Trouble spots to watch in 2018

Illustration: Eric Lobbecke

DAVID KILCULLEN
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR FOR MILITARY AFFAIRS

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The year just ending was a complicated one, with increased tension on the Korean peninsula, the territorial collapse of Islamic State’s “caliphate”, a realignment of traditional relationships across the Middle East, a spate of lone-wolf terror attacks in Western cities and controversy over Russian interference in last year’s US election. Looking ahead, the key conflicts to watch next year will include many of those that dominated this year. But the next 12 months also will bring fresh risks.

Eastern Europe

The first conflict to flare next year may be Ukraine. Russian troop movements, cyberattacks and increased subversion in western Ukraine (including assassinations and kidnappings targeting politicians in Kiev) suggest the conflict is about to enter another “hot” phase. Moscow withdrew its representatives from a ceasefire-monitoring body late this month and Kremlin-sponsored media has been accusing Ukrainian forces of gearing up for a major push in January-February — a tactic these outlets previously have used to justify Russia’s own planned offensives.
US President Donald Trump’s recent decision to supply Ukraine with Javelin anti-tank missiles was partly a response to this threat. Canada also approved arms sales to Ukraine, while several NATO countries expressed support for enhanced assistance. The 2018 US defence budget, signed by Trump in mid-December, includes $US350 million ($450m) in military aid to Ukraine.

All this creates an incentive for Russia to move quickly in the new year, before the new weapons arrive and increased military assistance can take effect.

Increased conflict risk in Ukraine brings increased risk of direct confrontation between Russian and NATO forces. In the past year, Russia has stationed nuclear-capable Iskander missiles and advanced S-400 air defence systems in its Baltic enclave of Kaliningrad, and it has conducted extensive military exercises designed to intimidate Ukraine, the Baltic states and Scandinavian countries.

For its part, NATO positioned combat troops and heavy equipment in several of Ukraine’s neighbours and deployed trainers and advisers inside Ukraine.

This brings NATO and Russian troops into closer proximity than before, raising the likelihood and potential impact of a clash in the coming year.

**Northeast Asia**

The next area to watch is North Korea, which remains the most dangerous potential state-based conflict for the year ahead, and where the risk of war will spike in March, when most analysts expect Pyongyang will have successfully miniaturised a nuclear warhead capable of being mounted on its new, long-range missiles.

Russia is increasingly replacing China as Pyongyang’s main backer — it increased trade with North Korea by 73 per cent during the first few months of this year, then provided essential fuel imports, helping reduce the impact of sanctions against North Korea. Russia has become Pyongyang’s main defender on the UN Security Council, even as the Chinese grow increasingly exasperated with leader Kim Jong-un’s antics.

Also in March, the US will conduct its annual military exercises with South Korea, which typically bring condemnation from China and Russia as well as retaliation from the North in the form of shelling or naval and air incursions along the demilitarised zone.

This coming year, on the back of inflammatory tit-for-tat rhetoric between Kim and Trump, North Korea’s new missiles will give it extra means of retaliation, and some analysts expect Pyongyang to mount a demonstration — firing a missile on a low trajectory towards US or Japanese territory, or even launching a live nuclear-tipped missile into a remote ocean area (something no country has done since 1980).

This would demonstrate North Korea’s ability to strike the US with a nuclear missile, a threat that US leaders repeatedly have vowed to prevent.

In response, or as a preventive measure, a limited American non-nuclear strike against North Korea — from bases in Japan or Guam, or using carrier-based aircraft operating from the seas
around the Korean peninsula, where an unprecedented three US Navy carrier battle groups are deployed — is certainly possible, but this would carry the risk of catastrophic escalation, and most analysts consider it unlikely.

More probable would be enhancements to missile defences and the forward deployment of forces, both by the US and a rearming Japan, which is positioning military garrisons and air defences on its outlying islands. These Japanese moves are seen as threatening in China, particularly since they include the placement of a military garrison and missile battery on islands that are disputed between China and Japan.

All this has led experienced observers — including former NATO military chief Admiral James Stavridis and John Brennan (Barack Obama’s CIA director) — to warn of increased risk across Northeast Asia in the year ahead.

**US-China rivalry**

The US is still the main global player but, as numerous analysts have pointed out, its influence is clearly declining, especially in the Asia-Pacific.

Given the painfully slow recovery in the US following the 2008 financial crisis and the tunnel vision on terrorism that distracted Washington while rival states filled the vacuum, American strategic decline has been a long time coming.

This means, irrespective of who occupies the Oval Office, diminished American influence will be a factor for the foreseeable future. The biggest beneficiary in our region, as Australian National University professor of strategic studies Hugh White and the authors of Australia’s new foreign policy white paper recently argued, will be China.

![A China-controlled island in the Spratlys.](image)
China’s rise — again, far from new but increasingly obvious — was one of the key themes this year. This was assisted by Trump who, despite campaigning on anti-China trade protectionism, quickly succumbed to the charm offensive of Chinese President Xi Jinping. Via the usual mixed messages — seeming to outsource North Korea to Beijing, then threatening sanctions on Chinese firms dealing with Pyongyang, then conducting a cordial state visit to China that touted billions of dollars in deals (little of which materialised) before describing China as a “strategic competitor” and provoking confrontation over ship visits to Taiwan — Trump’s inconstancy allowed Xi to step into the gap on trade, climate and -regional security.

There are early signs of potential US trade moves against China but the Trump administration’s record of inconsistency suggests that external events (notably North Korea’s nuclear timetable) rather than deliberate policy will drive the relationship in the coming year.

In many areas, including terrorism and North Korean missiles (which China opposes as much as the US) there is clear potential for co-operation.

Expect to see China and Russia hunting in a pack on an increasing range of issues that they both see as an opportunity to bog down the US and bolster their own great power aspirations.

Meanwhile, new Chinese bases in Africa and South Asia, placement of missiles and fortifications on man-made islands, deployments to Africa and Europe, joint manoeuvres with Russia (including amphibious power projection exercises) and missile drills against targets mimicking US systems in South Korea underline China’s increasingly assertive claims of military status. The concern for Australia is how to manage — beyond Chinese commercial and, allegedly, political penetration of Australian society — the fundamental challenge of having our strongest security relationship with a declining Western power and our closest economic relationship with a rising rival.

**Afghanistan**

By April, Afghanistan also is likely to heat up. Because of its harsh climate, fighting in Afghanistan has always had a seasonal quality, with militants typically focusing on urban terrorist attacks in winter before turning to the opium harvest, then launching a springtime “fighting season” of guerilla offensives in April. In recent years there has been less of a winter lull and fighting has started earlier each year, while Taliban fighters (along with terrorists from Islamic State) have been increasingly aggressive in targeting major cities such as Kabul, where a series of bombings killed hundreds this year.

The guerillas also have broadened their rural influence, where some analysts estimate they control or contest up to 45 per cent of the countryside. Between the stronger rural insurgency and increasingly deadly urban attacks, next year’s fighting season looks likely to be the most intense since Obama’s withdrawal of US and NATO forces at the end of 2014.

Trump’s new Afghanistan strategy, announced in August, was designed to counter the growing threat. It already has brought a modest increase in US airstrikes across the country, as well as raids by special forces against Taliban and Islamic State cells, but these are expected to rise significantly as the 2018 campaign begins.
This past week a US drone strike in Pakistan’s tribal areas killed a leader of the Haqqani network (a group associated with the Taliban and allegedly backed by factions within Pakistan’s intelligence service).

That strike probably was conducted by the CIA — which, under its director Mike Pompeo, has been particularly active in launching paramilitary activities to counter the Taliban and other insurgent threats. However, we also are likely to see more strikes by US Air Force drones and manned aircraft next year, as the collapse of Islamic State’s so-called caliphate in Syria and Iraq frees up resources for Afghanistan.

**Iraq and Syria**

As the caliphate disappears, the main conflict risk in Iraq and Syria next year will centre on disputes over control of the territory recaptured from Islamic State. In what some analysts have dubbed the “war after ISIS” (an acronym for Islamic State), Iraqi and Kurdish forces clashed over disputed territory late this year and tensions remain high between the Shia-led Iraqi government, Iranian-backed Shia militia groups in Iraq and the Sunni-majority population in newly recaptured areas.

At the same time, Islamic State is far from defeated. If anything, its loss of territory simply has forced the group — which previously (and unwisely) took on modern nation-states in open combat with tanks and artillery, and was soundly defeated for its trouble — away from conventional warfare and back into a more sustainable guerilla mode.

The organisation has gone underground, dispersing into small cells to regenerate, as it has done multiple times before. We can expect more attacks and a stabilisation challenge across the whole territory of the former caliphate through the year and well into the future.

Even as Islamic State drops into recovery mode, other groups — notably Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, the al-Qa’ida affiliate in Syria — are hitting their stride and will pose an increased threat next year. Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is vastly more sophisticated than Islamic State ever was: it has all the political savvy and social and governance programs of pseudo-states such as Hezbollah or Hamas, all the military prowess of Islamic State, significant popular support and control of almost an entire province in northwest Syria.

Headed by Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, a Syrian who once led the Nineveh branch of al-Qa’ida in Iraq, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham has learned fast. The group has pursued partnerships with like-minded groups, presented a reasonable media face and publicly rejected the extreme brutality of Islamic State. It has exploited the coalition’s single-minded focus on Islamic State to carve out territory in the white space between the Assad regime and the collapsing caliphate.

Hayat Tahrir al-Sham may or may not intend to mount operations into nearby Europe but its capacity and the land border it shares with NATO through Turkey mean it can pose a serious threat the moment it decides to do so. We can expect to hear more of this group, known as HTS, next year, even as the focus that sustained the coalition against Islamic State starts to fray amid political and military disputes over stabilising Iraq and Syria.
Sahel region, Africa

While the above conflicts — Ukraine, North Korea, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria — are the same ones that dominated last year, the coming 12 months will bring new threats in less familiar places. One to watch in the next few months will be Ethiopia, which has been in an increasingly tense stand-off with Egypt over the Great Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project, a hydro-electric scheme that includes a massive dam across the Blue Nile. The dam is about 65 per cent completed, causing consternation in Egypt over the loss of the water traditionally relied on for agriculture and industry (as well as for drinking) in the Nile Delta.

Late this year, rumours of an impending Egyptian airstrike against the GERD site brought concern in Ethiopia, after negotiators walked out of talks brokered by the African Union. In the event, a spate of terrorist attacks within Egypt — including a horrific Islamic State assault on a Sufi mosque that killed 311 people in the country’s worst terrorist attack, and ambushes of police — forced Cairo to focus on internal threats, putting external military action on hold. But tension will increase as the dam nears completion.

While a direct strike against GERD remains possible, many Africa analysts expect Ethiopia and Egypt to oppose each other in less direct ways: via sponsorship of separatist groups in each other’s territory or through proxy conflict in South Sudan.

Proxy war is only one of several drivers for increased conflict across Africa next year. Others include a spike in activity by Boko Haram, the militant group allied with Islamic State that originated in northeast Nigeria but now also operates in Niger, northern Cameroon and Chad.

After being fought almost to a standstill by Nigerian military operations in 2016-17, the group received a much-needed injection of cash in May when it was paid €3 million to release 103 of the 276 schoolgirls it had kidnapped from the town of Chibok in 2014. The ransom has since funded a string of suicide bombings and other operations, and the next year is likely to bring increased conflict — within Nigeria and in Niger and Chad, both of which are contributing members to a new joint counter-terrorism force that includes troops from five African nations and is funded and supported by France, the US and United Arab Emirates.

The new G5 Sahel Joint Force is not primarily targeted against Boko Haram; it will operate across the wider Sahel region that includes Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad, and target a range of insurgent and terrorist groups, many linked to Islamic State or al-Qa’ida. American drones and manned aircraft are increasing their presence in the region and US advisers are already deployed in Niger (where four US soldiers were killed in an ambush in October, close to the Niger-Mali border).

The combination of public pressure on Trump to respond to that ambush, the resurgent threat from Boko Haram and fears of a return of Islamic State fighters from the collapsing caliphate are all driving a rise in conflict that will be felt in the new year.

Elsewhere in Africa, the Zimbabwean military’s overthrow of Robert Mugabe, rising terrorist activity in the Great Lakes region (around Uganda, Burundi and Rwanda) and a sharp increase in violence in Somalia — where 500 people were killed in mid-October in the worst al-Shabab bombing and one of the worst global terrorist attacks since 9/11 — will bring
greater conflict in the coming months. Somalia is already the focus of intensified US counter-terrorism and efforts there are expected to increase next year.

**Non-ideological terror**

In the broader field of terrorism, we can expect, unfortunately, that the spate of lone-wolf attacks — more accurately, jihadist-inspired attacks carried out by individuals with little or no connection to terrorist organisations — will intensify.

A particularly worrying theme this year, which is likely to continue through the coming year and beyond, is the way terrorist techniques have become decoupled from ideology, making threats harder to predict, detect and counter. The attack on a Manila casino in June that killed 36 followed a jihadist playbook but turned out to be unrelated to any ideology — the perpetrator was an embittered, indebted gambler who launched a terrorist-style assault purely for revenge.

Worse, the gunman who massacred 58 and wounded 546 in Las Vegas in October has been linked to no known motive, though his methods were pioneered by jihadists in Mumbai and Bali. And numerous low-tech attacks using knives, vehicles or improvised explosives to target crowded public places have been linked only loosely to any terrorist group — despite Islamic State’s implausible claims of attacks it clearly knew nothing about ahead of time.

The year was book-ended by two horrific vehicle attacks in Melbourne that followed the exact methodology promoted by Islamic State, and between them killed six and injured more than 40 people, but had no direct connection to the group.

In effect, techniques pioneered by jihadists are now available to anyone with an internet connection, regardless of ideology, and undoubtedly we will see more of these in the year ahead.
The New Cold War

A final set of risks to consider — though in the realm of political or hybrid conflict, rather than warfare or terrorism — is renewed Russian interference in Western politics in the coming year.

More than 12 months after Trump’s election, there’s still no clear evidence of collusion between his campaign and the Kremlin. But there is very clear evidence of a Russian operation to undermine Hillary Clinton, manipulate US law enforcement, polarise American politics and undermine confidence in the media, political parties and government institutions.

For a modest investment, Russian intelligence services and their hacker accomplices succeeded (surely beyond their expectations) in creating enduring disarray. Russia has yet to suffer any significant consequences for its actions beyond those already imposed after the invasion of Crimea in 2014, leading some analysts to expect renewed efforts to disrupt next year’s US mid-term elections by hacking voting systems, spreading disinformation and selectively leaking damaging material against specific candidates.

Given the other areas of American conflict with Russia — in Ukraine, increasingly in North Korea and across the Middle East — these continuing influence operations are likely to make it harder to handle potential US-Russian conflicts next year.

At the same time, Moscow’s interference in European elections and in Catalonia’s independence vote, Russia’s attempt to build a Moscow-Tehran-Ankara coalition to stabilise Syria (which involves enmeshing NATO member Turkey in a competing set of geopolitical alignments) and continuing influence operations in the Balkans and Hungary will give substance to the notion of a new Cold War next year.

As someone whose day job involves thinking about worst-case scenarios, I’ll be happy to be proved wrong about some or all of these negative scenarios, as I undoubtedly will. Still, even on the best possible forecast, with this number of potential conflicts to watch, the year ahead of us is likely to be at least as complex and conflicted as this year.