

Global powers in 2020 and beyond



Multiple domestic factors appear set to continue to impact foreign interactions between the world's major powers this year, writes
Mohamed Fayez Farahat

With domestic shifts in the US, Russia, China and the European Union impacting on the international order, forecasts about what the year could bring centre on two main conclusions.

The first has to do with the varying outcomes of the influence of domestic affairs on the foreign policy course adopted from one country to another. Preparing for elections this year, the US, for example, is focusing on its domestic affairs more than foreign policy issues. Most probably, US foreign policy will be employed to serve the elections, even if this means being involved in limited foreign military operations.

In the case of China, domestic issues tend to reflect in a conciliatory tone in its foreign policy, as long as the matter is not related to sovereign issues (Taiwan, the South China Sea). Although there has been a change in China's foreign course during the tenure of President Xi Jinping,

gradual transformation remains a major feature of Chinese foreign policy, along with the concern to secure the international conditions necessary to protect China's ascension.

When it comes to the European Union, there is a host of domestic issues affecting its foreign policy, such as the rise of the populist right, increased polarisation and tensions between regions and major cities benefiting from or harmed by globalisation, the rising risk of secession, especially in Spain following Brexit, as well as varying military spending and financial policies. These issues tend to restrain the foreign performance of the European Union and end in weak coordination between member countries regarding a number of crucial foreign policy issues, such as the relationship with the US and Russia, the future of NATO and European military coordination.

The second conclusion relates to the pattern of interactions between the four major powers during 2020, as Russian-US relations are expected to become more polarised and confrontational on a wide range of issues, while Russian-European relations may improve due to a combination of factors, including continued European dependence on Russian gas. China's relation with Russia may lead to more coordination and cooperation as long as it does not intensify US-Chinese polarisation. Finally, European-US relations may be further strained by a combination of factors, such as disagreement over how to deal with Russia, and the gas issue.

It is in the light of these two dynamics that expectations can be drawn as to the course of the world's most powerful countries, based on domestic developments in 2019, some of which may continue to reverberate this year.

The US elections: Domestic concerns first



In January 2020, US President Donald Trump began his fourth year in office, the last year of his first term, with presidential elections scheduled for November. Throughout the past three years, Trump has been able to change the face of US domestic affairs, which in turn reflected on US foreign policy.

There are three major domestic shifts that will affect the shape of the US foreign policy in 2020.

A NEW RIGHT WING TAKES SHAPE: When Trump ran for the presidency for the Republicans in 2016, he did not win the support of many leaders. Many Republicans viewed Trump as an outsider and that his ideas did not reflect the traditional body of the political wing he represents. After three years in office, however, Trump managed to control the Republican Party, and his ideas became a major part of his vision for the United States. Over the past three years, the Republicans have witnessed an important ideological transformation, becoming a new right wing different from the traditional right that the party represented for many years.

One of these differences is related to government spending. The ideas and policies of the traditional right were based on fiscal discipline and a reduction in government spending, but Trump's trend has been linked to increased spending and the adoption of a massive infrastructure programme. The traditional right was supportive of ideas related to freedom of trade between countries of the world, while the new right wing adopted what is known as "economic nationalism", which aims to reformulate the rules governing the global economy, as well as protectionist policies.

This is related to the fact that the traditional right wing used to direct its political rhetoric to the upper classes, and businessmen formed a basic aspect of its popular base. Nonetheless, the present right wing is targeting the working class, or "blue collar" Americans, who have historically been inclined towards the left wing. Trump was able to take advantage of their anger at the policies of globalisation and trade liberalisation, and attracted them to vote for him. The new right wing will have a major impact on the domestic and foreign policies of the US.

DEEPENING DOMESTIC POLARISATION: Political polarisation



The year is unlikely to see bold US moves on the international scene as domestic considerations ahead of November's election take priority, writes
Mohamed Kamal

tion has intensified in the US during the past three years, especially with the launch of measures in 2019 to impeach Trump. Democrats have used these measures to achieve a political goal, which is to contribute to Trump's departure from the White House in the upcoming presidential elections, by accusing him of violating the powers of the presidency to achieve private gains, and seeking to destroy institutions and disturb the constitutional balance between the presidency and Congress.

In other words, the Democrats sought to portray Trump as a "dangerous", "reckless" and "untrustworthy" figure to run the state administration. President Trump dealt with his impeachment with a political logic, accusing the Democrats of seeking to "steal the will and voices of

American voters" who legitimately brought him to the White House, and that they (the Democrats) consume all the time of the legislative institution to try to isolate him instead of paying attention to the crucial issues of the people.

In addition, the Democrats' accusations of Trump that he "destroys" the traditions of government and "antagonises" institutions make him more popular in the social base that elected him to achieve these goals.

But regardless of the gains that each party is making, these measures have contributed to deepening the rift between the Republicans and Democrats and exacerbating internal polarisation in the country, which will continue during 2020.

THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION CAMPAIGN: Last year witnessed the beginning of the campaign for the 2020 US presidential election, taking place in November. President Trump has a good chance of being re-elected for a second term due to the improved economic conditions in the country during his tenure, as well as the advantages of being the incumbent president. Historical precedents show that a president rarely loses in his quest to win a second term.

Although Trump is still counting on the popular base that elected him, he did not expand this base, and the elections will ultimately depend on the ability of each candidate to mobilise voters. The Democratic Party managed to mobilise large numbers of voters in the mid-term elections in 2018, which resulted in the Democrats winning a congressional majority. Some are counting on a similar mobilisation campaign that could bring to the helm the Democratic nominee. In any case, the presidential campaign will be the focus of events in 2020.

Based on the aforementioned, 2020 will see less interest in foreign policy affairs in favour of domestic issues that mainly concern the American people. Making a comeback will be the stern subjects of immigration, environmental and climate issues, and the demand for more financial contributions from US allies.

US involvement in major military operations overseas will also be avoided. A new trade agreement is likely to be reached with China, which will keep economic conditions in the US improving. In short, it is election calculations and Trump's pursuit of his base that will drive US foreign policy in 2020.

Russia: Economic and security challenges



Belabouring under US and European sanctions, Russia will continue to focus on domestic issues in 2020, while nonetheless remaining influential in the international domain, writes
Norhan Al-Sheikh

Russia's domestic challenges remain its guiding compass and priority. Prime among these is the demographic composition of the country where youth comprise no more than 10 per cent of the population. This challenge is compounded by the fact that Russia is one of the world's least populous countries in terms of population growth, which affects economic development in the world's largest country.

Related to this are the increasing aspirations of the Russian people, especially the youth, where the communications and information revolution, spurring openness to the outside world, especially to the European Union, has led to a clear change in the needs and aspirations of Russians whose lifestyles, standards of living and welfare were previously unknown. This factor is a pressure point against the Russian government that is trying to fulfill its people's aspirations to win their approval.

This comes at a time when Russia has faced economic difficulties over the past four years as a result of the sharp decline in oil prices, the revenues of which are the backbone of the Russian economy, coupled with the escalation of sanctions by Washington and its allies, especially Europe, which led to a decline in foreign investment flows to Russia. However, 2019 witnessed the relative recovery of the Russian economy, recording positive figures, according to the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF estimated Russia's growth rate at 1.2 per cent, and it is expected to rise to 1.9 per cent in 2020.

In the Global Competitiveness Report 2019, issued by the World Economic Forum, Russia ranked sixth globally out of 141 economies in the market size index, which is one of 12 indicators on which the competitiveness report builds the ranking of world countries. Per capita gross domestic product amounted to around \$11,320.

The country's reserves of gold and foreign exchange increased to \$489.5 billion, while investment recorded a moderate increase compared to the previous year, after reaching its lowest levels in the beginning of 2018. However, the Russian economy did not recover its full strength, and economic performance is still far from being as solid as it was a decade ago. At that time, oil and investment prices hiked, and with it the Russian economy. The growth rate reached seven per cent, and in 2013 Russia ranked third globally in terms of the volume of foreign direct investment.

Security challenges are no less important. On 10 December 2019, the head of the Russian Federal Security Agency, Alexander Portnikov, announced the success of the agency in the fight against

terrorism (which included thwarting in 2019 50 terrorist attacks and dismantling 78 undercover cells affiliated to terrorist organisations). Ten days later, a shooting occurred in front of the headquarters of the agency, in the heart of the capital, Moscow, killing one member of the agency, which brought the elimination of terrorism to the top of Russian priorities.

In light of these challenges, a host of Russian policies, on the domestic and foreign fronts, have emerged in 2020.

Continuing competition and confrontation between Moscow and Washington on a wide range of issues, foremost among which is competition for energy markets, especially the European market, which is the largest and most important market for Russian gas and oil. The shale gas revolution rendered the US a prominent source for exporting liquefied gas to the rest of the world, especially Europe, which is the most important global market for gas, being the closest and most economically profitable to Washington.

Added to this is competition in the arms market and the US's attempt to block Russian deals for what it regards as its traditional markets, and the threat of a renewed arms race in light of US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF), and the ambiguity of the future of the new Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (START) that is due to expire in February 2021.

A marked improvement in Russian-European relations, especially in the wake of the European Union's refusal of US sanctions on the Nord Stream 2

project to transfer Russian gas to Europe, and Germany and Europe's commitment to proceed with the project, confirming the relative independence of the European approach from Washington. This was also reflected in French President Macron's comments about a "new European security structure" in cooperation with Russia, the resumption of French-Russian 2+2 talks after a seven-year hiatus, and the holding of a "Normandy Quad" summit on the Ukrainian crisis between the leaders of Russia, France, Germany and Ukraine on 9 December in Paris, after a hiatus of four years.

Strengthening the Russian-Chinese strategic partnership, supported by the fact that China has become one of the largest Russian gas markets after the opening of the Siberian power line to transfer Russian gas directly to China on 2 December 2019. That is in addition to economic partnership and security and strategic cooperation on the bilateral level, and through collective frameworks, such as BRICS and the Shanghai Organisation, and a coordination of positions on various regional and international issues.

A greater focus on the Gulf, which was reflected in the first Russian-Chinese-Iranian manoeuvres in the northern Indian Ocean and the Sea of Oman in December 2019, and the development of Russian partnerships with Arab Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in light of President Putin's visit to the two countries in October, the signing of the agreement on continuing coordination on oil prices by reducing production to maintain prices within the OPEC+ formula, economic cooperation and attracting Gulf investments to Russia, and technical cooperation in the areas of energy and space.

This coincides with the continuation of high-level strategic cooperation with Iran in all fields within the framework of a Russian approach based on parallelism in Russian policy, and pushing towards a system of collective security in the Gulf that is inclusive of all parties.

Russian policy in the Middle East will adopt the same trends, which include the centralisation of a peaceful settlement to the Syrian crisis through the completion of consensus on the Syrian constitution in preparation for elections, and support for the Syrian army to liberate Idlib from terrorist groups and reclaim control. Russia will also maintain the centrality of its partnership with Egypt in various economic, technical and strategic fields, as well as coordination on regional files, foremost of which is Libya, although Russian interference in the Libyan file will remain cautious and indirect, and in no way will it be the same as in Syria.