

# GREAT DECISIONS

## *Winter 2018 Update*

**Russia's foreign policy • China and America • Turkey: a partner in crisis  
• U.S. global engagement and the military • South Africa's fragile democracy**

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### **Russia's foreign policy**

In late January, the U.S. Treasury Department released a list of individuals with close ties to the Russian government. The Department published the list in adherence to its legal obligations under sanctions legislation enacted in August 2017, known as the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). CAATSA was passed in response to Russia's interference in the 2016 presidential election and its military intervention in Ukraine. However, the Treasury Department emphasized that its January list did not impose sanctions on the individuals included. Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is running for re-election on March 18th, called the release of the list an "unfriendly act," but said that he would not retaliate. In response to the passage of CAATSA last July, Putin ordered a steep reduction of U.S. employees—by as many as 755—at the U.S. embassy in Moscow and across U.S. consulates in the country.

Putin continues to push for increased global influence, especially in the Middle East. He visited Egypt, Turkey and Syria shortly after President Donald Trump announced in December that the U.S. would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel—an announcement which caused upset among regional allies. In Cairo, Putin announced the resumption of Russian commercial airline service, which had been suspended after the bombing of a plane that killed 224 passengers in 2015. In Ankara, the Russian president met with his Turkish counterpart for the eighth time in 2017. Putin also travelled to Syria—his first visit since Russia entered into the Syrian Civil War in 2015. At the end of January 2018, Putin hosted diplomatic negotiations over Syria in the Russian Black Sea resort town of Sochi.

In March, Putin delivered his state of the union

speech. He devoted one third of his speech to claims about upgraded nuclear missiles that could overcome U.S. defense systems, and included video clips as evidence. The speech was intended to serve as a warning to the U.S., though many critics conclude that the claims are more bombastic than substantial. Currently, Russia deploys some 1,400 strategic nuclear warheads and has thousands of others in storage.

Much of this news was overshadowed by the release in early February of the "Nunes memo," named for Chairman of the House Intelligence Committee Devin Nunes (R-CA), who pushed for its publication. The four-page Republican document accuses the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) of overstepping its authority in the investigation of Donald Trump's campaign ties with Russian officials during the 2016 election. Later the same month, the Intelligence Committee released a heavily redacted Democratic memo, written by Representative Adam Schiff (D-CA), which pushed back on claims made in the Nunes memo.

On February 16th, special counsel Robert Mueller, appointed by the Justice Department to lead the investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, indicted 13 Russian nationals and three Russian entities for election meddling. "The defendants allegedly conducted what they called information warfare against the United States, with the stated goal of spreading distrust to

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wards the candidates and the political system in general,” said Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein about the indictments.

### Recommended Readings

Brett Forrest, “In Cold War Echo, Russia Returns To U.S.’s Backyard,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Jan. 31, 2018).

Ishaan Tharoor, “Putin is Outplaying Trump in the Middle East,” *The Washington Post* (Dec. 12, 2017).

Julia Ioffe, “What Putin Really Wants,” *The Atlantic* (Jan. 2018).

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## China and America

**O**n February 25th, the Chinese Communist Party announced its decision to lift term limits for the country’s presidency and vice presidency, opening the door for President Xi Jinping to remain in office indefinitely. A two-term limit was enshrined in China’s constitution in the 1980s to protect against a return to the type of one-man rule experienced under the dictator Mao Zedong. The move represents an alarming disruption of political norms, but is largely a domestic calculation rather than a matter of foreign policy strategy. U.S. President Donald Trump praised Xi’s power grab during a fundraising event at his Mar-a-Lago estate, remarking “Maybe we’ll try that someday.”

Meanwhile, leaked photos from early 2018 reveal China’s continued militarization of the South China Sea, where various regional countries maintain competing territorial claims. The new photos show the construction of “island fortresses” concentrated in the disputed Spratly Islands. In March, a U.S. aircraft carrier made a port call in Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War. The visit served as a warning to China against expansionism and militarization of the Sea, where the U.S. sees protecting “freedom of navigation” as a vital national interest.

During a visit to Latin America in February, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson warned of China’s “predatory” advances in the region. China has rapidly overtaken the U.S. as the top trading partner of countries like Brazil, Peru and Chile. In January, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi invited the 33 members of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States to become part of China’s massive infrastructure push known as the Belt and Road Initiative.

On the other side of the hemisphere, Britain has also turned to China as a key trading partner as the UK

navigates its exit from the European Union. In late January, British Prime Minister Theresa May led the UK’s largest-ever trade delegation to China to seek concessions on a range of issues from trade to finance.

### Recommended Readings

Andrew J. Nathan, “The Chinese World Order,” *The New York Review of Books* (Oct. 12, 2017).

Evan Osnos, “Making China Great Again,” *The New Yorker* (Jan. 8, 2018).

Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, “The China Reckoning,” *Foreign Affairs* (Mar. 2018).

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## Turkey: a partner in crisis

**O**n January 20th, Turkey launched a direct incursion into the northern Syrian town of Afrin, in an effort against Syrian Kurdish forces there. The move potentially puts NATO allies the U.S. and Turkey in direct conflict, as Syrian Kurdish forces have been the U.S.’s primary partner on the ground in countering ISIS in the country. Turkey considers Syrian Kurds an extension of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), a Kurdish group fighting for autonomy in Turkey, and therefore a terrorist organization.

In the days preceding Turkey’s assault on Afrin, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson endorsed the creation of a permanent force of 30,000—about half to be affiliated with the Syrian Kurdish militia—along the Syrian border. The force would be part of the U.S.’s broader strategy to prevent the resurgence of ISIS in Syria. In response, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan vowed to stop the U.S. from “creating a terror army on our border.” The U.S. says it will not support Syrian Kurds in Afrin. Russia has also said it will not interfere in the conflict. But the Turkish incursion opens a new front in Syria’s brutal civil war, and has implications for Turkey’s orientation toward NATO and Eurasia.

On February 24th, the UN Security Council passed a resolution on a 30-day ceasefire to facilitate human-

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itarian assistance to civilians across Syria. The resolution allowed for continued combat against terrorist groups like ISIS. Turkey initially supported the resolution, but, realizing that it applied to the conflict in Afrin, went on to violate its terms. Russia, for its part, supports the resolution, but will not pressure Turkey to reverse its decision.

As part of his Middle East tour in February, Secretary of State Tillerson visited Turkey, where he met with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu and President Erdoğan. The meeting concluded with an agreement to normalize relations, which had become increasingly strained over Syria and other issues. “Our relations were at a critical turning point,” said Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu. “We were either going to correct this or it was going to take a turn for the worse.”

### Recommended Readings

Borzou Daragahi and Munzer al-Awad, “The War in Syria Has Gotten More Unstable as Turkey Fights US Allies for Control,” BuzzFeed News (Feb. 1, 2018).

Nujin Derik, “We Fought For Our Democracy, Now Turkey Wants to Destroy It,” The New York Times Opinion (Jan. 29, 2018).

Ranj Alaaldin, “What’s next for Turkey, the US, and the YPG after the Afrin operation?” Brookings Institution (Jan. 26, 2018).

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## U.S. global engagement and the military

In early February, President Donald Trump signed into law a massive budget deal raising military spending for fiscal year 2018 to \$700 billion and to \$716 billion for 2019. The additional funding will be targeted at maintaining ongoing wars and revamping the U.S. nuclear weapons arsenal. It backs Defense Secretary James Mattis’ goals of building a more powerful joint force, forging new and stronger alliances and increasing the efficiency of the Department of Defense.

In January, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that the U.S. military would remain in Syria indefinitely, as Washington seeks to stymie Iran’s in-

fluence, thwart a potential resurgence of ISIS and oust Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad (though Tillerson has in the past signaled a more tolerant stance toward Assad). As for the U.S.’s longest-running war, in Afghanistan, President Trump directed an increase in troops by 3,000 last year, bringing the total number to approximately 14,000. In January, President Trump cut off military aid to Pakistan in an effort to pressure Islamabad to crack down on the Taliban along its border with Afghanistan. In Iraq, the U.S.-led coalition has declared a “shift in focus” away from supporting Iraqi combat operations following Iraq’s declaration of victory over ISIS in December. The number of U.S. troops in Iraq, 5,200 last year, is set to gradually decrease.

The Trump administration continues to butt heads with North Korea in an effort to counter the isolated nation’s nuclear arsenal. In January 2018, President Trump deployed nuclear-capable B-52 bombers to the U.S. island territory of Guam, conceivably preparing for the possibility of a “bloody nose” strike, or a theoretically limited assault intended to send a message rather than trigger a flat-out war. South Korean President Moon Jae-in has recently made headway in talks with the North, including eliciting agreement from Pyongyang to engage in negotiations with the U.S. on denuclearization.

Even as this hint of progress emerged, Russian President Vladimir Putin used his annual state of the nation address in March to send an unusually antagonistic message to the U.S.: He accused Washington of initiating a new arms race by its refusal to support arms-control, and he claimed that Russia was developing nuclear weapons capable of breaching U.S. missile defenses. Some experts shot down the threat as a bluff.

In February, the Pentagon confirmed that President Trump had requested a military parade inspired by the Bastille Day celebrations in Paris. The U.S. last held a similar parade in the summer of 1991 to celebrate its victory in the brief Gulf War, at a cost of \$12 million.

### Recommended Readings

Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Troops Train in Eastern Europe to Echoes of the Cold War,” The New York Times (Aug. 6, 2017).

Samer Abboud, “Understanding America’s Endgame in Syria,” News Deeply (Feb. 1, 2018).

Steve Coll, “We Can’t Win in Afghanistan Because We Don’t Know Why We’re There,” The New York Times (Jan. 26, 2018).

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## South Africa's fragile democracy

On February 14th, South African President Jacob Zuma reluctantly stepped down from his post following demands by his party, the African National Congress (ANC). The deputy president, Cyril Ramaphosa, who ousted Zuma as head of the ANC in December, was sworn in as his replacement the following day.

Zuma's presidency had long been plagued by scandal and charges of corruption, leading to a strengthened external opposition, as well as factional splits within the ANC. Accusations of corruption came to a head in December, when the Constitutional Court ordered Zuma to repay millions of public dollars that he had spent on improvements to his country home. The court further tasked the National Assembly with creating a mechanism that would allow for the president's impeachment.

In an unprecedented move in early February, South African Parliament postponed the president's state of the nation address for the first time since 1994—the year when the ANC came to power—fearing disruption by Zuma's opposition. Even during the run-up to the address, the ANC's senior-most body, the National Executive Committee, met and set up negotiations to oust the then-president. The prestigious Nelson Mandela Foundation also weighed in on the matter, calling on Zuma to step down.

President Ramaphosa comes to office as one of the richest individuals in the country, with a background in business and politics. During South Africa's transition from apartheid, Ramaphosa served as the ANC's secretary general and helped draft the new Constitution. He became deputy president in 2014, and only began to distance himself from Zuma in 2017. He has since rallied political support around anti-corruption and pro-equality rhetoric.

Amidst the political upheaval, South Africa's second largest city, Cape Town, is facing the possibility of a so-called Day Zero. According to projections of water tables, all usable water could effectively run out in the coming months. The municipal government has taken strict conservation measures, including setting up water access points across the city, and drastically curtailing water usage. Cape Town has suffered a prolonged drought for nearly three years, but conserva-

tion efforts have raised hopes that catastrophe can be avoided this year.

### Recommended Readings

Jason Burke, "Jacob Zuma's Grip on Power Weakens as Key Speech Postponed," *The Guardian* (Feb. 6, 2018).

Rosa Lyster, "Counting Down to Day Zero in Cape Town," (Mar. 1, 2018).

William Finnegan, "Can Cyril Ramaphosa Revive the South African Dream?" *The New Yorker* (Jan. 5, 2018).



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*The UPDATES take into account events up to  
March 6, 2018*