



Crisis Group Statement

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# 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2018

*From North Korea to Venezuela, here are the conflicts to watch in 2018.*

It's not all about Donald Trump.

That's a statement more easily written than believed, given the U.S. president's erratic comportment on the world stage – his tweets and taunts, his cavalier disregard of international accords, his readiness to undercut his own diplomats, his odd choice of foes, and his even odder choice of friends. And yet, a more inward-looking United States and a greater international diffusion of power, increasingly militarized foreign policy, and shrinking space for multilateralism and diplomacy are features of the international order that predate the current occupant of the White House and look set to outlast him.

The first trend – U.S. retrenchment – has been in the making for years, hastened by the 2003 Iraq War that, intended to showcase American power, did more to demonstrate its limitations. Overreach abroad, fatigue at home, and a natural rebalancing after the relatively brief period of largely uncontested U.S. supremacy in the 1990s mean the decline was likely inevitable. Trump's signature "America First" slogan harbors a toxic nationalist, exclusionary, and intolerant worldview. His failure to appreciate the value of alliances to U.S. interests and his occasional disparagement of traditional partners is particularly self-defeating. His lamentations about the cost of U.S. overseas intervention lack any introspection regarding the price paid by peoples subjected to that intervention, focusing solely on that



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paid by those perpetrating it. But one ought not forget that Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) in the same election season, and Barack Obama, as a candidate in the preceding ones, both rejected foreign entanglements and belittled nation building. Trump wasn't shaping the public mood. He was reflecting it.

The retrenchment is a matter of degree, of course, given the approximately 200,000 active-duty U.S. troops deployed worldwide. But in terms of ability to manipulate or mold events around the globe, U.S. influence has been waning as power spreads to the east and south, creating a more multipolar world in which armed nonstate actors are playing a much larger role.

The second trend, the growing militarization of foreign policy, also represents continuity as much as departure. Trump exhibits a taste for generals and disdain for diplomats; his secretary of state has an even more curious penchant to dismember the institution from which he derives his power. But they are magnifying a wider and older pattern. The space for diplomacy was shrinking long before Trump's administration took an ax to the State Department. Throughout conflict zones, leaders increasingly appear prone to fight more than to talk – and to fight by violating international norms rather than respecting them.

This owes much to how the rhetoric of counterterrorism has come to dominate foreign policy in theory and in practice. It has given license to governments to first label their armed opponents as terrorists and then treat them as such. Over a decade of intensive Western military operations has contributed to a more permissive environment for the use of force. Many recent conflicts have involved valuable

The most ominous threats in 2018 – nuclear war on the Korean Peninsula and a spiraling confrontation pitting the United States and its allies against Iran – could both be aggravated by Trump’s actions, inactions, and idiosyncrasies. U.S. demands (in the North Korean case, denuclearization; in Iran’s, unilateral renegotiation of the nuclear deal or Tehran’s regional retreat) are unrealistic without serious diplo-

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geopolitical real estate, escalating regional and major power rivalries, more outside involvement in conflicts, and the fragmentation and proliferation of armed groups. There is more to play for, more players in the game, and less overlap among their core interests. All of these developments present obstacles to negotiated settlements.

The third trend is the erosion of multilateralism. Whereas former President Obama sought (with mixed success) to manage and cushion America’s relative decline by bolstering international agreements – such as trade deals, the Paris climate accord, and the Iran nuclear negotiations – President Trump recoils from all that. Where Obama opted for burden-sharing, Trump’s instinct is for burden-shedding.

Even this dynamic, however, has deeper roots. On matters of international peace and security in particular, multilateralism has been manhandled for years. Animosity between Russia and Western powers has rendered the United Nations Security Council impotent on major conflicts since at least the 2011 Libya intervention; that animosity now infects debates on most crises on the council’s agenda. Trump is not the only leader emphasizing bilateral arrangements and ad hoc alliances above multilateral diplomacy and intergovernmental institutions.

Then again, much of it is about Trump, inescapably.

matic engagement or reciprocal concessions. In the former, Washington could face the prospect of provoking a nuclear war in order to avoid one, and in the latter, there is the possibility of jeopardizing a nuclear deal that is succeeding for the sake of a confrontation with Iran that almost certainly will not.

(A third potential flashpoint that didn’t make it into our top 10 – because it came so late and was so unexpected and gratuitous – is the Jerusalem powder keg. At the time of writing, it has not yet exploded, perhaps because when one is as hopeless as the Palestinians there is little hope left to be dashed. Still, the Trump administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel for purely domestic political reasons, with no conceivable foreign-policy gain and a risk of explosion, must rank as a prime example of diplomatic malpractice.)

As with all trends, there are countervailing ones often propelled by discomfort that the dominant trends provoke. Europeans are defending the Iranian nuclear deal and may end up deepening their own common security and strategic independence, President Emmanuel Macron is testing the reach of French diplomacy, and international consensus on action against climate change has held. Perhaps African states, already leading efforts to manage crises on the continent, will step up in the Democratic Republic of the Congo or another

of the continent's major conflicts. Perhaps they or another assortment of actors could make the case for more engagement and dialogue and for defusing crises rather than exacerbating them.

These may seem slender reeds on which to rest our hopes. But, as the following list of the International Crisis Group's top 10 conflicts to watch in 2018 unhappily illustrates, and for now at least, they may well be the only reeds we have.

## 1. North Korea

North Korea's nuclear and missile testing coupled with the White House's bellicose rhetoric make the threat of war on the Korean Peninsula – even a catastrophic nuclear confrontation – higher now than at any time in recent history. Pyongyang's sixth nuclear test in September 2017 and the increasing range of its missiles clearly demonstrate its determination to advance its nuclear program and intercontinental strike capability. From the United States, meanwhile, comes careless saber-rattling and confusing signals about diplomacy.

Kim Jong Un's push for nuclear arms is driven partly by fear that without such deterrence he risks being deposed by outside powers and partly by perceived threats inside North Korea, notably elite rivalries, the tightly managed but still unpredictable impact of economic reform, and his difficulty in controlling information flow – including from foreign media channels.

The aggressive tone from Washington reflects equal urgency in the opposite direction. At least some senior officials believe North Korea must be prevented at all costs from advancing its nuclear program, in particular from being able to strike the continental United States with a missile carrying a nuclear payload. After crossing that threshold, they believe, Kim Jong Un will conclude that he can deter Washington from protecting its allies and thus impose demands – from lifting trade restrictions to expelling U.S. troops, all the way to Korean reunification on his terms. Those same officials appear convinced that he can

be dissuaded from retaliating in the event of limited, targeted military action.

For now, the United States is implementing a “maximum pressure strategy”: corraling the Security Council into tougher sanctions, pressing China to do more to strangle its neighbor's economy, conducting large Air Force and Navy drills, and signaling directly or through congressional allies that it does not fear military confrontation. Despite conflicting messages from Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, the Trump administration is making clear that it is not interested in talks whose goal would be anything short of North Korea's denuclearization, an objective as worthy as it is delusional. As the White House sees it, the approach is working: U.S. military action is no longer unimaginable for either North Korea or China. It hopes the former will be compelled to back down and the latter will get them there.

But this approach means a race against time – with Washington almost certainly on the losing side. Restrictive measures will not bite immediately, and they will bite the North Korean leadership last; ordinary citizens will suffer sooner and worse. Feeling threatened, Pyongyang is more likely to accelerate weapons development than halt or slow it. Both China and South Korea support tighter sanctions and are as frustrated with Pyongyang as they are alarmed by the prospect of U.S. military action. But South Korea has little power to alter the situation, China's willingness to pressure North Korea may be reaching its limit, and its influence over a fiercely independent neighbor resentful of its reliance on Beijing is easily overstated. While Chinese President Xi Jinping fears the prospect of war on the peninsula bringing chaos, a possibly U.S.-aligned regime, and U.S. troops to his doorstep, he also fears that squeezing Pyongyang could precipitate turmoil that could spill over into China.

Without a viable diplomatic offramp, Washington risks cornering itself into military action. Even a precisely targeted attack would likely provoke a North Korean response. While

Pyongyang would think twice before initiating a conventional strike on Seoul, it could take other steps: an attack on a soft South Korean target; an asymmetric strike against U.S. assets on or around the peninsula; or crippling cyberattacks. These might not immediately trigger regional conflict, but they would provoke an unpredictable escalation.

A successful diplomatic initiative ultimately will need to address two competing preoccupations: U.S. and wider international fears of what the Pyongyang regime would do with an advanced nuclear capacity, and the regime's fear of what might happen to it without one. The U.S. government should marry its sanctions and those of the UN to a clear and realistic political goal. An incremental solution could include pauses on North Korean testing of its missile system or weapons, before Pyongyang crosses what the White House sees as a red line; the United States agreeing to less provocative military exercises; and consensus on humanitarian support even as sanctions kick in. That might not satisfy anyone. But at least it would provide the space needed to explore a more durable resolution.

## **2. U.S.-Saudi-Iran Rivalry**

This rivalry will likely eclipse other Middle Eastern fault lines in 2018. It is enabled and exacerbated by three parallel developments: the consolidation of the authority of Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia's assertive crown prince; the Trump administration's more aggressive strategy toward Iran; and the end of the Islamic State's territorial control in Iraq and Syria, which allows Washington and Riyadh to aim the spotlight more firmly on Iran.

The contours of a U.S./Saudi strategy (with an important Israeli assist) are becoming clear. It is based on an overriding assumption that Iran has exploited passive regional and international actors to bolster its position in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Lebanon. Washington and Riyadh seek to re-establish a sense of deterrence by convincing Tehran that it will pay

at least as high a price for its actions as it can inflict on its adversaries.

The strategy seems to involve multiple forms of pressure to contain, squeeze, exhaust, and ultimately push back Iran. It has an economic dimension (via U.S. sanctions); a diplomatic one (witness vocal U.S. and Saudi denunciations of Iran's regional behavior and Riyadh's ham-handed attempt to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation); and a military one (so far exerted principally by Saudi Arabia in Yemen and by Israel in Syria).

Whether it will work is another question. Although recent protests in Iran have introduced a new and unpredictable variable, Tehran and its partners still appear to be in a strong position. The Bashar al-Assad regime, backed by Russian air power, is prevailing in Syria. Across Iraq, Iran-linked Shiite militias are entrenching themselves in state institutions. In Yemen, Tehran's relatively small investment in backing the Houthis has helped them weather the Saudi-led campaign and even launch missiles of unprecedented range and accuracy into Saudi territory.

Despite demonstrating its resolve to confront Iran and its partners, Riyadh has been unable to alter the balance of power. Forcing Hariri's resignation backfired, not just because he later withdrew it, but also because all of Lebanon united against the move and Hariri then inched closer to Lebanese President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah. In Yemen, Riyadh turned the Houthis and former President Ali Abdullah Saleh against each other, but in doing so further fragmented the country and complicated the search for a settlement and a face-saving Saudi exit from a war that is enormously costly not only to Yemenis but also to Riyadh's international standing. The Trump administration confronts similar obstacles. Thus far its belligerence, refusal to certify the nuclear deal, threats of new sanctions, and launching of several strikes at and near regime targets in Syria have done little to reverse Tehran's reach.

With so many flashpoints, and so little diplomacy, the risk of an escalatory cycle is

great: Any move – new U.S. sanctions that Iran would see as violating the nuclear deal; a Houthi missile strike hitting Riyadh or Abu Dhabi, for which Washington and Riyadh would hold Tehran responsible; or an Israeli strike in Syria that kills Iranians – could trigger a broader confrontation.

### **3. The Rohingya Crisis: Myanmar and Bangladesh**

Myanmar's Rohingya crisis has entered a dangerous new phase, threatening Myanmar's hard-won democratic transition, its stability, and that of Bangladesh and the region as a whole.

An August attack by the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army (ARSA), a militant group in Myanmar's Rakhine state, prompted a brutal and indiscriminate military response targeting the long-mistreated Muslim Rohingya community. That assault led to a massive refugee exodus, with at least 655,000 Rohingya fleeing for Bangladesh. The UN called the operation a "textbook example" of ethnic cleansing. The government has heavily restricted humanitarian aid to the area, and international goodwill toward Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's Nobel Peace Prize-winning state counsellor, has dissipated. Her government retains its hard-line stance toward the Rohingya and resists concessions on even immediate humanitarian issues. In this, it has the support of the population, which has embraced the Buddhist nationalist and anti-Rohingya rhetoric disseminated through state and social media.

Pressure from the UN Security Council is critical, and Western governments are moving toward targeted sanctions, which are a key signal that such actions cannot go unpunished. Unfortunately, these sanctions are unlikely to have a significant positive impact on Myanmar's policies. The focus is rightly on the right of refugees to return in a voluntary, safe and dignified manner. In reality, however, and notwithstanding a late-November Bangladesh/Myanmar repatriation agreement, the refugees will not return unless Myanmar restores

security for all communities, grants the Rohingya freedom of movement as well as access to services and other rights, and allows humanitarian and refugee agencies unfettered access.

While publicly, Bangladesh's government is trying to persuade Myanmar to take the refugees back, privately it acknowledges the hopelessness of that endeavor. It has neither defined policies nor taken operational decisions on how to manage more than a million Rohingya in its southeast, along the Myanmar border, in the medium- to long-term. International funding for an under-resourced emergency operation will run out in February. All this – indeed, the very presence of a large population of stateless refugees – creates enormous dangers for Bangladesh. Conflict between refugees and a host community that is heavily outnumbered in parts of the southeast and faces rising prices and falling wages is an immediate risk. The refugees' presence also could be used to stoke communal conflict or aggravate political divisions ahead of elections expected in late 2018.

There are risks, too, for Myanmar. ARSA could regroup. It or even transnational groups exploiting the Rohingya cause or recruiting among the displaced could launch cross-border attacks, escalating both Muslim-Buddhist tension in Rakhine state and friction between Myanmar and Bangladesh. Any attack outside Rakhine would provoke broader Buddhist-Muslim tension and violence across the country. Acknowledging the crisis, implementing recommendations of the Kofi Annan-led Advisory Commission on Rakhine State, and disavowing divisive narratives would put the Myanmar government – and its people – on a better path.

### **4. Yemen**

With 8 million people on the brink of famine, 1 million declared cholera cases, and over 3 million internally displaced persons, the Yemen war could escalate further in 2018. After a period of rising tensions, dueling rallies, and armed assaults, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh announced in December that his General

People's Congress was abandoning its partnership with the Houthis in favor of the Saudi-led coalition. Saleh paid for it with his life; he was killed immediately by his erstwhile partners.

Saudi Arabia and its allies – believing that the Houthi/General People's Congress split opens new opportunities and still convinced a military solution exists – will likely intensify their campaign at a huge cost to civilians. Iran will keep finding ample opportunity to keep the Saudis bogged down, and the more anarchic Yemen's north becomes, the more likely that violence is to bleed across the border. The Houthis will continue to take the fight to the Saudi homefront, firing missiles toward Riyadh and threatening other Gulf states.

Negotiations, already a distant prospect, have become more complicated. The Houthis, feeling simultaneously emboldened and embattled, could adopt a more uncompromising stance. The General People's Congress, a pragmatic centrist party, could fragment further. The south is divided, owing partly to the widening rift between forces loyal to Yemeni President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi and southern separatists backed by the United Arab Emirates.

There are signs of mounting U.S. discomfort with the indiscriminate Saudi bombardment and the blockade of Houthi-controlled territories. But the Trump administration's belligerent rhetoric toward Iran encourages all the wrong tendencies in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia and its allies should instead lift the blockade of Yemen and reopen civilian airports. Politically, there should be a new Security Council resolution providing for a balanced settlement. The Saudis are loath to concede anything to a group they consider an Iranian proxy, but were they to embrace a realistic peace initiative, the onus would shift to the Houthis to accept it.

## 5. Afghanistan

The War in Afghanistan looks set to intensify in 2018. The United States' new Afghanistan strategy raises the tempo of operations against the Taliban insurgency, with more U.S. forces,

fiercer U.S. airstrikes, and more aggressive ground offensives by Afghan forces. The aim, according to senior officials, is to halt the Taliban's momentum and, eventually, force it into a political settlement. For now, though, the strategy is almost exclusively military.

This strategy faces serious obstacles. While hitting the Taliban harder might bring tactical gains, it is unlikely to change the war's course or the incentives of a locally rooted and potent insurgency. The Taliban currently controls or is contesting more territory than at any time since 2001; it is better equipped and, even if pressured through conventional fighting, it would retain the ability to mount spectacular urban attacks that erode confidence in the government. Besides, between 2009 and 2012, the Taliban withstood more than 100,000 U.S. troops.

Military leaders contend that this time will be different because Trump, unlike Obama, has not set a withdrawal date. That argument holds little water. It also misreads the insurgency: Battlefield losses in the past have not impacted Taliban leaders' willingness to negotiate. Forthcoming Afghan elections (a parliamentary poll is slated for July 2018; a presidential vote is due in 2019) will suck oxygen from the military campaign. Every vote since 2004 has ignited some form of crisis, and political discord today is particularly severe, with President Ashraf Ghani accused by his critics of monopolizing power in the hands of a few advisors.

The strategy also underplays regional shifts. Thus far, U.S. regional diplomacy has centered on pressuring Pakistan; yet the calculations that motivate Islamabad's support for the insurgency are unlikely to change. The Taliban also now enjoys ties to Iran and Russia, which claim to view it as a bulwark against an Islamic State branch in Afghanistan that is small but resilient – and also capable of mounting high-profile attacks. Washington's militarized approach and diminished diplomacy risk signaling to those countries that it seeks not to stabilize and leave Afghanistan but to maintain a military presence. Given that they are likely

to perceive such a presence as a threat to their own interests, it could lead them to increase support for insurgents. Nor does U.S. diplomacy on Afghanistan currently involve China, whose increasing clout in parts of South Asia will make it critical to any settlement.

It is true that demonstrating sustained U.S. support might reinforce the morale of the Afghan Army; a precipitous withdrawal, in contrast, could trigger chaos. But as the battlefield tempo increases, the Trump administration should keep lines of communication to the insurgency open and explore the contours of a settlement with Afghanistan's neighbors and other regional powers, however slim prospects currently appear. U.S. allies in Afghanistan should push for a greater diplomatic political component to the U.S. strategy. As it stands, that strategy sets the stage for more violence while closing avenues for de-escalation. Afghan civilians will pay the price.

## 6. Syria

After nearly seven years of war, President Bashar al-Assad's regime has the upper hand, thanks largely to Iranian and Russian backing. But the fighting is not over. Large swaths of the country remain outside regime control, regional and international powers disagree on a settlement, and Syria is an arena for the rivalry between Iran and its enemies. As the Islamic State is ousted from the east, prospects for escalation elsewhere will increase.

In eastern Syria, rival campaigns by pro-regime forces (supported by Iran-backed militias and Russian airpower) and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (the SDF, backed by the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition), have forced an Islamic State retreat. In Syria and Iraq, Islamic State remnants have retreated into the desert to await new opportunities.

For the regime and the SDF, the fight against the Islamic State was a means to an end. The two aimed to capture territory and resources, but also to build on those gains – the regime by consolidating control; the Kurds by pressing for maximal autonomy. Thus far,

the two sides mostly have avoided confrontation. With the Islamic State gone, the risks will increase.

The east is also perilous due to wider U.S.-Iran rivalry and the close proximity of these rival forces. Iranian gains, particularly the corridor linking regime-held parts of Syria to government-controlled Iraq, could provoke the U.S. to attempt to block what it views as a dangerous land bridge from Iran to the Mediterranean. Iran might target U.S. forces to retaliate against U.S. actions elsewhere or to push the United States out altogether.

In the southwest, Israel could view Iran-backed militias operating on and near the Golan Heights as a direct threat and take military action to push them back. Whether Moscow can prevent any Iranian or Hezbollah presence there, as it has pledged to do, is unclear. Israel may take matters into its own hands, striking Iran-allied forces. That pattern – prodding by Iran, pushback by Israel – could last for some time. But a wider confrontation is only one miscalculation away and could quickly spread beyond Syria, to Lebanon.

One of the gravest immediate dangers, however, is the possibility of an offensive by the Assad regime in Syria's northwest, where rebel-held areas are home to some 2 million Syrians and into which Turkey has deployed military observers as part of a de-escalation deal with Iran and Russia. Regime and allied forces appear to have shifted some attention from the east to those areas, placing that deal under stress. A regime offensive in the northwest could provoke massive destruction and displacement.

## 7. The Sahel

Weak states across the Sahel region are struggling to manage an overlapping mix of inter-communal conflict, jihadi violence, and fighting over smuggling routes. Their leaders' predation and militarized responses often make things worse.

Mali's 2012 crisis – which saw the Malian army routed from the country's north, a coup

that overthrew the government, and jihadis holding northern towns for almost a year – illustrates how quickly things can unravel. Since then, implementation of a peace deal that aimed to end that crisis has stalled, while instability has spread from the north to Mali's central region as well as parts of neighboring Niger and Burkina Faso.

Dynamics in each place are local, but governments' lack of authority and their inability to stem – and, at times, their frequent contribution to – violence is a common theme. Weapons that flooded the region as Libya collapsed after Muammar al-Qaddafi's overthrow have made local quarrels deadlier. The instability has opened a rich vein for jihadis, who piggy-back on intercommunal conflict or use Islam to frame struggles against traditional authorities.

As the situation has degenerated, the regional and international response has focused excessively on military solutions. Europeans in particular view the region as a threat to their own safety and a source of migration and terrorism. In late 2017, a new French-backed force known as the G5 Sahel – comprising troops from Mali, Niger, Chad, Burkina Faso, and Mauritania – prepared to deploy into a field already crowded by France's own counterterrorism operations, U.S. Special Forces, and UN peacekeepers. While military action must play a part in reducing jihadis' influence, the G5 force raises more questions than it answers. It lacks a clear definition of the enemy, instead envisaging operations against an array of jihadis, traffickers, and other criminals. Disrupting smuggling in regions where that business represents the backbone of local economies could alienate communities. Regional leaders also appear likely to misuse military aid to shore up their own power.

To avoid further deterioration, military efforts must be accompanied by a political strategy that rests on winning the support of local populations and defusing rather than aggravating local disputes. Opening or restoring lines of communication with some militant

leaders should not be ruled out, if doing so can help diminish violence.

## **8. Democratic Republic of Congo**

President Joseph Kabila's determination to hold on to power threatens to escalate the crisis in Congo and a humanitarian emergency that is already among the world's worst. At the end of 2016, the Saint Sylvester agreement appeared to offer a way out, requiring elections by the end of 2017, after which Kabila would leave power (his second and, according to the Congolese Constitution, final term in office should have ended December 2016). Over the past year, however, his regime has backtracked, exploiting the Congolese opposition's disarray and waning international attention and reneging on a power-sharing deal. In November, the election commission announced a new calendar – with a vote at the end of 2018, extending Kabila's rule for at least another year.

The most likely course in 2018 is gradual deterioration. But there are worse scenarios. As the regime clamps down, fails to secure parts of the country, and stokes instability in others, the risk of a steeper descent into chaos remains – with grave regional implications.

There are already troubling signs. Popular discontent raises the risk of unrest in urban centers; in recent days, the violent dispersal of protesters in Kinshasa and other towns has left several people dead. Elsewhere, local militias plague several provinces. Fighting over the past year in the Kasai region has reportedly left more than 3,000 dead, and the conflict in the country's east claims dozens of lives each month.

International engagement has been lackluster. Disagreements between Africa and the West do not help: Western powers are more critical and have sanctioned some of Kabila's entourage, and African leaders and regional organizations are reluctant to criticize the regime openly, even as some recognize the dangers behind closed doors. Only more active, forceful, and united diplomacy – and ideally a more engaged Congolese opposition – stand a chance

of nudging Kabila toward a peaceful transition. The Saint Sylvester principles (credible elections, no third term for Kabila, an opening of political space, and respect for human rights) still offer the best route out of the crisis.

## 9. Ukraine

The conflict in eastern Ukraine has claimed over 10,000 lives and constitutes a grave ongoing humanitarian crisis. While it persists, relations between Russia and the West are unlikely to improve. Separatist-held areas are dysfunctional and dependent on Moscow. In other areas of Ukraine, mounting anger at corruption and the 2015 Minsk II agreement, which Russia and Ukraine's Western allies insist is the path to resolve the conflict, creates new challenges.

Implementation of that agreement has stalled: Moscow points to Kiev's failure to carry out the Minsk agreement's political provisions, including devolving power to separatist-held areas once they are reintegrated into Ukraine; Kiev argues it cannot do so while Russian interference and insecurity in those areas persist. Both sides continue to exchange fire across the line dividing Ukrainian troops from separatist and Russian forces.

Yet the east is not the whole story. The Ukrainian state remains fragile even outside areas where Moscow interferes directly. President Petro Poroshenko's government has not addressed the systemic corruption at the root of many of the country's problems. Many Ukrainians are losing faith in laws, institutions, and elites. Anger at the Minsk agreement, which Ukrainians see as a concession to separatists and Moscow, is growing, even among reformists.

Given the diplomatic deadlock, Russia's circulation of a draft UN Security Council resolution proposing peacekeepers for Ukraine in September 2017 came as a surprise. There are good reasons to suspect Russia's intentions. Despite the high costs of its entanglement, little suggests it intends to loosen its grip on eastern Ukraine. The lightly armed force it proposed, whose mandate would include only providing

security to Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe monitors, would more likely freeze the conflict than resolve it.

Yet Moscow's proposal opens a window for Kiev and its Western allies to explore how peacekeepers might secure not only the line of separation but also the Ukraine-Russia border, and to create conditions for local elections and the reintegration of separatist-held areas. They should, however, factor in growing animosity toward the Minsk agreement. Europe's involvement is essential for progress on peacekeeping negotiations and to promote a more measured debate in Ukraine that can halt the nationalist backlash against the Minsk agreement.

## 10. Venezuela

Venezuela took yet another turn for the worse in 2017, as President Nicolás Maduro's government ran the country further into the ground while strengthening its political grip. The opposition has imploded. Prospects for a peaceful restoration of democracy appear ever slimmer. But with the economy in free fall, Maduro faces enormous challenges. Expect the humanitarian crisis to deepen in 2018 as GDP continues to contract.

In late November, Venezuela defaulted on part of its international debt. Sanctions will make debt restructuring nearly impossible. Increasing Russian support is unlikely to suffice, while China appears reluctant to bail Maduro out. A default could provoke the seizure of Venezuelan assets abroad, crippling the oil trade that accounts for 95 percent of the country's export earnings.

Street demonstrations and clashes that killed over 120 people between April and July subsided after the July election of a National Constituent Assembly composed entirely of government allies. Subsequent polls for state governors and mayors led to major opposition losses amid disputes over whether to participate. But food shortages, a collapsed health system, and spiraling violent crime mean conditions for unrest persist.

While opposition politicians look to the presidential vote, due by late 2018, as an opportunity and entry point for foreign engagement, the government is unlikely to permit a credible vote. It might call early polls, catch its opponents unprepared, and deploy the same voter suppression tactics it has used to win local and regional elections. If the opposition begins to show signs of recovery, Maduro might seek to avoid elections altogether by claiming that external threats warrant a state of emergency. A less probable scenario is that the ruling party splits over who will succeed Maduro; without a formal mechanism, the military would be the likely arbiter. Meanwhile, the

weak Venezuelan state will continue to provide a haven for criminal networks and opportunities for money laundering, drug trafficking, and people smuggling, further disquieting Venezuela's neighbors.

The prognosis for 2018 is further deterioration, humanitarian emergency, and an increased exodus of Venezuelans. Sustained domestic and international pressure – as well as guarantees of future immunity – will be required to push the government toward credible presidential elections.