

Evaluating the Importance of Recent Events

by George Friedman - January 14, 2020

There are moments when the entire world seems to be coming apart, as if Armageddon itself were upon us. Public attention tends to be able to handle just one Armageddon at a time, and even though the end of the world would probably entail more than one calamity, newspapers have room for only one alarmed headline a day, and Twitter seems confined to one overwhelming rage attack at a time. I am of course referring to the high-profile confrontation between the U.S. and Iran and the much lower profile Turkish deployment to Libya. Catastrophic though they may seem, it is prudent to consider their current state, just a week or two after the panic, and to consider other panic-ridden global processes. What, after all, happened to China and Brexit?

The pattern of informational flow and emotional intensity does not derive from the underlying issue – the issues are still there. History grubs its way forward ineluctably, but we only sometimes notice it, usually when something happens that is both unexpected and noisy. Since humanity tends to expect tomorrow not to be any different than yesterday, and since its attention is drawn by noise, it assumes what was once unnoticed is now catastrophic.

Consider the unexpected and noisy events in Turkey and between the United States and Iran. They are significant but the frantic noise drowns out their importance, which unfolds over years, decades and generations.

Iran's struggle to create a sphere of influence, the Shiite crescent as it is sometimes called, is challenged by its opponents. On one side are Iranian non-state proxies in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq. On the other side are Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Iranians have tried to focus the struggle on Iraq, using substantial but far from overwhelming support among Iraqi Shiites. The United States has focused its efforts on Iran itself, using economic sanctions to undermine the regime and to block it in Iraq. Neither side has been successful. The sanctions have created unhappiness, reflected in the university-based demonstrations over the downing of a Ukrainian plane. But student uprisings rarely bring about regime change. Others must join, and to this point, the regime is under pressure but not falling.

Turkey, meanwhile, made a significant move to exert its control over the Eastern Mediterranean and in Libya, the goal of which is strategic. The chaos of the Middle East increasingly impinges on Turkey, yet Turkey is, second to Israel, the major power in the region. The assertion of power to the

east changes the perception and reality and gives Ankara access to major oil supplies, which it needs to control for national security reasons. The expectation was that its move into Libya might create conflict with Russia. The move into the Mediterranean might create tensions with Israel and Greece, both backed by the United States. Such tensions have not surfaced thus far, and indeed Turkey's control of the Eastern Mediterranean is still in the concept development phase. What is interesting is there seems to be something of an entente with Russia over Libya. Russia does not want to alienate Turkey, nor does Turkey want to alienate Russia. What happens later will happen. For now, a mistrustful bargain will do.

Both of these events were unexpected enough and noisy enough to capture the world's attention. As a moment in a far longer drama, they were not trivial events. Nor were they decisive enough to transform or endanger the world. It is interesting to look at two other events that just a few months ago seemed destined to endanger the world.

One was Brexit. Over three years ago, the British government called for a referendum on whether Britain should leave the EU. It was called because it was expected the British public would dismiss the idea as unworthy of the name. Instead, the British voted to leave. There followed a storm worthy of a Wagnerian opera. If Britain left, it would collapse into nothingness. If it stayed, it would collapse into nothingness. The EU would punish Europe's second-largest economy by isolating it. The Easter Rebellion in Ireland would be resurrected, and on and on. Now, we are weeks away from the beginning of the divorce, and while it is still mentioned widely, Brexit has had the venom drawn from it. Europe needs Britain because it absorbs a vast number of exports. The threats the EU made at the time weren't credible, and the panic of the City died down as the finance world considered how it might make money out of Brexit without moving to Frankfurt. The world will change in some way, but the fundamental reality on which Britain and its relationship to Europe rests will not change quickly. That relationship is a weighty thing, and moving it is like moving the Tower of London. It won't happen quickly.

The other event was China. The Chinese did not welcome American exports, so the United States became unpleasant about Chinese exports. This was seen as a new Cold War, a struggle between two equal powers. The fact was that China was still staggering financially from 2008. Its economy was a fraction of the size of the American economy (measured in something other than the mythical purchasing power parity). The Chinese economy was heavily dependent on exports, particularly to the United States. The U.S. is not heavily dependent on exports. Pig farmers and Apple execs were portrayed as being in agony. In fact, trade wars are common. That was what the EU was threatening Britain with. And China was the weak hand. It could not allow its domestic market to be swamped by

American goods, and it could not substitute for exports. It was a deadlock with intermittent threats and announcements of something or other. We have now reached the point of intermittent statements and discussions on obscure websites like our own.

The point is that geopolitical analysis lays out the broad format and direction of events. It is easy to see noisy events outside the context of geopolitics and therefore to vastly overstate their significance. The events between the U.S. and Iran last week are startling only if you fail to see the broad process underway, without which the important is overwhelmed by a mere set of events that flow from the important but are contained in the predictable emergence of Turkish power. The events in the Mediterranean and North Africa are part of that. They did not occur out of nothing but out of geopolitical necessity. The same can be said about China and Brexit. As time passes, the event is slowly forgotten, and the gradual evolution of history is something you get used to.

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