

Video: Military and Political Trends that Will Shape 2019. Confrontation between Global Forces

The Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and East Asia

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2018 was marked by notable and sometimes alarming political, military and security developments around the world. The Middle East, Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, Central Asia and East Asia once again became the scenes of global and intra-regional standoffs. A characteristic feature of the past year was the fact that almost all cross-border regions as well as regions which directly concern the economic and security interests of the USA, the EU, the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation have been drawn into the confrontation between global forces. This leads to the conclusion that there are no more "safe havens" in today's world.

In the first half of the year, the world was balancing on the brink of a new and wider cycle of violence in the Middle East conflict. Many believed that exactly this could finally destroy the fragile world security order based on the Post Cold-War system of international relations. However, by the end of the year, the situation had changed and confrontation between the key powers has now shifted to Eastern Europe and Asia.

This development is the result of the following factors:

- The situation in Syria has stabilized, as a result of a series of successful military operations by the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance and diplomatic measures undertaken in the framework of the Astana format.
- The US and key EU states concentrated their main attention on different regions in various corners of the world. This was conditioned by the interests of the Euro-Atlantic elite and new economic and by the new diplomatic approach of the Trump administration.
- The US changed the focus of its foreign policy towards the active deterrence of China, instead of a possible cooperation. For this reason, the US employed measures to contain the economic expansion of China in the US market as well as in those foreign regions where the interests of US and Chinese corporations competed.
- Germany, the most powerful European economic center, sent strong signals that its interests did not correspond with Euro-Atlantic interests.
- The regime of Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko and its backers employed active measures to fuel tensions in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region during the last two months of the year.

Throughout the year, the United States, which remains the only world superpower, successfully alienated some of its key partners and sharpened tensions with its competitors.

It appeared to be engaged in an economic war with China, an economic and diplomatic conflict with the EU and, a diplomatic conflict with Turkey – over the Kurdish issue and Ankara’s military and economic cooperation with Russia. The US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal as well as intensified the conflict with the Middle Eastern country in diplomatic, economic and even military spheres.

The Trump administration spent a notable amount of time threatening North Korea with an invasion and promising not to do this if a denuclearization deal were to be reached. However, it appeared that despite showing a readiness to negotiate, the North Korean elites decided that they were not prepared to sell their national interests, as they see them, for the remote chance of being accepted as a junior partner of the US-dominated “international community”. After this and in the second part of the year Trump suddenly lost interest in the Korean peace process which could signal that Korean issues were needed and used mainly to support Trump’s personal domestic political agenda.

In its turn, US-Russia relations have been further damaged. Washington increased sanction pressure on Moscow and officially declared its readiness to withdraw from key US-Russian arms reduction deals.

Top US officials, including military, often name Russia and China among the key challenges faced by the country. However, there is a difference in the approach employed towards these two powers.

Speaking to cadets at Virginia Military Institute on September 25, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis stressed that Russia and “the nuclear threat” are now key challenges for the US.

“There’s also other challenges out there as well, but in terms of urgency, I’d say North Korea. In terms of power right now, it is probably Russia and the nuclear threat. And in terms of long-term political will, it’s China.

But China does not have to be a threat. We can find a way to work together with China. We’re two nuclear-armed superpowers and we’re going to have to learn how to manage our relationship, and I do believe we can do that,” Mattis stated.

Russia is mostly seen as a military threat in the event of a large regional or global conflict while in the case of China, the Washington establishment is mostly concerned with its economic and diplomatic influence around the world. This US stance could shift in the future with the further growth of the Chinese Armed Forces’ military capabilities.

There is a logical explanation why the current Washington establishment pays so much attention to Russia. The US has long been facing a crisis in its social economic development model. If the US wants to maintain the living standards of its domestic population, it has to keep up the current level of consumption, which is impossible in the modern world without further expansion and colonial-style exploitation of “overseas” territories. Therefore, Russia could be considered as the only appropriate target of these efforts, because China is already incorporated into the system of international trading and finances and its internal political situation is much more stable.

This complex yearlong trip of the US administration was in many cases fueled by the populist attitude of Donald Trump personally. The US President was actively exploiting various types of foreign enemy – the Assad government, the Chinese, the Russians, Iran and North Korea, which his administration was “defeating” in twitter and mainstream media to solve its own domestic political problems and to justify its course.

Being an experienced showman, the US President was shuffling these foreign enemies hiding failures and showcasing the successes of his administration. For example, despite the obvious failure of the regime-change and anti-Iranian efforts in Syria, the US found time to show its supreme military power by launching another missile strike on the war-torn country. The economic war with China was justified as necessary measures to defend US domestic industry. The expanding anti-Russia sanctions, which since 2014 have failed to deliver a devastating blow to Russia’s economy, were used as an example of Trump’s firm policy towards Vladimir Putin, who is undertaking hostile actions against Western democracy. The anti-Iranian campaign in support of Israeli regional expansion appeared to be described as anti-terror efforts and was even used to turn a blind eye to the unprecedented murder of a journalist in a Saudi consulate in Istanbul. All the abovementioned was deftly packaged by Trump into his concise statement on the assassination of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi: “The world is a very dangerous place!”.

In 2019, Trump will likely continue juggling with enemies, threats and challenges, which he and his team will be confronting via twitter and other tools of US foreign policy. Meanwhile, the main threat to international peace and security will remain the US desire to withdraw from the INF Treaty and to not deal with the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. In particular, these possible developments could lead to direct threats to European homeland security.

Another threat to European security is a possible hot regional war in Eastern Europe, which may start in Ukraine.

On November 25, the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) Border Service opened fire on and damaged Ukrainian warships, which were advancing in Russian territorial waters in the Black Sea off Crimea. After the short close-quarter firefight, two Ukrainian ships were towed and one ship escorted by Russian forces to the Russian port of Kerch. The data available from both sides, Ukrainian and Russian, demonstrates that the Ukrainian warships intentionally entered Russian territorial waters and were moving more deeply into them. Such a military action with the to be expected intense political coverage is not possible without a direct order from the Ukrainian top military-political leadership.

Exploiting the incident, Ukraine imposed martial law and heightened its propaganda campaign claiming that Russia was about to invade Ukraine. At the same time, military tensions increased in the east of the country as the Ukrainian Army deployed additional troops and heavy weapons in the region of Donbass.

The Ukrainian leadership was fueling military tensions in order to create the appearance of a direct military threat to national security thus justifying political persecutions and censorship. Ukraine is set to hold a presidential election in early 2019 and, according to polls, incumbent president Poroshenko has little chance of staying in power unless the election is delayed or the situation changed dramatically, for example because of war. The West is also concerned about the situation. If the current Ukrainian foreign policy were to change, the Washington and Brussels establishment could lose 5 years’ worth of hacking

out a foothold in the political life or even in the economic landscape of Ukraine.

The wars in Syria and Yemen, the Israeli-Arab tensions in Palestine as well as the conflict between the US-Israeli-Saudi bloc and the Iran-Hezbollah bloc remained the main hot points in the Middle East.

The smoldering conflict in Syria is one of the key hot points in the Middle East. In 2018, the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance achieved a series of important victories against militants in the countryside of Damascus and in southern Syria establishing a full control of these important areas. The US-led coalition and Israel attempted to prevent these advances by indirect and even direct military actions, including the US-led missile strike on government targets in April. However, all these attempts failed to change the situation at the strategic level.

The Turkish Armed Forces (TAF) accompanied by Turkish-backed militant groups captured Afrin in northern Syria from the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). US-led forces used most of the year to consolidate their control of the desert areas on the eastern bank of the Euphrates and to show that they are fighting ISIS in the Euphrates Valley.

The military situation in Syria as of December 2018:

- Turkey and its proxies, usually referred as the Turkish-backed Free Syrian Army (TFSA), control the area of Afrin and the al-Bab-Azaz-Jarabulus triangle.
- The US-led coalition and its proxies, known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), control the northeastern part of Syria.
- Various militant groups, first of all Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, are in control of the most of Idlib -province and nearby areas.
- ISIS cells still operate on the eastern bank of the Euphrates River and in the Homs-Deir Ezzor desert.
- The southern and central parts of the country, including the most populated areas, are in the hands of the Damascus government.

Northern Syria is a big knot of contradictions, with every party (Syria, Turkey, Iran, Russia, and of course the US) seeking to implement their own plans.

The Assad government is still viewed as illegitimate by Ankara, though Erdogan prefers not to mention it officially if this is possible. Turkish authorities have also repeatedly claimed that Ankara is fulfilling its obligations under the de-escalation zones agreement. However, no practical steps have been made by Ankara to separate Turkish-backed "moderate" factions from the terrorist groups in Idlib or to combat the terrorists there.

Turkey considered ISIS and Kurdish armed groups to be terrorists. After ISIS suffered defeat, Kurdish armed groups remained the only point in that category. Some Kurdish leaders hoped that Erdogan may lose the presidential election and thus the Turkish stance on the Kurdish issue in northern Syria will soften. However, this has never happened.

On June 4, 2018, Ankara and Washington approved the "road map" for the town of Manbij in northern Aleppo, which is currently controlled by the Kurdish-dominated SDF. According to Turkey's Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, the first phase of the "road map" would see a withdrawal of Kurdish units from the town, which would come under joint patrols of Turkish and US troops. Turkish top officials also claimed that the agreement implied creating a town

administration out of local inhabitants after the Kurdish armed groups' departure. Turkey also insisted that all Kurdish armed groups within the SDF have to be disarmed or even disbanded in the framework of the roadmap.

Nonetheless, the turn of events appeared to be at odds with Ankara's desires. The YPG once again claimed that it had withdrawn its members from Manbij. US and Turkish forces started patrols north of the town, on the contact line between the SDF/YPG and Turkish-held areas. No Turkish troops entered Manbij. The political and military control over the town remained in the hands of the YPG-affiliated bodies. Furthermore, the US continued providing Kurdish fighters with various military supplies, including weapons and armoured vehicles, and training. No further joint US-Turkish steps to settle the Manbij issue in favor of the Erdogan government were made.

Moreover, the problem is also that for Erdogan, Afrin, Al-Bab, and Manbij are not enough. He has repeatedly vowed to completely clear Kurish armed groups from the area from Manbij to Sinjar, which means operations in Qamishli, Kobani and Haskah, the main YPG strongholds in Syria. Thus, in order to achieve own goals the Erdogan government is balancing between the US-led bloc and the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance.

From Russia's point of view, the strategic priority is Syria's territorial integrity and the prevention of radical islamists from coming to power. Russia is open to dialogue with a moderate part of the Syrian opposition and is ready to participate in the talks. The leadership likely understands that Turkey is a temporary ally of Russia in Syria, where the two countries together with Iran are guaranteeing the ceasefire in de-escalation zones.

Thus, some Russian experts claim that Turkey is allied with the US against Russia, which does have some basis. Turkey is in NATO, Ankara has supported and is still supporting the opposition, especially radical armed groups in Idlib, which are not willing to negotiate with Assad. The conflict of objectives between Turkey and the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance has become obvious when the SAA started preparing for a possible military operation in Idlib.

However, Turkey's, Syria's, and therefore also Russia's interests coincide on the question of Syrian Kurdistan. After Russian forces were dispatched to Syria and particularly after the liberation of Aleppo in 2017, Moscow tried to act as an intermediary between the Kurds and Damascus, trying to convince the latter to create Kurdish autonomy. But the Kurdish leaders rejected talks with Damascus and instead placed their hopes in an alliance with the US. It does not matter whether they picked that option because they felt Washington was the best hope to gain quick independence for Rojava or because of a cash stimulus from US emissaries. Most likely both factors played a role. The prospect of a pro-US Kurdish "independent" state formation was extremely worrisome to Ankara, Damascus, and Tehran, prompting them to close ranks.

Thus, the Kurds have lost their chance to get a wide autonomy within Syria and become a bargaining chip in the negotiations between major players involved in the conflict.

The Astana process format also deserves a few words. In the framework of this format, Russia, Turkey, and Iran have affirmed their determination to fight terrorism and also those organizations which are considered terrorist by the UNSC, oppose separatism aimed at undermining territorial integrity and the sovereignty of Syria and the security of neighboring countries, continue joint efforts to promote political reconciliation among the Syrians themselves in order to facilitate the earliest possible launch of the Constitutional Committee

in Geneva.

But the actual situation is radically different. Ankara de-facto controls part of Syria, with the fight against Kurdish armed groups and the expansion of own influence in the war-torn country being the motives. Turkey also lacks a UNSC mandate or a permission from Damascus to deploy forces in the country. These are undoubtedly violations of Ankara's commitments to the Astana agreements and of Syria's sovereignty. The participation of the Syrian opposition in the negotiations is also a problem. Many factions just sabotage the talks. Moreover, there are no significant results in the realm of political decisions on the country's future, even though they sides continue to affirm their unity in this effort. One could draw the conclusion that the Astana format is not effective and is only a platform for meetings among heads of states, since each country and Turkey in particular is pursuing its own interests.

If one examines Russian participation in the conflict, there is still no evidence that Russia plans to impose a solution for a future Syria by force. Troops and equipment are being withdrawn from Hmeimim, which indicates a gradual drawdown of the military operation and a shift towards diplomatic means. However, while it's possible to observe the successful implementation of this approach in some separate regions of the country, it has faced significant difficulties on the regional level.

The September 17 announcement of the demilitarized zone in northwestern Syria by President Putin and his Turkish counterpart are a part of the wider strategy aimed at reaching a kind of peaceful settlement to the conflict and to de-escalate the situation. The success of this effort depends on the ability and willingness of the sides to employ the agreement on the ground and to force radical militants to demilitarize at least the 15-20km deep area.

There are many potential clashes of interests between Turkey and Syria, including the Kurdish issue, mutual territorial claims, and ideological and political incompatibility. Since the very start of the protests in Syria, Turkey has rendered and continues to render help to the armed groups and political opposition. Moreover, the bilateral relations are made more complicated by the Euphrates river (nearly half the water is taken by Turkey which deprives countries downstream of water), the looting of industrial enterprises of the manufacturing center of Syria - Aleppo (equipment from nearly 1,000 factories were transported to Turkey). Ankara still believes Assad ought to leave his post, although in the last year its rhetoric concerning Assad's legitimacy has softened. This was due to the growth of Russian influence on the theater of operations, military defeat suffered by several groups backed by Turkey, and also by the political and economic pressure exerted by Moscow after the Su-24 incident. This shaped Turkish policy toward Syria.

In the best outcome scenario for Syria, Iran, and Russia, Turkey would not plan to annex the Syrian territory it controls in the north of the country in order to avoid a negative reaction from these three states. These territories may be used as bargaining chips in order to gain preferential treatment for work in post-war Syria, thus expanding and strengthening its sphere of influence in that country and strengthening Turkey as a regional power. It's possible that the Syrian border territories will see something akin to a trans-border protectorate, without redrawing national boundaries. Turkey has already transformed the agglomeration of its proxies into something like a unified opposition, with whom Ankara imagines Assad will discuss the future of Syria, thus giving it a place in the war-destroyed

country and thus ensuring Turkey's interests are safeguarded.

In the contemporary military and diplomatic reality surrounding the Syrian crisis, Ankara is pursuing the following tactical goals:

- To eliminate or at least disarm and limit influence of US-backed Kurdish armed groups in northern Syria;
- To strengthen a united pro-Turkish opposition Idlib and to eliminate any resistance to it, including in some scenarios the elimination of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and its allies;
- To facilitate return of refugees from Turkey to Syrian areas under its own control;

If these goals are achieved, Ankara will significantly increase its influence on the diplomatic settlement of the crisis and on the future of the post-war Syria. The returned refugees and supporters of militant groups in the Turkish-controlled part of Syria will become an electoral base of pro-Turkish political figures and parties in case of the implementation of the peaceful scenario. If no wide-scale diplomatic deal on the conflict is reached, one must consider the possibility of a pro-Turkish quasi-state in northern Syria, confirming the thesis that Erdogan is seeking to build a neo-Ottoman empire.

However, military and diplomatic successes were partially undermined by the economic crisis faced by the country in the middle of the year. The security situation in the southern and eastern parts of Turkey also remains complicated. According to the Turkish Internal Ministry, security forces are carrying out over 2,000 operations and neutralize dozens of terrorists every week in order to keep the situation under control.

From its turn, the Syrian-Iranian-Russian alliance continue to pursue the following goals in Syria:

- To eliminate the remaining ISIS cells operating in the central Syria desert;
- To increase pressure on Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the provinces of Idlib, Latakia and Aleppo in the framework of the de-escalation agreement reached during the Astana talks.

The Russian Special Operations Forces and the Aerospace Forces will continue providing support to government forces in their key operations against terrorists. Nonetheless, the direct involvement of Russian forces will decrease, while negotiators on the ground and on a higher diplomatic level, will play an increasingly important role. The defeat of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham in the province of Idlib will require at least a limited coordination with Turkey and a large-scale humanitarian operation to evacuate civilians from the area controlled by the terrorist group.

In turn, the US will continue working on establishing independent governing bodies that will aim to manage the areas held by the coalition and the SDF and that will be hostile to the Assad government. This effort is obstructed by a complicated situation in the coalition-occupied areas, because of the tensions between the Kurdish-dominated SDF and the local Arab population. Indeed, Kurdish SDF units have already complicated relations with US-backed Arab armed groups, which are also a part of the SDF.

At the same time, US-Turkish relations will continue to experience friction over US military support to Kurdish armed groups, which are the core of the SDF. Ankara describes these

groups as terrorist organizations. Continued US support for armed Kurdish groups may further increase the likelihood of improved Russian-Turkish relations and greater cooperation between Ankara and Moscow in how deal with resolving the Syrian conflict. Ankara will continue to pressure Washington to abandon its Kurdish proxies at every turn, and every US attempt to avoid this reality faces will be met with another Turkish move to boost economic and military cooperation with Russia.

Furthermore, Russian-Turkish relations are being strengthened by major joint economic and military deals, including the TurkStream gas pipeline, the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant and the S-400 air defense system deal. These cooperative economic and military arrangements will continue to increase tensions between Washington and Ankara.

The successful military operation in Syria has undoubtedly boosted the Russian role in the Middle East region in general, allowing it to act as a mediator in conflicts between nations. Moscow actively cooperates with Teheran supporting the Assad government and combating terrorism in Syria. At the same time; however, Russia has been able to leverage its reputation as the global power that is willing and capable of working with other regional players, including Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar in order to settle the conflict in Syria, thus avoiding a large-scale escalation or even a wider war in the region. Through its campaign in Syria, Moscow promoted its economic interests. President Bashar al-Assad and other officials have repeatedly stated that Syria is going to grant all the contracts on restoration of the country's infrastructure to its allies - i.e. Iran and Russia. Russian companies are already participating in the energy projects, both oil and natural gas, in the country and are preparing to expand their presence in the country. Syria will be able to rebuild after a devastating war and Russia will increase its economic and political power in the region, while further securing economic benefits for its citizens at home.

The operation also contributed to Russia's national security. As it was noted in the start of this video, Russia has always been a target of terrorist activity of various radical groups, including ISIS and al-Qaeda. Some Western state actors have endorsed at least a part of this activity. It is notable that no major terrorist attacks have been carried out inside Russia since 2015. Russian forces eliminated a large number of militants in Syria who were members of terrorist groups originating in its Southern Caucasus regions created in the post-USSR era. This is already proving to be a major blow to the remaining cells of these groups hiding in Russia, because they have lost their most experienced and ideologically motivated members in Syria. The expansion of Russian military infrastructure, including naval and air bases in Syria, shows that Moscow is not going to withdraw from the country in the near future. Russia will continue its efforts to defeat terrorism and to settle the conflict using a variety of military and diplomatic measures.

On the other hand, considering the current situation in the country, it does not seem possible for the Damascus government to restore control of the entire country in the immediate future.

In December 2018, the Trump administration announced the withdrawal of US troops from Syria. In 2019, the US will likely focus on promoting its interests in the region mainly through its allies and local forces under its control.

The stabilization of the situation in Syria also contributed to the growth of Iranian influence in the entire region.

The key to the success of Iranian foreign missions is Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami, the “Corps of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution,” often mistranslated in the West as the “Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps.” The Sepah is the voluntary army created and dedicated to the defense of the revolutionary order founded by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Headed by Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari, the 120,000-strong force consists of land, air, sea and aerospace branches dedicated to the territorial defense of the Islamic Republic and to preventing the subversion of its society by outside influences considered harmful by the leadership. As opposed to the conventional Iranian Armed Forces, the Sepah train to carry out irregular warfare. Due to the subversive and irregular style of combat in which the Syrian rebels and Daesh engage, it was quite natural for the Iraqi and Syrian Governments to petition the Iranians to send Sepah units to advise their conventional militaries and to found units patterned after the Sepah in organization and tactics.

In Iraq the Popular Mobilization Units are largely Shiite and a large component of these have pledged allegiance to Ayatollah Khamenei. In Syria, the Sepah helped to reorganize and train local militias already formed by the Syrian Arab Army and, as the need for manpower increased, transported units of their Iraqi militias to fight in Syria. The Syrians formed an umbrella group for all of these militias called the National Defense Forces, specifically modelled after the Basij militia in Iran, a voluntary paramilitary formation dedicated to civil defense and the prevention of foreign infiltration into Iranian society. The NDF now numbers anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 members and has recently volunteered to fight the Turkish Army in Afrin.

As can be seen from the examples given, the Iranian foreign missions in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria have been highly successful due mainly to the expertise of the Sepah personnel sent and their intimate knowledge of irregular warfare.

All of these developments have been met with displeasure by Israel, Iran’s main regional antagonist. Due to the precarious beginnings of their state and the continued occupation of foreign land in contravention to international law, the Israelis have had to rely upon the United States as a diplomatic guarantor at the United Nations as a military supplier. The enmity between the Zionist State and the Islamic Republic is ideological, each state possessing a religious identity and existing with a purpose beyond the abundance of material goods and individual rights prized by the West.

Despite the recurring slogan of ‘Down with Israel’ (a closer translation of the famous Marg bar Israel than the usual ‘Death to Israel’ which appears in the Western press), the Iranians do not actively seek the destruction of the State of Israel but rather the cancellation of its provocative and unjust behaviors, such as: the occupation of most of the West Bank, of the Golan Heights and of East Jerusalem/Al-Quds, and permitting religiously-motivated settlers to continue to build compounds in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

Conversely, Israel wants Iran to stop its armament program to Hezbollah and has made it a practice to cross into foreign airspace, usually that of Syria, to attack what it believes to be convoys laden with military hardware destined for Lebanon. The mutual suspicion between Israel and Iran takes shape locally at Israel’s northern border, across which Hezbollah with the permission of the Lebanese Government has created a multi-layered defensive network consisting of anti-tank and anti-infantry obstacles along with an interconnected bunker system. Behind these ground defenses lies the missile arsenal, kept up to date by Iran and the cause of grave anxiety in Israel. Iranian-Lebanese relations are more friendly than not, although the old fault lines from the Lebanese Civil War still exist with nearly all Shia

Muslims supporting Iran and most Sunni Muslims and Christians opposing it. Despite this state of opinion, Lebanon has welcomed Iranian overtures to come to its aid but keeps at a respectful distance due to fear of the US. Be that as it may, it is widely accepted that Hezbollah can protect Lebanon from another Israeli invasion whereas the Lebanese Army cannot, and so the relationship between Hezbollah and Iran continues.

The overall estimation of Iran's position in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region depends upon its domestic strength and the success of its regional foreign policy. Regionally, the invitation given by its allies Syria, Iraq and (in a passive manner) Lebanon have allowed Iran to greatly expand its soft-power influence against the US/Israel bloc, thus giving what it perceives to be a needed security buffer against the continual efforts of its enemies to overtly or covertly force regime change; this soft-power influence also protects Shia populations, which it considers vulnerable to Western attack or bad influence. The ties of political, civil and religious culture have allowed the Iranians to advance strong ties with the Iraqis and Syrians, and the brotherhood forged in the fight against ISIS and other militant groups continues to mean an advancement of Iranian interests regionally. While the defense budget of Iran is dwarfed by those of the United States and Israel, its expertise in asymmetrical warfare combined with its tactical use of advisors and diplomacy have seen Iran advance its regional standing since 2003 to the great consternation of its archenemy Israel and its patron the United States.

In 2018, Iran faced increasing sanction and military pressure from the US, which appeared to be ready to do whatever it takes to support Tel Aviv. In November, the White House announced "the toughest sanctions regime ever imposed on Iran". The sanctions targeted "critical sectors of Iran's economy, such as its energy, shipping, shipbuilding, and financial sectors". In fact, the US re-imposed all pre-nuclear deal sanctions and introduced fresh ones. The new sanction list included over 700 entities and individuals, including 300 new names. Trump and members of his administration concentrated special attention on threatening Iran's oil export.

In 2019, Iran will face further pressure from the US-Israeli-Saudi bloc on economic, diplomatic and even military fronts. Teheran will likely attempt to contain the US-led bloc by employing its asymmetric capabilities in the region and around the world as well as by strengthening its ties with the US geopolitical competitors - China and Russia. The EU will attempt to act as a neutral side in the US-Iranian conflict and will work to develop ways allowing it to continue economic cooperation with Iran at least in some fields.

Throughout 2018, Israel employed a wide range of military and diplomatic measures in order to pursue and promote its interests in the Middle East. A major part of Israeli military efforts was focused on Syria and the Gaza Strip. Tel Aviv also played the role of Washington's key ally in the region receiving multiple advantages from this.

Despite this, the US-Israeli bloc has not been able to achieve their goals in the war torn region. These goals were to replace the Assad government with a loyal regime and to limit the influence of its adversaries - Hezbollah and Iran. In fact, the conflict has led to a significant growth of Iranian influence and of the activity of Hezbollah.

The US decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of the Israeli state and the attempts of the Trump administration to intervene in any case where Israeli interests are allegedly under-respected have already led to a further escalation regarding the Palestinian and Israeli transborder issues. Moreover, the US withdrawal from the Iran Nuclear Deal forced

Teheran to take a tougher stance on regional issues, including its ballistic and military programs and investments in the conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen.

The situation in and near the Gaza Strip is especially tense. Clashes between Palestinian protesters and Israeli forces have resulted in hundreds of killed and thousands of injured Gazans. The number of Israeli strikes on various Palestinian targets has grown while Palestinian armed groups have also expanded mortar and rocket shelling of southern Israel.

Israel also adopted a basic law declaring itself the nation-state of the Jewish people. The law set Hebrew as the official state language, removing Arabic and declared Jerusalem the Israeli capital. The law further established “developing Jewish settlement as a national interest and will take steps to encourage, advance, and implement this interest.” This move became another factor fueling Arab-Israeli tensions in the region.

In view of this, Russia has for a long time been working to remain ready to cooperate with all sides in order to defeat terrorism and to put an end to the Syrian conflict. The Russian military established de-confliction lines with the US-led coalition and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Efforts from the Russian side allowed the situation near the Golan Heights to be de-escalated and prevented further confrontation between Israeli forces and Iranian-backed units in southern Syria. Furthermore, Moscow has avoided engaging in the smoldering Syrian-Israeli conflict and took no direct steps to repel any of the Israeli strikes on Syria.

However, the situation changed on September 18 when a Russian IL-20 reconnaissance plane was shot down in the eastern Mediterranean during an Israeli air raid on Syria. Russia said that the situation was caused by the “hostile actions” of Israel and responded by supplying S-300 air defense systems to the Syrian Air Defense Force, contributing additional efforts to modernize and expand the air defense network of the Syrian military as well as increased EW activity and an increased number of live fire naval drills in the eastern Mediterranean.

While it is unlikely that the Russian military will be publicly involved in the repelling of Israeli strikes on Syria, it will take some steps under the Syrian flag. These steps may include:

- providing the SADF with additional intelligence as well as means and measures to repel Israeli aggression;
- further supplies of modern air defense systems to Syria;
- coordination of the SADF efforts to repel Israeli strikes through their military advisers embedded with the crews of the Russia-supplied air defense systems.

Since late September, in consequence of these developments the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) had significantly decreased their military activity in Syria. Instead, the country’s political and military leadership was focusing on attempts to restore “working relations” with Russia, which would allow the IDF to restore their lost freedom of operations against Iranian and Hezbollah targets. Nonetheless, this is unlikely to work in the near future if Tel Aviv offers no concessions to Moscow.

The current level of media and political hysteria in Israel and the US, which is worsened by the complicated situation in the region, could once again put the Middle East on the verge of a hot regional war.

The war in Yemen is also a source of instability in the region. In 2018, the Saudi-led coalition was unable to deliver a devastating blow to the Houthis and thus achieve a decisive victory in the conflict. Saudi Arabia and its allies had to establish a naval and ground siege of the Houthi-held area causing a deep humanitarian crisis in this part of the country. Houthi-led forces were responding with cross-border raids and missile strikes on Saudi targets creating a zone of instability right on the Saudi-Yemeni border and in southern Saudi Arabia itself.

This as well as a complicated diplomatic and media situation in which, the kingdom found itself after an ill-conceived decision to assassinate an opposition Saudi journalist in its own consulate in the Turkish city of Istanbul, forced the Saudi leadership to take some open steps in the direction of settlement of the Yemeni conflict. In mid December, the warring sides reached a shaky ceasefire agreement. However, no comprehensive diplomatic solution was reached and the violence continued. It's hard to expect that in 2019 the Saudi-led coalition will be able to stabilize its southern border.

Additionally, Saudi foreign policy suffered painful blows in Syria and Iraq where Iran, the main Saudi regional competitor, is successfully expanding its influence. The diplomatic economic conflict with Qatar also resulted in no achievements for the Saudi leadership.

The foreign policy failures of the ruling members of the House of Saud remained one of the key risk factors in the destabilization of Saudi Arabia as a nation-state. The invasion in Yemen was draining state finances and fueling the social and political tensions in the kingdom.

Other already "traditional" sore points remained the high level of corruption, interconfessional conflicts, drug abuse as well as tensions within the royal family. In economic terms, the kingdom was neither able to launch nor join any global projects or initiatives, which would tug its economy, consolidate elites or at least draw society's attention away from current issues. The aforementioned factors will remain the main security and economic challenges for Saudi Arabia in 2019.

In 2018, a new crisis erupted in Armenia, a state in the South Caucasus. The balance of power, self-perception of local ethnic groups, and the influence of socio-economic and cultural ideological groups on public policy have significantly changed in the country. These changes are multidirectional, increasing the risk of a new armed conflict with Azerbaijan.

As a result of an acute internal crisis and a series of street protests Nikol Pashinyan, an opposition leader and a leader of the neoliberal, formally pro-US political party "Way Out Alliance", seized power in the parliamentary republic.

Despite the formally pro-western position of his party, Pashinyan changed his public foreign policy rhetoric after the situation had entered into a revolutionary phase of the race for power. In addition, there is an acute regional issue - an unresolved territorial dispute over the Nagorno Karabakh region and some nearby areas between Armenia and its Turkic neighbor Azerbaijan, also a post-USSR state. Pro-Armenian forces captured Nagorno Karabakh in the early 90s triggering an armed conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Further development of this conflict and the expected offensive by pro-Azerbaijani forces was stopped by a Russian intervention in May 1994. By end of 2018, Nagorno Karabakh and the nearby areas are still under the control of Armenian forces, de-facto making it an unrecognized Armenian state - Arts'akhi Hanrapetut'yun (Arts'akh).

From all the aforementioned regional players, Russia is the only power, which has been a strategic ally and a military defender of Armenia and its interests. Armenia is a member state of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Customs Union (ECU).

Meanwhile, the importance of the Armenian foothold in the South Caucasus for Russia has decreased. The importance of the Russian military base in Armenia has decreased because of the expansion of Russian military infrastructure in the Middle East, including naval and air bases in Syria. The political importance of Armenia has also decreased because of improved Russian-Turkish relations, which are strengthened by major joint economic projects, including the TurkStream gas pipeline and the Akkuyu Nuclear Power Plant. At the same time, Armenia has little economic value for the Russian state or private companies. Its only value is found in the nostalgic memories of a part of the Armenian diaspora with Russian citizenship. Additionally to the aforementioned factors, the Russian political leadership seems to be more cautious in forecasting and assessing the course of Armenian foreign policy, analyzing in depth actions and rhetoric of representatives of the Armenian elites. This shift was expected. For a long time, Armenia has pursued a foreign policy that was significantly at odds with the foreign policy position of its formal strategic ally. Furthermore, while enjoying Russian military protection, Armenia has declined to support Russia over key issues on the international agenda.

All these are objective factors, limiting the maneuverability of the relatively pro-Washington establishment in Armenia. Therefore, it decided to implement a double standard policy, de-facto providing a pro-Western course, but maintaining a relatively pro-Russian public rhetoric and standing on ceremony. If this situation develops further, in 2019, Moscow may use this as a formal pretext to reshape its presence, first of all military, in the region as well as the format of diplomatic relations with Armenia. In the worst case scenario, the current Armenian leadership would find itself without direct Russian support in a possible conflict with Azerbaijan for the Nagorno Karabakh region.

The instable political situation in Georgia is also contributing to the instability in the Southern Caucasus.

In Central Asia, Afghanistan was the main point of instability. In 2018, the US-led bloc once again appeared to be unable to defeat the Taliban. In turn, the Afghan movement only expanded its influence across the country, controlling or contesting at least a half of it. In 2019, the situation will likely become even worse for the US and its allies if they reach no agreement with the Taliban or undertake no decisive steps such as the deployment of additional troops to turn the tide in its favor. Another way out is a complete US withdrawal from the country which would be answering Taliban demands and could lead to or be a part of a US-Taliban agreement. Meanwhile there is little hope of the actual implementation of such a peace agreement because it would concede that thousands of American soldiers' lives had been wasted and 18 years of US policy towards Afghanistan had failed. It would be a major blow to the image of the United States as the leading world power.

Tajikistan is another point, which could negatively affect regional security. Cells of the Taliban and ISIS expanded their presence within the country in 2018. The main reasons are the complicated social and economic situation in Tajikistan, which is a result of the approaches being employed by the current government as well as the common economic doldrums in the region. If the situation develops further in the same direction in 2019, this country could become a new hot spot in the region.

Another important factor influencing the situation in the Central Asia, the Asia-Pacific and even Africa is the US-Chinese standoff. Tensions between the two states are rising in the economic, diplomatic and military spheres. Since the start of 2018, the US has imposed a series of tariffs on a wide range of Chinese goods and, according to President Trump, is ready to take further steps to defend US national interests. According to the Trump administration the tariffs are needed to protect US businesses, especially industry and intellectual property, and to reduce the trade deficit with China. Since the start of the “trade war”, US and Chinese top officials have held a series of meetings but have found no options to resolve the existing differences.

Furthermore, on September 20, the US sanctioned a Chinese defense agency and its director for purchasing Russian combat aircraft and S-400 surface-to-air missiles. The State Department claimed that its actions weren’t intended to undermine the military capabilities or combat readiness of any country, but rather to punish Russia in response to its alleged interference in the US election process. In response, China’s Foreign Ministry said the action was unjustifiable and demanded the US withdraw the penalties or “bear the consequences.”

The conflict expanded into the military and political field. Speaking at a UN Security Council meeting on September 26, President Trump accused China of “attempting to interfere” against his administration in the upcoming 2018 election in the US. However, the US president provided no evidence for his claims. Additionally, the Trump administration approved the sale of \$330 million of military equipment to Taiwan. This move caused another round of tensions with China.

The balance of power in the Asia Pacific region in general and particularly in the South China Sea and East China Sea are also a hot point in US-China relations. The US is actively working military and diplomatic levels to deter the growing Chinese influence. The US Armed Forces send warships and jets close to Chinese military facilities built on artificial islands, and hold drills near the contested area. The Chinese side is not going to abandon its South China Strategy and responds in a similar manner.

The Washington leadership is concerned by the further increase of Chinese military capabilities, including power projection capabilities, as well as its diplomatic and economic influence around the world. In 2019, this trend will develop further.

The Chinese deep ties with North Korea and the deepening ties with Russia are another focus of tensions between Beijing and Washington.

As to North Korea, in the first half of the year the US presented itself as the defeater of the Kim regime who had forced Pyongyang to denuclearize, abandon the missile program and accept a peace talk. However, in the second half of the year, it appeared that the peace process between the North and the South was developing on an equal basis and far beyond the model desired by the Trump administration. Such mutual give-and-take developments make it difficult to take further steps towards changing the North Korean regime and spreading American influence to the north of the peninsula. At the end of 2018 the White House started to throw sand in the wheels of peace building in the Korean Peninsula. The framework of the ongoing peace process does not satisfy Trump. This is not price which he is willing to pay to lose a bogeyman as Kim, who was exploited as such to justify a good part of current foreign policy and defense spending.

Washington sees Chinese and Russian activity in Africa as one more threat to its global

influence. China has already been widely acknowledged on the continent as an important player in economic and even political areas. In 2018 Beijing strengthened its position in the region.

Moscow was resuming its influence in Africa. The growing Russian military, diplomatic and economic activity in central Africa, especially in the Central African Republic and Chad, became a target of mainstream media speculations in the second half of 2018. In fact, Beijing and Moscow are steadily regaining ground from the US-led bloc in the region.

A complex diplomatic, military and economic cooperation with China is a part of Russia's "turn to the East" strategy. In January-November 2018, the trade between the countries grew by 27.8% in comparison to the same period in 2017. Russian exports to China in this period were valued at 53,782,900,000 USD while Chinese exports to Russia were 43,452,700,000 USD. The total commodity circulation by the end of the year was about 100 Billion USD. The commodity circulation grew significantly between Russia and other Asian states, in particular Singapore and Thailand. In 2019, Moscow will continue to adapt its economic and diplomatic policy in response to US attempts to isolate it.

Meanwhile, the European partners of the US have suffered significant economic losses from the sanction regime imposed on Russia. According to experts, European business losses can be estimated in hundreds of billions USD.

In Latin America, 2018 brought notable changes in the political landscape both at intraregional and transregional levels. Over the past decades, the United States has pursued a de-facto colonization policy towards its southern neighbors, exploiting all available resources from natural to human. At the same time, the US leadership lavishly supported the establishment cronies of its allies in the region. However, in 2018, the rhetoric and actions of the US towards Latin America changed significantly. The Trump administration made a series of harsh statements about Latin American countries and undertook some unfriendly acts. This applies to both traditional allies and traditional opponents.

As for the latter, the US President declared the so-called "axis of evil in Latin America" as being Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua. Then Trump's National Security Adviser John Bolton branded Cuba, Venezuela and Nicaragua a "troika of tyranny". However, in practice this US posture only strengthened cooperation between the aforementioned states and united their policies towards the US leadership.

US-Mexican relations also deteriorated. One of the main reasons was the issue of illegal migration from Mexico, which concerned especially the border states of the US. Trump actively used this topic for a domestic ideological struggle with his opponents inside the country. In the second half of the year, the Trump administration even sent regular army troops to the border, threatening that they, in some cases, will have the right to use live fire against migrants. At the same time, Trump continued to push his project of a border wall on the southern US border.

Venezuela faced an acute round of internal struggle for political power between different factions. The struggle was further worsened by a complicated economic situation. Washington attempted to use both these factors to change the regime in the country, but was not able to do so.

The 2018 G20 summit hosted by Brazil was the most notable international relations event in

the region. Some in the US administration believe that Brazil may shape its foreign policy course toward a more pro-US stance with its new elected president. However, despite the fact that Jair Bolsonaro is considered to be a “friend of the United States,” he is in fact only a friend of Trump’s “conservative concept” and nothing more. The new president of Brazil will certainly be a sincere ally of the US, but only until the time when or if supporters of the three new “-ism”s: neoliberalism, globalism, transhumanism or, putting all together, neo-colonialism come back to full power in the United States.

Despite some disagreements the Columbian regime remained the main American ally in the region.

As to Cuba, by the end of the year, Trump had lost a window of opportunity for drawing the country into the US sphere of influence. The main reason for this being the shortsighted policy of his administration.

Intolerance for other points of view, lack of foresight, credibility gaps, double standards, hostility, irrationality, devaluation of democratic procedures, and the resulting dismantlement of the existing system of international relations - all of these definitions can be applied to describe the policy of the global players in 2018. More and more symptoms of a systemic crisis can be distinctly observed. The depth of the divisions between the sides reached an unprecedented level when they almost could not be resolved via negotiations and mutual concessions, at least within the framework of the existing system of international affairs.

Furthermore, the ruling establishment of the world’s sole superpower, the U.S., has shown that it is not going to lower itself to equitable negotiation with other powers.

There are no signs that this situation will improve in 2019. The standoff between the leading powers, including sanctions, arms race, direct and indirect military confrontation, will not decrease. There is a high threat of the resumption or even the launching of new armed conflicts primarily in Eastern Europe and the Middle East. These conflicts may be larger in scale than all of the previous conflicts of the 21th century. Social, ethnic and ideological disputes in Europe, Russia and the U.S. may lead to the destruction of state institutions, and thus civil disorder and conflicts. Terrorist organizations will continue to pose a significant threat.

Global economic issues and the state of international affairs will contribute to the further fragmentation of the world and the growth of isolationist tendencies. 2019 could prove the pivotal year in marking the final breakdown of the existing model of international relations and the intensification of the conflict between global powers, as they seek to shape the new world order. Regardless, it is safe to assume that in 2019 the world will remain a “very dangerous place”.

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