

# Ten conflicts to watch in 2018

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The International Crisis Group (ICG) recently published an interesting report on top ten conflicts at the global level that needs to be watched during 2018.

If one has to attempt a similar survey in South Asia, ten conflicts could be identified with different intensity. Some conflicts – Afghanistan and the sectarian conflict in Pakistan are highly violent. Some - India's Northeast, Naxalite, Nepal and Sri Lanka – are facing a decline and transformation, but are likely to get relapsed, if the State does not walk the last mile. Some conflicts - J&K are facing a dangerous transformation – it could get worse if the present is not addressed.

In short, the conflicts in South Asia are in various stages. Some are high-intensity ones, some are facing transformation – positive and negative, and some are likely to remain in a slow burn process.

## **Afghanistan: A Conflict with No Winners**

Afghanistan is the most violent conflict in South Asia; it is likely to get worse during 2018, for four reasons. First, despite Trump's surge in American troops, the conflict has not entered into a decisive phase in Afghanistan. Despite the troops level, contractors and the use of technology, the American and Afghan troops have not succeeded in pushing the Taliban into a corner.

Second, the Taliban seems to have sustained; it may not win the war during 2018, but is not likely to lose it either. The ability of the Taliban to sustain itself will be the primary determinant of the conflict's course during 2018.

Third, the entry of the ISIS into Afghanistan; recent high profile suicide attacks highlight the new threat in 2018. Though it is not clear whether the ISIS is formed by the breakaway Taliban groups, or an independent phenomenon, one is likely to witness more attacks from it during 2018.

Fourth reason is explained subsequently.

## **Af-Pak Border Conflict: Drones and Beyond**

This year is likely to be the most decisive one regarding the conflict across the border between

Afghanistan and Pakistan.

First, the deteriorating relations between the US and Pakistan is likely to witness an increased cross-border attacks led by the US from the Afghan side. Since Trump becoming the President, there has been a renewed effort to use drones as a cross-border strategy by the US. So far, Pakistan has not fired back at the drones; will Pakistan remain a mute spectator, if the bilateral relations worsen further, or if the drones target militants beyond the tribal belt?

Second, besides the US-Pak relations, Afghan-Pakistan relations also have not stabilised yet, despite multiple high level bilateral and quadripartite meetings (involving China and the US). Pakistan has been accusing Afghanistan of not doing enough against the TTP who are using the latter as a haven.

The deterioration in Afghanistan-Pakistan-US relations also means effective calibration of the Haqqani network by Pakistan. This will make the Af-Pak border volatile – both politically and militarily during 2018.

### **Pakistan's Sectarian Conflict: Further expansion in targets and regions**

The third most violent conflict in South Asia will be Pakistan's sectarian conflict.

If the last few years are any indication – in terms of assault by the sectarian groups, expanding societal fault lines and the inability of the State to address the conflict – politically, legally and militarily, one could expect a continuation of sectarian violence in 2018.

At the societal law, the debate over blasphemy has polarised the communities internally. The State has not addressed this crucial issue – politically and legally. This has resulted in two specific issues – first, the expansion of the sectarian target; from the Ahmediyas and the Shias, there is an expansion of the targets. Now, the Sufi Islam is also being targeted. Second, there is an expansion in the areas and the recurrence of sectarian violence. For example, Quetta in Balochistan and Parachinar in FATA have become recurrent targets in the last two years. Unfortunately, this is likely to continue in 2018.

The use of suicide bombs, is likely to increase the intensity of sectarian violence in Pakistan.

### **Balochistan: The Slow Burn**

Balochistan has remained in a slow burn for the last few years. While the State has made substantial gains in brutally destroying the Baloch militants, it could not do much in handling the growing sectarian violence, especially in Quetta. Perhaps, it does not want to.

Provincial politics towards the end of 2017 became fragile; this is likely to impinge further on larger political stability of the province. This is important for Balochistan, especially with the ongoing CPEC projects, and the local fear that it would allow rest of Pakistan to subdue the Balochis further.

The slow burn will continue in 2018.

### **J&K: Another Tipping Point**

2018 is likely to be a crucial year for Kashmir. During the last two years, there has been an increase in youth unrest. 2017 witnessed this unrest giving way to youths picking up guns again, especially in South Kashmir. Worse, 2017 also witnessed support for the above phenomenon across the Kashmir valley, again among the youths.

New Delhi has appointed a new interlocutor for J&K. So far, its process is yet to show on the ground level.

Will the interlocutor break the ice? Or, will it be another half-hearted attempt by New Delhi? 2018 is likely to be a tipping point for Kashmir Valley – depending on the State's initiatives and their successes. Kashmir could go either way.

### **The Rohingya Conflict: South Asian Echoes**

Rohingya violence is not taking place in South Asia; but the region is likely to face the pangs of proximity. Dhaka is already struggling with hosting the Rohingya refugees and is expecting India to intervene in Myanmar, and also help Bangladesh in sharing the refugee burden.

India is hesitant and inward-looking over the Rohingya issue. The domestic politics is already muddled with the government's legal and security position over the Rohingyas. There is a fear that the Rohingyas presence in India will invite radicalization within and also be abused by hostile intelligence agencies.

### **ISIS across the Region: Further Radicalisation**

Across South Asia, from Kabul in Afghanistan to Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh, there is a fear that the ISIS will spread its tentacles, or worse find new recruits.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, the ISIS presence in 2017 has been confirmed. Will it spread further east towards India and Bangladesh? There have been reports in select pockets of the ISIS presence across the region.

For the State, the problem is two-sided – the first one radicalization on ground, and the second one through online. The State has to go a long way to understand the contours of both the problems.

Will the State finally comprehend the ISIS threat in 2018?

### **The Naxal Conflict: Walking the Last Mile in 2018**

The State has made an impressive inroad in controlling the Naxal violence in 2017. Either the State has succeeded, or the Naxalite groups and their ideology are breaking up.

However, the history of the Naxal movement in India will tell a story of its own. If controlled in one region, it finds a way to emerge in another.

The State will have a great opportunity in 2018. But, the regional history is full of stories on the failure of the State to walk the last mile, after controlling the violence.

## **Nepal and Sri Lanka: Conflict has ended, but peace is afar**

Finally, Nepal and Sri Lanka also have the last mile problem. Perhaps the elites at the national capital believe, that they have achieved victory already, so why should there be any further political concessions?

The history of human civilization has witnessed repeatedly that a bad deal by the victors leads to losers to prepare for the next round of war.

Will Nepal and Sri Lanka understand the above, and walk the last mile in 2018?