



More Distractions Loom for the US in 2020

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Impeachment hearings in the US have overshadowed important geopolitical developments in Eurasia that will affect Washington's position in 2020 and beyond. The US's failure to improve relations with Seoul and Tokyo strengthens China's position in the Asia-Pacific. Similar processes are unfolding around Ukraine, where Kyiv might—in the absence of US support—be pressured into accepting Russian demands on Donbas.

The change in the position of the US in the world can be felt from the Asia-Pacific to the Middle East to Ukraine. Though there are reports on US troop increases in Eurasia and a general growth in US military spending, many crucial US allies and partners are seeing a deterioration of their regional security situation. This is encouraging rising regional powers to behave in a more challenging way.

Take, for example, South Korea, a crucial US ally with about 28,500 US troops on the ground. The current cost-sharing agreement (\$5 billion per year) of the US base will end on December 31. As South Korea shares a heavily armed border with North Korea, and technically has been at war with Pyongyang since 1953, any doubts expressed by the US about the necessity of its base there set off alarms across the entire region.

There are also complications between the allies themselves. Japan and South Korea are in the middle of a trade war. In 2018, South Korea's highest court ordered a Japanese firm to compensate Koreans it had used as forced labor in the early 20th century. Mitsubishi Heavy, one of the firms involved, has reportedly refused to comply with the order, while two other companies have had their assets seized in South Korea. In August 2019, Japan announced it is removing Seoul's favored trade partner status and imposed export controls on

its electronics sector (vital for South Korean companies like Samsung). Seoul then decided to end its intelligence-sharing pact with Tokyo.

These troubles open up a diplomatic path for China. It is no wonder that on the sidelines of recent regional security talks in Bangkok, the South Korean and Chinese defense ministries agreed to set up more military hotlines and push ahead with a visit by the South Korean defense minister to China next year to “foster bilateral exchanges and cooperation in defense.” The sides agreed to develop their security ties to ensure stability in northeast Asia.

The US administration’s actions have drawn criticism from the US House Armed Services and Foreign Affairs committees, which are worried about a gradual dismantling of US relationships with crucial Asian allies. Though the damage already caused to Trans-Pacific ties is often overestimated, there are fears that if it continues, there will be serious trouble in coming years.

Moving from the Asia-Pacific to Syria, while it was recently announced that some US troops will remain in the country, the US’s regional allies are still reeling from the abandonment of the Kurds. Small states in the region worry that they could be dispensed with in the same way.

Ukraine is in an increasingly untenable position. With Crimea annexed and the war in Donbas still going on, fears abound in Kyiv that US vacillating could result in serious damage to its position before the upcoming Normandy summit. Indeed, there are already signs that France and Germany might be willing to pressure Kyiv to hold elections in Donbas without establishing Ukraine’s control over the border with Russia (relinquished after 2014).

2020 will be the year of the presidential election in the US, and quite naturally the American leadership will be keeping its eyes on the domestic front. It is likely that the impeachment hearings, whatever their result, will exert mounting pressure on Trump. Constant recriminations and possible new hearings involving former members of Trump’s administration will be a powerful distraction away from foreign policy.

Even at NATO European leaders are taking initiatives (some of them dubious) that put American leadership into question. French president Emmanuel Macron recently made several statements questioning NATO’s role. They followed earlier statements from Macron regarding the need to work more closely with Russia in order to prevent its being lost to a rising China.

As the US enters the election year with polls showing Trump likely to win another term, serious divisions among western allies will likely continue. This

would add more pressure to trans-Atlantic bonds and affect the US's ability to act decisively across the Eurasian continent.

From South Korea to the Kurds in the Middle East to Ukraine, everyone is feeling how unpredictable the geopolitical situation in the world has become. Many among the political elites are questioning how long dependence on US support can realistically last. The US will thus face complications in containing China's moves across Eurasia and the Asia-Pacific region.

China could work toward driving a further wedge between South Korea/Japan and the US as Russia exploits the gap between Ukraine and the US. Meanwhile, Iran and Turkey will gain more advantages in Syria and Iraq.

Overall, internal divisions and the upcoming election will distract Washington from responding quickly and effectively to rising problems across Eurasia. 2020 will be a year of increasing coalescing of interests among major Eurasian players that are positioned antagonistically toward the US. It is unlikely that the US will be able to improve its stance quickly, even after the presidential election.

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