

# Major Findings on Contemporary Great Power Competition

This strategic assessment is both firmly focused on the dynamics of contemporary Great Power competition (GPC) and respectful of past strategic assessments generated by the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) over the course of almost 40 years. As an homage to the format of several historical INSS strategic assessments, this one begins with a summary of major findings within the current volume.

The chapters that follow provide multiple insights and analytical conclusions about contemporary GPC. This prelude provides many of the most significant and substantive findings and conclusions found within them. The findings are provided with an explicit reference to the book chapters where they are found. Readers are encouraged to consult the referenced chapters for deeper analysis and insight into these major research conclusions about, and considerations for, a new era of GPC.

Before perusing these major findings, readers may be entertained by three key findings extracted from the INSS *Strategic Assessment 1998: Engaging Power for Peace*. These findings underscore the degree to which the world of a mere 20 years ago was breathtakingly different from the one today featuring an emerging new era of GPC:

- The United States now enjoys a secure and promising position in the world. . . . The other most successful nations are its closest friends; its few enemies are comparatively weak, isolated, and swimming against the current of . . . globalization [which] is both integrating and extending the core of free-market democracies, thus favoring U.S. interests and winning converts to the norms of state behavior.
- Great uncertainties still exist: the future of China and other large transition states. . . . Because of its capabilities, the United States has considerable influence, and a crucial stake, in how these uncertainties are resolved.
- In the best plausible case, an expanded core or commonwealth of peaceful democracies could encompass most of the planet—with U.S. partners shouldering an increased share of the burden of defending common interests and norms. China would reform and integrate into the core. . . . In the worst case, U.S. friends could be free riders instead of responsible partners, China's reforms would founder . . . leaving the United States superior but beleaguered.<sup>1</sup>

The major findings from *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* follow:

- A Great Power displays three conspicuous attributes: *capabilities*, *behavior*, and *status attribution* by other states in the international system. It has unusual capabilities in comparison with other states. It uses those unusual capabilities to pursue broad foreign policy interests beyond its immediate neighborhood. It is perceived by other states as powerful, having influence, and is thus treated accordingly. In the dawning era of new GPC, the United States, China, and Russia fit this description (chapter 1).
- Competition is not synonymous with conflict; competition exists on a continuum of interactions between and among states. On one end of the spectrum is cooperation, and on the other is direct armed conflict. In between, states compete in varying states of collaboration and confrontation. They edge toward cooperation and collaboration when geopolitical goals are aligned. They drift toward confrontation and armed conflict when main geopolitical aims are perceived as divergent and mutually unattainable (chapter 1).
- Power has absolute, relative, and transitional properties. State power exists in two major dimensions: hard power (or the *coercive* use of military power and leveraging economic power as a *payoff*) and soft power (which includes cooperative and collaborative interactions that attain influence by *attraction*: cooperative economic arrangements, ideological appeal, cultural and social engagements, diplomatic acumen, and reciprocal information exchanges). *Smart power* is sometimes today used to describe policy choices that effectively mix coercive hard power and the attractive features of soft power. *Sharp power* has become a vogue phrase to describe state actions that twist soft power attributes in a manipulative or confrontational manner to undermine or severely distort the political system or social order of a competitor state (chapter 1).

## Part I. Conceptualizing the New Era of Great Power Competition

- All states, especially Great Powers, compete to gain relative advantage in the classic objectives of power, prosperity, status, and influence. More critically, Great Powers contend for these relative advantages in five distinct categories of interaction: political and diplomatic, ideological, informational, military, and economic. States apply power capabilities (for example, foreign policy tools) in these categories. Effective state use of power capabilities establishes the degree to which they attain relative influence and secure strategic advantage. A complete analysis of GPC status requires a review of the comparative aims and relative power capabilities of each Great Power in these five competitive categories (chapter 2).
- As Great Powers compete, these particular states inevitably confront the dilemma of transition in relative power status. Great Power transition challenges rising states with the dilemma of how to assert their relative power gains without provoking outright clash with the dominant state(s). Transition also confronts the dominant but relatively declining state with a vexing choice of how to accommodate its rising challenger(s) in a manner that avoids both destructive military clash and an unacceptable change in its preferred status quo (chapter 2).

- Great Power transitions play out over decades or centuries, not years. Three-quarters of Great Power transitions since 1500 have culminated with—or featured during—a destructive period of direct violent clash. The inevitability of war between Great Powers during times of transition is not foreordained; Great Powers may channel or expend their worst animus in nonviolent categories of competition: politico-diplomatic, economic, ideological, and informational (chapter 2).
- Once a Great Power competition is under way, the most reliable indicator of when a war will erupt is when one or both sides recognizes a shift in the relative alignment of economic and military power that is perceived as immutable and untenable. As states view the relative power alignment moving decisively against them, they are much more inclined to risk a preemptive conflict than when they perceive a stable power status quo (chapter 2).
- Although incompatible ideologies and caustic informational exchanges about a Great Power rival's people are not a lone determinant of when Great Power rivalry will devolve into direct violent clash, they are strong yet lagging indicators of insurmountable contentiousness. Great Power leaders should appreciate the degree to which blanket invective of a rival's entire population differs from criticism of a competitor's political leadership. The latter, circumspect approach to official criticism—a feature of the peacefully resolved dyadic competitions between Great Britain and the United States and later the United States and the Soviet Union—was correlated with avoidance of war between those Great Power competitors (chapter 2).
- During power transition periods, Great Power competitors may not perceive their own various forms of power accurately. Too often, misperceptions of relative power, rather than detailed and empirical assessments of power, inform and then drive policymakers. Even when accurate assessments of relative decline or vulnerability are made, domestic or bureaucratic interests may retard agile adaptation necessary to mitigate risks. Thus, success in GPC requires extraordinary political leadership in both international statecraft and in generating domestic renewal and adaptation (chapter 2).
- During periods of dynamic technological change, the likelihood of strategic surprise or operational obsolescence is greater in the military dimension of GPC. States may overestimate or underestimate the potential combat power of new innovations, whether they are technological or conceptual. The dawning era of GPC is in just such an era—one featuring a fourth industrial revolution. The convergence of new technologies, including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics, 3D printing, nanotechnology, biotechnology, energy storage, and autonomous vehicles, among other breakthroughs, increases the risks of strategic surprise (chapters 2, 4).
- The United States enters the emerging era of GPC as the dominant of the three rivals. Its preferred norms, rules, and institutions for interstate interactions today set the patterns for all major categories of global activity. The emerging strategic aims of China and Russia are incompatible with those established by United States, and this conflict has produced the return of a historically dominant pattern of GPC in the international system. But the strategic challenges posed by China and Russia diverge significantly, portending a long-term Sino-American strategic competition,

while the U.S.-Russian rivalry is more likely to be a more regional set of contestations (chapter 3a).

- China is the most important—albeit presently less threatening—Great Power challenger to American power and policy interests. China is the lone contemporary rising Great Power with the combination of a positivist strategic vision for the future and the ambition to push for changes in the international system on near- and long-term bases. Moreover, gross power indicators in 2020, and projections for the next 5 to 10 years, clearly indicate that China is the Great Power best poised to displace America from its long-dominant position. While a net power comparison between the United States and China indicates that their power transition timelines are longer than some now fear, the Sino-American competitive dyad is likely to be the dominant Great Power rivalry into the future (chapters 3a, 3b).
- Vladimir Putin's Russia is an urgent but transient security risk for the United States and China, with the potential to do enormous military damage to the world if miscalculation leads to military clash. But Russia is a Great Power competitor without any positivist, global strategy or discernable norms, institutions, and procedures for establishing an alternative international order. Instead, it practices a reactive, disruptive strategy aimed to pacify its immediate borders and question contemporary institutions and processes it perceives as a threat. Putin's Russia has generated limited power factors that align well with the short-term, geographically limited strategy it is pursuing, thus making its long-term status as a Great Power questionable (chapters 3a, 3b).
- China and Russia may continue a tactical entente over the coming 5 to 10 years, working together on common near-term strategic interests to erode U.S. power, frustrate U.S. actions, challenge U.S.-dominated institutions, and question U.S.-underwritten norms and rules these states deem threatening. However, divergent long-term Sino-Russian strategic interests make it unlikely they will form a long-term alliance. The United States should remain careful not to misunderstand tactical coordination between Beijing and Moscow that balances U.S. power as evidence of some deeper strategic cooperation (chapter 3a).
- All three contemporary Great Powers are dissatisfied with some aspects of international order and are growing less willing to make compromises and sacrifices to keep the order working. Thus, there is heightened potential for Great Power rivalry to reduce the effectiveness of global institutions in managing complex regional and global problems. The absence of Great Power cooperation to confront the 2019–2020 novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic was symptomatic of this breakdown (chapter 3a).
- Over the next 5 to 10 years, U.S. economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and in Eastern Europe most conflict with Chinese and Russian regional interests. Thus, the competition will be fiercest, and risks of misperception and violent confrontation greatest, there (chapter 3a).
- Space and cyberspace are interrelated contested domains where GPC is increasingly on display, and inclining toward direct confrontation and clash. These relatively unregulated areas also present an opportunity for Great Power dialogue and a

chance to craft norms and rules emphasizing greater deconfliction of interests and reduction in the risks from unbridled competition (chapter 3a).

- The United States, China, and Russia face major internal structural, economic, and demographic challenges. Political leadership's decisions in each state about how to address these internal dynamics as well as international challenges will determine the future power each will possess and the future policy options each might pursue. Russia appears most likely to confront these challenges first, then China, and then the United States, although national leadership choices will greatly impact timing (chapter 3b).
- The crucible of emerging technologies that make up the fourth industrial revolution is today changing the manner in which products have been made, distributed, and used internationally over the past 40 years. The fourth industrial revolution is fueling deglobalization by eroding many aspects of global markets and supply chains, most notably moving product manufacturing closer to natural markets. This movement will mean less global economic integration and greater supply chain regionalization (and even localization) as the world moves into this era of GPC (chapter 4).
- The United States has distinct advantages over both China and Russia as the fourth industrial revolution begins to reshape the world. The one key American weakness is the gridlock in our current political systems. Failure to adjust American laws and regulations to fourth industrial revolution realities risks squandering nascent American advantages in higher education, innate innovation, entrepreneurial spirit, and the largest natural market in the world (chapter 4).
- China also could benefit greatly from the fourth industrial revolution. It is heavily subsidizing priority high-technology manufacturing sectors as part of its Made in China 2025 plan. Simultaneously, it is shifting its economy from export-based growth to domestic consumption as an economic engine. However, China must also deal with a looming dramatic reduction in labor demand and associated unemployment caused by the fourth industrial revolution while addressing the social and economic impact from a rapidly aging and less productive work force. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) must find a way to manage these challenges to continue its decades-long economic rise into the era of GPC (chapter 4).
- Russia, in contrast, is not well positioned for the fourth industrial revolution. It suffers from a combination of low investor confidence, a poor innovative culture, a low-quality workforce and education system, and a rapidly aging population. As a kleptocracy, Putin's Russia does a poor job in allocating capital to the industries and properties most likely to benefit from the convergence of critical fourth industrial revolution technologies. These multifaceted economic challenges reinforce the tenuous position of Russia as a durable Great Power (chapter 4).

## **Part II. Warfighting, Innovation, and Technology in a New Era of Great Power Competition**

- The technologies of the fourth industrial revolution will not change the fundamental nature of war or bring clarity about its imminence or brevity to its conduct. War will remain the domain of fog, friction, and uncertainty. Each society will use emerging technologies in unique ways that are best suited to it, and any conflict will evolve based on the reciprocal and dynamic interaction of all societies involved (chapter 5).
- The fourth industrial revolution is reducing the price of precision and advanced manufacturing, creating a new generation of smaller, smarter, and cheaper weapons. Yet the United States, China, and Russia continue to pursue exquisite, high-end systems such as fifth-generation fighters, heavy bombers, and aircraft carriers. As manufacturing continues to rapidly change in the era of GPC, a key question appears: Which nation can most rapidly and effectively adapt to this revolution (chapter 5)?
- In the conventional military arena, the revolution of small, smart, and cheap favors the United States over China or Russia. Operationally and tactically, the United States is on the defensive in both Eastern Europe and Asia. In the Indo-Pacific region, the United States could move from easily targeted bases and platforms to multiple locations and mobile systems that could disperse through the First Island Chain, denying China tactical military advantage for at least some time. In Europe, if the United States and its Allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are willing to equip frontline states with a mix of inexpensive drones and improvised explosive devices, and invest in autonomous drones and cruise missiles, they could deter and defend in depth against the most challenging Russian security threats (chapter 5).
- The foundation of modern Great Power wealth and competitive advantage has essentially changed from one dominated by industrial era technology to one in which information technology (IT) has become the source of geopolitical power. This change has been affecting the balance of global power in favor of China for over a decade, and is about to enter a dramatic new phase (chapter 6).
- Where China and Russia are concerned, information power is more likely than industrial power to determine the outcomes of long-term geopolitical contests. Indeed, no amount of American investment in industrial era technology could do much to defend against the damage being done by autocratic states' political-psychological operations or help the United States respond with information operations that uphold American values and characteristics (chapter 6).
- To compete in the critical IT arena, the United States must work with other developed nations, and in public-private partnerships, to reprioritize resources into key information technologies and capabilities. Simultaneously, America and its partners must effectively counter China's ability to steal intellectual property and Beijing's quest to control global information flows (chapter 6).
- Russia and China have been increasingly waging foreign propaganda campaigns on social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. These campaigns are enticing because they are cheap, easy to execute, allow targeting of specifically

refined audiences, and provide anonymity that limits the risks of attribution or reprisal (chapter 7).

- Russia has proved adept at using social media and other online channels of international influence and global propaganda in the new era of GPC. Multiple Russian campaigns since 2013 have been skillful and disruptive in many other states, but it remains unclear that they have met particular strategic goals or changed audience attitudes, behaviors, or beliefs in ways that Moscow intended. Nonetheless, the confusion sewn in these repetitive campaigns makes it likely Russia will value them in the future. Moscow appears prepared to adapt and persist in the face of any emerging countermeasures (chapter 7).
- China has gained a strong reputation for effectively stifling and influencing online debate within its borders, effectively censoring illicit content on the Web, and shaping online conversations. But it has struggled to weaponize social media or online tools to influence international policy and popular opinion abroad. There can be no doubt that Beijing will learn lessons and generate new projects to build international social media presence, leveraging its large state-generated IT investments to generate better scale and scope for international social media influence (chapter 7).
- To succeed in the GPC for influence through propaganda in social media, the United States must pursue broad, agile approaches to limiting the threat—featuring public and private domestic cooperation and close international collaboration. First, it must track, highlight, and block adversarial social media content. Then it must build resilience in at-risk populations at home and in allied states targeted by adversaries. Finally, it must better organize government to counter adversary propaganda (chapter 7).
- Weapons of mass destruction (WMD) remain a critical feature and potentially dynamic factor in GPC. For Russia and China, WMD contribute to multiple goals: conflict deterrence at the strategic and regional levels, regime survival, coercion of rival states, and, potentially, as an adjunct to conventional forces to support operations. The erosion of longstanding arms control treaties and nonproliferation norms increases the risks of arms races and the use of WMD in conflict. Ongoing advances in the technologies that underpin WMD could lead to the emergence of novel threats with uncertain consequences for GPC (chapter 8).
- The risk of an arms race in nuclear weapons, delivery systems, and missile defenses is growing as Great Power relations become more competitive and even confrontational. Systems of arms control treaties, which for decades limited U.S. and Russian nuclear forces, are under great strain and could even collapse. China is investing more in nuclear capabilities, modernizing and expanding strategic systems, and developing dual-capable theater-range platforms that would heighten nuclear risks in Indo-Pacific conflicts. And while the introduction of hypersonic vehicles by the Great Powers is unlikely to affect the balance of nuclear power in the next few years, as these capabilities are deployed in larger numbers, the risks to nuclear stability at both the strategic and theater levels are likely to grow (chapter 8).
- China and Russia may perceive chemical and biological warfare agents, including agents developed through new scientific and manufacturing techniques, as important

capabilities for a range of operations against the United States and its allies. Chemical or biological attacks could be difficult to attribute and may be well suited to support Russian and Chinese objectives in operations below the threshold of open armed conflict (chapter 8).

### **Part III. Geostrategic Interactions in a New Era of Great Power Competition**

- U.S. and Chinese strategic interests are less aligned in the Indo-Pacific region than anywhere else in the world, and the importance of those interests to both countries makes the region a central venue for GPC. The U.S. Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision is not compatible with China's aspirations for increasing control within its First Island Chain and wider Chinese regional aims sometimes espoused as a "community of common destiny" (chapters 3a, 9).
- China has economic dominance in markets and investment across most of the region. It also has eroded the U.S. military advantage in potential locations of confrontation near its shores and inside the First Island Chain. The United States retains an overall advantage in military technology and power projection across the wider Indo-Pacific region, a resonant ideology and ability to communicate it, along with a regional political and military alliance structure unmatched by China (chapter 9).
- China's superior ability to use market access and other economic tools to provide benefits means that Indo-Pacific countries will not give up their economic ties with Beijing, even if Washington attempts to decouple from the Chinese economy. But Washington needs to be actively involved in regional economic affairs, both to advance specific U.S. economic interests and to shape rules and norms in the most dynamic region in the world. A policy that combines engagement with China and attention to nurturing a balance of economic power around Beijing as a hedge would best serve U.S. interests (chapter 9).
- The United States should build on its relative political-military advantages to sustain and strengthen its overall Indo-Pacific security position. Reinforcing present alliances, building military partnerships, extending cooperative training, and expanding interoperability are techniques that states in the region would embrace and which would work against unilateral Chinese efforts to intimidate or erode the U.S. alliance system (chapter 9).
- As long as American society models and promotes open, transparent, and democratic institutions, the United States likely will appear as an ideological and even existential threat to CCP leaders. But strong and consistent messaging with Indo-Pacific allies and partners could send a positive signal to the Chinese people about the value of good, representational governance and provide other states around the region a positive alternative framework that contrasts with China's authoritarian model (chapter 9).
- Although best understood as a contemporary Great Power, Russia could be alternatively considered to be a rogue, disruptor, or spoiler state, such as Iran and the Democratic Republic of Korea. These are countries that lack the military and



long-term economic power and/or transnational cultural appeal to match U.S. power globally or stabilize an alternative international political order. They are motivated by a combination of regime survival, aspirations for regional dominance and sometimes global relevance, as well as an inclination to confront the United States, which they believe is the main obstacle to their own aspirations (chapter 10).

- Rogue states tend to confront the United States below the threshold of active armed conflict and across multiple domains in the contemporary era of GPC. As they do, these states' actions divert American attention and resources away from longer term objectives, thus impeding the United States and benefiting China. However, Russian, Iranian, and North Korean provocative behavior is not uniformly beneficial to China (chapter 10).
- The prospect of a robust and fully cooperative anti-U.S. rogue state axis in the early 2020s remains remote. While U.S.-Chinese competition will yield limited prospects for burden-sharing between Beijing and Washington to confront Russian, Iranian, or North Korean conduct harmful to the United States, China also must fear negative spillover from such conduct onto its own economic interests and strategic aims. The United States thus can expect a mixture of cooperative and obstructive responses from China when addressing these actors on a case-by-case basis in the new era of GPC (chapter 10).
- Terrorism is far from eradicated and will not go away in the emerging era of GPC. Instead, American counterterrorism efforts will confront a set of new realities. Recent American counterterrorism operations in Syria likely will be the model of the future. The U.S. Government should reconsider counterterrorism authorities, new technologies, and other tools that could help manage the risks from small-footprint deployments—especially those with active proxies—and that hold sponsor states accountable for actions by proxies against U.S. counterterrorism forces (chapter 11).
- Russia must be expected to undermine U.S. counterterrorism objectives, either directly or indirectly. Moscow will likely try to destabilize U.S. objectives by fomenting right-wing and other homegrown violent extremists indirectly through media campaigns. Russia also will confront U.S. forces, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, as the forces attempt to mitigate threats to the U.S. homeland. As in Syria, Russia will combine diplomatic initiatives, proxy warfare, and electronic warfare to foil U.S. military dominance (chapter 11).
- Regional states will continue to pursue their own counterterrorism objectives. Sometimes they will deploy their forces in a manner that the United States finds unacceptable. Sometimes they will utilize proxy forces in a destabilizing manner. In other instances, important regional states will have objectives, ways, and means that align with U.S. goals for countering violent extremist organizations. The best way to mitigate the risk of regional states acting in an unruly manner is to be involved—even to a minimal degree if necessary—and then leverage American influence with them (chapter 11).
- In the dawning age of GPC, Europe is a resilient but troubled region. Europe has shown considerable hardiness while overcoming the 2008 Great Recession and saving the euro in the face of a serious sovereign debt crisis. But its cohesion and

solidarity also have been severely tested by terrorism, uncontrolled migration, Brexit, and most recently, the still-evolving complications from the COVID-19 pandemic. These problems have generated extremist populist movements across the continent that challenge liberal democracy and inhibit cohesive European policy positions or security activities (chapter 12).

- Despite a share of global economic output comparable to that of the United States in 2020, Europe is not a Great Power. Europe finds itself an object of Great Power rivalry on the continent rather than a subject competitor itself. In 2020, it confronts a more aggressive Russia, growing Chinese power, and reduced trust in the longstanding U.S. commitment to Europe's security and the wider construct of transatlanticism (chapter 12).
- European cohesion and stability has long been a function of both American support and a collaborative Franco-German core. In 2020, that core is weak, as Germany and France lack common positions on many critical issues, including on European defense. As Brexit moves the United Kingdom out of the European Union, much about Europe's way forward will be decided in Washington and Moscow. Europeans worry that the United States may detach itself from Europe—particularly NATO—even as Europe today remains unable to create an autonomous system of security and defense. While Europeans mistrust Russia generally, their perception of Russia as a security threat varies greatly. All know that Europe cannot alone defend member states from Russia. Should America move to detach from NATO, Europe may intensify accommodation with Russia—and even with China—believing this move to be the least-worst path to the evolving competition among the Great Powers (chapter 12).
- The era of GPC 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—in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe—as well as the challenge of whether and how to compete with Moscow and Beijing on a global scale. Washington 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 (chapter 13).
- Russia and China present distinct competitive threats to the United States around the globe. China's behavior is grounded in its global investment strategy and desire to shape an international political order more conducive to Chinese interests, even if not fully Sino-centric. Russia's desire to be a global Great Power is not grounded in a proactive vision for a new global geopolitical order (chapters 3a, 13).
- In many regions, Russia often 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. Both are only nominally united in their desires to compete with and displace U.S. influence across Latin America, the Middle East, Africa, and the Arctic (chapter 13).
- 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 ideological commitment. With few exceptions, these countries accept support without any allegiance to China's global vision or Russia's cynicism vis-à-vis Western norms and institutions. The limitations to Russian and Chinese approaches—as well as the transactional hedging strategies of many of these smaller states—should induce caution and prudence in Washington (chapter 13).

- Few, if any, smaller states wish to be pulled into a zero-sum U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia GPC. Thus, the United States should avoid imposing regional strategies that view Russian or Chinese activities as uniformly harmful to U.S. interests and detrimental to the stability of recipient states across these regions. Instead, Washington should emphasize American strengths as an economic partner, the quality and quantity of its military assistance, and the positive and benign nature of its military forward presence (chapter 13).

## **Part IV. Preparing to Compete**

- Great Power competitions and accompanying power transitions are rarely resolved without a holistic approach, managed within an appropriate strategic framework. They require leadership involvement, disciplined priorities, sustainable resourcing, and adaptive oversight. In 2020, Russia is a dangerous competitor in the near term, but the U.S.-China competitive dyad is the one that will determine the prospects for continued global stability and the contours of any geopolitical Great Power transition (chapters 3a, 3b, 14).
- After more than two decades of geopolitical dominance featuring mainly cooperative interactions and relative comfort, the United States must acquire a competitive mindset. A competitive American mindset must understand that while interstate cooperation remains feasible today in areas of shared mutual interests, competitive tensions can occur in formerly cooperative political and economic categories so long as they are contested within established bounds. The challenge is to expand on the potential for cooperation while carefully managing the competition to keep it short of armed conflict, all without compromising vital national interests (chapter 14).
- In the Sino-American competition, the United States cannot merely accommodate China's rising power by acquiescing to its ambitions. An effective U.S. strategy must create leverage and accept risk. It must create leverage by working with allies and partners to strengthen rules and norms, set standards, collaborate on industrial policy, cooperate on critical information technologies, rejuvenate research and development, enhance innovation, invest in higher education, and share best practices. It must accept risk, while standing with these partners, to counter aggressive Chinese behaviors, violations of standing rules and norms, or the suborning of human rights. These principles frame a strategy of Strategic Balancing for America's role vis-à-vis China in the new era of GPC (chapter 14).
- The COVID-19 pandemic is far less likely to change the basic trajectory of emerging GPC than to accelerate it and expose underlying dynamics. The three contemporary Great Powers are likely to remain dominant rivals through at least the middle of

the dawning decade. If any of the three might falter, Russia seems the most likely candidate, but the odds of that are long. China and the United States may joust over whose model best dealt with COVID-19 crisis, but the basic outlines of their strategic disagreements will remain. Moreover, the phenomena of deglobalization and partial economic decoupling seems most likely to continue (chapter 15).

- As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, Washington will face the same choice that it confronted before: whether, where, and how to compete. As the dominant Great Power in a multipolar competition, America could contest or confront its Great Power rivals today with a resolve to sustain its global position and the standing rules, norms, institutions, and alliances of the current international order. Alternatively, it could abdicate leadership of the global order and allow Russia to trample it and then an increasingly powerful China to extend its own version of global norms, rules, and institutions. The former course entails risks of expanding confrontation and potential direct military clash, but the latter course would not necessarily avoid a military fight, especially if the United States comes to view an increasingly Chinese-ordered world to be unacceptable (chapters 3b, 15).
- The history of rivalrous dyads played out in periods of multilateral GPC offers several informative principles for competing effectively while minimizing the prospect of Great Power transition collapsing into Great Power war. Four stand out.
  - » Firmness with Flexibility. The dominant Great Power must demonstrate firmness with flexibility. It must clearly signal to the fullest extent possible the strategic aims it will defend at all costs and then offer the prospect for dialogue on those aims it may be willing to negotiate. While firm on its nonnegotiable goals, it should be flexible in finding issues and venues where win-win outcomes are possible. For example, the United Kingdom accepted U.S. primacy in the western Atlantic as a better path to sustaining high seas primacy on vital routes for its Middle East and Asian colonies—and preferable to naval confrontation in recognition of growing American power. At the same time, the rising United States came to accept the once-abhorrent British monarchy in recognition of growing political enfranchisement for a great number of British citizens. Is there such a trading room today for the United States and China to agree on rules for collaboration in space and cyberspace while at the same time negotiating over reduced CCP domestic economic and human rights constraints (chapters 2, 15)?
  - » Durable Partnerships and Alliances. The dominant Great Power must build and maintain durable interstate alliances and provide would-be partners with alternatives to the either-or choices posed by a hard-charging rival. Great Britain was right to seek strategic partnerships and allies in its rivalry with Napoleonic France, parlaying these alliances into first containment of the threat and then its defeat. Napoleon had no such partnerships, relying instead on conquest of allies. Today, the United States has a far greater base for building economic and military partnerships than any Great Power in modern history, and it confronts a rising Great Power in China with little experience or inclination in this area. Washington has an enormous opportunity to construct alternative economic,

diplomatic, and political geometries with an array of partners giving them alternatives to Chinese enticements and blandishments (chapters 2, 15).

- » The Peril of Reciprocal Societal Denigration. Successful GPC short of direct military confrontation is unlikely if the rivals give into a poisonous, open, and reciprocal denigration of each other's people. The choice to criticize the government or policies of a rival state while distinguishing it from the people is not as fraught with peril—although a tightrope must be walked to maintain the difference. Once the British and German press went after the character of the other's society, the march toward World War I accelerated. So, too, World War II in the Pacific loomed ominously once the United States and Tojo's Japan devolved to mutual societal recrimination. But the U.S. Government's conscious Cold War effort to distinguish the Soviet Union's Communist Party from the Russian people, reserving greatest criticism toward the Party and offering outreach to its people, generated a far different result. American leaders are likely to compete best with China while clearly distinguishing between its criticism of the CCP and its feelings for the Chinese people (chapters 2, 15).
- » Play for Time. Some argue that time works in favor of the rising Great Power in a competitive dyad, putting the dominant Great Power at more risk should it not take confrontational and decisive action. But this thesis rests on a false assumption that the rising power will continue to ascend in mainly a linear fashion and not confront problems or challenges on the way. The United States has its own domestic inconsistencies and challenges, but these pale in comparison to those certain to play out in China. The CCP faces multifaceted challenges to safeguarding both its political position and an economic rise, including environmental degradation; rising income inequalities; a rapidly aging and less productive population; chronic worry about abuses of political power; widespread corruption; restive domestic regions, including Tibet, Xinjiang, and Mongolia; and a poor record on human rights. As China's economy shifts and its economic growth decelerates, these issues are likely to move to the fore. Thus, a U.S. strategy that plays for time as China's challenges grow seems best suited for successful contemporary GPC (chapter 15).

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Hans Binnendijk and David C. Gompert, eds., *Strategic Assessment 1998: Engaging Power for Peace* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 1998), xiii, available at <<https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a354594.pdf>>.