointed. The past 12 months have been a trying time for international cooperation as the forces of conflict and contention grew stronger and the end of the American-led world order more clearly came into view. Unlike 2024, when the pageantry of the Summer Olympics and the beauty of the host city, Paris, reminded everyone of what cooperation and collaboration can accomplish, 2025 provided few instances of inspiration. One can only hope that 2026 will surprise us in a good way. But before we jump to the new year, here are my top 10 most significant world events in 2025. You may want to read what follows closely. Many of these stories will continue to make news in 2026.

10. Cambodia and Thailand clash

Countries can come to blows even when one is substantially larger and better equipped than the other. A case in point is the conflict that erupted in July between Cambodia and Thailand. With a population of just over 17 million, Cambodia is far smaller and militarily weaker than its neighbor, Thailand, which has a population four times larger. The July fighting, the worst in decades, ostensibly was about a century-old border dispute. In particular, Cambodia and Thailand both claim ownership of Prasat Ta Muen Thom, an ancient temple perched in the forested Dangrek Mountains that divide the two countries. But complicated domestic politics on both sides of the border pushed those latent tensions into open conflict. The initial fighting killed several dozen people and displaced tens of thousands. US President Donald Trump intervened and threatened to halt trade negotiations



A Thai mobile artillery unit fires towards Cambodia's side, in Surin, Thailand, on July 25, 2025.
ATHIT PERAWONGMETHA/REUTERS

with Cambodia and Thailand unless the fighting stopped. Both sides then grudgingly agreed to a cease-fire. A formal deal was signed in late October in Kuala Lumpur on the margins of the annual ASEAN Summit. The agreement, however, did not stick. A landmine killed four Thai soldiers in November, prompting Bangkok to suspend parts of the agreement.

The fighting escalated earlier this month when Thai fighter jets bombed targets in Cambodia. Thailand's new prime minister, whose predecessor was ousted for being too conciliatory to Phnom Penh, has vowed that "if the fighting is to stop, Cambodia must follow the course of action set by Thailand." That sounds like a recipe for continued fighting.

9. Cardinal Robert Prevost becomes Pope Leo XIV

The Roman Catholic Church has had 267 popes. Until 2025, not one of them had been from North America, let alone the United States. That changed in May. On April 21, the ailing Pope Francis died suddenly after suffering a stroke. He had been pope for a dozen years. The Roman Catholic Church then entered a period it calls the interregnum, which lasts until a new pope is selected. Following time-honored tradition, the 133 cardinals eligible to participate assembled in Rome for a conclave, the formal process for selecting the next pope. The first three ballots saw black smoke emerge from the Sistine Chapel's chimney, signifying that no one had achieved the necessary two-thirds support. Then on the fourth ballot, the smoke turned white. The conclave had selected Cardinal Robert Prevost. Born and raised on the South Side of Chicago and a graduate of Villanova Uni-



Newly elected Pope Leo XIV, cardinal Robert Prevost (c) of the United States, appears on the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica, at the Vatican, on May 8, 2025.
GUGLIELMO MANGIAPANE/REUTERS

versity, he spent more than two decades in Peru, first doing missionary work and then as Bishop of Chiclayo. In 2023, he moved to Rome to become prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops, which oversees the selection of most bishops, and was subsequently made a cardinal. Prevost became the first

member of the Augustinian religious order, which was founded in 1244, to become pope. Upon being installed, he took the name Leo XIV to recall the example of Pope Leo XIII, the author of the 1891 encyclical Rerum Novarum ("Revolutionary Change") that called for improving the lot of the working class.



The debris of an aircraft lies in the compound of a mosque at Pampore in Pulwama district of Indian-administered Kashmir, on May 7, 2025.
DAR YASIN/AP

8. India and Pakistan clash

In 2000, then-US president Bill Clinton called Kashmir "the most dangerous place in the world". The simmering tensions between India and Pakistan over the region erupted into open conflict in May, two weeks after five terrorists killed 26 people near Pahalgam in Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir. Lashkar-e-Taiba, the Pakistani-based terrorist organization that carried out the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attack that killed 175 people, likely sponsored the Pahalgam attack. In 2008, India declined to retaliate. This time, however, it

struck what it called "terrorist infrastructure" inside Pakistan. Pakistan responded with drone and missile strikes against Indian military bases and shot down two of India's most advanced fighter jets. India, in turn, destroyed air defense systems around the Pakistani city of Lahore. Neither side gained a meaningful military advantage from their most intense fighting in half a century, and they agreed to a cease-fire after three days. President Donald Trump said he mediated the cease-fire, a claim that Pakistan's Army Chief of Staff Asim

Munir supported and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi rejected. The immediate consequence of the fighting was a rift in US-Indian relations as Trump slapped steep tariffs on Indian exports partly in retaliation for Modi's refusal to acknowledge his mediation efforts. But the underlying animus between India and Pakistan remains. One open issue is whether India's decision to suspend its participation in the Indus Waters Treaty of 1960 means it will curtail the flow of water in the Indus River system that supplies 80 percent of Pakistani farms.

7. AI race intensifies

Russian President Vladimir Putin said of artificial intelligence (AI) back in 2017 that "whoever becomes the leader in this sphere will become the ruler of the world." History may prove him wrong, but for now, countries are acting as if he might be right. The United States and China are the world's two leading AI powers, and no one else is close. The Chinese firm DeepSeek captured global attention in January when it released an AI model that matched the best US AI models without using advanced Nvidia chips that had been seen as essential to cutting-edge AI operations. Experts challenged DeepSeek's claims, but US firms took them as reason to double down on their own AI investments. The importance of chips in AI development fueled the Trump administration's initial decision to continue and then expand

the restrictions the Biden administration placed on the export of advanced semiconductors made in the United States or with US technology. Three weeks ago, however, Trump reversed course and authorized Nvidia to sell its powerful H200 chip to China. The decision triggered biting criticism that he was endangering US national security.

Lost in this debate is the fact that the AI race is not just about which country builds the best models but also who does a better job integrating AI into everyday operations. Here, China may have the advantage. Meanwhile, critics ask whether AI might turn into an epic bust that shocks the economy or an epic success that erases jobs.



THE ECONOMY SENATE

6. Sudan's grueling civil war continues



HUMANITARIAN RESEARCH LAB/THE GUARDIAN

"Hell on Earth" may be the best description of Sudan's nearly three-year-long civil war. The fighting pits the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF), led by Gen. Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, against the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), led by Mohamed Hamdan "Hemedti" Dagalo. The two men seized power in a coup in October 2021 but eventually had a falling out. Neither side has won a decisive breakthrough, and fighting continues across multiple fronts. The SAF governs from Port Sudan on the Red Sea, con-

trols the major cities in the east and north, and is recognized as Sudan's legitimate government. Meanwhile, the RSF controls most of Darfur and other areas in central and western Sudan. Each side has foreign backers, with Egypt, Russia, and Turkey among the countries supporting the SAF and Chad, Ethiopia, and the United Arab Emirates among those supporting the RSF. The war's human cost has been staggering. As many as 400,000 people have died, and more than 12 million have been dis-

placed. Much of the country faces famine, and the demand for humanitarian aid far outpaces available resources. The fighting was particularly gruesome in the city of El Fasher, the last SAF stronghold in Darfur, which the RSF took in October after an 18-month siege. The blood and bodies from the resulting slaughter of the city's inhabitants could be seen from space. The prospects for a mediated end to the civil war remain dim, and the country's de facto partition is a possibility.