



10 Conflicts to Watch in 2019

As U.S. leadership of the international order fades, more countries are seeking to bolster their influence by meddling in foreign conflicts. In this new era of limit testing, Crisis Group's President Robert Malley lists the Ten Conflicts to Watch in 2019.



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In a world with fewer rules, the only truly effective one is knowing what you can get away with. The answer today, it turns out, is: quite a lot.

As the era of uncontested U.S. primacy fades, the international order has been thrown into turmoil. More leaders are tempted more often to test limits, jostle for power, and seek to bolster their influence – or diminish that of their rivals – by meddling in foreign conflicts. Multilateralism and its constraints are under siege, challenged by more transactional, zero-sum politics. Instruments of collective action, such as the UN Security Council, are paralysed; those of collective accountability, including the International Criminal Court, are ignored and disparaged.

Nostalgia can be deceptive. Too fond a portrayal of the era of Western hegemony would be misleading. Iraq's chemical weapons use against Iran in the 1980s; the 1990s bloodletting in Bosnia, Rwanda, and Somalia; the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq; Sri Lanka's brutal 2009 campaign against the Tamils; and the collapse of Libya and South Sudan: all these happened at a time of – in some cases because of – U.S. dominance and a reasonably coherent West. A liberal and nominally rules-based order hardly stopped those setting the rules from discarding them when they saw fit. The erosion of Western influence, in short, looks

different from Moscow, Beijing, and the global south than it does from Brussels, London, or Washington.

Still, for better and for worse, U.S. power and alliances have for years shaped international affairs, set limits, and structured regional orders. As the West's influence declines, accelerated by U.S. President Donald Trump's contempt for traditional allies and Europe's struggles with Brexit and nativism, leaders across the world are probing and prodding to see how far they can go.

In their domestic policies, many of those leaders embrace a noxious brew of nationalism and authoritarianism. The mix varies from place to place but typically entails rejection of international institutions and rules. There is little new in the critique of an unjust global order. But if once that critique tended to be rooted in international solidarity, today it stems chiefly from an inward-looking populism that celebrates narrow social and political identity, vilifies minorities and migrants, assails the rule of law and independence of the press, and elevates national sovereignty above all else.

Trump may be the most visible of the genre, but he is far from the most extreme. The wind is in the sails of strongmen worldwide. They realize, at times perhaps to their surprise, that constraints are crumbling, and the behavior

that results often fuels violence or crises. Myanmar's mass expulsion of 700,000 Rohingya, the Syrian regime's brutal suppression of a popular uprising, the Cameroonian government's apparent determination to crush an Anglo-phone insurgency rather than tackle the grievances fueling it, the Venezuelan government's economic warfare against its own people, and the silencing of dissent in Turkey, Egypt, and elsewhere are but a few examples. All are motivated in part by what leaders perceive as a yellow light where they used to see solid red.

Beyond their borders, these leaders test norms, too. Having annexed parts of Georgia and Crimea and stoked separatist violence in Ukraine's Donbas region, Russia is now throwing its weight around in the Sea of Azov, poisoning dissidents in the United Kingdom, and subverting Western democracies with cyber-

diplomacy have set a strikingly negative tone. So too has his flouting of America's international commitments: tearing up the Iran nuclear deal and, worse, threatening to impose economic punishment on those who choose to abide by it; hinting he will leave the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty if U.S. demands are not met rather than working within it to press Russia to comply; and signalling, through attacks on the International Criminal Court and chest-thumping speeches about U.S. sovereignty, that Washington regards its actions and those of its friends as beyond accountability.

The danger of today's free-for-all goes beyond the violence already generated. The larger risk is of miscalculation. Overreach by one leader convinced of his immunity may prompt an unexpected reaction by another;

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warfare. China obstructs freedom of navigation in the South China Sea and arbitrarily detains Canadian citizens – including the International Crisis Group's Michael Kovrig. Saudi Arabia has pushed the envelope with the war in Yemen, the kidnapping of a Lebanese prime minister, and the gruesome murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi in its consulate in Istanbul. Iran plots attacks against dissidents on European soil. Israel feels emboldened to undermine ever more systematically the foundations of a possible two-state solution.

Such actions are hardly new or equal in magnitude. But they are more brazen and overt. They have this much in common: They start with the assumption that there will be few consequences for breaches of international norms.

The U.S. government has hardly been an innocent bystander. Trump's disdain for human rights and penchant for transactional

the ensuing tit for tat easily could escalate without the presence of a credible, willing outside power able to play the role of arbiter.

True, not everyone gets away with everything all the time. Bangladesh seemed poised to forcibly return some Rohingya refugees to Myanmar but stopped, almost certainly in response to international pressure. The feared Russian-backed reconquest of Idlib, the last rebel stronghold in Syria, has, for now, been averted, in no small measure due to Turkish, European, and U.S. objections. The same is true (again: for the time being) when it comes to a potential Saudi-led offensive on the Yemeni port of Hodeida, with Riyadh and Abu Dhabi largely deterred by warnings about the humanitarian impact and cost to their international standing.

Elsewhere, leaders anticipating impunity have been taken aback by the severity of the response: Russian President Vladimir Putin,

for example, by the stiff sanctions and show of united resolve that Western powers have maintained since Moscow's annexation of Crimea and the killing of its former agent on British soil; Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman by the outrage that followed Khashoggi's murder.

Overall, though, it is hard to escape the sense that these are exceptions that prove the absence of rules. The international order as we know it is unravelling, with no clear sense of what will come in its wake. The danger may well lie less in the ultimate destination than in the process of getting there. As the following list of 10 Conflicts to Watch in 2019 amply illustrates, that road will be bumpy, and it will be perilous.

1. Yemen

If one place has borne the brunt of international lawlessness over the past year it is Yemen. The humanitarian crisis there – the world's worst – could deteriorate further in 2019 if the key players do not seize the opportunity created over the past weeks by UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths in achieving a partial ceasefire and encouraging a series of confidence-building steps.

After more than four years of war and a Saudi-led siege, almost 16 million Yemenis face "severe acute food insecurity", according to the UN. That means one in two Yemenis doesn't have enough to eat.

Fighting started in late 2014, after Huthi rebels expelled the internationally recognised government from the capital. It escalated the following March, when Saudi Arabia, together with the United Arab Emirates (UAE), began bombing and blockading Yemen, aiming to reverse the Huthis' gains and reinstall the dislodged government. Western powers largely endorsed the Saudi-led campaign.

In late 2018, Yemeni militias backed by the UAE surrounded Hodeida, a Huthi-controlled port, through which aid for millions of starving Yemenis passes. The coalition appeared

determined to move in, convinced that taking the port would crush the rebellion and make the Huthis more pliant. But the consequences of such an offensive would be almost unimaginable. The top UN relief official, Mark Lowcock, has warned it could provoke a "great big famine". That, and the fallout from Khashoggi's murder, prompted Western powers to begin restraining the Gulf coalition. On 9 November, the U.S. announced it would no longer refuel coalition jets conducting air raids in Yemen. A month later, Griffiths, with Washington's help, reached the "Stockholm agreement" between the Huthis and the Yemeni government, including a fragile ceasefire around Hodeida.

There are other glimmers of light. U.S. pressure to end the conflict could intensify in 2019. The Senate has already voted to consider legislation barring all U.S. involvement in the war. Once the Democrats assume control of the House of Representatives in January 2019, they could move more aggressively in this direction.

That and more will be needed to end the Yemen war or at least avoid it taking another turn for the worse. All parties – the Huthis and their Yemeni adversaries, but also the Saudis and Emiratis – seem to believe that time is on their side. Only pressure from Europe, Oman, and Iran on the Huthis; from the U.S. on Saudi Arabia and the UAE; from those two Gulf countries on the Yemeni government; and from Congress on the U.S. administration stands a chance of making a difference.

2. Afghanistan

If Yemen is the world's worst humanitarian disaster, Afghanistan suffers its deadliest fighting. In 2018, by one tally, the war killed more than 40,000 combatants and civilians. Trump's reported decision in mid-December that half of U.S. forces in Afghanistan would leave brought further unease. In principle, Washington's signal that it is ready to pull out could advance diplomatic efforts to end the war by focusing belligerents' and regional actors' minds. But the ad hoc nature of the decision—seemingly made

without looping in top officials—and the spectre it raises of the U.S. cutting and running could bode badly for the coming year.

In 2018, the war exacted a higher toll than at any time since the Taliban were ousted from Kabul more than seventeen years ago. A three-day ceasefire in June, which the Taliban and the government enforced and which prompted joyous celebration by fighters and civilians alike, offered a short respite, though fighting resumed immediately afterwards. Taliban fighters now effectively control perhaps half the country, cutting off transport routes and laying siege to cities and towns. A sharp uptick in U.S. airstrikes has not curbed their momentum.

In September, Washington appointed the veteran diplomat Zalmay Khalilzad as an envoy for peace talks – a welcome sign that it was prioritising negotiations to end the war. Taliban leaders appear to be taking the talks seriously, though the process is stuck over their continued insistence that the U.S. commit to a timeline for full withdrawal of international forces as a precondition for a wider peace process involving other Afghan factions, a sequence that would be a win for the Taliban while saddling other Afghans with uncertainty.

Only days after Khalilzad's latest talks with the Taliban came Trump's bombshell. Withdrawing 7,000 troops in itself will probably not be militarily decisive: U.S. forces now mostly perform support roles. Indeed, there could be value to the U.S. making clear it is serious about bringing troops home. All sides understand that a rapid pullout could provoke a major new civil war, an outcome nobody, including the Taliban, wants. With a U.S. drawdown in the cards, the Taliban's suspicion about Washington's motives might ease, propelling talks forward.

Neighbouring countries and others involved in Afghanistan – notably Iran, Pakistan, Russia, and China – all want the Americans out eventually, but none of them wants a precipitous withdrawal. They may be more inclined to support U.S. diplomacy if they believe that Washington will eventually give up its strategic

foothold in South Asia. Trump's announcement could therefore spur them to help end the war, but regional powers could just as easily increase their meddling by doubling down on Afghan proxies to hedge their bets.

The rashness of Trump's decision risks outweighing any potential silver lining. Its timing appeared to catch everyone – from Khalilzad and top U.S. military chiefs to the Afghan government – off guard. The fact that it was not coordinated with Khalilzad meant that the envoy could not extract any concessions from the Taliban in return for such a key pledge that partially addressed their core demand. In Kabul, the sense of betrayal was palpable. A few days later, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani nominated two hard-line anti-Taliban officials as his defence and interior ministers, suggesting a move away from his compromising tone of the past year.

The festivities that greeted the June ceasefire revealed broad support for peace, and there are signs that the war's core protagonists are open to a settlement. But that was always an uncertain bet. Trump's decision has only added to the uncertainty.

3. U.S.-Chinese Tensions

The standoff between China and the U.S. is not a deadly conflict, no matter how bitter the trade war between Washington and Beijing has become. Still, rhetoric between the two is increasingly bellicose. If relations, already at their lowest ebb since the Tiananmen protests almost three decades ago, continue to deteriorate, the rivalry could have graver geopolitical consequences than all of the other crises listed this year.

In a deeply divided Washington, one position that wins bipartisan consensus is that China is an adversary with which the U.S. is inexorably locked in strategic competition. Most U.S. policymakers concur that Beijing has exploited institutions and rules to its own end – joining the World Trade Organization or signing up to the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, for example, even as it acts

inconsistently with the spirit of both. President Xi Jinping's ending of term limits, rapid expansion of China's military, and extension of the Communist Party's control across state and society confirm to many in Washington the dangerous turn the country has taken under his stewardship. The U.S. government's 2018 National Defense Strategy cites "inter-state strategic competition" as its primary concern, with China and Russia named as primary competitors, after many years in which terrorism took the top spot.

Heightening the sense of lawlessness is Beijing's unjust detention of three Canadians – including one of my colleagues, the North East Asia expert Michael Kovrig – widely seen as a tit for tat for Canada's arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou, wanted for Iran sanctions violations by the U.S., with which Canada has an extradition treaty.

In reality, China likely has no short-term desire to fundamentally challenge the world order. Nor will it match Washington's global clout anytime soon, provided the Trump administration takes steps to stop haemorrhaging allies and credibility. But Beijing is ever readier to throw its weight around in multilateral institutions and its region. In Asia, it expects a Chinese sphere in which neighbours are sovereign but deferential. U.S. policymakers mostly regard such an arrangement as inimical to U.S. alliances and interests.

Mounting U.S.-Chinese tension has implications for conflicts in Asia and beyond. For the two superpowers, pooling efforts to end crises has never been easy. An increasingly bitter rivalry would make it much harder. China would be less likely to back either tougher sanctions against North Korea, if stuttering talks between Washington and Pyongyang break down, or U.S. diplomatic efforts in Afghanistan.

Risks of direct conflict remain slim, but the South China Sea is a troubling flash point. The past two decades have seen occasional run-ins between Chinese forces and U.S. planes. Beijing stakes claim to 90 per cent of the South China Sea, stopping mere miles from the Vietnamese,

Malaysian, and Philippine coastlines, and has aggressively built bases on strategic natural and man-made islands. From Beijing's perspective, such manoeuvres are standard operating procedure for what Xi calls a "big country". China wants what the U.S. has: pliant neighbours, influence around its periphery, and the capacity to control its sea approaches and transport lanes. Others, of course, see it differently. The smaller South East Asian nations object, and some look to Washington for protection.

Beijing and Washington could reach some form of trade deal in the months ahead, which would help ease tensions. But any respite is likely to be short-lived. On both sides, leaders believe a long-festering geopolitical and economic clash has reached a point of rupture.

4. Saudi Arabia, the U.S., Israel, and Iran

Much like 2018, 2019 presents risks of confrontation – deliberate or inadvertent – involving the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Iran. The first three share a common view of the government in Tehran as a threat that has been emboldened for too long and whose regional aspirations need curbing. For Washington, this has translated into withdrawal from the 2015 nuclear deal, the restoration of sanctions, more aggressive rhetoric, and threats of powerful retaliation in the event of Iranian provocation. Riyadh has embraced this new tone, and – mainly in the voice of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman – suggested it will fight back and seek to counter Iran in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen, and even on Iranian soil. Israel has focused on Syria, where it has regularly struck Iranian and Iranian-aligned targets, but it has also threatened to target the Iranian-backed militant group Hizbollah in Lebanon.

So far, Iran – confident in long-term trends and deterred by the possibility of retaliation – has opted to hunker down. While it has resumed missile testing, and the U.S. has accused it of using its Shiite proxies in Iraq to threaten the U.S. presence there, its response appears calculated not to invite a harsh reply. But as economic pressure builds on Iran,

this posture may not last. Moreover, the risk of an accidental clash originating in Yemen, in the Persian Gulf, in Syria, or in Iraq cannot be discounted.

The main source of tension, so far, has been the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal and the reimposition of secondary sanctions against countries engaged in business with Tehran. That Iran has not responded in kind to what it describes as economic warfare owes much to the efforts of the deal's other signatories, namely European countries, Russia, and China. Their attempts to preserve a modicum of space for trade coupled with their continued diplomatic engagement with Tehran have given sufficient reason for Iran's leaders to adhere to the terms of the deal. Those leaders also seem to be hoping for a one-term Trump presidency.

This calculus could change. While U.S. and Saudi hopes that sanctions will force Iran to modify its disruptive behaviour or prompt regime change almost certainly will be disappointed, the economic squeeze is hurting ordinary Iranians. As more pain is inflicted on Iran's citizens, hard-line voices urging the Islamic Republic to eschew the agreement will grow louder, especially as jockeying for President Hassan Rouhani's and, possibly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's posts heat up. Even if they comply with nuclear constraints, the temptation could grow in Tehran to make Washington pay a price for its actions by taking aim at its presence in the region, for example by encouraging attacks by Iraqi Shiite militias against U.S. targets in Iraq.

Hostility between Saudi Arabia and Iran is playing out in proxy struggles across the Middle East, from Yemen to Lebanon. Any of these conflicts could escalate. Yemen is arguably the most dangerous. Should a Huthi missile inflict casualties in a Saudi city or if the Huthis target international commercial shipping in the Red Sea – a move they have long threatened to make – the conflict could enter a far more dangerous phase.

In Syria, Israel has so far been adept at striking Iranian targets without prompting a wider war. Iran, no doubt aware of the potential cost of such escalation, calculates that it can absorb such attacks without endangering its deeper interests and longer-term presence in Syria. But the Syrian theatre is congested, Iranian forbearance is not limitless, and the likelihood of a miscalculation or an attack gone awry remains a risk.

Hanging over these dynamics will be continued reverberations of the October assassination of Khashoggi. The murder amplified criticism in the U.S. of both Saudi foreign policy and the seemingly unconditional U.S. support for it. These feelings will intensify next year as Democrats assume control of the House. One can only hope this leads to stronger U.S. pressure on Riyadh to end the war in Yemen and to greater congressional scrutiny of U.S. and Saudi escalatory policies toward Iran.

5. Syria

As 2018 came to a close, it looked as if the Syrian conflict would continue along the same path. It seemed that the regime of Bashar al-Assad, with Iranian and Russian help, would win its battle against the opposition. The war against the Islamic State would approach the finish line. Foreign actors would maintain a fragile equilibrium in various parts of the country: among Israel, Iran, and Russia in the south west; Russia and Turkey in the north west; and the U.S. and Turkey in the north east. But with a mid-December phone call to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announcing the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Trump upended that balance; increased the odds of a bloody conflict involving Turkey, its Syrian allies, Syrian Kurds, and the Assad regime; and, in so doing, potentially gave the Islamic State a new lease on life by fueling the chaos on which it thrives.

The Trump administration's earlier policy of indefinitely retaining a military presence in Syria was always of questionable value.

It was unclear how 2,000 U.S. troops could curb Iranian influence or create meaningful pressure on the Assad regime. The fight against the Islamic State is not over, but it need not require maintaining U.S. troops on the ground. That said, a precipitous withdrawal presents one major risk: it will leave the People's Protection Units (YPG) – the Kurdish-dominated armed group that partnered with U.S. forces against the Islamic State and now controls roughly one-third of Syrian territory – perilously exposed.

The YPG could now face an attack from Turkey (which considers it a terrorist organisation due to its affiliation with the Kurdistan Workers' Party, or PKK) or by the Assad regime (which aims to reassert control over the entirety of the country, including the oil-rich north east). Should disorder ensue, the Islamic State could seize the opportunity to stage a comeback by regrouping and recapturing some of the territory it has lost over the past two years.

In short, the real question for the U.S. should not have been whether to stay or go, but under what timetable and what conditions to withdraw.

Both the U.S. and Russia should have an interest in preventing an all-out scramble for the territory abandoned by the U.S. because it could revitalise the Islamic State and because (from Russia's perspective) it could result in Turkey controlling more of Moscow's ally's land. Averting this scenario will require Washington and Moscow (separately or in tandem) to persuade Turkey not to launch an assault on YPG-held territory, to persuade the YPG to lower its armed profile, and to facilitate a deal between Damascus and the YPG that entails the return of the Syrian government to the north east coupled with a degree of Kurdish self-rule in the area. Such an outcome would simultaneously allow Syria to restore its sovereignty, reassure Turkey by limiting YPG authority and firepower, and protect the Kurds from military attack. It might be too late to achieve this goal. It is not too late to try.

6. Nigeria

Nigerians will go to the polls in February 2019 to elect a president and new federal legislature, and again in March to choose state governors and lawmakers. Nigerian elections are traditionally violent affairs, and conditions this time around are particularly combustible.

The presidential contest between incumbent Muhammadu Buhari and his main rival, former Vice President Atiku Abubakar, will be hard fought. Relations between Buhari's ruling All Progressives Congress and Abubakar's People's Democratic Party – which governed for sixteen years until Buhari came to power – are as acrimonious in the capital as they are in hot spots across the country. Disputes between Buhari and the leaders of parliament's two chambers, both of whom defected from the ruling party in July, delayed funding for the electoral commission and security agencies, hindering election preparations. The opposition's distrust of both the commission and security forces heightens risks of protests during and after the vote. Such protests have a troubled precedent: demonstrations after the 2011 polls morphed into attacks on minorities across northern Nigeria in which more than 800 people died.

The election comes atop other challenges. Levels of violent crime and general insecurity remain high across much of the country. Civilians in parts of the north east bear the brunt of the brutal conflict between government troops and a resilient Islamist Boko Haram insurgency. One militant faction, known as Islamic State West Africa Province, appears to be gaining ground. Violence in Nigeria's Middle Belt this past year between predominantly Muslim herders and mostly Christian farmers escalated to unprecedented levels, killing approximately 1,500 people. Though that bloodshed has calmed over past months, it has frayed intercommunal relations – especially between Muslims and Christians – in those areas, which are likely to see fiercely fought elections, as ballots from there could swing the national presidential vote. Already, politicians are stoking

divisions for political ends, including by using inflammatory, identity-based language against rivals.

In the oil-rich Niger Delta, too, tensions between locals and the federal government could boil over this year, given simmering anger at the latter's failure to fulfil pledges to clean up oil pollution, build infrastructure, and increase social investment over the past few years.

The immediate priority for the government must be to avert an election crisis by beefing up security in vulnerable states and taking steps to ensure that security forces act impartially, while all parties pledge to campaign peacefully and handle disputes lawfully. That in itself will not resolve Nigeria's many problems. But it would be a necessary start.

7. South Sudan

Since South Sudan's civil war erupted five years ago, 400,000 people have died. In September, President Salva Kiir and his main rival, the former vice president-turned rebel leader Riek Machar, signed an agreement to hold fire and rule together until elections in 2022. The deal satisfies – for now at least – the two antagonists' interests and those of Presidents Omar al-Bashir of Sudan and Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, the two regional leaders with the most sway in South Sudan. Most importantly, it has reduced violence. For now, this is reason enough to support the accord. Yet the odds remain stacked against it ushering in a new era of stability.

First, the deal is worryingly similar to a pact the two men signed in August 2015, which collapsed the following year, triggering a surge in fighting. By envisaging elections in 2022, the deal perpetuates the Kiir-Machar rivalry until then, paving the way for another showdown. It also remains a work in progress. Most alarming, security arrangements for Juba, the capital, remain contested, as do plans for unifying a national army.

In Sudan, meanwhile, Bashir faces what could be a serious challenge to his own rule. In mid-December, protesters took to the streets in many towns and cities decrying high prices and urging the president to step down. The protests' endgame is unclear. But a prolonged crisis in its northern neighbour could be hugely destabilising for South Sudan.

Finally, donors, wary of funding deals that have collapsed in the past, are now mostly sitting on the sidelines. The U.S., which until recently spearheaded Western diplomacy in South Sudan, has stepped back. Others are waiting to see tangible steps forward by Kiir and Machar before opening their check books.

Such caution is understandable. But if this deal fails, it is not clear what would replace it, and the country could collapse into major bloodshed again. Some form of third-party shuttle diplomacy among regional heads of state, who back different sides and largely focus on protecting their own short-term interests, will be necessary. An envoy, clearly backed by Western and other actors outside the region, might help keep regional leaders focused on ensuring the deal does not fall apart, as well as build consensus for a wider settlement that shares power across South Sudan's groups and regions. Without that, the fragile opportunity for peace that currently exists could evaporate.

8. Cameroon

A crisis in Cameroon's Anglophone areas is on the verge of escalating into civil war and destabilising a country that was once considered an island of relative calm in a troubled region.

The tempo of the crisis has escalated steadily since 2016, when Anglophone teachers and lawyers took to the streets to protest the creeping use of French in the education and legal systems. Their demonstrations morphed into wider protests over the marginalisation of Cameroon's English-speaking minority, which represents about one-fifth of the country's population. The government refused to

acknowledge the Anglophones' grievances or engage their leaders as security forces violently repressed protests and jailed activists. The response fuelled Anglophones' anger at the central government, pushing many protesters who had initially called only for autonomy and rights into the arms of separatist groups, whose attacks started in late 2017. A disputed presidential election this October, which President Paul Biya, aged 85 and in power for 36 years, won and in which few Anglophones voted, hardly helped.

Nearly ten separatist militias now battle government forces, while two organisations provide direction from abroad: the interim government of Ambazonia (the putative name of the self-proclaimed Anglophone state) and the Ambazonia Governing Council. The separatists are pitted not only against Cameroonian security forces, but also against pro-government "self-defence" groups. Criminal gangs in Anglophone areas have taken advantage of the chaos to expand their activities.

According to the International Crisis Group's estimates, fighting has already killed nearly 200 soldiers, gendarmes, and police officers, with some 300 injured, and killed more than 600 separatists. At least 500 civilians have died in the violence. The UN counts 30,000 Anglophone refugees in Nigeria and 437,000 internally displaced in Cameroon.

Defusing the crisis will first require confidence-building measures. These should include the government's release of all political detainees, including separatist leaders; a pledge from both sides to implement a ceasefire; and support for a planned Anglophone conference, which would allow Anglophones to select leaders to represent them in negotiations. These steps could pave the way for talks between the government and Anglophone leaders, followed by some form of national dialogue in which options for decentralisation or federalism would be on the table.

Cameroonian authorities made a welcome move in mid-December when they released 289 Anglophone detainees, though hundreds,

including separatist leaders, are still behind bars. It remains unclear whether this signals a genuine change of heart by the government, which has appeared determined to crush insurgents rather than address Anglophone concerns. Nor is it clear whether the release can, on its own, persuade hard-line separatists to talk rather than fight.

Without meaningful, mutual compromise, Cameroon is in danger of sliding toward a major and destabilising conflict.

9. Ukraine

The war in Ukraine continues to smoulder with no end in sight. Sparked by Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and its subsequent support for separatists in Ukraine's eastern Donbas region, it also fuels the wider geopolitical standoff between Russia and Western powers. The latest flash point is the Sea of Azov, where in November Russian and Ukrainian vessels clashed and Russia effectively blocked access to the Kerch Strait, at the mouth of the sea. The confrontation suggests that neither side sees any advantage in compromising.

As Kyiv sees it, the attack on Ukrainian military ships and seizure of two dozen sailors is the culmination of months of Russian attempts to squeeze Ukrainian boats out of those waters, violating a 2003 bilateral treaty that guarantees both countries free shipping. Moscow claims the boats were entering its coastal waters and that Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko provoked the skirmish to shore up Western backing and his domestic base ahead of presidential elections scheduled for March 2019. Poroshenko's subsequent efforts to introduce martial law didn't help; the Kremlin, together with the president's domestic critics, painted it as a political stunt. Either way, the incident clearly showcased Moscow's newfound willingness to use overt force against Ukraine.

Meanwhile, fighting in the Donbas continues, and civilians living along front lines – abandoned by both Kyiv and the separatists – are paying the price. Neither Ukraine nor Russia has taken steps to end the war. Kyiv refuses

to devolve power to Donbas – something it pledged to do as part of the Minsk agreements that set out a path to end the war – until Russia withdraws arms and personnel from separatist-held areas, which Moscow shows scant willingness to do. Proposals for possible peacekeeping missions have not gone far.

Absent a meaningful shift in tack by either side, 2019 will most likely see more of the same. Kyiv is unlikely to budge before elections (in addition to the presidential vote, parliamentary polls are due before the year's end). Russia may chafe at the cost of keeping separatist-held areas afloat, but it is unlikely to give up influence in the Donbas any time soon. The Ukrainian elections or domestic developments in Russia might bring opportunities for peace-making. But as the Azov spat shows, the danger of escalation is ever present.

10. Venezuela

Home to enormous oil reserves, Venezuela ought to be the envy of its neighbours. Instead Latin America is watching apprehensively as the country's implosion threatens to provoke a regional crisis.

Venezuela's economy is in freefall, with a devastating social impact. Poverty and malnutrition are rampant. Once-eradicated diseases, such as diphtheria, have made a comeback. Some 3 million of Venezuela's 31 million people have fled the country, primarily to Colombia and other neighbours. The U.N. expects that number to climb to 5.3 million by the end of 2019.

President Nicolás Maduro's ruling clique, having badly mismanaged the economy, now refuses to admit the depth of Venezuela's agony or accept most humanitarian relief. The government has dismantled the country's institutions, stripping the opposition-controlled parliament of its powers and stage-managing the election of a rubber-stamp legislature in its place. On 10 January 2019, Maduro will start a second term, though neither his domestic opponents nor much of the outside world consider his re-election credible. For its part,

the opposition is paralysed by infighting, with a vocal faction (mostly in exile) calling upon foreign powers to topple Maduro by force.

Venezuela's neighbours are struggling to accommodate the influx of people fleeing and anxious at the prospect of more. One barometer of Latin American impatience is the stance of Luis Almagro, the secretary general of the Organization of American States: in September, he said the region "should not exclude any option", implying a military intervention could be coming. The Trump administration has made similar hints. Such talk may be just that, and one of Maduro's strongest critics, new Colombian President Iván Duque, disavowed it in October – fortunately, given that external military action would almost certainly provoke further chaos.

There are few good policy options. The U.S. and Europe have targeted Maduro's inner circle with sanctions, with Washington adding financial restrictions, though broader trade penalties are inadvisable, as they would harm the population. Peru and others suggest cutting diplomatic ties, but that would isolate Venezuelans as their plight worsens.

If concerned outsiders are to help while discouraging talk of armed intervention, they should press for a peaceful transition, likely involving negotiations on political and economic reform between the government and opposition and some form of transitional administration. Maduro has little incentive to agree to such a step, of course. But Latin American leaders could increase the pressure by imposing their own sanctions on top Venezuelan officials, to be lifted if the government complies (although such regional sanctions would be almost unprecedented).

Without such steps, Venezuela's collapse remains possible, and the suffering of its people looks set to continue, with the country's neighbours left to pick up the pieces.