

Video: Military and Political Trends of 2017 that Will Shape 2018

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2017 presented the world with a number of crises, among which were the continued wars in the Middle East and the spread of terrorism, the humanitarian crises in Africa and Asia, the rising military tensions over North Korea's missile and nuclear programs, and the militarization of both the South China Sea and eastern Europe. Throughout the past year regional and global powers have repeatedly been on the verge of open military conflict, any of which may yet still lead to large regional wars.

In the Middle East the war on ISIS, the Iran nuclear deal, the crisis in Lebanon, and Israeli-Arab tensions took center stage.

By the end of the year, the self-proclaimed caliphate of ISIS had fully collapsed in both Syria and Iraq. Thanks to the efforts of the alliance between Syria, Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah, along with the Iraqi forces and the US-led coalition, this group was driven out from almost all of the areas it had held in the two countries. ISIS has lost control of such strategic locations as Mosul, al-Qaim, Raqqah, al-Tabqah, Deir Ezzor, al-Mayadin, al-Bukamal, as-Sukhna, Deir Hafer, Maskanah, and al-Resafa.

ISIS, in form of a terrorist state, does not exist more. However, this does not mean that Syria and Iraq will face calm soon. There are still lots of ISIS sleeper cells and former ISIS supporters in these countries, a Syrian al-Qaeda branch (now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) controls Idlib, and the Kurdish-Arab tensions are smoldering in northern Syria and Iraq. These issues cannot be ignored and will become an important part of the post-ISIS standoff in the region.

Now, Russia, the US, Turkey, Iran and Syria are increasing their diplomatic activity in order to find a way, which could allow work to start on developing a final political settlement of the crisis. They all have objective limits to their influence on the ground and some contradictory goals. This complicates the situation, especially amid a lack of strategic vision from the US which, according even to American experts, has no long-term strategy for Syria. The US elites and their Israeli and Saudi counterparts are especially dissatisfied with the strengthened position of Hezbollah and Iran.

Following the defeat of ISIS, the US-led bloc began attempting to use those areas of Syria held by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces to limit the influence of the Damascus government and its Iranian and Russian allies.

Another flash point in this conflict lies within the province of Idlib, now mostly controlled by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. Within the framework of the agreements reached by Syria, Iran,

Russia, and Turkey in the Astana format, a de-escalation zone should now have been established in this area. However, this is hardly possible while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham remains the main powerbroker in this location.

Despite the defeat of ISIS and the partial withdrawal of Russian forces, Syria will remain a battleground in this regional military and geo-political standoff in 2018. Militarily, the Iranian-Russian-Syrian alliance will continue to focus its efforts on reducing the influence of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the province of Idlib. These efforts will include launching a series of limited military operations against Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and further developing counter-insurgency efforts against ISIS. On the diplomatic stage, the different sides will continue to work on developing a political solution to the crisis.

Meanwhile, the United States finds itself in a complicated situation: on the one hand, it cannot officially accept Assad's government as a participant in the negotiations, while on the other hand the US has scant leverage to influence the situation. Thus, the White House will try to increase its efforts to divide Syria through supporting the separatist intentions of the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), as well as the armed 'opposition' groups in the region.

The goal of such a strategy is to build a 'de-facto' independent entity within Syria. Additionally, the US could make either direct or proxy attempts to assassinate Assad and his inner circle.

Iran will likely further strengthen its influence within Iraq after establishing a land route linking Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut. This so-called 'Shia Crescent' will become reality despite stiff opposition from both Israel and its allies. Watch for Washington to play the Kurdish card to counter Iran's growing influence in both Iraq and Syria.



Ahmed al-Asadi

In addition, the US could also attempt to split the ranks of the Popular Mobilization Units by separating individual groups from the larger organization. Such an action could be done with the use of mass bribes, as was done with some generals of the Iraqi Armed Forces during the Iraq War.

The military victory over ISIS in Syria dramatically escalated tensions between Israel and the Iranian-backed forces of Hezbollah.

At present time, Israel's top political leadership is in the state of outright hysteria regarding

the Lebanese movement. Senior Israeli officials have repeatedly claimed that Israel will not allow Hezbollah and Iran to concentrate its forces in border areas and to expand their influence in the region, particularly in Syria and Lebanon.

The already difficult situation in southern Lebanon and Syria was further complicated by the series of events, which contributed to the growing tensions in the region in November and early December. It started with a resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al-Hariri announced from Saudi Arabia on November 7, continued with Saudi accusations of military aggression through missile supplies to Yemen against Iran and rose to a new level on December 6 when US President Donald Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital sparking further escalation. Some experts also said Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US are conspiring to start a new war in the region. In this light, a series of military exercises, including the biggest one "The Light of Dagan", was described as a part of the preparations for armed aggression against Lebanon.

The recent developments in the Middle East, including the nearing end of the conflict in Syria and the growing influence and military capabilities of Hezbollah, have changed the political situation in Lebanon. Hezbollah units de-facto fulfil functions of the presidential guard. Lebanese special services and the special services of Hezbollah are deeply integrated. Hezbollah's victories in Syria and humanitarian activities in Lebanon increased the movement's popularity among people.

Tel Aviv believes that the growing influence of Hezbollah and Iran in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, is a critical challenge to its national security. The key issue is that Israeli military analysts understand that Hezbollah is now much more powerful than it was in 2006. Now, Hezbollah is a strong, experienced, military organization, tens of thousands troops strong, which has the needed forces and facilities to oppose a possible Israeli ground invasion in Lebanon.

Iran has also strengthened its positions in the region over the last ten years. It has reinforced its air defense with the Russian-made S-300 systems, strengthened its armed forces and got combat experience in Syria and other local conflicts. Tehran also strengthened its ideological positions among the Shia and even Sunni population which lives in the region.

Considering these circumstances, initial expert opinions indicate that Israel would decide to participate in a large-scale conflict in Lebanon only in the case of some extraordinary event. However, the growing Arab-Israeli tensions and the tense Israeli-Hezbollah relationship are moving this extraordinary event ever closer.

Nonetheless, Israel will continue local acts of aggression conducting artillery and air strike on positions and infrastructure of Hezbollah in Syria and maybe in Lebanon. Israeli special forces will conduct operations aimed at eliminating top Hezbollah members and destroying the movement's infrastructure in Lebanon and Syria. Saudi Arabia will likely support these Israeli actions. It is widely known that Riyadh would rather use a proxy and engage in clandestine warfare.

All these took place amid the developing crisis in Saudi Arabia where Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman had launched a large-scale purge among the top officials, influential businesspersons and princes under the pretext of combating corruption. According to the experts, the move is aimed at consolidating the power of the crown prince and his father,

King Salman. In general, the kingdom is seeking to shift its vector of development and to become a more secular state. In 5-10 years, it can even abandon Wahhabism as the official ideology. At the same time, Saudi Arabia is involved in an unsuccessful conflict in Yemen and a diplomatic crisis with Qatar. This situation fuels tensions and a competition for resources among the Saudi clans. As a result, the Saudi regime and the Saudi state in general, are now, in a weak position.

These are the key reasons why Saudi Arabia prefers to avoid an open participation in new conflicts. Additionally, there is always a chance, that for example of conflict in Lebanon, the main combat actions could be moved to the Saudi territory.

Russia and Iran are also not interested in this “big new war” as well because such a conflict in the Middle East will pose a direct threat to their national security.

During the coming year we can expect to see both Israel and Saudi Arabia continuing their diplomatic and military efforts to deter Iran and Hezbollah.

Riyadh will continue its efforts to turn Yemen into a puppet state, but is unlikely to achieve any notable successes, leaving the Houthis and their missile arsenal as a constant threat to Saudi Arabia.

Israel and Saudi Arabia will also continue their building of a broad anti-Iranian coalition, with the support of the Trump administration, while Israeli forces will continue conducting their limited military operations against Hezbollah targets in Syria and Lebanon. In general, the chances of a new regional conflict will remain high.

In this already unstable environment, the current US policy remains as one of the key destabilizing factors in the region. The recent US recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, as well as the hostility towards the Iranian nuclear deal continue to fuel tensions between the Israeli-Saudi and the Iranian-Hezbollah blocs.

The current US administration continues with America’s consistent pro-Israeli and anti-Iranian policies in the region, inspiring both Israel and Saudi Arabia to embrace more active policies as well.



As a result of this growing US support, the Israeli military stands ready to implement active military responses to any action taken by Hamas, Hezbollah, or any of the other regional players whom Israel considers a threat to its wide range of national interests.

While the odds are low of the Trump administration being able to abort the Iranian nuclear

deal, the mere fact that such attempts continue does little to contribute to peace in the region. The fact remains that Washington fuels the new cold war and perhaps even a potential hot war in the Middle East.

We may expect that during the coming year Iran will continue to increase its influence in the region by using the war in Yemen, and its strengthened positions in Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon to counter its opponents. In addition to its military efforts on the ground, Teheran's main strategic focus will likely be the development of military and economic relations with both China and Russia. During 2018 we may also expect that Iran will pay special attention to the modernization and reformation of its armed forces.

In Egypt, the security situation remains complicated, especially in the North Sinai. Following the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, remnants of the terrorist group have spread across the region with a number of them arriving in the peninsula. While the Egyptian Army and security forces have conducted a number of operations to eradicate terrorist cells in the area, militant activity remains high there, fueled in part by trafficking to Gaza.

In addition to the remnants of ISIS in the North Sinai, Egypt faces continuing challenges along its border with Libya. Following the NATO intervention in that country in 2011, the Libyan government and social structure have been all but destroyed, with multiple factions battling each other for control over both the trafficking and oil business.

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.

These events have led to strengthening economic ties and military cooperation between both sides. Recent negotiations to build Egypt's first nuclear plant, as well as those allowing Russian and Egypt joint use of each other's air space and military bases are perhaps the most noticeable examples of this cooperation.

With recent rumors of Russia establishing a military base on the coast of the Red Sea, in Sudan, it is easy to conclude that Moscow has become an influential power in the region, with some countries now viewing Russia as an attractive alternative to the US. With its rejection of direct cooperation with Moscow, Washington has weakened its own position in the region.

In the coming year Egypt and other regional powers will move further towards a diversification of their foreign policy partners, with regional elites recognizing that the world has become more multipolar and threats and challenges have taken new forms and greater complexity.

Due to the rapidly developing situation in the region and the failed military coup attempt in

July, Erdogan's Turkey has become a reluctant ally of the Syrian-Russian-Iranian alliance in the Syrian war. Examples of this, such as the success of the Astana talks on Syria, the Russian-Turkish S-400 deal, and the Turkish-Iranian-Iraqi cooperation to counter the formation of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq by the Kurdistan Regional Government showcase this changed geo-political landscape.

During 2018, Turkey will remain a key player in the ongoing Syrian crisis, and an ally (if a reluctant one) of the Iranian-Russian-Syrian alliance in the region. Ankara has few options remaining aside from developing its coordination with this bloc.

The current US foreign policy towards northern Syria and Iraq is frankly incoherent, with Turkey (being a NATO member and the most powerful US partner in the Eastern Mediterranean), no longer considering the US as a reliable ally in its strategic planning.

The diplomatic crisis over Qatar, which began in June after Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt severed diplomatic relations and imposed sanctions upon the country is yet another development leading to the current balance of power in the region.

The crisis represents the most severe conflict among Gulf Arab states since the end of the Cold War. While these oil-rich, autocratic OPEC members have historically been at the most allies of convenience united by common fears (USSR, Saddam Hussein, Iran, etc.), their mutual mistrust has arguably never escalated to the point of demanding to what amounts to a complete surrender by one of its members.

However, the recent Saudi-led attempts to force Qatar to obey Saudi interests in the region have pushed Doha into the arms of Turkey, Iran, and Russia.

In 2018, the main goal of Qatar will be to normalize relations with the Saudi-led bloc while simultaneously avoiding being forced into making significant concessions to this bloc's members. Qatari cooperation with Turkey, Iran, and Russia will be a useful card to play in this case. Qatari elites may also search for opportunities to influence internal relations within the Saudi elites.

Throughout 2017, US-Russian diplomatic relations continued to deteriorate with both sides using increasingly strident rhetoric and imposing various measures against each other. Initial hopes and expectations that the election of Donald Trump to the presidency would lead to a détente between the two powers were quickly dashed.

The Trump administration sacrificed its promises to normalize relations with Moscow, and to cooperate more fully in counter-terrorism actions in an attempt to gain a temporary softening of the pressures imposed by its own domestic political opponents. Unfortunately, this attempt to placate this internal opposition gained nothing for Trump and his administration, and succeeded only in escalating the continued media and diplomatic standoff with Russia.

This internal opposition, which some may describe as the American Deep State, cares little about the true intentions of Trump and his supporters, and continues to keep playing the so-called 'Russia Card' as a means of further limiting the freedom of action of the new US president.

US society has become further polarized by racial, ethnic, and political divisions and opposing sides are unlikely to resolve this conflict through negotiation.

Racial and cultural divisions, always present in American society, were further inflamed by the liberal, Clinton camp's attempts to create discord by playing the race card and demonizing the leaders of the Confederate States. At the same time, a large part of American society has become disappointed with Trump's domestic and foreign policies, and has become disillusioned with his seeming inability to overcome the resistance of the Deep State.

In 2018 we can expect to see further deterioration in relations between the US and Russia, with both sides remaining involved in a number of crises around the world. The defeat of ISIS will add to the geo-political standoff in the Middle East, while in Ukraine both nations will support opposing sides, with little chances of finding common ground. Another critical factor that will make its appearance in the coming year is the Russian 2018 presidential election and the strong intention of US elites to intervene in Russian internal policy, with the risk of pushing a new Cold War past the brink.

The Latin American situation remains unstable and complicated, with Venezuela remaining as a center of uncertainty. In 2018, the Venezuelan president will struggle to retain power in the midst of continued turmoil in his country.

Unsettling processes are also evident in Russia, which faces ongoing economic problems caused by the increasing pressure of Western imposed sanctions. Russian power elites, allied with foreign powers, have benefited from this situation, and have strengthened their influence. Generally, the Russian state has shown a relatively low degree of economic effectiveness, only partly compensated by its foreign policy successes. These factors can and will complicate Russia's internal political situation during the upcoming 2018 presidential election.

Ukraine still remains the key flash point in Europe. The Kiev government, strongly influenced by various radical groups, is unlikely to abide by the terms of the Minsk agreements, as it views Minsk as surrender. Prominent Ukrainian political figures publically admit that these agreements were a trick, meant only to buy time in order to prepare for a military solution to this crisis in the eastern part of the country.

The leadership of the Donetsk and People's Republics clearly understand this, and have further strengthened their ties to Russia in order to prevent a future attempt by the Kiev government to re-integrate this territory.

The regime in Kiev remains in a very complicated political and economic situation, having been all but abandoned by its US and EU handlers. In an attempt to retain control over their country, the current Ukrainian government will likely try to escalate the situation in Donbass in an attempt to gain more economic, political, and perhaps even military support from the West.

Meanwhile, Washington and Brussels are considering alternatives to President Poroshenko and his government, one of whom is Mikhail Saakashvili, the disgraced former president of Georgia. At this time, the odds of Saakashvili gaining power in 2018 remain high. If he were to gain power it is likely that he would attempt to improve Ukrainian internal and economic policies to strengthen the state and to obtain additional Western support.

It is doubtful that Saakashvili would be able to pursue this attempt to stabilize the country for any length of time, due to his erratic personality. After he realizes the military and

economic potentials still possessed by the nation, he would likely attempt a military operation against the self-proclaimed republics of eastern Ukraine and the Russian military forces in Crimea, much as he did in Georgia in 2008. Such a move would likely lead to a large regional conflict in 2019.

In the European Union, we can observe the continued decline of the institutions of the European bureaucracy. Crises such as those we see in Catalonia, as well as the inability of the European leadership to successfully deal with the migration flow from North Africa and the Middle East are clear signs of this continuing decay. In an attempt to control these problems, the EU has intensified attempts to develop a joint security system and to lay the foundation for the creation of a European army. These efforts, however, could come too late.

If the EU is unable to find a way to consolidate its member states in 2018, we can expect to witness further fragmentation in the future.

In Central and Southeastern Asia, the key security problems continue to be militancy and the spread of terrorism. The US and its NATO partners remain unable to deal with the Taliban in Afghanistan – some experts believe that the Taliban is slowly reaching a level of influence in the region which could lead to its recognition as a rightful party in any negotiations involving the US-led bloc. Currently, in some parts of the country, the Taliban even conducts operations against ISIS in order to prevent this group from spreading further.

The historical instability seen on the Pakistani-Indian and the Indian-Chinese borders have long been factors contributing to the general instability in this region. However, all sides have been successful, so far, in avoiding open military conflicts.

In the Philippines, an attempt by ISIS to establish its rule on the island of Mindanao was defeated by the government, who also purged militants who had seized control in the city of Marawi. The ISIS threat has been successfully countered in this nation, at least for the time being.



In 2018, terrorism will remain the key threat for Central and Southeastern Asia. Expect the Taliban to expand its influence further in Afghanistan, as ISIS continues its attempts to establish a larger foothold in the region. Pakistani-Indian and Chinese-Indian tensions will likely remain within the spheres of diplomatic and economic competition, barring any extraordinary and destabilizing events. An additional and notable threat to the stability of the region is the continued flight of ISIS members from Syria and Iraq into Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region.

China has continued its expansion in the Asian Pacific by turning the South China Sea into an anti-access and area-denial zone controlled by the Chinese military through a network of artificial islands. In addition, Beijing has also expanded its maritime, airlift, and amphibious capabilities, and is actively working to shift the balance of power in the Pacific, a region which it describes as lying within its sphere of influence, through its naval power dominance in the area.

In diplomatic and economic terms, China continues to follow a finely balanced foreign policy, while providing a slight diplomatic support to Russia. This calibrated approach allows Beijing to contest US dominance in some regions, most obviously in the Middle East, while avoiding an open confrontation with its main economic partner.

In addition to the tensions in the South China Sea, North Korea's nuclear and missile programs have been the center of attention within the international community. North Korea has recently conducted another nuclear test, and has tested an intercontinental ballistic missile, which it claims has the range to reach any target within the mainland United States. Despite the war-like rhetoric of the Trump administration and the imposition of additional sanctions, no progress has been made toward a peaceful resolution, with North Korea only accelerating its efforts to become a fully-fledged nuclear power. In the near future, this situation may pass a turning point, when the US is left with no military options in its conflict with North Korea, and negotiations remain the only solution. Should this situation come about, it will be a blow to both the image of the US as the self-proclaimed world's policeman, and to the mechanisms of nuclear non-proliferation.

In 2018, China will continue to strengthen its military and diplomatic positions in the region, and become a regional superpower, and well on its way to global dominance as it competes with the US. North Korea will likely continue developing its nuclear and missile programs, and if the US does not invade, which is unlikely, become a fully-fledged nuclear state.

As 2017 comes to a close, it becomes evident that this year, has been a difficult one, for all of mankind. The world trembled over new threats of large-scale regional conflicts and over potential use of the weapons of mass destruction. The year brought considerable escalations between key global players, which created real risks of direct confrontation.

At the same time, 2017 can be coined as the year, when the threat known as ISIS, a proxy terrorist state, was eliminated. It was the year when global powers were compelled to compromise under the most stringent conditions and amid multiple conflicts. International players, capable of rigorous logic and in-depth analysis, will extricate valuable lessons from 2017, which can help make the world safer.

However, experience shows that emotions, poise and ill-conceived projects often triumph over common sense. The result, is a breakdown of pragmatic and balanced approaches of traditional diplomacy. Rudeness and incivility are becoming more common within the spheres of international organizations and in bilateral relations. Ambitions of small elite-based groups force countries and nations, to adopt models of behavior which clearly contradict their interests.

Unfortunately, all of this precludes a bright prognosis for 2018. The world will not become safer. Relationships between major global powers will remain strained at best. Likely, they will deteriorate. The number of small-scale regional conflicts will not decrease. The use of weapons of mass destruction will remain a real threat within the framework of regional

conflicts. Levels of terrorist activity may rise. One can only hope, that this combination of threats and provocations, will lead to a re-assessment of reality and force de-escalation in the subsequent years.

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