

Learning Curves and Curve Balls - National Security in Transition

Every new incoming president uses the transition to prepare for an array of prevalent national security challenges. Although lacking first-hand national security practice, the POTUS-elect is surrounding himself with a team of considerable military experience, illustrated by the nomination of only the second recently retired four star general as Secretary of Defense. Such appointments signal a military buildup driven by a “peace through strength” philosophy. However, even before any buildup effort, there is an urgent need to set out clear strategic plans and policies to contain, restrict, suppress or defeat enemies and adversaries.

As the world waits to see what effect the next American administration will have on the global security environment, two things are also clear. First, this will be a significant learning curve for the incoming POTUS (as it was with his predecessors). Second, adversaries and competitors worldwide in any case will continue to throw some curve balls to test the United States, but should also be prepared for the new President to throw a few of his own. In fact, there have been enough outside surprises and game-changers since the election to impact planning and preparation before the next administration even arrives. The long list of major issues includes recent events within Syria, Russia, Israel and Islamic terrorism, increasing concerns about problems that lie ahead.

Syria

Nearly six years of civil war in Syria has claimed at least 300,000 lives and displaced another four million. Previous attempts by the United Nations, or the U.S. and Russia, to broker a ceasefire between pro-Assad forces and Syrian rebels, which number between a dozen to 1200 groups, have failed. A brief ceasefire negotiated by Russia and Turkey allowed civilians and rebels to evacuate the heavily besieged city of Aleppo. Just days before the New Year, Turkey and Russia announced that a nationwide ceasefire agreement had been reached with peace talks to be held in Kazakhstan a month later. The tenuous deal creates a truce between Syrian government forces, their factional allies and the Russian military, and the High Negotiations Committee, an umbrella group and main opposition body, and the Free Syrian Army, a loose alliance of several moderate rebel factions. Excluded from the deal are jihadist groups who continue to fight, including against U.S. Special Forces, and the Kurdish Popular Protection Units that control a large area of northern Syria. The UN and U.S., who have been sidelined from the process, officially welcomed the development.

The future is still complicated and uncertain. Days after the agreement, Syrian rebel groups released a statement that they were halting preparations for peace talks because of repeated breaches of the ceasefire by the Syrian government and its Hezbollah allies. The truce’s chances for success are still helped by the rebels diminishing resources and territory. Meanwhile, Russia said it would scale back its military presence in Syria, but would continue to support the regime against terrorism.

Aleppo also provides a glimpse of things to come. The city represents the wastelands of towns that lack populations to rebuild or opportunities to revitalize. Bashar al-Assad is also not guaranteed to remain in power. Even if he does, “Assad’s survival would leave him in the debt of both Russia and Iran, and head of a rump state in a Sunni-majority country and rejected by some of the main Sunni powers in the Middle East.”¹ This raises the possibility of overtures from Iran to expand Shiite influence in Syria. As such, the threat of violence and instability remain high.

¹ Alissa J. Rubin, “For Bashar al-Assad, Winning the Syrian War May Lead to New Troubles,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/28/world/middleeast/syria-civil-war-assad.html>.

Islamic Extremist Terrorism

Proving yet again that there's no rest for the wicked or the weary, there have been over 235 terror incidents around the world since the U.S. presidential election. These attacks have left 2030 dead and 2348 injured. Among those were the knife attacks at Ohio State University (11 injured), car bombings in Istanbul (44 dead, 155 injured), a truck plowing through a Berlin Christmas market (12 dead, 49 injured), and a New Year's Eve gunman attack on an Istanbul nightclub. The assassination of the Russian Ambassador to Turkey, Andrei Karlov, in Ankara failed to rattle Turkish-Russian relations. Despite the shooter angrily screaming "don't forget Aleppo" over his victim, the two countries negotiated two cease fires in Syria, including in Aleppo. Russia has also said terrorism has not been ruled out in the crash of a Syria-bound military transport plane on Christmas Day.

Meanwhile, the Islamic State, Al Qaeda and their ilk, continue to fuel their intolerant ideologies, boost radicalization and incite terrorist activities against non-believers and Muslims alike. In turn, the authoritarian regime in Turkey continues to use terror attacks as an excuse to purge and punish the opposition. Assad's plan to empower Islamic extremists to infiltrate the opposition in Syria worked too well, backfiring on Assad himself. "The global Islamist insurgency has been boosted by the bloodshed in Syria and brought mayhem onto Europe's streets, while people in the Middle East find themselves trapped between strongmen and terrorist organizations that only have their own interests and the retention of power at heart."² The intricacies of terrorism with national politics and global power dynamics make eradicating all vestiges of the extremist threat harder...yet necessary.

Russia

The failed reset of America's relationship with Russia has been followed by the apparent resurrection of a new quasi-Cold War. At the same time in the U.S., the election had already focused attention and scrutiny on the "calm-the-waters" orientation taken by the President-elect toward Vladimir Putin. In the weeks after, allegations arose – from intelligence reports to Wikileaks information – that Russia may have interfered with the U.S. election cycle through the exploitation of fake news presumably to damage one candidate, reveal digital break-ins of the Democratic Party, and to undermine the American electorate's faith in their government. Russia repeatedly denied the allegations, which reportedly included using "thousands of botnets, teams of paid human 'trolls,' and networks of websites and social-media accounts [to] echo and amplify" false or misleading tweets, Facebook posts, videos and media reports.³

Just before the end of the year, the Obama administration retaliated by tweaking Moscow with sanctions for involvement in "Significant Malicious Cyber-Enabled Activities." The sanctions included the expelling of 35 Russian diplomats, nine Russian entities including their primary security services and intelligence directorate, and the closure of two Russian compounds in Maryland and New York allegedly used for intelligence gathering. Additional responses out of the public eye were not ruled out. Reactions to the sanctions were divisive. Russia continued to deny any involvement or activities, but Putin declined to (publicly) retaliate possibly to mock President Obama. The President-elect and his team continued to be skeptical of any significance in the allegations or impact on the elections, while scheduling in-depth briefings on the matter. However, many GOP and intelligence

² Julie Lenarz, "Terrorism plays into the hands of Erdogan and Assad," *CNN*, January 3, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/03/opinions/vicious-cycle-of-terror-lenarz-opinion/>.

³ Jill Dougherty, "The reality behind Russia's fake news," *CNN*, <http://www.cnn.com/2016/12/02/politics/russia-fake-news-reality/>.

leaders found the sanctions to be long overdue and not strong enough. Sen. John McCain, for example, held a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on global cyber threats and Russian cyber hacking, in particular.

Despite comments by the President-elect and Putin on straightening out the relationship between the two countries, relations remain strained from recent concerns over the Syrian civil war, failed joint operations against the Islamic State, and Russia's cyber and military aggressions.

Israel

Tensions rose with Israel when the U.S. didn't veto a UN Security Council resolution calling to end construction activities of Israeli settlements in occupied Palestinian territories, including East Jerusalem. Although a non-binding UN measure, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lashed out against the administration, going as far as accusing President Obama of colluding with other nations to shape the resolution.

Jewish settlements in occupied areas have long been considered by some as an obstacle in the pursuit of a two-state solution, about which Secretary of State John Kerry asserted the opinion the day after the vote that "the only way to achieve a just and lasting peace between Israelis and Palestinians" and "the only way to ensure Israel's future as a Jewish and democratic state." Despite his previous public support of the two-state solution, the U.S. veto abstention and pressures from within his coalition in Israel pushed Netanyahu into an even more antagonistic position with the current administration. Meanwhile, Netanyahu has welcomed the very pro-Israel President-elect who has not expressed an interest in pushing a two-state solution. In the end, decades of fighting and innocent victims, numerous failed negotiations, and the anti-Israeli stances of Hamas and neighboring countries make almost any solution impossible. (Hamas and its supporters have repeatedly expressed their intent to do away with Israel as a state.) Nor will this diplomatic flare up impede the development of the settlements, curb Israeli-Palestinian animosities, or thwart violence in any way, any time soon.

Such recent events highlight the challenges that lie ahead, already underscored by other long-standing national security challenges. In his New Year's Day address, North Korea's Kim Jong Il expressed his resolve to develop a missile that could reach the continental U.S., reasserting North Korea's paranoia and desire for a nuclear self-defense capability. China maintains its steady military buildup (including cyber), regional hegemonic interests, and expansive economic reach. China's claims over most of the South China Sea and creation of several new islands, for example, pit it against neighboring countries over oil and natural gas resources, boost its military capabilities, and obstruct passage through international waters, including for the U.S. Navy. Iran continues to exert its interests, both directly and indirectly via extremist and violent proxies in the Middle East, while suspicions continue about the advancement of Iran's nuclear capabilities even in the wake of the deal with the United Nations Security Council and the European Union.

The global threat environment continues to be an ever changing game where winning has different meanings to different players, but also one that no one wants to lose. The President-elect and his incoming administration will need to be ready on day one with policies and implementable strategies to deflect any curveballs, defeat any adversary's game plan, and make the winning moves.