

# Video: Military and Political Trends of 2019 that Will Shape 2020

By [South Front](#)

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*In the year 2019 the world was marked with a number of emerging and developing crises. The threat of terrorism, conflicts in the Middle East, expanding instability in South America, never-ending military, political and humanitarian crises in Africa and Asia, expansion of NATO, insecurity inside the European Union, sanction wars and sharpening conflicts between key international players. One more factor that shaped the international situation throughout the year was the further collapse of the existing system of international treaties. The most widely known examples of this tendency are the collapse of the INF and the US announcement of plans to withdraw from the New START.*

*Meanwhile, the deterioration of diplomatic mechanisms between key regional and global actors is much wider than these two particular cases. It includes such fields as NATO-Russia relations, the US posture towards Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, unsuccessful attempts to rescue vestiges of the Iran nuclear deal, as well as recent setbacks in the diplomatic formats created to de-escalate the Korean conflict.*

## Syria and The Middle East

One of the regions of greatest concern in the world, is the Middle East. The main destabilizing factors are the remaining terrorist threat from al-Qaeda and ISIS, the crises in Libya, Syria and Iraq, the ongoing Saudi invasion of Yemen, the deepening Israeli-Arab conflict, and a threat of open military confrontation involving the US and Iran in the Persian Gulf. These factors are further complicated by social and economic instability in several regional countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran.

After the defeat of ISIS, the war in Syria entered a low intensity phase. However, it appears that the conflict is nowhere near its end and the country remains a point of instability in the region.

ISIS cells are still active in the country. The announced US troop withdrawal appeared to be only an ordinary PR stunt as US forces only changed their main areas of presence to the oil-rich areas in northeastern Syria. Washington exploits its control over Syrian resources and influence on the leadership of the Syrian Kurds in order to effect the course of the conflict. The Trump administration sees Syria as one of the battlegrounds in the fight against the so-called Iranian threat.

The province of Idlib and its surrounding areas remain the key stronghold of radical militant groups in Syria. Over the past years, anti-government armed groups suffered a series of defeats across the country and withdrew towards northwestern Syria. The decision of the Syrian Army to allow encircled militants to withdraw towards Idlib enabled the rescue of

thousands of civilians, who were being used by them as human shields in such areas as Aleppo city and Eastern Ghouta. At the same time, this increased significantly the already high concentration of militants in Greater Idlib turning it into a hotbed of radicalism and terrorism. The ensuing attempts to separate the radicals from the so-called moderate opposition and then to neutralize them, which took place within the framework of the Astana format involving Turkey, Syria, Iran and Russia, made no progress.

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The Summer-Fall advance of the Syrian Army in northern Hama and southern Idlib led to the liberation of a large area from the militants. Nevertheless, strategically, the situation is still the same. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, formerly the official branch of al-Qaeda in Syria, controls most of the area. Turkish-backed 'moderate militants' act shoulder to shoulder with terrorist groups.

Turkey is keen to prevent any possible advances of the government forces in Idlib. Therefore it supports further diplomatic cooperation with Russia and Iran to promote a 'non-military' solution of the issue. However it does not seem to have enough influence with the Idlib militant groups, in particular HTS, to impose a ceasefire on them at the present time. Ankara could take control of the situation, but it would need a year or two that it does not have. Therefore, a new round of military escalation in the Idlib zone seems to be only a matter of time.

Syria's northeast is also a source of tensions. Turkey seized a chunk of territory between Ras al-Ayn and Tell Abyad in the framework of its Operation Peace Spring. The large-scale Turkish advance on Kurdish armed groups was halted by the Turkish-Russian 'safe zone' agreement and now the Syrian Army and the Russian Military Police are working to separate Kurdish rebels from Turkish proxies and to stabilize Syria's northeast. If this is successfully done and the Assad government reaches a political deal with Kurdish leaders, conditions for further peaceful settlement of the conflict in this part of the country will be created. It should be noted that Damascus has been contributing extraordinary efforts to restore the infrastructure in areas liberated from terrorists by force or returned under its control by diplomatic means. In the eyes of the local population, these actions have an obvious advantage over approaches of other actors controlling various parts of Syria.

Israel is another actor pursuing an active policy in the region. It seeks to influence processes which could affect, what the leadership sees as, interests of the state. Israel justifies aggressive actions in Syria by claiming to be surrounded by irreconcilable enemies, foremost Iran and Hezbollah, who try to destroy Israel or at least diminish its security. Tel Aviv makes all efforts to ensure that, in the immediate vicinity of its borders, there would be no force, non-state actors, or states whose international and informational activities or military actions might damage Israeli interests. This, according to the Israeli vision, should ensure the physical security of the entire territory currently under the control of Israel and its population.

The start of the Syrian war became a gift for Israel. It was strong enough to repel direct military aggression by any terrorist organization, but got a chance to use the chaos to propel its own interests. Nonetheless, the rigid stance of the Israeli leadership which became used to employing chaos and civil conflicts in the surrounding countries as the most effective strategy for ensuring the interests of the state, was delivered a blow. Israel missed the moment when it had a chance to intervene in the conflict as a kind of peacemaker, at

least on the level of formal rhetoric, and, with US help, settle the conflict to protect its own interests. Instead, leaders of Israel and the Obama administration sabotaged all Russian peace efforts in the first years of the Russian military operation and by 2019, Tel Aviv had found itself excluded from the list of power brokers in the Syrian settlement. Hezbollah and Iran, on the other hand, strengthened their position in the country after they, in alliance with Damascus and Russia, won the war on the major part of Syrian territory, and Iran through the Astana format forged a tactical alliance with Turkey.

Iran and Hezbollah used the preliminary outcome of the conflict in Syria, and the war on ISIS in general, to defend their own security and to expand their influence across the region. The so-called Shia crescent turned from being a myth exploited by Western diplomats and mainstream media into a reality. Iran and Hezbollah appeared to be reliable partners for their regional allies even in the most complicated situations.

Russia's strategic goal is the prevention of radical Islamists from coming to power. Russia showed itself ready to enter dialogue with the moderate part of the Syrian opposition. Its leadership even demonstrated that it is ready to accept the interests of other actors, the US, Israel, Kurdish groups, Turkey, Iran, and Hezbollah, if this would help in reaching a final deal to settle the conflict.

Summing up the developments of 2019, one might expect that the current low-intensity state of the Syrian conflict would continue for years. However, several factors and developments could instigate the renewal of full-fledged hostilities:

- A sudden demise or forceful removal of President Bashar al-Assad could create a situation of uncertainty within the patriotic component of the Syrian leadership;
- Changes within the Russian political system or issues inside Russia which could lead to full or partial withdrawal of support to the Syrian government and withdrawal of Russian forces from Syria;
- A major war in the Middle East which would turn the entire region into a battlefield. In the current situation, such a war could only start by escalation between the US-Israeli-led bloc and Iran.

## Iran and The Persian Gulf. The War on Yemen

The Persian Gulf and the Saudi-Yemen battleground are also sources of regional instability. In the second half of 2019, the situation there was marked by increased chances of open military confrontation between the US-Israeli-Saudi bloc and Iran. Drone shoot-downs, oil tanker detentions, open military buildups, and wartime-like rhetoric became something common or at least not very surprising. The US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel point to Iran as the main instigator of tensions.

Iran and its allies deny responsibility for the escalation reasonably noting that their actions were a response to aggressive moves by the US-Israeli-Saudi axis. From this point of view, Iran's decision to limit its commitments to the already collapsed Nuclear Deal, high level of military activity in the Persian Gulf, shoot down of the US Global Hawk spy drone, and increased support to regional Shia groups are logical steps to deter US-led aggression and to solidify its own position in the region. Iran's main goal is to demonstrate that an open military conflict with it will have a devastating impact to the states which decide to attack it, as well as to the global economy.

The US sanctions war, public diplomatic support of rioters, and the Trump administration's commitment to flexing military muscle only strengthen Tehran's confidence that this approach is right.

As to Yemen's Houthis, who demonstrated an unexpected success in delivering retaliatory strikes to Saudi Arabia, they would continue to pursue their main goal – achieving a victory in the conflict with Saudi Arabia or forcing the Kingdom to accept the peace deal on favorable terms. To achieve this, they need to deliver maximum damage to Saudi Arabia's economy through strikes on its key military and infrastructure objects. In this case, surprising missile and drone strikes on different targets across Saudi Arabia have already demonstrated their effectiveness.

The September 14 strike on Saudi oil infrastructure that put out of commission half of the Saudi oil output became only the first sign of future challenges that Riyadh may face in case of further military confrontation.

The unsuccessful invasion of Yemen and the confrontation with Iran are not the only problems for Saudi Arabia. The interests and vision of the UAE and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East have been in conflict for a long time. Nonetheless, this tendency became especially obvious in 2019. The decline of influence of the House of Saud in the region and inside Saudi Arabia itself led to logical attempts of other regional players to gain a leading position in the Arabian Peninsula. The main challenger is the UAE and the House of Maktoum.

Contradictions between Saudi Arabia and the UAE turned into an open military confrontation between their proxies in Yemen. Since August 29th, Saudi Arabia has provided no symmetric answer to the UAE military action against its proxies. It seems that the Saudi leadership has no will or distinct political vision of how it should react in this situation. Additionally, the Saudi military is bogged down in a bloody conflict in Yemen and struggles to defend its own borders from Houthi attacks.

The UAE already gained an upper hand in the standoff with Saudi Arabia in the economic field. This provided motivation for further actions towards expanding its influence in the region.

During the year, Turkey, under the leadership of President Recep Erdogan, continued strengthening its regional positions. It expanded its own influence in Libya and Syria, strengthened its ties with Iran, Qatar, and Russia, obtained the S-400, entered a final phase in the TurkStream project, and even increased controversial drilling activity in the Eastern Mediterranean. Simultaneously, Ankara defended its national interests -repelling pressure from the United States and getting off with removal from the F-35 program only. Meanwhile, Turkish actions should not be seen as a some tectonic shift in its foreign policy or a signal of 'great friendship' with Russia or Iran.

Turkish foreign policy demonstrates that Ankara is not seeking to make 'friends' with other regional and global powers. Turkey's foreign policy is mobile and variable, and always designed to defend the interests of Turkey as a regional leader and the key state of the Turkic world.

Developments in Libya were marked by the strengthening of the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar and backed by the UAE, Egypt, and to some extent

Russia. The LNA consolidated control of most of the country and launched an advance on its capital of Tripoli, controlled by the Government of National Accord. The LNA describes its main goal as the creation of the unified government and the defeat of terrorism. In its own turn, the Government of National Accord is backed by Turkey, Qatar, the USA and some European states. It controls a small part of the country, and, in terms of military force, relies on various militias and even radical armed groups linked with al-Qaeda. Ankara signed with the Tripoli government a memorandum on maritime boundaries in the Mediterranean Sea. Thus, it sees the GNA survival as a factor which would allow it to justify its further economic and security expansion in the region. This clash of interests sets conditions for an escalation of the Libyan conflict in 2020.

Egypt was mostly stable. The country's army and security forces contained the terrorism threat on the Sinai Peninsula and successfully prevented attempts of radical groups to destabilize the country.

### Central Asia

By the end of the year, the Greater Middle East had appeared in a twilight zone lying before a new loop of the seemingly never-ending Great Game. The next round of the geopolitical standoff will likely take place in a larger region including the Middle East, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. Consistently, the stakes will grow involving more resources of states and nations in geopolitical roulette.

The threat that faces Central Asia is particularly severe since the two sets of actors have asymmetrical objectives. Russia and China are rather interested in the political stability and economic success of the region which they view as essential to their own political and security objectives. It is not in the interest of either country to have half a dozen failed states in their immediate political neighborhood, riven by political, economic, and religious conflicts threatening to spread to their own territories. In addition to being a massive security burden to Russia and China, it would threaten the development of their joint Eurasian integration projects and, moreover, attract so much political attention that the foreign policy objectives of both countries would be hamstrung. The effect would be comparable to that of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq on the US political and military establishment. The monetary price of these wars, the sheer political distraction, wear and demoralization of the armed forces, and the unfortunately frequent killings of civilians amount to a non-tenable cost to the warring party, not to mention damage to US international "soft power" wrought by scandals associated with Guantanamo, Abu Ghraib, and "black sites". Even now, shock-waves in the US military hierarchy continue to be felt regarding the court-martialed senior-ranking US Navy "SEAL" commando charged for the wanton killing of civilians in Northern Iraq during the US military's anti-ISIS operations.

By contrast, this dismal scenario would be enough to satisfy the US foreign policy establishment which, at the moment, is wholly dominated by "hawks" determined to assure the continuation of US hegemony. Preventing the emergence of a multi-polar international system by weakening China and Russia is their desire. This sets the stage for another round of great power rivalry in Central Asia. While the pattern is roughly the same as during the 19th and late 20th centuries—one or more Anglo-Saxon powers seeking to diminish the power of Russia and/or China—the geography of the battlefield is considerably larger for it encompasses the entirety of post-Soviet Central Asian republics. Also included is China's province of Xinjiang which has suddenly attracted considerable Western attention,



manifested, as usual, by concern for “human rights” in the region. Historically, such “concern” usually precedes some form of aggressive action. Therefore the two sets of great power actors—the US and other interested Western powers on the one hand, with Russia and China on the other—are locked in a standoff in the region.

## Afghanistan

The key security problem is militancy and the spread of terrorism. The US and its NATO partners remain unable to achieve a military victory over the Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban reached a level of influence in the region, turning it into a rightful party to any negotiations involving the United States. Nonetheless, it is unlikely that a fully-fledged peace deal can be reached between the sides. The Taliban’s main demand is the withdrawal of all foreign troops from the country. For Washington, conceding to this would amount to public humiliation and a forceful need to admit that the superpower lost a war to the Taliban. Washington can achieve a military victory in Afghanistan only by drastically increasing its forces in the country. This will go contrary to Trump’s publicly declared goal – to limit US participation in conflicts all around the world. Therefore, the stalemate will continue with the Taliban and the US sitting at the negotiating table in Qatar, while Taliban forces slowly take control of more and more territory in Afghanistan.

Besides fighting the US-backed government, in some parts of the country, the Taliban even conducts operations against ISIS in order to prevent this group from spreading further. Despite this, around 5,000 ISIS militants operate in Afghanistan’s north, near the border with Tajikistan. Member states of the Collective Security Treaty Organization are concerned that ISIS militants are preparing to shift their focus to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Russia. The terrorists are infiltrating CIS states, incorporating with organized crime, creating clandestine cells, brainwashing and recruiting new supporters, chiefly the socially handicapped youth and migrants, [and] training them to carry out terrorist activities. The worsening situation in Central Asia contributes to the spread of radical ideas. Now the main threat of destabilization of the entire Central Asian region comes from Tajikistan. This state is the main target of militants deployed in northern Afghanistan.

Destabilization of Central Asia and the rise of ISIS both contribute to achievement of US geopolitical goals. The scenario could devastate Russia’s influence in the region, undermine security of key Russian regional ally, Kazakhstan, and damage the interests of China. The Chinese, Kazakh, and Russian political leadership understand these risks and engage in joint efforts to prevent this scenario.

In the event of further destabilization of Central Asia, ISIS sleeper cells across the region could be activated and a new ISIS self-proclaimed Caliphate could appear on the territory of northern Afghanistan and southern Tajikistan. Russia and China would not benefit from such a development. In the case of China, such instability could expand to its Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, while in Russia the main targets could be the Northern Caucasus and large cities with high numbers of migrant laborers from Central Asian states.

Armenia now together with Georgia became the center of a US soft power campaign to instigate anti-Russian hysteria in the Caucasus. Ethnic groups in this region are traditionally addicted to US mainstream propaganda. On the other hand, the importance of the South Caucasus for Russia decreased notably because of the strong foothold it gained in the Middle East. 2020 is looking to be another economically complicated year for Georgia and

Armenia.

## China Challenges the US

Throughout 2019, China consolidated its position as a global power and the main challenger of the United States. From the military point of view, China successfully turned the South China Sea into an anti-access and area-denial zone controlled by its own military and moved forward with its ambitious modernization program which includes the expansion of China's maritime, airlift, and amphibious capabilities. The balance of power in the Asia-Pacific has in fact shifted and the Chinese Armed Forces are now the main power-broker in the region. China appeared strong enough to fight back against US economic and diplomatic pressure and to repel the Trump Administration's attempts to impose Washington's will upon Beijing. Despite economic war with the United States, China's GDP growth in 2019 is expected to be about 6%, while the yuan exchange rate and the SSE Composite Index demonstrate stability. The United States also tried to pressure China through supporting instability in Hong Kong and by boosting defense aid to Taiwan. However, in both cases, the situation appears to still be within Beijing's comfort zone.

## The Russia-China Partnership

An interesting consequence of US-led pressure on China is that Washington's actions provided an impetus for development of Chinese-Russian cooperation. In 2019, Moscow and Beijing further strengthened their ties and cooperation in the economic and military spheres and demonstrated notable unity in their actions on the international scene as in Africa and in the Arctic for example.

As to Russia itself, during the year, it achieved several foreign policy victories.

- The de-facto diplomatic victory in Syria;
- Resumption of dialogue with the new Ukrainian regime and the reanimation of the Normandy format negotiations;
- Improvement of relations with some large European players, like France, Italy, and even Germany;
- Implementation of the Nord Stream 2 project despite opposition from the US-led bloc;
- Implementation of the Turkish Stream project with Turkey;
- Strengthening of the Russian economy in comparison with previous years and the ruble's stability despite pressure from sanctions. Growth of the Russian GDP for 2019 is expected to be 1.2%, while the Russia Trading System Index demonstrated notable growth from around 1,100 points at the start of the year to around 1,500 by year's end.

The salient accomplishment of the Russian authorities is that no large terrorist attack took place in the country. At the same time, the internal situation was marked by some negative tendencies. There was an apparent political, media, and social campaign to undermine Chinese-Russian cooperation. This campaign, run by pro-Western and liberal media, became an indicator of the progress in Chinese-Russian relations. Additionally, Russia was rocked by a series of emergencies, corruption scandals linked with law enforcement, the plundering of government funding allocated to the settlement of emergency situations, the space industry, and other similar cases.

A number of Russian mid-level officials made statements revealing their real, rent-seeking stance towards the Russian population. Another problem was the deepening social stratification of the population. Most of the citizens experienced a decrease in their real disposable income, while elites continued concentrating margin funds gained through Russia's successful actions in the economy and on the international level. These factors, as well as fatigue with the stubborn resistance of entrenched elites to being dislodged, caused conditions for political instability in big cities. Liberal and pro-Western media and pro-Western organizations exploited this in an attempt to destabilize the country.

### The Militarization of Japan

Militarization of Japan has given the US a foothold in its campaign against China, Russia, and North Korea. The Japan Self-Defense Forces were turned into a fully-fledged military a long time ago. Japanese diplomatic rhetoric demonstrates that official Tokyo is preparing for a possible new conflict in the region and that it will fight to further expand its zone of influence. The Japanese stance on the Kuril Islands territorial dispute with Russia is an example of this approach. Tokyo rejected a Russian proposal for joint economic management of four islands and nearby waters, while formally the islands will remain within Russian jurisdiction -at least for the coming years. Japan demands the full transfer of islands a term which is unacceptable to Russia from a military and political point of view. The social and economic situation in Japan was in a relatively stable, but guarded state.

### US-North Korea Relations

Denuclearization talks between the United States and North Korea reached a stalemate after the North Korean leadership claimed that Washington was in no hurry to provide Pyongyang with acceptable terms and conditions of a possible nuclear deal. The example of the US unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran also played a role. The positive point is that tensions on the Korean Peninsula de-escalated anyway because the sides sat down at the negotiation table. Chances of the open military conflict involving North Korea and the United States remain low.

### Kashmir

In February 2019, the Indian-Pakistani conflict over the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir put the greater region on the brink of a large war with potential for the use of nuclear weapons. However, both India and Pakistan demonstrated reasonable restraint and prevented further escalation despite an open confrontation between their militaries which took place at the same moment. Meanwhile, the February escalation demonstrated the growing power of Pakistan. In the coming years, look to Jammu and Kashmir as a point of constant instability and military tensions, with very little chance that the sides will find a comprehensive political solution to their differences.

### The Extension of ISIS in Southeast Asia

The threat of terrorism is another destabilizing factor in the region. In 2019, ISIS cells made several attempts to strengthen and expand their presence in such countries as Malaysia and Indonesia. Law enforcement agencies of both countries are well aware of this threat and contribute constant and active efforts to combat this terrorism and radicalism. It should be noted that Malaysia is in conflict with the Euro-Atlantic elites because of its independent foreign policy course. For example, its government repeatedly questioned the mainstream



MH17 narrative and officially slammed the JIT investigation as politicized and nontransparent. So, the leadership of the country is forced to be in a state of permanent readiness to repel clandestine and public attempts to bring it into line with the mainstream agenda.

## The European Union

While the European Union is, theoretically, the world's biggest economy using the world's second most popular currency in international transactions, it remains to be seen whether, in the future, it will evolve into a genuine component of a multi-polar international system or become a satellite in someone else's—most likely US—orbit. There still remain many obstacles toward achieving a certain “critical mass” of power and unity. While individual EU member states, most notably Germany and France, are capable of independent action in the international system, individually they are too weak to influence the actions of the United States, China, or even Russia. In the past, individual European powers relied on overseas colonial empires to achieve great power status. In the 21st century, European greatness can only be achieved through eliminating not just economic but also political barriers on the continent. At present, European leaders are presented with both incentives and obstacles to such integration, though one may readily discern a number of potential future paths toward future integration.

Continued European integration would demand an agreement on how to transfer national sovereignty to some as yet undefined and untested set of European political institutions which would not only guarantee individual rights but, more importantly from the point of view of national elites, preserve the relative influence of individual EU member states even after they forfeited their sovereignty. Even if the Euro-skeptics were not such a powerful presence in EU's politics, it would still be an insurmountable task for even the most visionary and driven group of political leaders. Such a leap is only possible if the number of EU states making it is small, and their level of mutual integration is already high.

The post-2008 Euro zone crisis does appear to have communicated the non-sustainability of the current EU integration approach, hence the recent appearance of “two-speeds Europe” concept which actually originated as a warning against the threat of EU bifurcation into well integrated “core” and a less integrated “periphery”. In practical terms it would mean “core” countries, definitely including Germany, France, and possibly the Benelux Union, would abandon the current policy of throwing money at the less well developed EU member states and, instead, focus on forging “a more perfect Union” consisting of this far more homogeneous and smaller set of countries occupying territories that, over a thousand years ago, formed what used to be known as the Carolingian Empire. Like US territories of the 19th century, EU states outside of the core would have to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” to earn membership in the core, which would require them to adopt, wholesale, the core's political institutions.

The deepening disproportion of EU member state economies, and therefore sharpening economic disputes, are the main factor of instability in Europe. The long-delayed withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the union, which is finally expected to take place in 2020, might trigger an escalation of internal tensions over economic issues which might blow up the EU from the inside. Other cornerstones of European instability are the extraordinary growth of organized crime, street crime, radicalism, and terrorism, most of which were caused by uncontrolled illegal migration and the inability of the European bureaucracy to cut off the flows of illegal migrants, integrate non-radicalized people into European society, and detect

all radicals and terrorists that infiltrate Europe with migrants.

The situation is further complicated by the conflict in Ukraine and the destruction of international security treaties, such as the US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty and its planned withdrawal from the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty). These developments go amid constant military and political hysteria of micro-states and Poland instigated by the Euro-Atlantic elites. The EU bureaucracy is using this state of hysteria and ramping up speculations about a supposed military threat from Russia and an economic and political threat from China to distract the public and draw attention away from the real problems.

## Russia and Africa

The return of Russia as the diplomatic and military great power to Africa marked a new round of the geo-economic standoff in the region. The apparent Russian-Chinese cooperation is steadily pushing French and British out of what they describe as their traditional sphere of influence. While, in terms of economic strength, Russia cannot compete with China, it does have a wide range of military and diplomatic means and measures with which to influence the region. So, Beijing and Moscow seem to have reached a non-public deal on a “division of labor”. China focuses on implementation of its economic projects, while Russia contributes military and diplomatic efforts to stabilize the security situation, obtaining revenue for its military and security assistance. Moscow plays a second violin role in getting these guaranteed zones of influence. Terrorism is one of the main threats to the region. The Chinese-Russian cooperation did not go without a response from their Western counterparts that justified their propaganda and diplomatic opposition to Beijing-Moscow cooperation by describing Chinese investments as “debt-traps” and the Russian military presence as “destabilizing”. In 2019, Africa entered into a new round of great powers rivalry.

## US “Soft Power” in Latin America. Ecuador, Brazil, Venezuela, Bolivia, Colombia, Mexico

The intensification of US “soft power” and meddling efforts, social, economic tensions, activities of non-state actors, and organized criminal networks became the main factors of instability in South America. Venezuela and Bolivia were targeted by US-backed coups. While the Venezuelan government, with help from China and Russia, succeeded in repelling the coup attempt, Bolivia was plunged into a violent civil conflict after the pro-US government seized power. Chile remained in a state of social economic crisis which repeatedly triggered wide-scale anti-government riots. Its pro-US government remained in power, mainly, because there was no foreign ‘democratic superpower’ to instigate the regime change campaign. Actions of the government of Colombia, one of the key US regional allies, undermined the existing peace deal with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and forced at least a part of the former FARC members to take up arms once again.

If repressions, killings, and clandestine operations aimed at the FARC members committed to the peace continue, they may lead to a resumption of FARC-led guerrilla warfare against the central government. The crisis developing in Mexico is a result of the growth of the drug cartels-related violence and economic tensions with the United States.

The right-wing Bolsonaro government put Brazil on track with the US foreign policy course to the extent that, the country worked with Washington against Venezuela, claiming that it should not turn into ‘another Cuba’. A deep economic crisis in Argentina opened the road to

power for a new left-centric president, Alberto Fernandez. Washington considers South America as its own geopolitical backyard and sees any non pro-US, or just national-oriented government, as a threat to its vital interests. In 2020, the US meddling campaign will likely escalate and expand, throwing the region into a new round of instability and triggering an expected resistance from South American states. An example of this is the situation in Bolivia. Regardless of the actions of ousted President Evo Morales, the situation in the country will continue escalating. The inability of the pro-US government to deliver positive changes and its simultaneous actions to destroy all the economic achievements of the Morales period might cause Bolivia to descend into poverty and chaos causing unrest and possibly, a civil war.

## Hybrid Warfare

During 2019, the world superpower, led by the administration of President Donald Trump, provided a consistent policy designed to defend the interests of US domestic industry and the United States as a national state by any means possible. This included economic and diplomatic pressure campaigns against both US geopolitical competitors and allies. The most widely known Trump administration move of this kind was the tariff war with China. However, at the same time, Washington contributed notable efforts in almost all regions around the globe. For example, the United States opposed Chinese economic projects in Africa, Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in Europe, tried to limit exports of the Russian defense industry, pressured NATO member states who did not want to spend enough on defense, and proposed that US allies pay more for the honor and privilege of provided "protection".

## The US Economy in Crisis

Additionally, Trump pressured the Federal Reserve Board of Governors into lowering interest rates and announced plans to lower interest rates even further to weaken the dollar in order to boost national industry and increase its product availability on the global market. These plans caused strong resistance from international corporations and global capitalists because this move may undermine the current global financial system based upon a strong US dollar. This straightforward approach demonstrated that Trump and his team were ready to do everything needed to protect US security and economic interests as they see them. Meanwhile, it alienated some "traditional allies", as in the case of Turkey which decided to acquire Russian S-400s, and escalated the conflict between the Trump Administration and the globalists. The expected US GDP growth in 2019 is 2.2%. The expected production growth of 3.9% reflects the policy aimed at supporting the real sector. In terms of foreign policy, the White House attempted to rationalize US military presence in conflict zones around the world. Despite this, the unprecedented level of support to Israel, confrontation with Iran, China, and Russia, militarization of Europe, coups and meddling into the internal affairs of sovereign states remain as the main markers of US foreign policy. Nevertheless, the main threat to United States stability originates not from Iranians, Russians, or Chinese, but rather from internal issues. The constant hysteria in mainstream media, the attempt to impeach Donald Trump, and the radicalization of different social and political groups contributes to destabilization of the country ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

## Dangerous Developments in 2019

The year 2019 was marked by a number of dangerous developments. In spite of this, it could have been much more dangerous and violent. Political leadership by key actors

demonstrated their conditional wisdom by avoiding a number of open military conflicts, all of which had chances to erupt in the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia, South America, and even Europe. A new war in the Persian Gulf, US military conflict with North Korea, an India-Pakistan war -none of these were started. A peaceful transfer of power from Petro Poroshenko to Volodymyr Zelensky in Ukraine allowed for the avoidance of a military escalation in eastern Europe. China and the United States showed their restraint despite tensions in the Asia-Pacific, including the Hong Kong issue. A new global economic crisis, expected for some time by many experts, did not happen. The lack of global economic shocks or new regional wars in 2019 does not mean that knots straining relations among leading world powers were loosened or solved. These knots will remain a constant source of tension on the international level until they are removed within the framework of diplomatic mechanisms or cut as a result of a large military conflict or a series of smaller military conflicts.

Chances seem high that 2020 will become the year when a match will be set to the wick of the international powder keg, or that it will be the last relatively calm year in the first quarter of the 21st century. The collapse of international defense treaties and de-escalation mechanisms, as well as accumulating contradictions and conflicts among world nations give rise to an especial concern.

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