

Lost Ground and New Opportunities amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

By Jennifer Cafarella
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Overview

The pandemic's impact on US national security has been mixed, but emerging trends indicate the potential for more serious losses in America's geostrategic position in coming months. Momentum is accelerating toward a fragmented, complex, and fluid global environment in which overlapping threats are increasingly the norm. Retaining US presence and engagement in key theaters including the Middle East and North Africa is essential to prevent dangerous escalations in regional conflicts, Salafi Jihadist threats, and great power competition. The US also has opportunities to exploit our adversaries' constraints but can only do so through a focused application of American power beyond sanctions and rhetoric.

Key Outcomes

▼ **1. A widening regional conflict is emerging in the Mediterranean.** The overlap of an escalation in the war in Libya and competition over natural gas in the Mediterranean Sea is driving a widening regional conflict. Russia and Turkey are further internationalizing the Libyan war. Turkey [reversed](#) the Russian-backed campaign of the Libyan National Army (LNA) to overthrow the UN-recognized Government of National Accord (GNA) in Tripoli, provoking Egypt to [announce](#) a coming military intervention to block further GNA gains. Russia is [expanding](#) its [basing](#) in Syria, which can enable it to increase its power projection into Libya. Meanwhile, Turkey is asserting [sovereignty rights](#) over parts of the Mediterranean Sea economic zones claimed by Greece and Cyprus, in part through its partnership with the GNA.

Both dynamics drive a merging of the wars in Libya and Syria and deepening divisions within NATO. Turkey and Russia are mobilizing Syrian fighters to reinforce their partners in Libya. Greece, a NATO ally, and [Cyprus](#) are [normalizing](#) relations with the Russian-backed Assad regime in Syria to retaliate against Turkey. The Syrian and Libyan wars grow more difficult to resolve as these interconnectivities widen. Tensions are rising within NATO over Libya, meanwhile. France [withdrew from a NATO mission](#) in the Mediterranean after Turkey repeatedly blocked inspections of naval vessels suspected of carrying weapons to the GNA in Libya in violation of the UN embargo in May and June. These cumulative pressures on NATO advance Russia's interests to disrupt and weaken the alliance.

▼ **2. Institutions that provide resilience in the West are eroding.** Russia, China, and Iran are waging sophisticated [disinformation campaigns](#) to inflame distrust within Western societies towards their governments and advance specific political goals including delegitimizing Western sanctions. China and Russia have coordinated some of these efforts and China is adopting Russian tactics including [text spoofing](#). China and Russia are expanding their [disinformation](#) architecture through partnerships with Western and African news organizations. Clear evidence of China's malign [influence](#) over the WHO contributes to growing distrust of such institutions, meanwhile. China, Russia, and Iran are also strengthening their tools of domestic repression to disrupt and neutralize future protests. For example, Iran is implementing new facial recognition technology likely acquired from China. Read ISW's analysis of Russia's new social control measures [here](#).

▼ **3. Salafi – jihadist groups gained further momentum in Africa and the Middle East.** ISIS generated momentum in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria through its [annual surge](#) of operations during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (April 23 – May 23). ISIS's campaign included the temporary seizure of terrain from pro-Assad regime forces in a dangerous sign of [ISIS's capabilities](#) and commitment to regaining territorial control. ISIS also continues to [expand its operations](#) on the African continent. The G5 Sahel force in West Africa warned the UN Security Council on June 5 that security "is deteriorating visibly and with [rare constancy](#)" as a result of operations by both ISIS and al Qaeda. The US-Taliban peace deal in Afghanistan has emboldened al Qaeda. A [UN report](#) confirms the Taliban secretly pledged not to sever its historic relationship with al Qaeda despite the peace deal. Al Qaeda seeks to [replicate](#) the deal in Mali to secure a withdrawal of French forces.

- ▼ **4. A growing confrontation with China poses escalation risks.** China has scaled up its aggression abroad, including [asserting control](#) in Hong Kong in violation of the one country, two systems treaty with the UK as well as [signaling](#) preparation for possible [military action](#) against Taiwan. The Trump administration has increased the [US's military posture](#) in the Pacific, strengthening US deterrence and reinforcing [new political will](#) among US allies in the Pacific to respond to Chinese aggression. President Trump is [signaling](#) that he will not take broader action to impose costs on China for its aggression through measures such as sanctions, however. China may perceive this as an opportunity to advance further. China is also making a strategic investment in Africa, posturing as a [humanitarian leader](#) while gaining leverage over African states that have valuable infrastructure and [resources](#). Finally, China is posturing to pressure the US in the Middle East by expanding its [military base](#) in Djibouti to host both of its aircraft carriers.
- ▲ **5. The innovation boom linked to the pandemic could generate new competitive advantages.** The US will gain considerable leverage and the opportunity to make an important global contribution if the US develops a COVID-19 vaccine first. The US also reaps important secondary benefits from such research, which can lead to new medical advances in other areas. China recognizes this threat and is waging a broad effort to [steal US research](#).
- ▲ **6. The Russo-Iranian coalition is disrupted.** Russia and Iran have [failed](#) to gain control of [virus outbreaks](#) and face major economic constraints as a result of the combined pressures of US sanctions, COVID-19 related recessions, and (for Russia) low oil prices. Russia's operations abroad have been the most affected. Russia has been unable to re-engage in key theaters after suffering setbacks in the first half of 2020, including the Balkans and the Middle East. This disruption is temporary, however. Russian President Vladimir Putin is prioritizing consolidating domestic power first, having succeeded in passing a referendum on July 1 allowing him to remain president for a fifth term (until 2036, if reelected) and extending the power of the presidency to fire federal justices, among other things. See ISW's report on Putin's domestic consolidation [here](#).
- ▲ **7. The US has an opportunity to strengthen relations with the Iraqi government and constrain Iran.** A new Iraqi government under Prime Minister Kadhimi is demonstrating credibility as a US partner by making important strides toward necessary economic reform and other measures to address protester grievances, including steps to hold Iran's proxies accountable for violence against protesters. PM Kadhimi is also demonstrating a willingness to [take action against](#) Iranian proxies conducting rocket attacks on US forces. These steps are also important to setting the political conditions necessary to prevent a major ISIS resurgence. The US is implementing a premature [military drawdown](#) in Iraq, however, which will weaken US leverage and cede greater opportunity for ISIS to resurge. Read ISW's latest Iraq Situation Report [here](#) and its June 2019 warning on ISIS's reconstitution [here](#).
- ▲ **8. State collapse is deepening in Syria, increasing the value of the US investment in the east.** The Assad regime faces internal unrest unprecedented since the start of the civil war in 2011 due to a deepening collapse of the Syrian economy. The unrest includes [open defiance](#) from a major economic powerbroker Rami Makhlouf and protests from Druze populations that had remained aligned with Assad since 2011 but are now [expressing solidarity](#) with Syrian opposition groups. These dynamics increase the significance of the US commitment in eastern Syria, which provides stability and a counterterrorism platform the Assad regime and its backers cannot offer. New instability scenarios in regime - held Syria are possible and dangerous, however. Assad is unlikely to accept the reforms the US demands in return for a lifting of the financial pressure. Read ISW's latest Syria Situation Report [here](#) and a January 2020 OPED from Jennifer Cafarella on the implications of Assad's economic collapse [here](#).