

Video: Economic, Geopolitical, Military and Diplomatic Trends in 2016. What Prospects for 2017

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2016 marked by important of diplomatic, political and military developments around the world.

Britain voted to leave the European Union by 52% to 48% in a national referendum. The outcome of the Brexit referendum has caused strong reaction at home and worldwide. Brexit was supported by the popular majority of Britain and a significant portion of the UK national elite. Even the use of lobbying clout by Cameron's cabinet did not allow EU supporters to attain victory.

Indeed, leaving the EU would allow the UK to control immigration more efficiently, save billions of pounds in membership fees and advocate its own trade deals while leaving all trade conditions between the UK and the EU relatively unchanged – all while getting rid of restrictive EU regulations, bloated Brussels bureaucracy and run down Eastern and South European economies. In fact, the UK has simply jilted continental Europe. After all, it was Britain that was an active supporter of many decisions that have had a negative impact on the current situation of refugees in the EU and the economic issues of the Member States.

As to the trade cooperation and conditions, the EU could hardly proceed without British industry, technologies and investments. At the same time Britain acquires the first chance to jump in the US-backed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership freely without intra-European debates.

However, EU lobbyists now have moved beyond just the information campaign and diplomatic pressure. They have started to use bureaucratic technologies and well-known “color revolutions” technologies, previously field-tested in Eastern Europe and the Arab countries, to attempt to rip the referendum results to shreds. As a result, the process of the UK exit from the EU was de-facto frozen, ignoring the people's choice. However, the BREXIT became an important step in the ongoing confrontation between EU citizens and the European bureaucracy.

Following the Brexit, Donald J. Trump won the US presidential elections. While on the campaign trail, President-Elect Donald J. Trump made a range of statements suggesting a shift away from a policy of interventionism, combined with a focus on safeguarding US borders and jobs at the expense of the dominant ideology of globalism. Can and will he deliver on these promises? There are many reasons to believe he will genuinely push US foreign policy in this direction, but at the same time he will face obstacles on his path.

One of the factors clearly helping him is the increasingly indisputable fact that globalism as

an ideology has been discredited, except, ironically, among the liberal “creative classes” and among the financial elites. The rest of the society and of the elite is increasingly skeptical of such policies if not downright opposed to them, which means they are willing to experiment with economic nationalism and even isolationism.

At a minimum, the “global elites” will attempt to find as much compromising information concerning Trump, his family, and close associates as possible, in order to make him an “offer he can’t refuse” backed up by a sizable financial “consolation prize”.

If Trump refuses to succumb to direct and indirect pressure and attempts to pursue even part of what he promised during the campaign, Trump’s opponents will embark on more drastic measures, including a Maidan-like permanent demonstration aimed at tarnishing Trump’s reputation or even an assassination attempt. While the former is highly likely, the latter is somewhat less plausible because it would result in elevate Trump to martyrdom and also set a precedent for future assassinations, which is something the US elite fears greatly. However, Trump will have to deal with tremendous and constant psychological pressure that will be exerted on him through his close associates, family, and of course the media, in order to disorient him and throw him off course.

Moreover, Trump’s political foes will pursue an international approach, using NATO and EU as means of exerting pressure on the new administration, through military provocations if need be. US, being a relatively sparsely, resource-rich country not unlike Russia, can pursue a “Fortress America” strategy. The EU would find it much more difficult to do so without embracing authoritarian governance, as it requires a “Lebensraum”-like sphere of influence that will provide natural resources which the continent lacks. But this Europe has no Grande Armee or Wehrmacht- it has to rely on US military power and subversion. Hence the hysterical European reaction to the US election, for the adoption of a “Fortress America” strategy by the US renders EU’s own strategy of expansion obsolete.

Deciding what to do about the US relationship to Europe that has become a major net drain on US resources will therefore be a major challenge for the Trump Administration. If it is pulled down the same path as its predecessor, it will ultimately be because of its inability to redefine its relations with an increasingly burdensome and costly set of allies on the other side of the Atlantic, and for this reason the outcome of the upcoming elections in Germany and France is of critical importance.

The development of conflicts in the Middle East was the alternate side of the changes in the EU and the US. While backers of Syrian terrorists were trying to hold the power at their home, the Russian-Syrian-Iranian alliance made significant steps aimed on combating terrorism in Syria.

The provinces of Latakia, Homs, Hama, Aleppo and the Damascus countryside were the main areas of operations against terrorists. The joint anti-terrorism forces achieved a series of significant victories in these areas, liberating waste areas near the Syrian capital, the important town of Qaryatayn and the key Syrian city of Aleppo. They also temporarily liberated the ancient city of Palmyra from ISIS, but lost it as result of a large-scale ISIS attack in December.

On October 1, 2015, SouthFront predicted that the Russian military operation in Syria will likely lead to the establishment of a permanent Russian air and naval base in eastern

Mediterranean. By October 2016, Moscow expanded its military facilities in Syria, launching a program of transforming the Khmeimim Air Base into a full-fledged military base with a permanent contingent of the Russian Aerospace Forces and announced plans to turn its naval facility in Tartus into a fully-fledged permanent naval base.

Summing up the gains of pro-government forces across the country within the past year and the growing military presence of Russia in Syria, it's easy to conclude that the course of the Syrian war was dramatically changed and the Syrian-Iranian-Russian forces delivered a devastating blow to terrorists and saving the Assad government from the military defeat. Now, the strategic initiative of the war is in the hands of Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance.

Another key player in the conflict was Turkey that had entered northern Syria to combat ISIS and Kurdish YPG forces in August. Turkey's aim was to build a buffer zone with pro-Turkey militant groups and to prevent Kurdish forces from creating a semi-autonomous state in Syria. Turkey's decision to intervene in Syria was made amid the rapprochement with Russia and Iran. This allowed many experts to suggest that Turkey, Iran, Russia and Syria had some unpublicized agreements over the ongoing crisis. The Turkish-Russian-Iranian negotiations that excluded the US-led block of the so-called "friends of Syria" and took place in Moscow in December contributed to this version. The military coup attempt that took place in Turkey in July and was allegedly supported by some part of the US elite became the main reason of Ankara's decision to increase cooperation with Moscow and Tehran.

The Russian anti-terrorist operation also pushed the US to take more active steps in combating ISIS in Iraq and Syria that led to the start of advance on Raqqa, Fallujah and Mosul. While Fallujah was liberated, Mosul remained a major ISIS stronghold in Iraq despite the US-led attempts to retake the city from terrorists.

It appears that the pre-election project of the Democratic Party of the USA, under the title "Quick Capture of Mosul" has, seemingly, failed together with Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign. Now, the tactics of the USA administration have changed. This may mean that Donald Trump gets dragged into a quagmire of a war. That being stated, high-ranking Pentagon officials no longer believe that the Iraqi military is capable of taking Mosul, and have been preparing a plan with greater participation of the US Armed Forces.

The US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) also launched an advance on the ISIS self-proclaimed capital in Syria, Raqqa. However, until now, they have not even reached the city.

Conflicts in Yemen and Libya continued to flare in the Middle East with almost no chances to be solved with diplomatic measures, contributing to instability in the region. The Saudi-led intervention turned Yemen into a zone of instability and set conditions for the growth of local al-Qaeda branch. Even despite this, Saudi-led forces failed to achieve their military goals in the area and to inflict a defeat to the Houthi-Saleh alliance backed by Iran.

The rapidly developing relations between Russia and Egypt have been overshadowed by the more prominent relationships between Russia and Syria, as well as Russia and Iran. Nevertheless, the Russia-Egypt relationship deserves closer scrutiny because, unlike the country's relations with the other two Middle Eastern powers, it concerns a country that until recently appeared to be firmly in Western orbit. The abrupt shift of its geopolitical vector toward Eurasia therefore represents a far bigger change for the region than Russia's successful support of the legitimate Syrian government, or the close relationship with the

Islamic Republic of Iran, both of which have been on the Western “enemies list” for decades. The reasons for this shift are twofold, and have to do with the way Western powers interact with Middle Eastern powers in the context of a systemic economic crisis, as well as with Russia’s demonstrated attractiveness as an ally.

From the Russian perspective, Egypt represents yet another bulwark of security against Western encroachment, a symmetric response to NATO expansion, “Eastern Partnership”, and color revolutions. Combined with the military presence in Syria, Cyprus’ general pro-Russian orientation, and the neutralization of Turkey which was also facilitated by an abortive West-promoted coup attempt, the Egyptian-Russian cooperation would impact the balance of power in the Mediterranean.

In 2016, the whole Middle East was affected by the major crisis with Syria, Iraq, Yemen and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Turkey in its core. Turkey faced a military coup attempt, economic decay and Kurdish insurgency that almost turned into a full-scale civil war.

2016 witnessed a sharp escalation in the militarization of the South China Sea. The cause of the escalation is multifaceted and comes from both regional and international quarters. The militarization has been initiated and exacerbated by both China and the United States, both bearing responsibility for the current level of tension in the region. As land reclamation and building efforts on the part of the Chinese continue at Fiery Cross Reef and Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands with no signs of slowing down in the immediate future, the US increases the size and tempo of future patrols in the area and expands its cooperation with regional powers to counter the Chinese claims.

The Central Asia also remained the point of instability that attracted attention of the key regional players: Russia, the US and China. While Afghanistan remained the main source of instability, neighboring central Asian countries also faced various terror and security threats, strengthened by an instable internal political situation.

Security threats are growing in Europe. The ongoing migration crisis and acute situation with a terrorism threat didn’t force the EU elite to change their failed foreign and internal policy and the union was plunged into shock by the continued series of terror attacks.

If this situation is not to get worse, it would require the adoption of a revised approach, namely a unified, well-funded and comprehensive EU-level migration policy, consisting of combating organized crime among ethnic groups, screening new arrivals, guaranteeing access to social services and labor markets, etc. Otherwise the EU is risking a massive social explosion provoked by growing inter-ethnic and inter-religious conflict, and the constant perception of a growing terrorist threat. Unless addressed rapidly, these problems could be sufficient to destroy the already fragile EU common security framework.

The general security situation in Europe was further worsened with the smoldering conflict in eastern Ukraine, where the recent escalation took place in December. The situation is worsening due to the economic collapse in Ukraine and the Kiev’s government inability to negotiate and unwillingness to follow the Minsk agreements. Ukraine remained the point that can be used by some powers to instigate destabilization in the whole Europe.

In general, 2016 was a very complicated year in military and diplomatic terms. The reactive processes were observed the international relations at all levels. The number of local conflicts didn’t reduce and even grew involving more and more regional and world powers.

The diplomatic, military and security trends formed in the end of 2016 year will shape 2017. It will be the year of continued geopolitical standoff of global powers amid the reducing US influence around the world.

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