



2018 - A NEW WORLD ORDER IN REVIEW



An analysis of socio-political upheavals in 2018 & forecast of political conflicts and hotbeds to be expected in 2019

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2018: Overview

2018 was a year of erratic belligerence. World politics shifted from a rules-based international order to a time of populist uprisings, a greater international diffusion of power, increasingly militarized foreign policies, and shrinking space for multilateralism and diplomacy. For the better part of the preceding century, for better and for worse, U.S. power and alliances have shaped international affairs, set limits, and structured regional orders. For this reason, the stunning, defining feature of the past year has been an altogether new lesson in the laws of the New World Order, that with rules of accountability and order lagging, with the right amount of power – anyone can get away with anything.

As the era of largely uncontested U.S. primacy fades, the international order has been thrown into chaos. More leaders are tempted more often to test limits, fight for power, and seek to bolster their influence—or diminish that of their rivals—by meddling in foreign proxy conflicts. As hybrid warfare becomes the new norm replacing weaponized warfare, multilateralism and its constraints were seen to be more than ever under siege, challenged by swift, transactional, zero-sum politics.

Instruments of collective action, such as the United Nations Security Council, are paralyzed; those of collective accountability, including the International Criminal Court, are ignored and disparaged.

The erosion of Western hegemony means that Moscow and Beijing benefit from the isolationism that Trump's America has begun to impose upon itself. A growing disregard for traditional allies and international customs further manifested itself in the form Europe's crisis with Brexit and its nativism.

Domestically, countries have seen a toxic rise of nascent ultra-right nationalist parties and leaders have been elected on the basis of their authoritarian and often, puritan ideologies that promise to uphold inward looking policies and celebrate relics of the past where nations were defined by narrow social and political identities. The leaders vary in the level of nationalism but almost all find common ground in the rejection of international rules and institutions. Trump, Putin, Assad, MBS, Li Penn, Kim Jong Un came out as leaders promulgating policies, individualistic to them and their unilateral choices, rather than as politicians collaborating with their administration advisors leading state-centric policies.

In this new political set-up, it is the minorities and migrants that have both faced the brunt of this cataclysmic toppling of the liberal order making perilous

journey from war-mongered home states – and being rejected outright by either states hostile to utilizing resources to host, or by the ideology of the burgeoning ultra-right citizens who see the refugees as threats to their lives and culture.

There was also a brave and dauntless element to state-led persecution of those of different faiths and creeds. China and Myanmar's brazen genocidal campaigns against their Muslim populations, Saudi Arabia's call to war in a ravaged Yemen, the Syrian regime's brutal suppression of a popular uprising, the Venezuelan government's economic warfare against its own people, and the silencing of dissenting voices in the Arab world such as Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere are but a few examples. Constraints of facing the punishment or penalties that held back impulsive and violent unilateral actions by populist leaders are no more.

Beyond state borders, it is state leaders in fact who flout personal prejudices and vendettas most openly. Under Putin, Russia - attempting to assimilate its former glory days as an Empire - annexed parts of Georgia and Crimea, fought hybrid cyberwarfare against Western democracies and poisoned dissidents in foreign lands. The Salisbury incident perhaps offered a primer of what was to come; Saudi Arabia's Muhammad Bin Salman's prerogative remained to embolden his hold over power, most critically defined by his fierce and swift campaign of persecution of voices who challenged him – seen in the brutal dismemberment of MBS in a consulate in Turkey, execution of female campaigners and the brazen kidnapping of the Lebanese Prime minister. In Yemen, the horrid murderous campaign of Prince Mohammed continues under the patronage of his US, EU, Arab and Israeli allies.

"Some 132 million people in 42 countries will need assistance next year," the UN says, with Yemen topping the list, along with Syria, Afghanistan and the Central African Republic.

Arab leaders, meanwhile, from one end to another appeared busy appeasing Israel and normalizing relations with the settler colony while slowly opening doors to Syria's Assad's, giving the green-light to the acceptance of his victory in the 560,000 casualty-led civil war.

With the rise of a new Beijing-led world order, Xi Jin Ping offered both multilateral connectivity via the ambitious OBOR initiative spanning three continents, but used China's new strategic leverage on the world stage to isolate and maneuver the South China Seas and begin an economic cold war in

the form of a trade stand-off with the US. Further, its joining of the World Trade Organization or signing up to the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea, for example, appeared to be a cosmetic show of progressiveness, even as it acted inconsistently with the spirit of both.

Modi's India led the movement for the social and cultural 'Saffronization' of the state, sidelining and trampling minority rights under the guise of championing a new, pure Hindutva nation-state. This tactic of altering and recalibrating a nationalist ideology to move attention away from pressing economic concerns plaguing the country is not new to world leaders. Trump paved the way for populist leaders worldwide with his America First mantra, talking down domestic crises within his administration while ramping up international condemnation for the 'Axis of Evil' that it views as Iran. Israel complicit in the end-all, be-all resentment against Tehran, viewed the erosion of the JCPOA deal as a sign that its position in the Middle East is now emboldened enough for it to unilaterally declare Jerusalem as its capital, undermining the prospect of a two-state solution with Palestine more than ever.

To say that Trump, the most obvious and usual cavity for media and academia when it comes to upheaval of the rules-based liberal order as we know it today, would not be a false assertion entirely. In the tearing up of the Iran deal and worse, threatening to impose economic punishment on those who choose to abide by it and a similar attempt to both coerce and take jabs at North Korea leader ('little rocket-man') into abiding by US demands, the President unearthed his cavalier disregard for diplomatic channels.

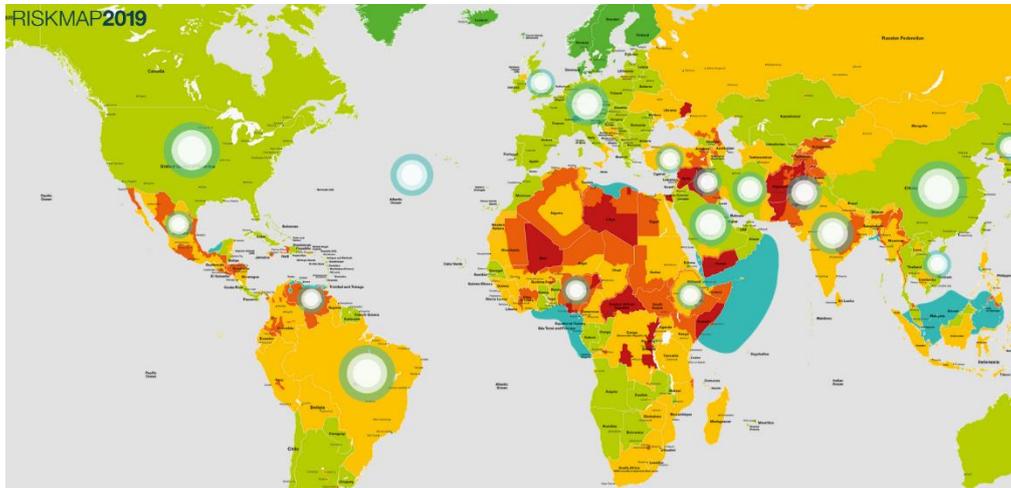
This goes deeper; President Trump's failure to appreciate the value of alliances to U.S. interests and his occasional disparagement of traditional partners is particularly self-defeating. channels, preferring to use hard-headed and often, crude severing of ties. Nascent in his policies were also his overt partiality towards Israel and Russia (for the most half of the year), his attacks on the International Criminal Court and chest-thumping speeches about U.S. sovereignty on international stages such as the UNGA. These measures were even more striking as Trump revved up tensions with old allies serving long-term US interests such as Pakistan and NATO demanding vociferously to 'do more' for the US. These lamentations about the cost of U.S. overseas intervention, particularly in areas where the US initiated and led wars, such as Afghanistan lack any introspection regarding the price paid by peoples subjected to that intervention, focusing solely on that paid by those perpetrating it. Trump's last major decision as President in 2018 involved the

announcement of US withdrawal of troops from Syria, leaving behind an isolated Kurdish ally in the wake of a possible hostile Turkish intervention in Syria and an open trail for Russia-backed Assad to officially declare his victory in the brutal 8 year long civil war.

There have been saner voices, albeit a few. For the time being, there is a glaring spotlight on Myanmar's Aung San Kyi as she is stripped of her Nobel Prize, and forced by international pressure to allow Rohingya refugees to return amidst media and human rights watch-dogs tracking the return. The feared Russian-backed reconquest of Idlib, the last rebel stronghold in Syria, has, for now, been averted, in no small measure due to Turkish, European, and U.S. objections. For the time being even potential Saudi-led offensive on the Yemeni port of Hodeidah have been halted, deterring Riyadh and UAE allies by warnings about the humanitarian impact, but more so the cost to their international standing. Stiff sanctions against North Korea's nuclear program and the severity of response against Russia for its alleged meddling in foreign states and for its annexation of foreign territories has meant that leaders like Kim Jong Un, Putin and MBS face nimble but jarring reality checks of their power.

But as a recent Foreign Policy editorial poignantly put it – *“it is hard to escape the sense that these are exceptions that prove the absence of rules. The international order as we know it is unraveling, with no clear sense of what will come in its wake.”*

What is to be expected in 2019?



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Yemen and Afghanistan

It is to be seen how the humanitarian crisis in Yemen—the world’s worst—could deteriorate further in 2019 if the key players do not seize the opportunity created over the past weeks by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in achieving a partial cease-fire and encouraging a series of confidence-building steps.

Afghanistan too suffers its deadliest fighting and remains a critical hot-bed for more violence if key stake-holders do not join heads to back an Afghan-led, Afghan-owned peace process with the Taliban. In 2018, by one tally, the war killed more than 40,000 combatants and civilians. It is telling that the June cease-fire revealed broad support for peace, and there are signs that the war’s core protagonists are open to a settlement. However, with a rash US announcement of retreating troops from Afghanistan, it raises the threat of the United States cutting and running from the quagmire. It is predicted that a rapid pullout could provoke a major new civil war, an outcome nobody, including the Taliban, wants. However, with a potential U.S. drawdown in the cards, the Taliban’s suspicion about Washington’s motives might ease, propelling talks forward.

US-Chinese tensions

Another potential crisis in the brewing in 2019 are the mounting U.S.-Chinese tensions, which have deep implications for conflicts in Asia and beyond. With both superpowers on edge, China would be less likely to back tougher sanctions against North Korea, and U.S. diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan. The recent confrontation in the trade war however, suggests that neither side sees any advantage in compromising.

Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its support for separatists in Ukraine's Donbass region, fuels the wider geopolitical standoff between Russia and Western powers. The latest flash point is the Sea of Azov, where in November Ukrainian vessels clashed with Russian ships prompting Russia to effectively block access to the Kerch Strait, at the mouth of the sea.

Middle East; Saudi Arabia, Iran, Israel and a US exit

The Middle East has a greater penchant for confrontation in 2019, whether deliberate or inadvertent, now more than ever involving the Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. With crippling US sanctions at its heel, Iran has responded pragmatically by hunkering down but and staying clear of any controversial actions that could spark military action against it. However, as economic pressure builds on Iran, this posture may not last. Moreover, in Syria and in Yemen where Iran backs the Houthi rebels and Shiite rebels, the risk of an accidental clash with Saudi Arabia in the Persian Gulf or in Iraq cannot be underestimated.

It is also predicted that the Khashoggi murder will follow Saudi Arabia into 2019. As world powers including the United States rethink their support of Saudi foreign policy and their unconditional U.S. for MBS led by the Trump administration, it is expected that with the Democrats in control of the House of Representatives, perhaps stronger U.S. pressure on Riyadh to end the war in Yemen and greater congressional scrutiny of U.S. and Saudi escalations against Iran, can be expected.

Even the US in light of its decision to exit its presence in conflict-zones abroad may look to softer policies in the future as a form of damage control. In 2019, this could include the adoption of policies more inclined towards balancing US relations with allies to correct the consequences of its overreach in Iraq,

Yemen, Syria and Afghanistan. In Iraq and Syria, for instance, the US-Turkish relationship was damaged by the Syrian civil war, pointing to the United States' backing of YPG forces in Syria. However, now the US must make a tough call on whether to continue backing their long-term Kurdish allies in the region or whether by exiting all aid from the YPG completely, re-start relations with the Turkish government. Without the backing of the US to the Kurds, Turkey is more likely to not view the YPG forces as a serious security threat.

Syria, even as Assad claims victory, is expected to go through greater geopolitical tensions than before as with the US decision to leave the territory, there is a critical need to avoid an all-out scramble for the territory abandoned by the United States because it could revitalize the Islamic State from Moscow's perspective, there is a threat of Turkey taking over the land left behind and launch a possible assault against the Kurdish YPG-held territory. There must be push from all main stake-holders such as Moscow and Washington to facilitate a deal between Damascus and the YPG that entails the return of the Syrian government to the northeast coupled with a degree of Kurdish self-rule in the area.

South Sudan and Nigeria to face leadership challenge

In Africa, violence in South Sudan and Nigeria's Middle in 2018 was on the uptick. Conflict between predominantly Muslim herders and mostly Christian farmers escalated to unprecedented levels in Nigeria killing 1500, and cries of sky-rocketing prices have spiraled protests against President Bashir in South Sudan. In 2019, the frayed intercommunal relations—especially between Muslims and Christians in Nigeria and the serious threat to Bashir's rule in Southern Sudan means that the protests will continue in 2019 although the endgame of the mass discontent is unclear at the moment. But a prolonged crisis in its northern neighbor could be hugely destabilizing for South Sudan. The United States, too which until recently spearheaded Western diplomacy in South Sudan, has stepped back. It remains to be seen whether Western allies are able to build consensus for a wider settlement that shares power across South Sudan's groups and regions.

Brexit and the future of Britain's economy

The immediate question for the UK in 2019 will be whether the government can gain approval for its Brexit deal. Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal has come under increasing pressure from allies and opponents alike after the Government was forced to publish legal advice showing the United Kingdom could be locked indefinitely in the European Union's orbit.

In 2019, PM May is set to attempt to get her deal approved by a Parliament that shows every sign of striking it down in a vote on December 11.

With the UK due to leave the EU on March 29, it's not clear what will happen if the deal is rejected. If Parliament rejects her deal, May has warned Britain could leave without a deal or that there could be no Brexit at all. If the deal is voted down, some MPs from both Labour and Tory parties have said they would act to stop a Brexit with no agreement, which business chiefs and investors fear would weaken the West, spook financial markets and block trade.

In the absence of an election or fresh referendum as was witnessed in December 2018, focus is now likely to turn to full-blown trade talks with the EU, which may take several years to complete. If the UK exits with a deal by March 2019, then the economy may regain some poise, with hiring and investment likely gaining a little more momentum. However, according to a poll by Financial Times led by 8- leading economists, even if Britain manages to avoid a disorderly no-deal Brexit, uncertainty will continue to cloud over the outlook in 2019 and beyond regarding UK business investments and depress consumer spending in 2019, stunting long-term growth for the country.

South Asia – Indo-Pak tensions

In South Asia, Modi's anti Pakistan stance in 2018 could be dismissed as election year rhetoric however, it can be foreseen that regardless of short-term political gains from the anti-Pakistan rhetoric, India's long-term political strategy also stands to benefit from more of the same; India's intent and investment in the Chabahar port is seen as an attempt to deny regional connectivity to Pakistan, while maintaining an aggressive posture against the Pak-China led CPEC project. India's ambitions in Afghanistan and its emphasis on playing a military role in the country is directly linked to its stated aim of

keeping Pakistan under pressure for its role in the Afghan peace process. Indeed, in his first interview in 2019, Prime Minister Modi was seen to employ a hardliner view against Pakistan in 2019 stating, “the Indian government is working out various strategies to keep up the pressure on Pakistan to check alleged terrorism.”

It is predicted that as General elections draw nearer for the BJP government, Line of Control (LOC) violations along the Indo-Pak border are only set to rise and more security threats in Baluchistan – much like the November attack on the Chinese Consulate in Quetta - likely to manifest to impact negatively not only Pakistan’s relations with global investors but also derail CPEC development growth underway.

It is telling that Pakistan PM Imran Khan has set the tone for resuming bilateral dialogue with India, stating that his government will resume peace talks with India after the 2019 elections. Instead, the incumbent government has announced its resolve to focus on issues of national concern, pledging to eradicate “the four ills of our country: poverty, illiteracy, injustice and corruption.”

It remains to be seen however, what trajectory the relations between the two neighbors will take, with the ushering in of a new government in New Delhi in 2019.