During December 2015, INcontext published an article listing 15 of the most significant ‘tipping points’ that had shaped the global political scene and international relationships during the year.

These geopolitical tipping points will, in a domino effects, create ‘launching pads’ for future trends to develop. Five major trends that constitute launching pads likely to shape the future are as follows:

1. **A new surge in EUROPEAN NATIONALISM is gaining momentum**, following the January and November attacks in Paris, France, during 2015. These attacks were tipping points in the hearts and minds of many Parisians, French citizens and Europeans, and a platform was created for new anti-immigrant sentiments tied to European nationalism.

2. **A possible new ‘COLD WAR’ and the fall of the PETRODOLLAR** seems possible as the fragile Russian-US relationship was driven to multiple tipping points in 2015, while the Russian-Chinese relationship continued to flourish, especially in the fields of economics and energy resources. These tensions have created a dangerous platform from which the fall of the ‘petrodollar’ could bring about a collapse in the US economy.

3. **Changes in the US POLITICAL PLAYING FIELD** abound, largely due to presidential hopeful Donald Trump, who has seized opportunities created by the declining support for incumbent president Barack Obama. President Obama faced multiple tipping points in 2015 – including Israel, Russia, Iran, Iraq and domestic race-relation challenges – and the general disillusionment of the American public has created a platform of discontent, used by Mr Trump as a launching pad for introducing political change.

4. **A SELF-DESTRUCTIVE FAITH** is being counter-productively forwarded by Islamic extremists, whose visual brutality is becoming more and more repellent. Radicals such as those belonging to the Islamic State (in Iraq and Syria) and Nigeria’s Boko Haram have effectively used social media to gain support, but their public actions have also brought about tipping points in inter-Islamic relations, and have created a platform of division that could bring about a self-destruction.

5. **A shift in TRADITIONAL MISSIONS** is being seen as hundreds of thousands of refugees continue to enter Europe. A tipping point of the influx occurred when a young boy drowned and was washed ashore as his family attempted to flee Syria, and while a Biblical deep concern for meeting the immediate needs of the desperate grew among Christians and non-Christians alike, at the same time a precarious launching pad for traditional missions to be replaced by societal necessities was created.

**1. A launching pad for renewed European nationalism**

The January and November attacks in Paris, France, during 2015 were tipping points that led to a wave of anti-immigrant sentiments, giving rise to a new surge in European right-wing nationalism.

On Sunday 6 December 2015, France held the first round of high-stakes regional elections. The NATIONAL FRONT, France’s far-right political activists with a strong anti-immigration agenda, gained a significant majority vote and a major political boost. Led by Marine Le Pen, the party gained national support after the November 13 Islamic State (IS) attacks that killed 130 people in Paris, and high
unemployment and fears about an escalation in immigration played a role in the party securing 30.6% of the national vote. According to Reuters, former President Nicolas Sarkozy’s conservative Les Republicains party and their allies came in second with 27% of the vote, while President Francois Hollande’s ruling Socialists came third (winning 22.7% of the vote).

In the second round of elections, however, on 13 December, the National Front failed to win a single region of France’s municipal elections, coming in third behind Les Republicains and the Socialists. BUT, even though Marine Le Pen’s party failed to win a single region, it is still significant that the party had tripled its number of councillors and was now the ‘first opposition force’ in many French regional councils.

Beyond France’s borders, European nationalist leaders are finding increased support. In June 2015, the far-right parties in the European Parliament announced that they had mustered enough unity to form a political group under the leadership of Marine Le Pen – this was a result of joint efforts of France’s National Front, the Dutch PVV of Geert Wilders, Austria’s Freedom Party, Italy’s Northern League and the Belgian Flemish Interest Party. In Poland and Hungary, and in the governing coalition in Switzerland and Finland, nationalists also have significant influence. PEGIDA in Germany grew from strength to strength during 2015, and anti-Islamic Geert Wilders in Holland is already polled to win 26% of votes in a next Dutch election. Left-wing groups like Syriza in Greece also enjoy large support, as do anti-immigration groups in Sweden.

George Friedman, writing for the political analyst publication Stratfor, commented on European nationalism as follows: “European nationalism has always had a deeper engine than simply love of one’s own. It is also rooted in resentment of others. Europe is not necessarily unique in this, but it has experienced some of the greatest catastrophes in history because of it. Historically, the Europeans have hated well. We are very early in the process of accumulating grievances and remembering how to hate, but we have entered the process. How this is played out, how the politicians, financiers and media interpret these grievances, will have great implications for Europe. Out of it may come a broader sense of national betrayal, which was just what the European Union was supposed to prevent.”

2. A launching pad for the end of the ‘petrodollar’

The fragile Russian-US relationship was driven to multiple tipping points in 2015, while the Russian-Chinese relationship continued to flourish, especially in the fields of economics and energy resources. These tensions have created a dangerous platform from which the fall of the ‘petrodollar’ could bring about a collapse in the US economy.

Much was reported about Russia’s signed gas deal with China in 2014, which was expected to be worth more than $400 billion. But little attention was paid to a public announcement by China’s President Xi Jinping, who spoke if it being ‘time for a new model of security, not just for China, but for all of Asia’. China and Russia have similar views of the US – mistrust, suspicion and animosity – and would benefit from efforts to ‘dethrone’ the US dollar as the world’s reserve currency.

Forbes reported that it was believed that the 30-year China-Russia gas deal would involve annual Russian delivery of 1.3 trillion cubic feet of gas to China, and that the total capital expenditure to build the pipeline and all other infrastructure for the project will be more than $22 billion, making it one of the largest projects in the world. Through the deal, Russia will provide about 25% of China’s current natural gas demand.
The significance and importance of this relates to the ‘petrodollar’. As a result of the new gas deal with China, Russia may refuse to take payment in US dollars for their gas supplies (as they currently do), and this could mean the beginning of the end for the petrodollar.

Andrew Topf of Oilprice.com reported as follows: “…trade deals and high-level cooperation between Russia and China have set off alarm bells in the West, as policymakers and oil and gas executives watch the balance of power in global energy markets shift to the East... the era of US dollar dominance could be coming to an end, due to increasing competition from the world’s second largest economy and primary consumer of commodities, China.”

Topf continued: “It is no secret that Beijing has been looking to promote the yuan as an alternative reserve currency. Having that status would allow China cheap access to world capital markets and cheaper transaction costs on international trade, not to mention increased clout as an economic power commensurate with its rising proportion of world commerce... An International Business Times article pointed out that ‘more than 10,000 financial institutions are doing business in Chinese yuan, up from 900 in June 2011, while the pool of offshore yuan, non-existent three years ago, is now near 900 billion ($143 billion). And the proportion of China’s exports and imports settled in yuan has increased nearly sixfold in three years to nearly 12 percent.’”

Thus China’s continued rise as a global economic superpower threatens US financial supremacy, and China’s growing ties to Russia add to the launching pad that could bring about dramatic changes in the US economy and beyond.

3. A launching pad for new political playing fields

US presidential hopeful Donald Trump has seized opportunities created by the declining support for incumbent president Barack Obama, who has faced multiple tipping points in 2015 (including Israel, Russia, Iran, Iraq and domestic race-relation challenges). The general disillusionment of the American public has created a platform of discontent, used by Mr Trump as a launching pad for introducing political change.

Whoever wants to win the 2016 US elections will have to deal with a ‘redefined’ playing field for the next US president. Thanks to Donald Trump, business mogul turned presidential candidate, deep divides in opinion and widespread discontent with US leadership have been exposed.

In December 2015, Mr Trump shocked the US public with a proposal to ban Muslims from entering the United States. His statements were the latest evidence that Mr Trump does not apply the rules of political correctness as applied by the current president. But equally shocking was the response: nearly two-thirds of likely Republican voters, including prominent Christian leaders like Franklin Graham, supported Trump’s controversial idea. An online poll conducted by Bloomberg Politics and Purple Strategies found that 64% of likely GOP voters supported Trump's proposal.
Donald Trump, the ‘face’ of new, unconventional and contrary US politics, has stated some beliefs and opinions that have appalled some and attracted other potential US voters. Gerry Mullany summarised some of Mr Trump’s policies in the NEW YORK TIMES:

- **Foreign Policy** – Mr Trump claimed that he had devised a ‘foolproof way’ to defeat the Islamic State (IS) ‘very quickly.’ But he refused to divulge it, saying he did not ‘want the enemy to know what [he’s] doing’. He calls President Obama ‘one of the worst things that’s ever happened to Israel’, and blames him for deteriorating US-Israeli relations. He says Russian-backed separatists are acting aggressively in Ukraine because the US is ‘not a respected country and we don’t have respected leadership at this moment’ – but says America’s European allies should confront Russia.

- **Immigration** – Mr Trump – whose mother emigrated from Scotland – says illegal immigrants are ‘destroying the fabric of the country’ while the middle class is getting ‘decimated’. He opposes efforts to grant legal status to undocumented immigrants, calling that a ‘suicide mission’ for Republicans because ‘every one of those 11 million people will be voting Democratic’. He proposes instead to fortify the nation’s borders by building ‘a real wall’ to keep immigrants out.

- **Same-Sex Marriage** – Mr Trump says that his views on marriage are ‘evolving’ but that he still favours ‘traditional marriage’, between ‘a man and a woman’ (he has been married three times). Same-sex marriage, he says, isn’t his ‘thing’.

- **The Environment** – He does not just deny that climate change is occurring; he calls it a hoax, and says those who warn of global warming only want to raise taxes. He is less outspoken on other environmental issues, though he sued unsuccessfully in 2013 to block plans for wind turbines in Scotland that would power 65,000 homes, arguing, in part, that they would mar the view from a golf course he was proposing to build.

- **The Economy and Budget** – Mr Trump believes reckless government borrowing and stimulative policies by the Federal Reserve threaten the long-term health of the American economy and undermine the dollar, which, he said in 2012, ‘is going to go to hell’. He strongly opposes the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade deal, calling it ‘an attack on America’s business’ that fails to penalize Asian nations like Japan when, he says, they engage in currency manipulation and flooding the United States with low-cost exports that ‘are truly hurting our economy and our jobs’ – including, as it turns out, products with the Trump label.”

It is clear that Mr Trump is addressing fears that many voters are too scared to voice. The sad reality, however, is that Mr Trump’s voice seems rooted in self-preservation and self-interest. The Washington Post recently released a confidential memo in which a senior Republican official details the “brash New Yorker” that was finding himself at the top of their party ticket. According to the memo, “Trump has risen because voters see him as authentic, independent, direct, firm – and believe he can’t be bought.”

For better or worse, Mr Trump is unquestionably changing the political playing field ahead of a critical US election.

### 4. A launching pad for an Islamic implosion

A self-destructive faith is being counter-productively forwarded by Islamic extremists, whose visual brutality is becoming more and more repellent. Radicals such as those belonging to the Islamic State and Boko Haram have used social media to gain support, but their public actions have also brought about tipping points in inter-Islamic relations, and have created a platform of division that could bring about a self-destruction.

The horrific video images of people being beheaded by members of the Islamic State, the images of bodies
spread across an entertainment hall in Paris, the merciless killings in multiple countries including Syria, Yemen and Libya, and daily reports of inhumane atrocities in the name of Islam, have brought questions within Islam to a tipping point. It is no longer just ‘Islamophobic’ Westerners expressing their opposition to Islam – high numbers of Muslims are questioning what could be a self-destructive faith.

While ‘moderate’ Muslims in the Western world deny that their ‘beloved faith’ shares commonalities with the radical IS beliefs, it becoming clearer by the day that Islam is a ‘many-splintered, much divided faith’ with different doctrinal and ideological versions, varying degrees of devotion, and highly opposing interpretations. In other words, Islam is not monolithic. This is illustrated by the fact that radical Islamic jihad, the harsh and violent means of seeking to impose by force a worldwide Islamic caliphate, has (up to the present moment) been responsible for the deaths of at least four Muslims for every non-Muslim victim.

A kingdom divided is a kingdom destined for desolation – Jesus said in Matthew 12v25: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not stand.” This principle implies that in all societies, a common ruin is the consequence of mutual quarrels. Division commonly ends in desolation: if we clash, we break; if we divide one from another, we become an easy prey to a common enemy; “if we bite and devour one another, we shall be consumed one by another” (Galatians 5:15, KJV with slight paraphrase).

An widely-repeated concept is that while not all Muslims are radical Islamic jihadists, almost all violent radicals today are Muslim. Public opinion polls reveal that perhaps as many as 10-20% of the approximately 1.6 billion Muslim adherents worldwide believe that violence in pursuit of jihad is often morally justifiable (that’s a minimum of 110 million people).

On 1 January 2015, Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi went to the Al-Azhar University (widely considered the most important center in the Arab world for the study of Islamic doctrine and principles) in Cairo and delivered what many considered to be a courageous and possibly historic ‘tide-turning’ speech. Mr Sisi called on the assembled Islamic clerics, scholars, and imams to lead a revolution within Islam and to move away from the idea of wanting to destroy the non-Muslim world. He called for more “enlightened” thinking. A few days later, on 6th January, Mr Sisi attended a Coptic Christian mass and spoke there of his deep affection for Egyptian Christians – a first for any Egyptian president. This kind of behaviour by a Muslim world leader could have resounding ripple effects within the global Muslim community.

There is no doubt that Islam is a divided faith, and while any widespread implosion within Islam is not likely to happen overnight (more likely taking generations), the actions of violent extremists like those supporting the Islamic State are preparing the launching pad for this process to start.

5. A launching pad for a decline in traditional missions

A shift in TRADITIONAL MISSIONS is being seen as hundreds of thousands of refugees enter Europe. A tipping point of the influx occurred when a young boy drowned and was washed ashore as his family attempted to flee Syria, and while a deep concern for meeting the immediate needs of the desperate grew among Christians and non-Christians alike, at the same time a precarious launching pad for traditional missions to be replaced by societal necessities was created.

The refugee crisis in Europe will have far reaching effects on ‘Christian Europe’, the traditional bastion of mission endeavours. Many of the mission ‘heroes of faith’ started their lives in Europe – Hudson Taylor, William Carey, Eric Liddle and countless other British and European missionaries gave their lives for the sake of the Kingdom.
With a secular mind-set now the norm in Europe, a 'Kingdom mentality' will not be the first priority for those reaching out to the ever-growing numbers of refugees. The primary concerns of those welcoming refugees are focused on the humanitarian and secular wellbeing of those seeking refuge. ‘Missionary work’ is being minimised while ‘societal necessities’ are emphasised, and the neglect of the spiritual wellbeing of refugees could well create a launching pad that could change Western missions forever.

In an article that first appeared in Die Welt, Barbara Rudolph (head of the Ecumenical Department of the Protestant Church in Germany's Rheinland region), recalls speaking with Austrian sociologist Mouhanad Khorchide at an academic seminar: Khorchide, who holds the chair for Islamic Religious Studies at the University of Muenster, was explaining his belief that God loves all people – no matter their religion, or lack thereof – and that God only expects compassion and kindness towards others, not pious dogmas. Rudolph asked herself why she should wish to convert such a good man. "He would have been well within his rights to view that as a slap in the face," she recalls.

Rudolph took that idea to the logical next conclusion, drafting a policy document sanctioned by the Regional Protestant Church regarding the relationship between Christians and Muslims, which was subsequently sent out to all parishes in the region. According to this paper, the church leaders categorically rejected the conversion of reform-minded Muslims, and dismissed outright all missionary work directed at Muslims.

This is an extraordinary approach towards Christian-Muslim relations – by Germany’s second largest national Protestant Church – and while some may hail as a ‘progressive and ground-breaking effort’, others view it as a dangerous breach of Biblical tradition and understanding, and a drastic compromise.

The sharing of one’s faith with unbelievers has been an integral part of Christianity since its earliest days. And it is important to note that no other ecclesiastical statement made by the Protestant Church of Germany has gone as far as the paper mentioned above. Abandoning efforts of conversion will be out of the question for many church leaders, including those of the Catholic Church, while still follows the catechism published under Pope John Paul II, which states that God wishes for "the entirety of humanity to find its unity within one church".

Time will tell how these conflicting sentiments play out in Germany (and the wider secular Europe), and how far any breaks with traditional mission will spread. But there is no doubt that attitudes like that of Barbara Rudolph could create a launching pad that will change the face of missions for future generations.

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