

The Geopolitical Flash Points of 2019

December 20, 2018

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If 2018 was a year marked by international challenges that percolated but did not boil over into full-blown crises, next year may well be the year in which that good fortune runs out. As the former deputy and then acting director of national intelligence, I am frequently asked during discussions about the global threats I am most concerned about. So, let me highlight five major geopolitical challenges that I fear may become more troublesome in the coming months, as well as a few less publicized but still worrisome “hot spots” that may also command policy maker attention in the year ahead.

Syria

While several foreign policy experts believe that the Syrian war is winding down and that the Bashar al-Assad regime has won, there is still, in my view, considerable cause to worry about the direction of this conflict in 2019. For example, the uneasy truce in the Idlib Province, which is home to many (probably numbering in the low thousands) of the most extreme al-Qaeda and Islamic State fighters left in Syria, as well as 2,000,000 civilians, seems shakier by the day.

There are recent reports of shelling in Idlib between Assad regime forces and the extremist militias that Turkey—as part of the Sochi agreement last September—was supposed to remove from the province by October. There are also recent press reports that Assad is relocating combat units from southern Syria to the Idlib region.

While it’s clear that all parties to the Sochi deal would prefer that Assad reestablish control of Idlib through a negotiated settlement, I think it’s quite unlikely that the extremists there will ever relinquish their weapons, or that Assad will allow the situation to linger for too much longer, meaning that a regime offensive to retake the province could be launched within the next few months.

And why would that matter in a conflict already marked by extreme violence and incredible human suffering? Keep in mind, the United Nations warns that a major clash in Idlib could force as many as 1,000,000 more Syrians to flee north to the Turkish border—a development Ankara, which is already home to more than 3,000,000 Syrians, appears determined to forestall. Also, if the fighting bogs down, it’s quite plausible that the regime could resort to the use of chemical weapons, particularly given



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Assad's history of using chemical weapons in the province. This would obviously increase the pressure on the United States and the West to respond militarily.

Although Idlib is the most likely near-term flash point in Syria, there are also other potential risks, including Israel's periodic air strikes on Iranian military facilities in Syria (Israel has struck more than 200 targets there in the past two years) and a potential Iranian counterstrike, and Turkish efforts to eliminate Kurdish influence in areas near the Turkish-Syrian border, especially around Manbij. The White House's reported plan to withdraw U.S. forces from Syria rapidly is likely to increase Turkey's determination to deploy its troops east of the Euphrates and, consequently, increase the likelihood of direct military clashes with Kurdish forces over the next several months. A sudden withdrawal of U.S. troops may also allow remnants of the Islamic State in eastern Syria to reconstitute there, potentially complicating Baghdad's ability to secure its western border with Syria.

So, far from being over, the Syrian conflict remains a potential powder keg with potentially ominous security and humanitarian implications.

Iran

Tehran is experiencing its most intense combination of domestic and international challenges in at least a decade, fueling concerns about both the regime's internal stability and its potential to lash out in unpredictable ways. In the wake of Washington's decision to reimpose punishing US economic sanctions in November, Iran's oil exports fell to around 1,000,000 barrels per day (bpd) that month, down from a peak of around 2,500,000 bpd earlier this spring. Not surprisingly, this has taken a heavy toll on Iran's economy, with the IMF now estimating that Iran's oil-driven economy will shrink by 1.5 percent this year and around 3.5 percent in 2019. Prior to the US sanctions announcement, the IMF had been projecting growth of around 4 percent this year and next, so this is a major reversal in Iran's fortunes.

The latest economic news is exacerbating the public's underlying frustration with endemic government corruption, chronically high unemployment (especially within the young college-educated population), and even widespread water shortages—Iran has this year suffered its worst drought in half a century.

There is little doubt that this confluence of factors will produce a tumultuous year ahead for the Iranian regime. Recall that Iran experienced a series of antigovernment protests at various points in 2018, largely over deteriorating economic conditions, and the economy is likely to be much worse next year.

Meanwhile, on the foreign policy front, I believe it's unlikely that Iran will sit passively by while its oil exports are strangled, so we should anticipate Iranian foreign policy responses ranging from new ballistic missile tests (as it did in early December) and increased naval activity in the Persian Gulf, to asymmetric actions such as plausibly deniable cyberattacks on Israeli, Saudi, and Western infrastructure

targets. We should also anticipate increased behind-the-scenes support to its proxies such as Hizballah, the Houthis in Yemen, and various Shiite militia groups in Iraq.

Although most Iran experts believe that Tehran will try to steer clear of a military conflict with the United States and its regional allies, they also worry that as economic and political pressure mounts on the regime in the coming months, the chances increase for a regime miscalculation, or an accidental military confrontation that escalates more rapidly and broadly than anyone desires.

Russia-Ukraine

A third major geopolitical challenge that has the potential to deteriorate sharply next year is the stalemate in Ukraine. Russia's seizure of Crimea in 2014 and its ongoing support of separatists in Eastern Ukraine has been a major point of contention with both Kyiv and the West. In the past four years, the conflict has claimed more than 10,000 lives, with no end to the fighting in sight.

In fact, there are worrisome signs of late that Moscow may be preparing to ratchet up its pressure on Kyiv. Russia's move in late November in the Kerch Strait to fire on and eventually seize three Ukrainian naval vessels, and to arrest two dozen Ukrainian sailors, has caused tensions to spike. Ukraine has commercially critical ports in the Sea of Azov that require transit through the Strait, so Russia's actions were a clear message that it controls this vital waterway and that it retains the ability to threaten Ukraine's economic interests.

There are also press reports that Russia is moving military units closer to the Ukrainian border. These reports recently prompted Ukrainian President Poroshenko to declare martial law for 30 days and to publicly declare his concern that Russia could launch a ground offensive against Ukraine at any moment.

So, what's driving Russia's latest aggression? In my view, it's quite likely that President Putin now recognizes that the United States–Russia relationship is frozen for the foreseeable future and that Western sanctions against Russia are unlikely to end anytime soon. As a result, he may calculate that he has little to lose from trying to double down in Ukraine and reverse Kyiv's increasing economic integration with the West. The fact that Putin is also confronting a lagging economy (the IMF forecasts growth of less than 2 percent this year and next) as well as declining personal popularity (a recent poll revealed that public trust in Putin has fallen 20 points from a year ago) may also whet his appetite for foreign adventure.

Against that backdrop, then, it's worth keeping an especially sharp eye out for signs of stepped-up Russian meddling during the run-up to Ukraine's presidential election in late March, and for increased Russian military activity, either through the provision of new and more lethal weapons to their separatist allies or direct military intervention in Eastern Ukraine.

China

While the ongoing trade dispute between the United States and China is justifiably absorbing much of the media's attention, heightened bilateral military tensions should not be overlooked, particularly given their potential to spark a sudden bilateral crisis.

To counter China's diplomatic and military assertiveness in the South China Sea over the past few years, the United States has steadily increased its air and naval patrols there, disinvited China from attending last fall's biannual Rim of the Pacific international maritime exercise, and increased the tempo of naval transits of the Taiwan Strait. For its part, China has publicly defended its claims to the South China Sea islands, continued its military buildup in the region (including the deployment of surface-to-air missiles and radar-jamming equipment), and publicly warned the United States not to violate the One China principle with Taiwan.

Military tensions spiked between the United States and China last October near the Spratly Islands when a Chinese warship forced an American destroyer to change course by sailing too close to it—the ships reportedly came within 45 yards of each other. The incident revived memories of the Hainan Island incident of 2001, which involved a midair collision between an American P-3 and a Chinese fighter jet, and which triggered an intense diplomatic stalemate that lasted nearly two weeks.

In my view, the prospect of an inadvertent military confrontation between the United States and China is perhaps even more worrisome today, however, given the heated rhetoric from both sides over the ongoing trade dispute and the bad blood that exists in the relationship across a broad front. Indeed, it's difficult to imagine either President Trump or President Xi being easily able to deescalate and resolve a military standoff should one occur, which raises the potential for a crisis that neither side wants but that both find difficult to contain.

North Korea

A final potential threat to watch in 2019 is North Korea and the drama surrounding its nuclear and missile weapons programs. It seems likely that President Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will meet at some point early in the new year, which if nothing else will keep tensions low for the next few months and help build upon the personal relationship the two leaders cultivated at the Singapore summit.

But if, as I expect, there continue to be few concrete deliverables for either side from these talks, we should prepare for Kim to begin ratcheting up his aggressive behavior later in the year. North Korea's diplomatic track record suggests that it believes it's most likely to win concrete concessions through stepped-up military pressure, and in the absence of meaningful concessions such as the easing of US economic sanctions or a continuing cancellation of US military exercises with the South, Kim is soon likely to go on the offensive again.

In my view, Kim is unlikely, at least initially, to demonstrate his frustration by engaging in something as provocative as another missile or nuclear test. But what might he try? He could threaten to sell the North's conventional and advanced weapons, as well as its technology, to a ready list of potential buyers including Iran, Pakistan, and Syria. He could also launch a large-scale cyberattack against South Korean or Western commercial interests, both to extract money and to highlight the North's impressive cyber capabilities. If either tactic is attempted, the recent lull in tensions with North Korea will have officially ended, and the United States and its allies, as well as China, will have some difficult policy choices to make.

So, these are five major issues to watch closely in the coming year. In each case, the implications at play are profound, and each issue alone could, if conditions seriously deteriorate, dominate Washington's (and the West's) security agenda.

But are these the only potential crises we might confront in the year ahead? Sadly, the answer is no. Let me briefly highlight a few other topics that are less highly visible than ones already discussed, but that are percolating just over the horizon.

Simmering Hot Spots

In my view, there are several increasingly fragile states that could reach a tipping point next year, many of which would have major implications for US interests, particularly in terms of the global energy market.

In Libya, for example, the combination of political gridlock and periodic clashes in recent months between rival militias in Tripoli underscores the country's tenuous security situation. In addition, a high profile Islamic State attack against the country's National Oil Commission last September, and another on the country's electoral commission in Tripoli in May, highlight the terrorist group's resurgent military strength there, which is now strongest in southern and central Libya. Sadly, seven years after the NATO-led coalition intervention to oust Gaddafi, Libya remains deeply polarized, politically fragile, and susceptible to periodic bouts of instability.

In Venezuela, the country's economic decline has recently reached a startling level, one not witnessed globally for many years. According to the IMF, an 18 percent GDP contraction is expected this year—the third straight year of double-digit decline. This has, not surprisingly, triggered a wave of social misery, including a collapsing health care system and the spread of preventable diseases, soaring crime rates, and a mass migration of Venezuelans throughout the hemisphere. According to the Red Cross, more than 1,000,000 Venezuelans have crossed into Colombia in the past year, and that's only counting those who crossed at official checkpoints.

While it's always difficult to predict with precision when a government or an economy will finally reach a tipping point, it's clear that opposition to the leadership of President Nicolas Maduro is quite high and is growing both domestically and internationally with each passing month. The domestic dissatisfaction was most recently demonstrated by a drone attack last August on Maduro as he and his wife watched a military parade.

One thing is certain, and that's that the longer this crisis drags on, the more damage is inflicted on the country's already devastated economic infrastructure and governing institutions, including the state-run petroleum company (PDVSA). PDVSA has experienced a steep production decline from nearly 3,000,000 barrels per day (bpd) five years ago to around 1,000,000 bpd today, and even that number is likely to fall further next year as the country's political and economic crisis grinds away.

A final issue to carefully monitor next year is the evolving internal political dynamic in Saudi Arabia, which is always an opaque topic to outside observers. In recent months, the kingdom has suffered a series of major body blows, from the stalled Saudi Aramco IPO project to the controversies surrounding the Saudis' conduct of their war in Yemen and Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's role in the murder of *Washington Post* columnist Jamal Khashoggi. These events have rattled international confidence in the future of the Saudi reform effort, and in MBS's long-term leadership potential.

And keep in mind that all of this is occurring at a time when the Saudi economy is still struggling to shake off an economic contraction in 2017 and when foreign investment in the kingdom fell last year to a 14-year low. As of now, there are no visible signs that MBS's grip on power is at risk, but he has alienated other members of the royal family by his sudden rise and anticorruption purges and has alienated conservative elements of society through some of his reform measures, so Saudi regime stability will be an important issue to keep a close eye on in the coming year.

Looking Ahead

If this lineup of potential geopolitical challenges isn't sufficiently scary, remember that they are likely to unfold against a backdrop of considerable turmoil in Washington, Paris, London, and Berlin; a gradually slowing global economy; and international institutions, including the United Nations, that are stretched thin and battling public criticism of their effectiveness.

Also, in a departure from even the past few years, there is a growing spirit of unilateralism and a disdain for collective action that is taking root in many Western capitals. This trend, coupled with growing fiscal challenges throughout the West and an American military that has been engaged in nonstop combat deployments for the last 17 years, may complicate efforts to counter gathering threats. In other words, the geopolitical challenges we may soon confront are likely to have to be addressed with a shrinking set of available policy responses.

Therefore, as 2018 comes to an end, policy makers might usefully pause and reflect on what lies before them. They should carefully consider the array of geopolitical challenges that may require their full attention next year and the simple reality that the best hope for preventing simmering problems from mutating into full-blown crises is through proactive and dynamic diplomacy; a judicious use of military force; the creative exercise of soft power; and a return to a Western leadership model that embraces the importance of allies, multilateral organizations, and the enforcement of international norms.

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The views in this commentary represent those of the author.

This work was made possible by support from the Center on Global Energy Policy. More information is available at <http://energypolicy.columbia.edu/about/mission>.