

# U.S. Adversaries and Allies Start the Countdown to 2020



There are less than 17 months to go until the 2020 U.S. presidential election. For U.S. President Donald Trump and his reelection prospects, that means expectations are rising for him to deliver results on the past two-and-a-half years of hardball tactics against U.S. adversaries and allies in pursuit of an artful – and evidently still elusive – deal.

For every country that has something massive to gain or (more likely) to lose from the Trump presidency, this is the time to make some big decisions on what to do with that window.

That is if it even is a "window." For the more prudent strategic planners who are wary of polling and cognizant of just how potent political polarization in the United States has grown, this is also the time to prepare contingencies for a scenario in which the Trump era extends by another four years.

## Iran Opts for Confrontation Over Negotiation

Trump believed that a maximum pressure sanctions campaign would force Iran back to the negotiating table, allowing him to claim that he had secured a better and more comprehensive nuclear deal than former President Barack Obama. Short of that outcome, the sanctions pressure on Iran would be so great that anti-regime protests would spread across the Islamic republic, fueling a popular revolt capable of replacing the regime with a government friendlier to U.S. interests. Most importantly, Trump assumed that this strategy would avoid a military outcome, allowing him to stay true to his campaign promise that he would end costly U.S. wars in the Islamic world.

But Tehran is not waiting around for 2020. Iran is not yet experiencing widespread unrest and the government sees no point in entering a negotiation with the Trump White House that would entail making heavy concessions on matters critical to its defense and national sovereignty. Instead, Iran is pushing back aggressively while it can still operate from a position of relative strength at home. Iran's defiant rhetoric matches the boldness of its actions, from shooting down a U.S. drone to attacking oil tankers near the Strait of Hormuz to resuming its nuclear activity to encouraging a spike in proxy attacks in Iraq. This suggests that Iran has already calculated the cost [1] of pushing the United States toward a limited strike. But even a limited strike scenario can spiral quickly.

That leaves Trump in extreme denial that his Iran strategy is failing spectacularly and forcing him into meetings where his joint chiefs are presenting him with military options on how to respond. After attributing the drone shootdown to a "mistake" by some "loose and stupid" general and describing the tanker attacks as "very minor," the U.S. commander in chief apparently got cold feet in following through with a limited strike late on June 20. But the reckoning of Trump's Iran's strategy has arrived. Trump's best shot at avoiding war may be to try and spin up a de-confliction channel through third-party mediators and frame it as the start to "the negotiation" that he had been seeking all along. But that requires Tehran to play along. And Iran does not seem interested in doing Trump any political favors in the lead-up to 2020, especially if there is no reason to expect meaningful sanctions relief. Given the cycle of retaliation underway, the White House faces a pressing need to build a military deterrence against further Iranian escalation. A plan to establish military deterrence is likely to still entail a limited military strike against Iran.

## Drawing New Lines in the U.S.-China Negotiation

Chinese President Xi Jinping has been playing hard to get ever since U.S.-China trade talks unraveled at the end of April, but has decided to accept an invitation to sit down with Trump at the June 28-29 G-20 summit in Osaka, Japan. Trump badly wants to demonstrate that he is the only president who has been willing to stand up to Beijing and negotiate a comprehensive deal that fundamentally alters China's behavior while previous presidents and corporate executives cowered at the thought of the economic disruption that would come with upsetting Beijing.

Unlike his risky Iran campaign, Trump's attempt to hold China accountable for its trade abuses has drawn broader support. At the same time, the president's heavy reliance on tariffs to shape and enforce a trade deal means that any negotiation will also draw heavy bilateral scrutiny to make sure all that pain and disruption from the trade war was worth it.

In trying to beef up and enforce the draft deal, the White House evidently trampled over China's economic sovereignty to the point that now Beijing's calculation seems to have fundamentally shifted. China is not about to make heavy trade concessions in exchange for a minimal and gradual easing of tariffs. Nor is China going to undermine its own competitiveness by limiting state support to strategic industries. And as China's strategic competition with the United States deepens on nearly all fronts, there are plenty of other major irritants, including U.S. export controls, military support for Taiwan and human rights sanctions, that will distract from and diminish the value of a limited trade deal in Beijing's eyes.

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So even as China will have to contend with rising debt vulnerabilities, supply chain disruptions, currency stress and the social unease of an all-out trade war, it is prepared to do just that if the White House refuses to significantly scale down its demands. In other words, China is preparing for the worst while testing just how badly Trump wants to clinch a deal, however imperfect, to strengthen his reelection bid and remove a thick layer of uncertainty hanging over the global economy. If the White House sticks to its guns, then China would rather forgo a deal than agree to a bad one that ends up aiding Trump's 2020 campaign.

## A Worried Lot Prays for Distraction

While Iran and China are the most pressing and unavoidable foreign policy challenges facing Trump, there are a number of nervous countries on his target list hoping to ride out the clock to 2020 without major incident.

The European Union has little hope of reaching a trade compromise with the Trump White House that effectively neutralizes the threat of auto tariffs and opens European agricultural markets to more U.S. competition. EU negotiators will try to drag out talks for as long as possible and hope that the economic blowback from Trump's existing trade wars will constrain further escalation. The European Union also seems to have given up hope on engaging the Trump administration on World Trade Organization reform to stop the White House from driving the trade authority's appellate body into paralysis. Instead, the European Union is improvising by creating an ad hoc system to arbitrate trade disputes in the hopes that 2020 will produce an American president who will be more willing to uphold the rules-based system that the United States itself created to govern global trade.

Japan, on the other hand, has a decent shot at negotiating a successful trade deal with the United States to avoid auto tariffs. And in the event that trade talks drag out, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe is going out of his way to demonstrate his alignment with the United States on an array of issues, including Iran, China and North Korea, to lessen the chances of Japan becoming a trade casualty in the final months of Trump's term. India meanwhile had managed to fly under the radar for most of Trump's term but has only recently grown into a big target for the White House. New Delhi will do its best to avoid escalating a confrontation with the United States over trade barriers and India's ties to Iran and Russia while hoping that a new American president will take a more careful approach to managing strategic allies like India that can help

hedge in China.

Mexico does not have time on its side. Border security will feature prominently in Trump's reelection bid, and instability in Central America will continue to drive migrants northward. If and when ill-equipped Mexican security forces fall short of curbing migrant flows to the United States within the next three months, then Mexico City and Guatemala will be expected to reform their asylum laws to prevent migrants from reaching the United States. But the asylum step will be rife with legal complications and delays, raising the potential for Trump to once again threaten Mexico with heavy tariffs. Mexico City is sticking to an official policy of "patience and prudence," while hoping that the massive economic consequence that comes with upending North American trade will constrain Trump from following through with his tariff threats in the runup to the 2020 election. Mexico will nonetheless be unable to escape the fact that it remains an easy target in Trump's tough guy border act.

Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, on the other hand, may have dodged a bullet. After a flopped U.S.-backed coup attempt, Venezuela has fallen low on the list of U.S. foreign policy priorities. And with another Mideast war scenario now consuming him, Trump is unlikely to have the appetite to even entertain a messy military intervention and post-coup mop-up in Venezuela. Instead, the United States will stick to its sanctions campaign and watch from the sidelines as Venezuela continues to spiral on its own.

### The Opportunists Lean In

For a small group of countries, the Trump presidency is a true window of opportunity. And if there is a chance of that window closing in November 2020, then this is the time to squeeze as much out of the Trump White House as possible before he becomes a lame duck.

Israel has already succeeded in securing the White House's recognition of Jerusalem as its capital and of the Golan Heights as Israeli territory. It has even succeeded in getting the White House to neuter the concept of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to turn a blind eye toward West Bank annexation. Now the question is how far does Israel want Trump to carry the anti-Iran campaign. Israel will be dealing with a lot of blowback from Iranian proxies, but it's also no stranger to that threat. And if Iran is already driving the United States toward a military strike anyway, Israel will try to ensure that the target set is as comprehensive as possible to set the Iranian military and possibly Iran's nuclear program back as much as possible. Israel is, therefore, a key variable that could widen the scope of a U.S. military plan against Iran. Saudi Arabia, while wary of Iranian retaliation in a military scenario, shares Israel's interest in ensuring Iran is severely weakened on Trump's watch and lacks the economic resources to fund its proxies in the region. Both Israel and Saudi Arabia are also well aware that a Democratic presidential win in 2020 would raise a lot more scrutiny on the U.S. relationship with both of their countries. While it still can count on the American president's low regard for human rights [2] in conducting foreign policy, Saudi Arabia will rely on Trump to thwart congressional efforts to curb U.S. defense ties with the kingdom.

North Korea has a lot to gain from the Trump window and very little to lose. An Iranian military distraction along with a building great power competition with China and Russia [3] means there is little chance that the White House entertains a military option with North Korea. On the contrary, Trump desperately wants to claim North Korea as his foreign policy success story that avoided a costly war and drove an international pariah to negotiation at the highest level. North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has shored up his own credibility in securing high-level diplomatic recognition by the American president and he has used the diplomatic opening to convince North Korea's neighbors to ease up on sanctions. In the remainder of Trump's term, Kim can push the envelope with missile and possibly nuclear testing to try and draw Trump's attention back to their negotiation. But even if North Korea fails to secure sanctions easing from the United States, it has managed to fully retain its nuclear deterrent in a negotiation ostensibly framed around "denuclearization."

### **Trump's peculiarities have raised both opportunities and risks for smaller states on the edge of China and Russia.**

In an era of great power competition, the smaller states on the edge of China and Russia will work quickly to secure security guarantees from their American great power patron while they have Washington's attention. This will remain true well beyond the Trump presidency, but the peculiarities of the current president have raised both opportunities and risks for these borderland states. Poland's shameless flattery of the American president in naming a still-yet-to-be-built base as "Fort Trump" appears to have helped advance plans to rotate more U.S. forces through the front-line state with Russia. And while Taiwan is a big casualty in the U.S. trade war with China, Taipei can benefit from the Trump White House's more confrontational stance with China and the incessant search for leverage to elevate diplomatic ties and advance politically sensitive military sales.

One might assume that Russia would also fall into this group of opportunists. But for all the political intrigue around Russia's interference in the 2016 election and Trump's unusually deferential relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the Kremlin has utterly failed in extracting big concessions from the Trump White House. On the contrary, the United States has steadily built up its military presence on Russia's western flank with Europe, piled more sanctions on Russia, courted European energy clients with American natural gas and even shown a willingness to ditch major arms control pacts. Trump or no Trump, Russia will remain a chief adversary second to China in the U.S. great power competition. And the more foreign policy fires that erupt on Trump's watch, the more options Russia will have to build leverage in places like Iran and Venezuela to challenge the United States.

### **The Futility of Negotiation?**

With the immense economic and military prowess of the United States at his disposal, Trump has spent the majority of his presidency trying to bulldoze U.S. adversaries and allies into negotiations. He has been loath to start economically devastating wars, yet, in the relentless pursuit of the deal, he has also surrounded himself with some of the most ideologically-driven hawks in Washington to shape those negotiations. The dizzying array of negotiations was supposed to yield new and improved deals that would put his predecessors to shame and cement his legacy as the "outsider" president of the United States. Instead, with 17 months to go until American voters deliver a highly fateful verdict to the world, most of the countries on Trump's target list see little point to a negotiation with a White House that has stomped over their sovereignty with maximalist demands. For many, the cost of holding out on a negotiation may end up being less than making heavy concessions to a mercurial U.S. president in a deal that may or may not even last. For Trump, that means he can use the remaining time in his term to significantly scope down his demands for

the sake of striking a deal, stomach the economic consequences of his actions at the height of his reelection bid or, perhaps in the case of Iran, prepare for war.

## **Referenced Content:**

- [1] [iran-going-all-against-us-trump-nuclear-oil-tanker-hormuz](#)
- [2] [when-human-rights-become-handicap-us-foreign-policy](#)
- [3] [where-does-iran-fit-world-defined-great-power-competition](#)