

Chapter 13

Competing Visions and Actions by China, Russia, and the United States in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic

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This chapter reviews the contours of Great Power competition across Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic; it traces the motivation and scale as well as receptivity to, and potential repercussions of, Chinese and Russian activities across these regions. It finds the challenge of these two competitors to be distinct, the risks to U.S. interests to be uneven across and within each region, and, ultimately, regional states' cooperation with China and Russia to rarely be grounded in an ideological commitment to Beijing's global vision or Moscow's cynicism. This points to the need for parallel strategies that appreciate the diverse challenges China and Russia pose, a broader recalibration of U.S. regional interests that moves beyond the post-9/11 focus on counterterrorism, and a discerning strategic approach that avoids pulling U.S. regional partners into an unrestricted, zero-sum competition.

The priorities of the 2018 National Defense Strategy imply a greater emphasis on the Indo-Pacific region and Europe, yet the era of Great Power competition currently unfolding among the United States, China, and Russia is not confined to these boundaries. Just as Russia's targeted influence activities in selected geostrategic regions have become more visible in the past decade, so too does China extend its economic and, to a lesser extent, military reach into its far abroad.¹ These activities have now begun generating some alarm—especially in U.S. military circles—that America's Great Power rivals might peel away traditional U.S. strategic partners and allies, embolden or insulate U.S. adversaries, or otherwise provide China and Russia with access and resources that will magnify their power to the strategic disadvantage of the United States.²

How should the United States best balance its regional investments in an emerging era of Great Power competition? The answer to this important question requires an appraisal of the nature and stakes of U.S. competition with Russia and China outside of

each competitor's immediate neighborhood. This chapter thus surveys the interests and activities of these competitors across Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic. It further evaluates regional receptivity to these activities, as well as how Chinese and Russian behavior could pose direct and consequential threats to U.S. regional interests.

We find the motivations, scale, and potential repercussions of Chinese and Russian activities across these four geographic regions to be distinct from each other. Russia has expanded its political and diplomatic stature by sponsoring multilateral initiatives and presenting itself as a reliable, unconditional ally to regional friends. China has also come to compete with the United States by establishing a narrative of a politically disinterested, national sovereignty-respecting power, establishing cooperative partnerships with U.S. friends and foes alike. Chinese economic investments have been expansive and could yield economic gains, opportunities for political coercion, and military access.

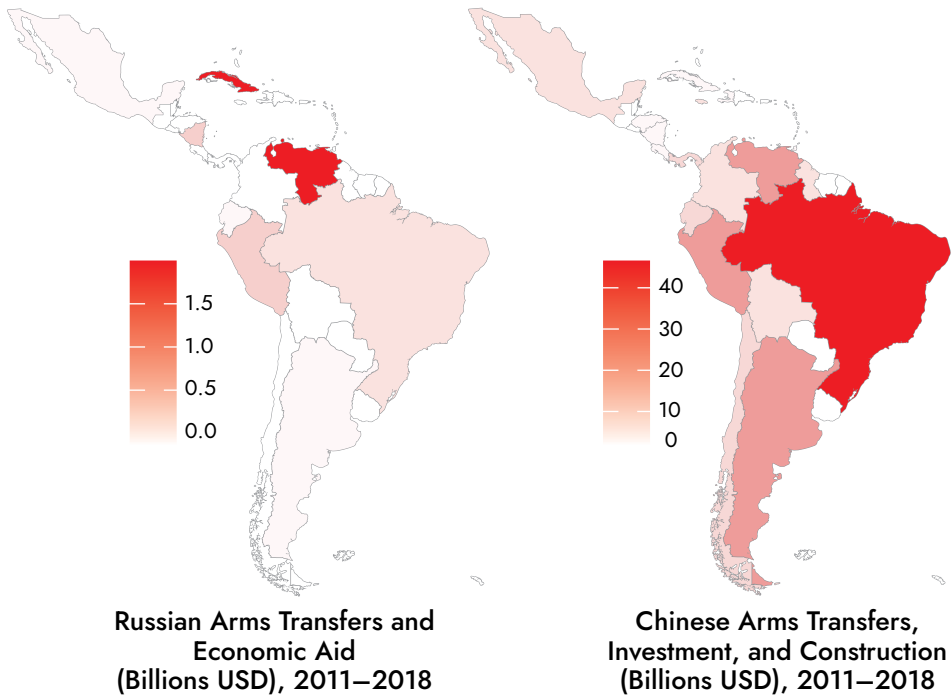
The emerging era of Great Power competition will confront U.S. policymakers both with the challenge of how to shift greater resources and attention toward Russian and Chinese traditional spheres of influence and with the questions of whether and how to compete with Beijing and Moscow on a global scale. Doing so will require distinct strategies for competing with Russia and China, a recalibration of U.S. interests across the world, and a discerning approach that reduces the prospects of pulling U.S. regional partners into an unrestricted, zero-sum competition.

Latin America

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has generally viewed stability in Latin America as a central goal in the region.³ The United States seeks a Latin America comprised of “stable, friendly, and prosperous states,” in order to contain the spillover effects of transregional violence, criminal enterprises, and illegal immigration, as well as for the benefit of the U.S. economy.⁴ To this end, the United States has established a robust network of free trade agreements as well as regional and bilateral security initiatives, and it has leveraged economic assistance—more than \$2 billion in 2018—to promote good governance in the region.⁵

At the same time, China and Russia are increasingly engaging in Latin America, hoping to gain access to new markets, acquire strategic ports and electronic hubs, and benefit geopolitically from increased proximity to the American “near abroad.” Yet each competitor approaches the region on a different scale—and, at times, through different partners—as reflected in figure 13.1.

In the past decade, China's engagement in the region has not varied according to Latin American nations' political ideologies. Beijing's investments appear to have paid off; a 2018 regional survey found that 55 percent of respondents in Latin America had a “good” or “very good” view of China.⁶ Beijing's tool kit is largely based on economic instruments, using large-scale loans, infrastructure investments, and telecommunications projects to engage the region. The China Development Bank and China Export-Import Bank are now the largest lenders in Latin America, with loans totaling \$141.3 billion between 2005 and 2018, more than five times the amount of official U.S. economic loans and grants disbursed during the same time period.⁷ Currently, 19 countries in Latin America participate in China's Belt and Road Initiative, and China is active in more than 50 port projects across the

Figure 13.1. Russian and Chinese Aid and Investments in Latin America

Sources: Arms transfer data for both Russia and China were retrieved from Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) Arms Transfers Database, available at <<https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>>. Chinese investment data are from Derek Scissors, "China Global Investment Tracker," American Enterprise Institute, available at <<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>>. Russian Official Development Assistance data are from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development Web site, available at <<https://stats.oecd.org/>>.

region, for both commercial and potential military use.⁸ China has also at times provided military assistance to regional powers—second only to Russia in the value of its arms transfers to Venezuela—and has established 40 Confucius Institutes in the region that could serve as important platforms for Chinese soft-power projection.⁹

Russia lacks China's ability to offer significant economic resources, so it instead opts to engage Latin America by focusing its efforts on countries that it had a strong relationship with during the Cold War. This primarily entails members of the Bolivarian Alliance, which is led by Venezuela but includes other ideologically likeminded countries such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Bolivia, as well as some members of El Salvador's political elite. This alliance shares a strong anti-U.S. ideology and operates as a likeminded network of deeply criminalized states. Russia's engagement offers little more than an opportunity to challenge or frustrate the United States; however, by working predominantly with the Bolivarian Alliance, Russia also avoids navigating as many economic and political hurdles as China as it increases its activities in Latin America.

The Vladimir Putin regime's outreach to Latin America is designed to maximize impact at low cost. To date, this approach consists largely of weapons sales and donations; high-level state-to-state visits; military and police training in areas such as counternarcotics; and

the opportunity for certain partner nations to access Russian financial institutions, to avoid being sanctioned while moving funds through the American banking system.¹⁰ Russia has actively opened financial operations in Latin America—including banks and a cryptocurrency—to help blunt the impact of U.S. and European Union sanctions on allies such as Venezuela and Nicaragua. In addition to financial access nodes, Russia works with regional partners to create joint space projects and to flood the region with Internet propaganda creating a “fog of falsehoods” designed to disorient audiences.¹¹ All such actions bolster Russia’s brand as a reliable and predictable ally for regional states, and more than 50 percent of respondents in a recent regional survey held a “good” or “very good” opinion of Russia.¹²

Russia and China are attractive partners for Latin American countries in the new era of Great Power competition. Both offer their allies—Venezuela, Cuba, and Nicaragua, in particular—protection from condemnation in the United Nations (UN) Security Council and means to avoid U.S. sanctions. Beijing and Moscow also provide an avenue to bypass the rule of law and democratic accountability-based conditions the United States often imposes on its foreign assistance. China has been an attractive partner throughout Latin America since at least 2005 but more particularly in these past 3 years. Since 2016, China has named eight countries—including Venezuela—as hemispheric strategic partners.¹³

For the United States, the most immediate consequence of Russian and Chinese activities in Latin America has emerged from their support of the Nicolás Maduro regime in Venezuela—including purchasing oil, a violation of U.S. sanctions. In 2019, China purchased, on average, 320,000 barrels per day from Venezuela despite U.S. sanctions going into effect in January of the same year.¹⁴ Although China’s objectives are primarily economic in nature—such as securing oil and oil drilling rights—Beijing’s activities in Venezuela have been crucial to Maduro’s survival. China has loaned Venezuela more than \$70 billion in recent years, a rather controversial decision given that Venezuela still owes China approximately \$20 billion.¹⁵

Russia’s robust engagement in Venezuela has been mainly to disrupt U.S. engagement and help the Maduro regime bypass international sanctions. Actions taken by Russia in Venezuela include sending two long-range nuclear-capable bombers, deploying special forces troops and Wagner Group mercenaries, sending intelligence-collection ships to Venezuelan waters, and deploying underwater research ships capable of mapping undersea cables.¹⁶ In addition to these actions, Russia has provided Venezuela \$17 billion in loans and credit lines from 2006 to 2018.¹⁷

Beyond Venezuela, China and Russia support authoritarian, anti-U.S. regimes across the region both directly and indirectly. Since 2017, China has successfully persuaded three countries—Panama, the Dominican Republic, and El Salvador—to establish diplomatic ties with Beijing, abandoning their decades-old practice of recognizing Taiwan and leaving only nine nations in the hemisphere, primarily small Caribbean islands, that recognize the legitimacy of Taipei.¹⁸ Whereas China has been successful in securing political concessions from its partners, both Russian and Chinese actions threaten to erode democratic governance in Latin America while weakening historic U.S. alliances in countries such as Panama, Argentina, and Ecuador.¹⁹ While distinct in their approaches, the immediate consequences of Russian and Chinese engagement in Latin America may achieve a similar anti-U.S. end.

The Middle East

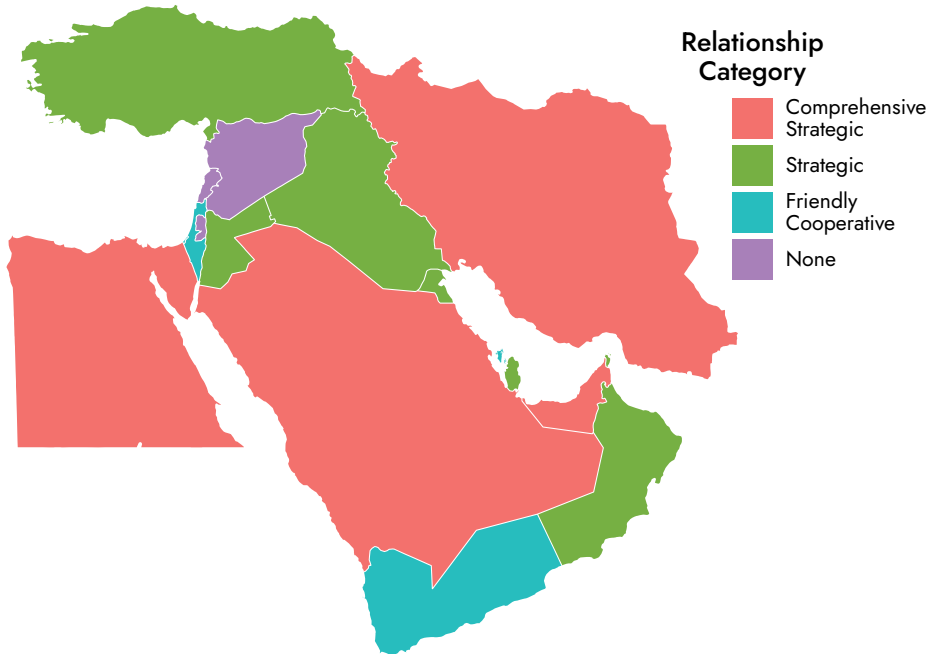
Since 9/11, U.S. engagement in the Middle East has been buoyed by a desire to contain or degrade terrorist safe havens, maintain a regional balance of power favorable to U.S. interests, and—given that the Middle East is home to three geostrategic maritime chokepoints—ensure the stability of global energy markets.²⁰ The United States has generally secured these interests through the forward presence of military forces, but it has also employed security cooperation agreements, as well as military and economic aid, to cement key partnerships and secure military access in the region.²¹ In terms of economic and military resources, the level of U.S. investment in the region is considerable. In 2018, the United States is estimated to have transferred to the Middle East nearly \$6 billion worth of armaments, comprising 55 percent of total U.S. arms transfers for the year.²² The region also received more than \$8 billion in American economic aid in 2018 and hosts the fourth largest overseas presence of U.S. troops.²³

Chinese interests and instruments in the region are predominantly, though not exclusively, economic in nature. China leans heavily on Gulf oil producers and routes, importing approximately 40 percent of its crude oil from the region in 2018.²⁴ China also relies on Middle East states to absorb its excess industrial capacity, which it in part offloads through infrastructure development projects, having invested nearly \$130 billion throughout the Arab Middle East alone in the past 10 years.²⁵ In 2004, China established the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum as a platform for shared principles and economic exchanges with Arab states.²⁶ Finally, Beijing has emerged as an important arms supplier to the region, providing military equipment primarily to Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and the United Arab Emirates.²⁷

Similar to China's approach in Latin America, President Xi Jinping has framed China's engagement in the region as apolitical. He proclaimed at the League of Arab States in 2016 that "instead of attempting to fill the 'vacuum,' China builds a cooperative partnership network for mutual benefits and win-win results."²⁸ China indeed maintains a bevy of strategic partnerships that transcend regional rivalries, as depicted in figure 13.2. In an attempt to establish soft influence in the region, China has also scattered 14 of its Confucius Institutes across the Middle East.²⁹

Russia's interventions and engagements in the Middle East are motivated by a combination of reputational and material interests.³⁰ Among the former, Russia seeks to opportunistically undermine and disrupt U.S. influence and reassert its own identity as a global power. To a lesser extent, Russia is likely motivated to engage in the Middle East by a set of economic factors, including maintaining the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries + cap-and-cut oil production agreements as well as expanding its access to nuclear energy markets, trade, and arms sales. Russian activities in the Middle East and North Africa are diverse, ranging from the establishment of an enduring military presence in Syria to attempts at expanding arms sales to regional powers and the sponsorship of parallel conflict resolution initiatives—which have allowed Russia to posture as a neutral mediator. Much like China, Russia has adopted a diverse portfolio of partners in the Middle East rather than binding solely to its historical allies from the Cold War era.

In some instances, Russia and China have been willing to work together toward common objectives in the region. For instance, both Russia and China have signaled their support for Iran. As tensions between Washington and Tehran mounted through the end

Figure 13.2. Chinese Strategic Partnerships in the Middle East

Sources: Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2017); Jonathan Fulton, *China's Changing Role in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, 2019), 4; "Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, Lebanese Foreign Minister Mansour Exchange Congratulatory Messages on the 40th Anniversary of Diplomatic Ties Between the Two Countries," Chinese Embassy in Lebanon, November 9, 2011, available at <<http://www.china-embassy.org/eng/zgyw/1876100.htm>>.

of December 2019, Russia, China, and Iran held a joint naval exercise in the Gulf of Oman, which Beijing's defense spokesman claimed was aimed at "displaying the three sides' strong will and capabilities to jointly maintain world peace and maritime security."³¹ Both Russia and China have vetoed UN Security Council resolutions that condemned Bashar al-Asad's conduct in the Syria civil war, and both have provided avenues for humanitarian aid.³²

The emergence of alternative external patrons is a boon for regional states vulnerable to domestic unrest and seeking to manage local civil conflicts. Through its economic investments, China has proved to be an attractive economic partner for regional states. For example, Egypt and Saudi Arabia have launched ambitious domestic development programs to stabilize and diversify their economies without political liberalization, approaches that mirror in many ways China's model of economic ascent.³³ Israel has also pursued a relationship with Beijing as a way to diversify its economic portfolio.³⁴ Regional polls suggest positive views of Russia and China in the region; 27 percent of respondents to a regionwide survey viewed Putin favorably, and only 12 percent held the same views of Donald Trump.³⁵ Nearly 50 percent of survey respondents preferred that their country's economic relations with China become stronger in the future, compared with 38 percent for the United States.³⁶

Maintaining a partnership with Russia and China has allowed regional countries to circumvent Western conditions or restrictions on military aid and economic sanctions. The

United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq have all purchased armed Chinese unmanned aerial vehicles, which the United States is prohibited from selling.³⁷ To dampen the effect of international sanctions, Iran has relied on China as a continued economic lifeline, though China has demonstrated a degree of reticence to deepen economic relations with Tehran.³⁸

The implications and future trajectory of Chinese and Russian engagement in the Middle East are unique. In the most immediate term, Russia's military presence in Syria could constrain U.S. counterterrorism operations.³⁹ Russia can also continue to exploit the relational seams between the United States and its regional partners and allies—in some instances taking advantage of perceived U.S. failures or missteps, both to undermine U.S. standing in the region and to present itself as an all-weather ally.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, Russia lacks the longer term vision, strategic interests, and resources to accomplish much more beyond selectively disrupting U.S. regional initiatives.

The nature of Chinese activities will pose both short-term and longer term challenges for the United States. Any Chinese willingness to purchase Iranian crude oil in defiance of U.S. and international sanctions could continue to insulate Iran from the economic costs of its provocative behavior, just as its weapons sales could fuel risky, destabilizing regional wars. Continued economic investments may also provide China access and leverage to gain competitive advantages over the United States. For instance, Chinese investments in the Suez Canal could allow Beijing to monitor U.S. ships and could also serve as an initial step toward establishing a platform for expeditionary military operations or disrupting U.S. military access. Investments in Israel's technology sector could also allow China to acquire dual-use technologies that it could exploit for military advantage.⁴¹

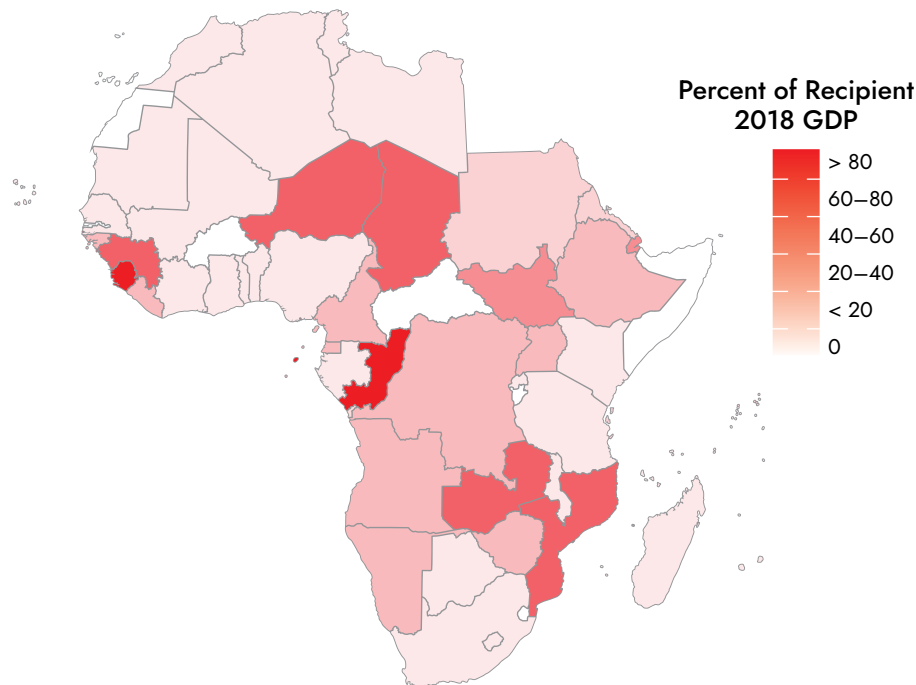
Africa

In Africa, the United States hopes to access the continent's growing economies as markets for American goods and services and to counter violent extremists who could pose a threat to Western interests. Increasingly, U.S. strategic documents highlight competition with China as an interest in and of itself.⁴² Africa receives a major share of U.S. development and humanitarian assistance, which in 2018 amounted to more than \$10 billion, and the United States has instituted several capacity-building programs to help establish more proficient African security forces.⁴³ U.S. direct investment in the region is also considerable, amounting to \$47 billion in 2018.⁴⁴

Beijing's interests in Africa span the military, geopolitical, and economic sectors: access to markets, investments, and raw materials—particularly oil and strategic minerals—and ports. The long-term vision of China's Belt and Road Initiative includes embracing Africa as part of its expanding web of Silk Roads, for both digital and maritime byways.⁴⁵ In 2018 alone, China invested on the African continent \$26 billion, a significant portion of recipient states' gross domestic products (GDPs) (see figure 13.3).⁴⁶ Yet China likely views Africa as a strategically important locus for military access as well, having established a base in Djibouti in 2017 and expanded its military presence in the Red Sea region.⁴⁷

Chinese investment in Africa is increasingly diverse (beyond natural resources), private sector based (within the blurred Chinese context), and integrated with local labor. China is also the largest creditor in Africa, controlling about one-third of African external debt.

Figure 13.3. Total Chinese Investment and Construction in Africa (2005–2018) as a Percent of Recipient 2018 GDP



Sources: GDP data retrieved from World Bank Databank, available at <<https://databank.worldbank.org/home.aspx>>. Eritrea GDP is from 2011 and South Sudan GDP is from 2015, the last years data were available. Chinese investment data are from Derek Scissors, "China Global Investment Tracker," American Enterprise Institute, available at <<https://www.aei.org/china-global-investment-tracker/>>.

Chinese tech giant Huawei provides 4G networks to over half the continent.⁴⁸ In 2017, China's trade with Africa was more than four times greater than that of the United States, and commercial relationships have matured beyond extractives.⁴⁹ Ongoing since October 2000, the annual Forum on China-Africa Cooperation also draws virtually every African head of state for discussions of loans, grants, and pledges of noninterference. Chinese leaders regularly visit the continent. China has also built some 70 Confucius Institutes in Africa—the most of any region explored in this chapter—all while tens of thousands of Africans study in China.⁵⁰ On the security front, the People's Liberation Army participates actively in UN peacekeeping operations, and China has become the largest arms exporter to sub-Saharan Africa, including heavy and advanced weaponry.⁵¹ Finally, China is reportedly providing software and artificial intelligence technologies that buttress repression in certain African countries while affording Beijing important data-collection opportunities.⁵²

Although China's involvement tends to align with a desire for stability in Africa, Russia's interests and activities seem to feed on regional insecurity. Africa offers Russia a source of patronage for Kremlin cronies through business deals and private security company contracts. Moreover, Russia likely views the African continent as an attractive source of mineral resources and, ultimately, as a region that has an opportunity to undermine Western and U.S. interests at moderately low cost.⁵³

Russia's reentry into African affairs, after a relative post-Cold War hiatus, is smaller than that of China; nonetheless, its maneuvers can have a negative effect on governance and stability. Russia's approach often opportunistically targets fragile or corrupt partners.⁵⁴ This pattern stretches from Libya, where Russian mercenaries are fighting with Khalifa Haftar against the UN-backed government; to the Central African Republic, where Russian funding, weapons, and mercenaries have yielded mineral rights and political influence; and to Madagascar, one of many states where Kremlin operatives allegedly deployed cash and fake news in recent elections. Africa also offers geopolitical opportunities, and Russia's engagement employs a range of diplomatic and military tools to exploit them. In addition to an October 2019 summit in Sochi with more than 40 African leaders, Russia also offers educational opportunities, arms sales, and some debt relief.⁵⁵

Notably, African states do not perceive themselves in a three-way zero-sum game of Great Power competitive influence among Russia, China, and the United States. Africa's 54 countries are actively engaging with external actors in terms of their own priorities, with varying levels of success and transparency. African leaders seek infrastructure, economic development, and job creation for the 33,000 young people entering the labor market every day.⁵⁶ For those nations seeking surveillance technology or arms, Russia and China have offerings. Countries facing terrorist threats or instability also may view Russian and Chinese training, equipment, and support for peace operations as an alluring alternative to U.S. assistance, which is often viewed as slow and restrictive. Chinese activities appear to have yielded some local goodwill; according to a 2014–2015 public opinion survey, nearly two-thirds of Africans regard China's influence as "somewhat" or "very" positive.⁵⁷

The consequences of Russian and Chinese activities in Africa have thus manifested themselves in distinct ways. Russian interventions in local civil conflicts and political interference serve to prop up corrupt, unstable regimes in the region, and Russia's alleged involvement in more than a dozen elections can undermine more democratic states as well. Africa has provided Russia access to valuable mineral resources. China, too, has been able to secure key minerals through its activities in Africa, including reportedly taking control of more than 52 percent of the cobalt production in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.⁵⁸ Although few African countries are currently classified as being under debt stress to China, growing debt burdens will affect national development prospects and international relationships and thus create at least the potential for future pressure or exploitation.⁵⁹ China indeed already appears to have been able to leverage its diplomatic and economic investments. In 1971, 20 African countries recognized Taiwan; today, only Eswatini (formerly Swaziland) does.⁶⁰ As in Latin America, Chinese economic engagement and political pressure in Africa have generated important diplomatic results. Ultimately, Chinese and Russian activities on the continent, in the emerging era of Great Power competition, enhance access to resources and offer opportunities for political coercion.

The Arctic

The United States relies on access to the Arctic to safeguard its freedom of navigation and overflight, both of which allow it to project power globally.⁶¹ The United States has come to view the Arctic as a region that could afford important strategic advantages from both Russia and China, describing the Arctic as a competitive rather than cooperative space. For

example, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in his remarks at the May 2019 Arctic Council ministerial meeting, rejected China's claim to be a near-Arctic state, warning about growing Chinese influence in the region while also pointing to Russian actions in the Northern Sea Route (NSR) as "part of a pattern of aggressive Russian behavior here in the Arctic."⁶² The June 2019 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy echoes this sentiment, calling the Arctic "a potential avenue for expanded Great Power competition and aggression," noting that the United States has an interest in "limiting the ability of China and Russia to leverage the region."⁶³

The United States has historically pursued its interests in the Arctic through cooperation and consensus-building in the Arctic Council. As the United States has come to view the Arctic region through a competitive lens in the emerging era of Great Power rivalry, Washington has increasingly preferred unilateral or bilateral actions in the region.⁶⁴ In August 2019, President Trump offered to buy Greenland from Denmark, rather than working cooperatively with Denmark on joint investment. In short, U.S. leaders no longer see the Arctic as a zone of peace and stability; rather, they see it as another competitive arena that is best addressed through unilateralism.

In January 2018, China introduced its Arctic Policy, declaring itself to be a "near Arctic" state, affording itself weight in regional governance decisions.⁶⁵ According to this policy, all Arctic stakeholders should "ensure that the benefits are shared by both Arctic and non-Arctic States as well as by non-state entities, and should accommodate the interests of local residents including the indigenous peoples."⁶⁶ For China, the Arctic is attractive, in part, due to the potential viability of maritime shipping routes, which could shorten the shipping time between China and Europe by 2 weeks.⁶⁷ Given the region's abundance of natural resources, China also has expressed an interest in "resource exploration and exploitation."⁶⁸

China has relied on investing in research stations and economic instruments of statecraft to pursue these Arctic interests. This approach has included steadily increasing the manpower in the Polar Research Institute of China, headquartered in Shanghai, which oversees China's increasing number of ice-breaking research transits and manages Chinese research stations in the Arctic.⁶⁹ Moreover, from 2012 to 2017, China invested \$2 billion in Greenland and \$1.2 billion in Iceland, constituting 11.6 percent and 5.7 percent of each country's respective GDP.⁷⁰

The official responses to Chinese behavior are mixed and, where positive, are likely driven by demand for Chinese investment rather than genuine political alignment with Beijing. For instance, China's activities in the Arctic found a somewhat sympathetic ear from officials with responsibility for Arctic scientific research, fisheries management, and shipping standards, in addition to some politicians in Greenland and Iceland, all seeking Chinese investment.⁷¹ Arctic nations, however, have rejected China's appeals for inclusive governance, viewing Chinese research behavior as a potential mask for longer term security goals.⁷² Most famously, Secretary Pompeo singled out China in May 2019, stating that "China's words and actions raise doubts about its intentions" in the region.⁷³

Unlike those of China or the United States, core Russian economic, security, and ideological interests are directly at stake in the Arctic. A significant portion of Russia's gross domestic product—by some estimates more than 30 percent—comes from natural resources in the Arctic.⁷⁴ Russia's own longstanding Policy for the Arctic calls for the "transformation

of the Arctic zone . . . into a leading strategic resource base of the Russian Federation.”⁷⁵ Russia also must maintain a military presence along the NSR to protect its nuclear deterrent, as it is home to Russia’s North Sea Fleet, including a large portion of ballistic missile submarines.⁷⁶ Finally, Russia’s Great Power ambitions and national identity as an Arctic nation are intertwined with its behavior in the region.⁷⁷

Even so, Russia has a history of constructive interactions within the Arctic Council and routinely expresses a desire to maintain peace and stability in the region.⁷⁸ To defend its critical security interests in the Arctic, Russia has become more assertive: It has claimed unilateral control of its Arctic waters, and specifically the NSR along its northern coast, fortifying its presence in the area while also building at least seven additional bases since 2013.⁷⁹ Russia has demanded that transiting ships pay tolls, take aboard a Russian ice pilot, and allow inspections when required. Noncompliant ships are subject to being stopped, boarded, impounded, and even destroyed. Russia justifies these actions under Article 234 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which states that countries with ice-covered waters in their exclusive economic zones—but beyond their territorial waters—can regulate those zones if doing so will protect the environment.⁸⁰

Russian and Chinese activities in the Arctic will thus likely produce a different set of challenges for the United States in this emerging era of Great Power competition. China could leverage its sizable investments in Greenland and Iceland to constrain the U.S. military’s regional access or monitor its behavior for future strategic advantage. Conversely, Russia already maintains a substantial material advantage in the Arctic vis-à-vis the United States, which could complicate the U.S. ability to challenge Russia’s claim to the NSR and obstructions to freedom of navigation.

Conclusion and Implications

Expanding the aperture of Great Power competition beyond Russia and China’s “near abroad,” this chapter explores the competitive advantages these two countries continue to gain through their engagements in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic. The analysis reveals considerable diversity in the nature, intensity, and potential stakes in Great Power rivalries across these regions, which, in turn, carries several implications for U.S. policymakers.

First, although these countries will at times coordinate to frustrate U.S. objectives or pursue their own, Russia and China often present distinct competitive threats to the United States. In many regions, Russia poses the more immediate challenge, whereas the repercussions of Chinese economic investments manifest themselves subtly and will likely undermine U.S. strategic interests more gradually. Beyond differences in temporal urgency, there remains daylight between the two competitors’ long-term strategic visions and behavior. Both countries are only nominally united in their desire to compete with and displace U.S. influence across Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic. China’s behavior is grounded in its global investment strategy and desire to create a Sino-centric international political order, whereas Russia’s desire to be a global Great Power is not based in a proactive vision of a new global geopolitical order.⁸¹ China often invests broadly within these regions, whereas Russia’s capacity limitations compel Moscow to be more discerning in its partnerships. China’s tool kit relies on regional stability; Russia’s

often produces instability. Both nations sometimes seek to extract the same resources from the same region, which may bring them into zero-sum competition.

Even though Russia and China are conflated in U.S. strategic documents, the instruments and overall strategic approach required to effectively compete with, manage, and counter Russian influence will not necessarily translate into progress against China's activities, and vice versa. Addressing the Russian rivalry may require military and economic assistance designed to insulate key U.S. partners from the spillover effects of Moscow's behavior, while also conveying U.S. staying power and commitments to allies who may view Russia as more reliable. Competition with China will not only necessitate greater emphasis on economic, diplomatic, and other soft-power instruments of U.S. national influence but also require the United States to recognize select shared interests with China, particularly when it comes to containing regional pandemics, natural disasters, maritime piracy, and terrorist threats. The United States should adopt parallel but coordinated strategies to compete with Beijing and Moscow—approaches that recognize the more immediate threat posed by the latter and the longer time horizon of the former.

Second, the stakes involved in competition across these regions are uneven for the United States. In the Middle East, the United States risks losing access to strategic maritime chokepoints. In Africa, growing Russian and Chinese influence undermines the stability of U.S. partners and allows China to fuel its economic growth by accessing and extracting minerals. In Latin America, the risks to the United States relate more to the externalities of regional instability within the U.S. backyard; in the Arctic, more assertive policies by Russia and China could limit U.S. access to and freedom of navigation.

In terms of intrinsic American interests, deciding which of these consequences deserves higher priority necessitates a reevaluation of U.S. strategic interests across and within each of these regions in light of Great Power competition. Put simply, U.S. policymakers need to refresh how they define these interests both globally and regionally, viewing them through the lens of Great Power competition rather than counterterrorism. The presence of Russian or Chinese activities should alone be insufficient to warrant prioritization or a competitive response from the United States. Instead, U.S. policymakers need to adopt a more discerning approach grounded in each region's geopolitical significance, thinking carefully about ramifications of Russian and Chinese success. This pivot should help the United States avoid unnecessarily wasting finite time and resources competing with Russia and China in areas or countries of limited importance.

Finally, states in Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic are often eager recipients of Russian and Chinese attention and resources due to convenience rather than to ideological commitment. With few exceptions, many countries' willingness to accept these resources is not grounded in a sincere dedication to China's global vision or Russia's cynicism vis-à-vis Western norms and institutions; instead, it is often the scale and unrestricted nature of Russian and Chinese largesse that makes each country an attractive partner. With this convenience sometimes come hidden costs and clear limitations. China, for instance, continues to leverage economic investments to coerce recipient states and, without a military presence, cannot offer its partners credible security guarantees. Russia has less material power to invest globally.

These motivations and limits in Russia's and China's respective approaches—as well as the hedging strategies that smaller states have adopted as they balance relationships with Russia, China, and the United States—warrant a cautious response from Washington. Where necessary, policymakers should emphasize U.S. strengths as an economic partner, juxtaposing the profit-driven motives of American private sector investment with the risks of China's sometimes more coercive state-driven model; they should also highlight the long history of U.S. foreign assistance versus the short track record of China's economic activities. The United States also has an advantage in the quality and transparency of its military assistance, as well as its military superiority and forward presence.

Each of these advantages can convey a strong commitment to U.S. partners that is not evident from Russia or China. The United States should avoid, however, systematically imposing a regional strategy that views Russian or Chinese activities as uniformly harmful to U.S. interests and detrimental to the stability of recipient states across these regions. Doing so might unnecessarily damage U.S. relations with key partners and allies seeking sources of economic investment, military hardware, or alternative political forums. Few, if any, countries wish to be pulled into a zero-sum U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia competition in this dawning era of Great Power competition.

The authors thank Peter B. Zwack, Joel Wuthnow, and the volume editors for their thoughtful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

Notes

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