Chapter 1

Introduction to Evolving Great Power Competition at Mid-Decade

By Thomas F. Lynch III

This introductory chapter situates the volume's focus on the evolution of strategic Great Power competition (GPC) at mid-decade of the 2020s. It establishes that the dominant paradigm of interstate relations since at least 2017 is one of strategic competition among the contemporary three Great Powers: the United States, China, and Russia. It frames the difference between Great Power competition as a description of the main feature of modern international relations and strategic competition as shorthand for the American foreign policy approach for successful GPC against its rivals during the first half of the 2020s. The chapter contrasts Strategic Assessment 2025 with its predecessor volume, Strategic Assessment 2020, and provide a brief introduction of the book's 15 chapters. It provides an analytical evaluation of four topics of relevance to GPC at mid-decade that cannot be addressed fully in the volume with references to some resources for studying those subjects: Central Asia, the Arctic, Antarctica, and U.S. homeland security. The chapter then concludes with a short foreshadowing of four themes underpinning the remainder of the book: accelerating global domain fragmentation, the growing importance of the "Global South," India's increasingly important role, and the implications of American foreign policy as a "variable" rather than a "constant" in international affairs.[1]

Backdrop and Relevance

The geostrategic framework of international relations today is one heavily conditioned and shaped by Great Power competition (GPC) among three rivalrous, globally dominant states: the United States, China, and Russia. After more than two decades of mainly cooperation and collaboration, these Great Powers drifted into de facto rivalrous competition at the end of the 2000s.[2] By the middle of the 2010s, their undeclared but obvious rivalry intensified and their major interactions shifted from those of cooperation and collaboration to competition, confrontation, and preparation for potential armed clash.[3] Fully acknowledged GPC arrived in late 2017—after a decade of de facto GPC contested by China and Russia

but poorly understood in Washington—when the United States published a dramatically new National Security Strategy and declared a formal end to the 25-year era of U.S.-led globalization and proactive, worldwide American democratization initiatives (see figure 1.1).[4]

The National Security Strategy of December 2017 openly advanced the idea that America and fellow Great Powers, Russia and China, had transitioned formally from more than a 20-year period of collaboration and cooperation into one of permanent competition.[5] Some elements of legacy collaboration among the Great Powers persist in selected international organizations, agencies, and activities, but serious disagreements about strategic goals and legitimate means to achieve them underpin a structure that features intensifying competition and greater confrontation than witnessed for decades.[6]

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By 2018, the United States, China, and Russia were engaged in *fully-acknowledged, global Great Power rivalry*.[7] In October 2022, the Joseph Biden administration published its National Security Strategy. The 2022 update did not reject the Donald Trump strategy diagnosis of a new geostrategic era of GPC. Instead, the October 2022 strategy accepted it.[8] However, the Biden administration did end the Trump administration's "American First" policy approach toward GPC that it believed too often resulted in "America alone" effects. The Biden approach that came to be known in many quarters as "strategic competition."

Under Biden, *strategic competition* featured a vigorous program of security, economic, informational, and diplomatic competition with China and Russia, working closely with allies and partners against these rivals, and with specific attention to reinvigorating both American domestic economic competitiveness and the attractiveness of American strategic partnership. The Biden administration approach believed that the United States would succeed in competition with China over time by enhancing its domestic competitiveness while working more closely with friends and partners and avoiding the strategic error of posing stark, binary choices to would-be partners and friends.[9]

From 2021 through 2024, the debates about GPC's relevance to the international geostrategic framework subsided. They were replaced by debates about what could be done to succeed in this strategic competition between large, rivalrous powers. The second Trump administration entered office with a different view about the best path forward in GPC. The "Trump 2.0" approach is just emerging in early 2025, but nascent administration activities suggest that significant change will occur. The new administration indicates that it will expand and evolve an "America First" agenda with less reliance on American global alliances and partnerships and focusing more on defending the American homeland and a greater willingness to broker arrangements that afford today's Great Power strategic rivals with primacy in their immediate geographic regions.[10] One January 2025 analysis forecast that American strategy in the late 2020s may turn toward one where the United States "is to be ruthlessly pragmatic about values, tough with allies, and open to deals with opponents."[11]

Strategic Assessment 2025 explores the evolution of this fully acknowledged strategic competition among and between the Great Powers at mid-decade. Its insights extend beyond those in *Strategic Assessment 2020*.[12] *Strategic Assessment 2025* extends those early decade insights as appropriate, adding new analysis when warranted and enhancing reader

understanding of Great Power strategic competition in an array of critical competitive categories. *Strategic Assessment 2025* chapters feature primary analysis amplifying the reciprocal and dynamic interaction of the policies, strategies, capabilities, and influence of today's three Great Powers.

Beneath the surface of these *Strategic Assessment 2025* chapters is a historic feature of multistate GPC: *Great Power transition*. Great Power transition involves differential state economic growth rates and the impact on relative power between the states. A transition of differentiated power levels generates new geostrategic relationships and the formation of new political and economic entities. One by-product of differential state growth is a high potential for conflict when a challenger (or challengers) to a dominant country approaches the stage of relative equivalence of power, and specifically when the challenger is dissatisfied with the status quo.[13]

This book proceeds from a historical perspective. The emerging era of GPC, while not the same as previous eras with three or more competitive Great Powers, now features three dominant states with robust capabilities in all the major areas of power interactions. Over the past decade, these states have moved from a phase of generally cooperative and collaborative interactions to those now dominated by competitive and confrontational dynamics.[14]

As established in *Strategic Assessment 2020*, throughout history Great Powers display three conspicuous attributes. They have *unusual capabilities* in comparison with other states. They use these capabilities to pursue broad and sustained policy interests *beyond their immediate neighborhood*. Therefore, they are *perceived by other states* to be powerful, have influence, and are treated accordingly around the world. Each individual criterion is necessary, but none alone is sufficient. A Great Power is one that clearly meets all three criteria.

Today the United States, China, and Russia fit the Great Power description. However, history tells us that this triangular Great Power structure is not durable.[15] One of these Great Powers could decline precipitously and fall from status, thereby altering the structure of global power distribution from three Great Powers to two or even one. Alternatively, another state might amalgamate power capabilities of sufficient quantity and quality to cross the threshold and become a Great Power.

The number and arrangement of Great Powers in the international system conditions the global geostrategic environment and frames the policy choices made by these powerful rivals seeking to maximize individual wealth, influence, and security in conditions of uncertainty and anarchy.[16] Less powerful states retain agency to seek wealth, influence, and security but within parameters defined by the preferences and the interaction of the Great Powers.[17]

Great Powers constantly joust for relative advantage in *military* stature. They also compete vigorously to amalgamate power and exert influence on other states and in multinational arrangements and institutions in four additional categories of interstate competition short of armed conflict: politico-diplomatic, economic, ideological, and informational (see table).

As detailed in chapter 1 of *Strategic Assessment 2020*, power is best understood as the "probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance."[18] Power has absolute, relative, and transitional properties. At its essence, power exists in two major dimensions: *hard power* (or the *coercive* use of an at-

tributes like military capabilities economic tools for *payoff*) and *soft power* (which includes cooperative and collaborative interactions that attain influence by *attraction*—partnered economic arrangements, ideological appeal, cultural and social engagements, diplomatic acumen, reciprocal information exchanges, and even military-to-military cooperation).[19] Too often confused as merely leveraging military capabilities for coercive outcomes, hard power also often involves the manipulation of political, social, and especially economic tools in a coercive manner to attain payoff from another state or entity. Scholars recognize that viable states—especially Great Powers—exercise *smart power*: intermixing the coercive aspects of hard power and the persuasion and attraction of soft power to successfully attain national interests.[20] The successful exercise of power to attain effective influence in the pursuit of national interests, in the face of resistance, and in the context of Great Power rivals seeking alternative and largely unacceptable objectives with their own power assets is increasingly at the heart of the evolving GPC among the United States, China, and Russia. This volume explores the degree to which, in an increasingly rivalrous age, Great Power coercive influence will prove better at securing Great Power interests than influence by attraction.

Strategic Assessment 2025 evaluates Great Power competition at mid-decade and projects the trajectory of major trends in this strategic competition for the remainder of the decade—through 2030. Its authors—subject matter experts all—explore the most salient features of strategic GPC over the course of 15 original chapters. In addition to this introductory chapter, one chapter focuses on historical analysis of past trends in multistate global Great Power competition, two frame the global strategies and power capabilities of today's Great Powers, five focus on today's Great Power competitive posture and power capabilities in critical functional areas and activities, another five focus on evolving GPC in critical geostrategic regions, and a concluding chapter draws together major insights for the future of GPC for the remainder of the decade.

Intent, Audience, and Authors

This volume is written to provide a succinct, expert, and nuanced understanding of important emerging dimensions of GPC at the mid-point of the 2020s. It primarily focuses on the critical interactions and activities among the United States, China, and Russia. It simultaneously develops many of the major implications of these interactions for other state actors and for nonstate actors and processes. Therefore, its analyses and recommendations mainly are framed for the years from 2025 to 2030. The speed and pace of change in Global Power relationships and activities will require an update of credible analysis by the dawn of the 2030s.

Chapter authors—and the book as a whole—provide readers with text, analysis, and notes that fully reference primary documents and sources. Where primary sources are not available, the authors cite and then note for reader reference the most prominent and influential secondary sources and analytical pieces available. The book is designed to enable each reader to gain access to the best and most relevant writings on the major topics of GPC at mid-decade.

The book is written with chapters that are short, self-contained for stand-alone use and that tie back to the central themes of GPC developed in the early chapters (1, 2, 3a, and

3b). Each chapter and the overall elements of the book's key findings and conclusions are written for graduate-level students within professional military institutes, graduate students in civilian political science and national strategy programs, and mid-to-upper-level career civil servants in the U.S. interagency community and other security establishments. The book editor and its authors hope that individual chapters and combinations of chapters will be of use to students and policy practitioners in both an academic setting and for personal study and understanding.

The chapter authors include many who have been—and remain today—directly engaged as thought leaders and policymaking pioneers grappling with the emerging contours of GPC. One author is a regular advisor on matters of strategic competition with the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Director of the Joint Staff Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate. Three authors have served as a subject matter experts and consultant with U.S. Cyber Command. Several authors have served across the U.S. military and wider interagency and intelligence organizations as subject matter consultants and red teaming leaders on China—providing uniquely informed insights on the key dimensions of China's rise and interaction on the world stage. Two of the main chapter authors have provided direct analysis and recommendation about the implications to the U.S. military from the emerging GPC dynamics across South Asia, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific region. Finally, one chapter author has been a leading public voice for understanding how the competitive space of social media has become and will continue to evolve as a critical nexus among Great Powers and their surrogates. Detailed author biographies are provided at the end of the book.

Each chapter includes original author research, analysis, and insights—much of it generated from direct contact with senior U.S. government policymakers and other global security leaders. Some chapters include text drawn from pieces the authors have published elsewhere in recent years. All chapters feature original, updated analysis and insights for understanding the mid-decade status and future expectations for GPC from 2025 to 2030.

Major Parts and Chapter Overviews

This strategic assessment of GPC from 2025 to 2030 is organized into 5 discrete parts and a total of 15 numbered chapters that include a couplet chapter, chapters 3a and 3b.

The first part frames the analysis found in subsequent chapters and considers insights from past eras of multistate Great Power competition. It includes this introductory chapter and chapter 2. This chapter concludes with a short review of four areas of the globe where GPC is meaningful and evolving but where space limitations prevented a full chapter of exploration in the book: Central Asia, the Arctic, Antarctica, and the U.S. homeland. It also establishes four recurring themes found in many of the chapters that follow: increasing global domain fragmentation, the importance of the Global South, India's emerging strategic role, and the ongoing change of American foreign policy from a "constant" to a "variable" in global security calculations.

In chapter 2, author Thomas Lynch takes a focused historical look at three important subjects for evolving GPC: strategic economic competition during past eras of multistate GPC; alliance and partnership formation under past conditions of multistate Great Power rivalry; and historic competition over global rules, norms, organizations and institutions.

Chapter 2 describes how Great Power rivals in history have jousted over access to vital economic resources and at the same time struggled with the balance between state control and growth-inspiring free market forces. It examines how intensifying GPC in an era of multiple rivals inevitably generates fragmentation in a globalized economic domain and across the multiple domains of state-to-state interactions. It reviews how Great Power choice and management of strategic partners and close allies matter historically to successful competition in an era of multistate Great Power rivals. Chapter 2 concludes with a description of how increasingly public Great Power disagreements about the proper framework and standards for the conduct of international interactions demonstrate a historically resonant pattern where intensifying Great Power rivalries fragment once collaborative interactions appear too threatening to the strategic aims of jousting rivals.

The second book part evaluates the overarching, global dynamics of GPC at mid-decade. It features two couplet chapters that roughly align with a similar pairing in chapters 3a and 3b of *Strategic Assessment 2020*.

Chapter 3a of *Strategic Assessment 2025* analyzes the evolving strategies and policy trajectories preferred by today's three Great Powers. It also analyzes India, explaining New Delhi's conspicuous status in the global Great Power rivalry even though not yet a Great Power itself. Thomas Lynch, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Phillip Saunders describe the evolution of American, Chinese, and Russian strategies in the early 2020s and then forecast how these might be expected to adapt over the rest of the decade. They conclude with an evaluation of the prospects for durable alliances and partnerships between the rivals and demonstrate that distinct dissimilarities in long-term visions and objectives make it hard to envision a lasting combination of any two Great Powers beyond a temporary period of strategic vulnerability.

Chapter 3b extends the work in chapter 3a by examining contemporary GPC from the perspective of state power assets and the tools available to the three Great Power states at mid-decade and anticipated by 2030—evaluating their objective means to achieve the strategic goals covered in chapter 3a. Lynch, Mankoff, and Saunders establish the individual power capabilities possessed by each Great Power in the areas of diplomacy and politics, ideology, information management, military strength, and economic strength. They then offer analytical assessments of where each Great Power's capabilities are trending, how they compare, and how they might be expected to evolve before 2030. The authors evaluate the relative change in power balance among the three Great Powers and assess the degree to which power postures may enable successful attainment of the main Great Power strategic objectives sketched in chapter 3a.

The third part of the book focuses on critical functional areas and activities, evaluating Great Power strategic competition in innovation, cyberspace, outer space, weapons of mass destruction, and global climate sustainability.

In chapter 4, T.X. Hammes begins this five-chapter segment with specific attention to Great Power competition in the areas of innovation, key technologies, and advanced manufacturing. Hammes demonstrates how at mid-decade, especially China and the United States are now fully engaged in intensifying competition over technology-driven innovation—and advanced manufacturing—believing that these are key determinants of future economic and military power. The chapter lays out all Great Power plans to drive strate-

gically important innovation—and especially key disruptive technologies. Demonstrating that Russia's aspirations have fallen far behind its rivals, Hammes describes the 10 key technologies China aims to dominate, the 18 critical technologies emphasized in U.S. strategic plans, and evaluates how each state is doing in its aspirations at mid-decade. He concludes with recommendations for the most appropriate U.S. approach to anchor its competitive strengths and mitigate its weaknesses.

Chapter 5 looks directly at the emerging impact of artificial intelligence (AI), quantum computing, and 5G wireless technologies for modern GPC. Richard Andres updates and extends his analysis in chapter 6 of *Strategic Assessment 2020*. He offers mid-decade observations that the United States and China intensified their overt competition for future dominance in AI; massive data collection; and the control of cybercommunication on land, at sea, in the air, and in outer space. Andres demonstrates that China remains fully committed to extending and expanding its mid-decade advantages over the United States in capturing the global 5G wireless market, the "pull" of global big data for use in quantum computing and AI programs, and the dissemination of AI information for the maintenance of Chinese Communist Party dominance at home and increasingly abroad. The chapter explains why the United States must work smarter to prevent China from dominating global information flows and AI application by 2030 or risk an outcome that could enable China to attain a clear advantage in its strategy to replace the United States globally.

Chapter 6 describes how intensifying Great Power commercial and security postures on outer space will crystallize a second space race mainly between the United States and China before the end of the 2020s. John Hickman of Berry College describes the trajectory of explosive growth in Great Power outer space assets—mainly those of China and the United States but also some second-tier powers—anticipated over the coming half decade. This expansion will intensify Great Power space rivalries in near earth orbit due to certain overcrowding by small satellite constellations there. It will also intensify Great Power competition in cislunar space—and especially regarding the lunar south pole. Hickman explains how Russia will decline in stature, effectively becoming one of the junior allies in Chinese outer space aspirations. The chapter explains how second space race dynamics will differ from the first space race between the United States and Soviet Union in several ways, but most crucially in that it will be sustained over a longer period—a marathon and not a sprint—with the ultimate status of GPC in outer space undecided until sometime after 2030.

Chapter 7 focuses on weapons of mass destruction and strategic deterrence in the emerging era of GPC. William Eliason, Thomas Lynch, and Ryan Celski explain the trajectory of Great Power interactions during the early 2020s that have increased the risk of nuclear war to the highest it has been since the end of the Cold War. They identify the factors and forces that have largely collapsed the rules, norms, treaties, and protocols that constrained the development and use of nuclear weapons for the past several decades. The chapter explains how Russia's nuclear drills and threats to use them in the Ukrainian conflict, China's rejection of strategic nuclear arms control talks, and the U.S. flirtation with a return to nuclear testing each have had a role in collapsing the institutions, rules, and taboos that have prevented the use of nuclear weapons since the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945. The authors establish that the challenge of deterring strategic attack—

nuclear or conventional—confronts unprecedented challenges in the dynamic mid-decade multipolar GPC environment. They explain how the once unthinkable dynamic integrated national missile defense and a more complex view of deterrence must take hold in the remainder of the decade to meet the grave and growing challenge of strategic security and stability.

Chapter 8 evaluates the impact that GPC will have on environmental instability. Jeremy Mathis and Natalle Cawston-Gibson of Georgetown University examine the interplay between the processes of environmental instability and GPC among the United States, China, and Russia. They explain how each Great Power has competing interests and strategies for addressing both the causes and effects of environmental instability and approaches the issue through the lens of national security and strategic advantage. After analyzing three critical regions of the world where collective efforts to stabilize the environment appear vital, the chapter explains why the future of global environmental stability depends on whether the Great Powers can balance their competition with the imperative to address accelerating global instability collaboratively. It also indicates that at mid-decade, the prospects for vital enhancements in Great Power collaboration to mitigate environmental instability remain highly uncertain.

The fourth part of *Strategic Assessment 2025* features five chapters that examine selected geostrategic regions where intensifying GPC shapes the future of global security and stability. The first two look in some detail at the Indo-Pacific region and Europe. The final three chapters focus explicitly on the Global South. The Global South features multiple regions largely comprised of lesser-developed countries. In these regions, the Great Powers have been intensifying their competitive struggle over the future of international rules, norms, procedures and organizations.

Chapter 9 looks at the Indo-Pacific competitive space—perhaps the most contentious geopolitical region in the GPC era at mid-decade—including Europe. Thomas Lynch and Joel Wuthnow describe the intensifying the divergence of strategic interests between America's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision and China's Community of Common Destiny framework and how Russia's growing alignment with China affects the strategic standoff. They describe China's growing regional military footprint and its strong economic advantage over the United States across most of the Indo-Pacific but lay out how Washington's diversification of alliances and partnerships around the region during the early 2020s has complicated China's strategic calculus there. The chapter discusses four potential flashpoints for direct Great Power war in this vast region: over Taiwan, in the South China Sea, in the East China Sea, and across the disputed Sino-Indian Himalayan border. It establishes the important role of India to understanding the future trajectory of competition in the region given New Delhi's complex, three-way relations with the Great Powers there. The authors establish that despite great and growing regional tensions, there are opportunities for collaboration among the Great Power rivals in the region. These require the establishment of military-to-military confidence-building measures, communications structures, and guardrails to assure that Beijing and Moscow understand that accommodation of continuing U.S. presence is a better choice than conflict.

Chapter 10 takes a direct and comparative look at Europe, examining the consequences of the Russian-Ukraine war and the role of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)

in GPC. Liana Fix and Ben Harris of the Council on Foreign Relations develop the abrupt way European relations with the Great Powers were upended from 2020 to 2024. They describe how Moscow's brazen invasion of Ukraine on the heels of European frustrations with Chinese opacity and brusque diplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic radically altered European relations with the three Great Powers. The chapter describes how Europe at mid-decade is at the point where it is actively supporting Ukraine's war of self-defense and largely decoupled from once extensive connectivity to Russia, de-risking from China after decades of intensifying economic interactions and embracing a closer relationship with the United States while wary of American backsliding after the 2024 Presidential elections. The authors explain why greater European friction with China, security pushback against Russia, and geostrategic integration with the United States and the Americas seemed the most likely course for Europe before the second Trump administration. Then they speculate on what growing frictions in the transatlantic relationship may mean for yet another turn in European foreign policy toward Russia, China, and the United States before the end of the decade.

Chapter 11 is the first of three chapters focusing on the Global South. Thomas Lynch addresses the mid-decade status and future trajectory of GPC in South and Southeast Asia and across the Indian Ocean region. He describes how increasing Chinese presence and influence in almost every country there makes the U.S.-China and the China-India rivalries most salient both in terms of risks and opportunities. Russian interests matter but are complicated by Moscow's long-standing relationship with New Delhi and the expectation that their bilateral strategic partnership should moderate some of the worst animus of the Sino-Indian security dilemma in the Himalayas and across the Indian Ocean region. Lynch describes how—like in the western Indo-Pacific arena—Japan and Australia matter to the contest of power and interests between the United States and China across South and Southeast Asia for the remainder of the decade.

Chapter 12 continues an examination on the Global South by discussing GPC effects on Africa and the Middle East. Thomas Lynch, Jeffrey Mankoff, and Dawn Murphy demonstrate how the Great Powers are engaged in an intense and dynamic competition across these regions with varying degrees of success. The chapter establishes that Russia and China are pursuing different strategies toward Africa but share a convergent goal of bolstering authoritarian regimes and undermining U.S. and European influence on the continent. Through commercial, financial, and military engagement, China and Russia aim to accelerate a gravitational shift in Africa from the West to the East. The authors demonstrate that Beijing at mid-decade features Africa and the Middle East in its efforts to reshape the global system to advance China's national interests and set standards in digital governance and data security as well as telecommunications, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and other advanced technologies. They establish why and how the United States might move to counter the important Chinese initiatives in these contiguous regions, noting that the limitations in American power suggest that Washington might only compete successfully if it can sustain and enliven partnerships, including those with Europe and India, to provide alternatives to lavish Chinese financial advances and pernicious Chinese propaganda.

Chapter 13 is the final chapter on the Global South. It concludes the fourth part of the book with an analysis of GPC across Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) at mid-de-

cade. Douglas Farah and Marianne Richardson of IBI Associates demonstrate how China has begun to turn two decades of economic and infrastructure development programs into political influence operations and venues for future potential military access. They also detail how Russia refurbished and upgraded its Cold War regional disinformation operations and military support activities with modern technologies and processes. The chapter observes that Washington has just begun to recognize that it cannot take LAC for granted. They observe that the United States retains an array of advantages to counter Chinese and Russian gains in LAC—those that are unilateral and in partnership with Europe and Japan. Properly applied, these advantages can safeguard LAC adherence to post–World War II rules, norms, and procedures that Chinese and Russian investments and influence aim to change.

The fifth and final part of the book features a one-chapter conclusion examining the likely trajectory of GPC from 2025 to 2030. In chapter 14, Thomas Lynch moves beyond the analysis of previous chapters and extends them into a comprehensive mosaic about the future of GPC for the remained of the 2020s. He asserts that the Sino-American rivalrous dyad will intensify as China and the United States vigorously contest global rules, norms, and procedures in a competition that will fragment global economic, diplomatic, and communications domains but not yet produce fully siloed interstate blocs. This will drive accelerating deglobalization and fragmentation across an array of economic, diplomatic, communications, and social-cultural domains that have been interconnected over the past 30 years. He forecasts that although Russian power certainly will decline, it will retain Great Power status and witness Beijing and Washington joust to gain most from accelerating Russian descent. China will continue growth in relative strategic power but at a slower pace. The United States will experience a decelerating relative power decline as it limits Chinese access to global markets and high-end technologies. India will accelerate an ascent toward Great Power status without attaining it but with an increasingly prominent role arbitrating GPC especially in the Global South. The Global South will emerge as a fulcrum for competition over the future shape and scope of the international order.

Finally, this book features two appendices. The first is a selected bibliography of critical documents, books, and articles featured in and culled from the individual book chapters. The second appendix is an original, online-only selected database compiled in the research for this volume titled *Contemporary Great Power Dynamics*. This modest index of very focused data provides readers with a ready reference for nine of the most significant quantitative indicators of relative state status: gross domestic product (GDP), GDP per capita, Composite Index of National Capability, population, birthrate, level of industrialization, percentage of global financial markets, and innovation rank. Each indicator is provided for the three contemporary Great Powers and five other states. This data is measured for seven different years between 1980 and 2030. Some of this data is assimilated and provides insights found in chapter 3b of the book. This appendix is intended as a one-stop reader resource for follow-on investigations and as a living document that will be updated periodically by the research team in the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University. The *Contemporary Great Power Dynamics* index is available at https://XXXXXXXX (TF).

Summary and Forthcoming Themes

The chapters that follow are generated as standalone products. The major conclusions from each are summarized in the chapter abstracts. Resonant insights from them also are captured in extracts found in the fronting material titled "Summary of Key Findings" (pp. xx–xx). Four of these resonant insights stand out as major themes that transcend most book chapters. Readers should be attentive to these themes as introduced here:

- the acceleration of global domain fragmentation
- the increasing importance of the Global South
- India's growing role
- the movement of U.S. foreign policy from a "constant" to a "variable."

Each of these themes is briefly profiled below.

Global Domain Fragmentation

Key domains underpinning the post–Cold War international order have been undergoing deglobalization for the better part of a decade. The fragmentation of interlocking global supply chains was catalyzed by the evolution of modernized production techniques and the relative cheapness of "home-shoring" for manufacturing. The COVID-19 pandemic's worldwide trade disruption and related adjustments during the first half of the 2020s accelerated this process of global economic fragmentation. Targeted tariffs and trade barriers reinforced technological and political impetus for supply chain "derisking" and moved much of the world inexorably away from global interaction and toward fragmented trade in various subregions. Similarly, Great Power disagreements over the benefits and risks of a globally accessible Internet fragmented the cyberspace domain. Cyberspace was developed, enabled, and managed during the unique era of American unipolar dominance where the United States was primarily focused on generation of global connectivity and wealth creation. By the early 2020s, rivalrous Great Powers were using cyberspace tools in an increasingly coercive manner to gain strategic advantage.[21] At mid-decade the world had fragmented into three distinct cyber domains: a highly manipulated and coercive one preferred by Russia; a tightly constrained, mostly closed, self-interested one preferred by China; and an open and free one preferred by the United States and its partners.[22] The similar trade and cyberspace patterns of once-interlocking global domains fragmenting under pressure is a consistent feature of past eras of GPC.[23] Thus, the fragmentation of globalized activities and processes that have been a hallmark of the post–Cold War liberal international order must be expected to continue for the remainder of the decade, spreading into multiple domains including, but not limited to, seaborn transportation, aerial transportation, and outer space interactions.[24]

The Increasing Importance of the Global South.

The term *Global South* refers to countries around the world that are alternatively described as "developing," "less developed," or "underdeveloped." Many of them are in the Southern Hemisphere. Most are in Africa and Latin America. Another grouping is found in South and Southeast Asia and the Pacific Island Nations (see figure 1.2).[25] At mid-decade the

Great Powers are increasingly referencing this construct in their strategic writing and policy formulations. China explicitly speaks of its mission in the Global South and how it has a unique role to play in "South-South relations" to end the unfair treatment of these countries endemic in the U.S./Western-led international order.[26] Russian foreign policy at mid-decade courts the Global South to avoid increasingly harmful Western sanctions and to de-Westernize the global order. U.S. foreign relations during the Biden administration turned increasing attention to the intensifying strategic competition in the Global South, especially with China. The Biden administration referred to the cluster of Global South states to be at risk from China's assertion of an alternative vision for global governance that will alter the U.S.-led global order into a better "value proposition" for the developing countries there.[27] While it is unclear that a second Trump administration will sustain Biden's intent to compete vigorously with China and Russia across the Global South for preservation of the norms, rules, and procedures at the center of U.S.-led international order, it is certain that Russia and especially China will exploit any U.S. absence there to generate support for its vision of a global order "with Chinese characteristics."[28]

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India's Growing Role

At mid-decade, India is not a Great Power and unlikely to become one anytime soon. However, India has outsized presence and influence at the center of many Great Power interactions.[29] India is a strategic rival with China while at the same time a deeply intertwined trading partner with Beijing. India maintains a long-standing friendship with Russia and treats Moscow as a valued strategic partner with special attention to the degree that Moscow might deter China from bullying India when Delhi and Beijing disagree. This gives New Delhi influence and cache in the Kremlin. Over the past decade, India and the United States have drawn into an ever-closer strategic partnership—one that New Delhi leverages in its rivalry with China but not to the degree that provokes negative reactions from Beijing or Moscow. Beijing and New Delhi intensely vie to be the Global South's champion. Each advances a different vision for the future of the international order and its case for primacy. While China touts the need for these regions to benefit from "true multilateralism" and more "globally beneficial globalization with Chinese characteristics," India urges the states of these regions and the multilateral organization of Association of Southeast Asian Nations to strive for an elevated international status for the common interest of all.[30] All told, India is a rising middle state with both strategic autonomy and an independent role to play in shaping the manner and degree to which the three Great Powers vie for geostrategic power and influence over the rest of the decade.[31]

American Foreign Policy as a Variable Rather Than a Constant

American foreign policy from the beginning of the Cold War sustained several basic premises independent of the political party or temperament of the President in the White House. At its base, this foreign policy emphasized promoting global democracy and human rights, favoring free trade with limited exceptions, maintaining a strong military with a global pres-

ence, building and sustaining military and diplomatic alliances and strategic partnerships, supporting international institutions, and engaging the world with programs including foreign aid, diplomatic outreach, and military interventions, as necessary.[32]

But American consensus on these premises began to wane in the early 2010s, well before the political career of Donald Trump.[33] Many ordinary Americans found the bruising and inconclusive American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq as costly and counterproductive.[34] An increasing number in the American polity grew weary of the burdens of American global leadership and questioned the value of a sustained foreign policy consensus.[35] Historian Hal Brands observed in early 2017 that this struggle for the "soul of American foreign policy" had found a vessel in the views of newly elected President Trump.[36] America's allies and partners confronted a vastly different American President and foreign policy from 2017 to 2020—one mistrustful of alliances, wary of free trade dogma, open to diplomacy without ideological preconditions, and focused on an "America First" mantra. Their faith and trust in the constant of American global engagement and leadership waivered but remained largely intact.[37]

From 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration projected the return of American foreign policy constancy featuring deep interaction with allies and partners and a resolve in Washington to take the lead in bearing foreign policy burdens and absorbing collective security costs. Many concluded that as President Biden stated, "America was back"—meaning that U.S. foreign policy and security strategy would not become a variable in their national calculations as America's leadership had returned to the kind of global partner it had been since the end of World War II.[38] Whatever the specific manifestations of a second Trump administration's post-2025 foreign policy and security initiatives, the U.S. 2024 Presidential election disabused many global assumptions about the enduring core of American foreign policy.

A plurality of American voters selected the Presidential candidate who reflected a weariness with the burdens of international leadership, skepticism in the value of global human rights and democracy promotion, belief in global trade as less a "win-win" exercise and more of a zero-sum game, and so forth. The American voter choice for this atypical approach to U.S. foreign policy in two of the past three Presidential election cycles was now seen across the world as a feature, not an aberration.[39] America's global partners, and its Great Power rivals, confronted a new reality: American foreign policy could no longer be considered a constant in their own national plans and strategic activities, but rather a variable, subject to change from American administration to administration.[40] This change of American foreign policy will have significant ramifications for the conduct of GPC during the remainder of the 2020s and well into the 2030s.

Important GPC Topics Without Individual Book Chapters: A Summary

As was the case in *Strategic Assessment 2020*, there is no possible way for this single volume to cover full array of topics that might be addressed in an exhaustive assessment of strategic Great Power competition at mid-decade. There are varied and interesting topics involving GPC that will not fit these pages as standalone chapter contributions. Many such topics are mentioned in context within the various book chapters. Among the topics of interest but

without specific chapters, four merit special reader attention. Three focus on geographic regions of GPC: Central Asia, the Arctic, and Antarctica. One focuses on the functional area of U.S. homeland security. This first chapter flags some of the key dynamics between today's Great Powers in these four topic areas. Admittedly, space limitations constrain the degree of detail found in these short sections. Therefore, each segment features detailed notes that alert readers to many important reference sources that could provide a point of departure for more detailed exploration of GPC in these contested arenas at mid-decade.

GPC in Central Asia

Central Asia runs from the Caspian Sea in southwestern Europe to the northeastern boundary of western China and Mongolia. It is traditionally thought of as consisting of five countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan (see figure 1.3). All established independence from the collapsed Soviet Union in the early 1990s but quickly found themselves at the crossroads of post–Cold War political, economic, and security dynamics.

Moscow considered the newly independent "Stans" as an element of Russia's legitimate sphere of influence. Afflicted by the realities of distance and an absence of U.S.–Central Asia historic linkages, Washington demonstrated little interest there in the early 1990s save for some American oil and gas conglomerate companies that explored options for resource extraction during that decade before confronting roadblocks from reticent authoritarian leaders and growing political risk due to metastasizing regional terrorist groups. After September 11, 2001, Washington viewed Central Asia through the prism of its "war on terror" and interacted there mainly for the purpose of resupplying counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. China possessed the vision but lacked the power to shape a more friendly and pliant region at the beginning of the 1990s—and Beijing also was cautious about provoking Moscow with its interest in the newly independent states

By the mid-2000s a de facto competition between the three Great Powers was joined in Central Asia, but its parameters were always asymmetric and destined for change once American regional counterterrorism presence waned, Russia's economic influence declined, and China's economic growth and security interests grew.

China's impact across Central Asia expanded in the late 1990s, accelerated into the 2000s, and became a juggernaut in the 2010s. China amassed the technological know-how and the investment capital that enabled it to assert an increasingly dominant presence in the Central Stans.[41] The region hosted the "coming out" party for China's worldwide economic and infrastructure development prowess when President Xi Jinping made his 2013 announcement inaugurating global infrastructure program known as Belt and Road Initiative in Kazakhstan.[42] As Chinese diplomatic presence and economic influence grew at rapid pace, Beijing worked to stay collegial with Moscow while asserting its own interests across the Central Asian region.

Chinese interests in Central Asia are best understood as featuring three overarching objectives. The first two are interrelated and involve China's ongoing quest for growth in relative power vis-à-vis the United States and its belief that the creation of continental trade routes free from U.S./Western interference will accelerate that rise. A third features China's quest to maintain stability and security along its western border with special attention to

the threats that global Salafi Muslim insurgent and terrorist groups pose should they gain a toe hold with the Uighur Muslim minority group in Xinxiang Province.[43] Beijing established the multilateral Shanghai Cooperation Organization security partnership in 2001 as a counterterrorism framework welcoming Moscow as a partner but with clear ambitions to be more predominant in the Central Asian security space.[44] China works directly with Pakistan, and since 2021, with the Afghan Taliban government in Kabul to augment its antiterrorism efforts across Central Asia.

Moscow has consistently conveyed its intent to preserve Central Asia as a zone of its "near abroad" where it has privileged influence.[45] Russia works through two main organizations to sustain its historic influence there: the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).[46] For 30 years, Russia used the fear of terrorism to assert its role as the security guarantor across Central Asia.[47] The Russian military maintains bases in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and extensive infrastructure in Kazakhstan, although these were drawn down partially after 2022 to fulfill military manpower and equipment needs in Ukraine.[48]

Russia's war in Ukraine exacerbated tensions in its relations across Central Asia. States in the region distanced themselves from Russian integration projects. In October 2022, Kyrgyzstan canceled military exercises on its territory that were due to be held by the Moscow-led CSTO. In December 2022, Uzbek President Shavkat Mirziyoyev postponed a visit to Bishkek to avoid meeting Vladimir Putin there. Throughout 2022 to 2024, many Central Asian states felt alienated from Moscow's EAEU and began focus on non-Russian economic and cultural projects. Beyond the ubiquitous Chinese projects, these increasingly involved the Organization of Turkic States—a development that increased Türkiye's influence at the expense of Russia's while at the same time enhancing Beijing's relative regional posture vis-à-vis Moscow.[49] The mainstay of Russian influence in Central Asia is the relationship of trust between the countries' political elites.[50] So at mid-decade, Russia's geopolitical interests in Central Asia remained significant, and Moscow retained the diplomatic and political tools necessary to safeguard them but with notably less economic traction or security credibility to offset growing Chinese presence and activity than it possessed there at the dawn of the 2020s.

After the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in mid-2021, Central Asian perception of the United States moved from curious but wary to indifferent. From early 2022, public opinion there described the United States as a transient and opportunistic foreign power.[51] At the same time, Central Asian state leaders see the benefit of having a Great Power friend in the United States that is powerful but not a threat. Then U.S. Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, visited the region in late 2023 with an effort to rekindle Central Asian engagement focused on U.S.-encouraged ventures strengthening regional civil societies and initiating public-private commercial initiatives around the region.[52] But American investments in the region—generally limited to the tens of millions of dollars range—do not come close to the billion dollar packages offered by China, France, the United Arab Emirates, and other Gulf states.[53] Moreover, the early 2025 Trump administration cancellation of U.S. Agency for International Development programs worldwide eliminated the main vehicle for the limited American investment initiatives across Central Asia.[54] Combined, America's mid-decade

profile in Central Asia indicated that it would not be in a favorable position for meaningful influence or strategic competitive advantage there for the remainder of the decade.

Central Asia is increasingly captive of Chinese preferences for economics, policy, and security. By the late 2010s, China established economic dominance across the region and dominated the norms and protocols for brick-and-mortar infrastructure advancement and soft/cyber infrastructure standards and norms. While continuing to respect Russia's historic role as a privileged power in Central Asia, China sought to carefully cultivate relationships with Central Asian republics that deepen its engagement in the region. The competition between Russia and China in Central Asia includes both rivalry and cooperation. Russia and China seek to keep the United States, the West, and democracy out of the region, maintain stability, and pursue economic benefits.[55] Russia seeks to maintain its historical influence through security alliances and economic integration, while China leverages economic investments and infrastructure development to expand its presence.[56] This delicate bilateral balance appears durable unless Beijing perceives a growing uptick in regional terrorist threats that Russia's Ukrainian preoccupation would leave Moscow unable to suppress. That form of insecurity could witness China stepping into a sphere where Russia has historically played the primary role, propelling a largely collaborative relationship in Central Asia toward a more contentious one where southern Russia and western China meet.[57]

GPC in the Arctic

At mid-decade, the geopolitical importance of the Arctic region is taking on new contours as the Russia-Ukraine war dragged on and polar ice melted at an accelerating rate. Climate surveys indicated that the Arctic Ocean may witness its first nearly ice-free summer by 2030. By 2050, the Northern Sea Route (NSR) atop Russia is expected to be one of the most efficient shipping paths between Asia and Europe. The Arctic holds abundant natural resources, including oil, gas, minerals, and fish, with its untapped oil and gas reserves estimated to comprise about 25 percent of the world's undiscovered resources.

The Russian-Ukraine war severely damaged Arctic state relations and highlighted critical fault lines between Russia and NATO-allied states. Russia's intensifying alignment with China since February 2022 moved Moscow and Beijing into a new place in their thinking about a collective future in the Arctic. The United States and its European NATO allies began weighing many cooperative options to address Russia's growing Arctic interactions with China during the early 2020s. Then, President Trump entered office suggesting that he may prefer to assert unilateral U.S. strategic presence in the Arctic by acquiring Greenland and absorbing Canada as the 51st state.[58]

Until recently, the Arctic was a region where cooperation and collaboration to meet the challenges of climate change was at the fore. Historically, the Arctic represented a model of cooperation among the eight circumpolar nations. This included coordinated efforts that dated back to 1996 among the Arctic Council states—Canada, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, Russia, Sweden, and the United States—to standardize search-and-rescue operations, environmental protection, and the prevention of illegal fishing in the Arctic, among other issues. But by the mid-2010s, the Arctic emerged as another venue for GPC. Then in March 2022, the other members of the Arctic Council suspended Russia over its war with

Ukraine, leaving Moscow to seek new partners to develop the region. Among its Arctic suitors, China loomed. Thus, at mid-decade, the Arctic emerged as venue for intensifying GPC and one that seems destined to take center stage during the 2030s.

The Arctic's natural gas and energy reserves are concentrated in Russia's northern territories. These were reserves that European countries aspired to tap for their main their energy supply through trading relations with Russia. The Russia-Ukraine war and Europe's reaction dashed these aspirations and led to greater Russian collaboration with China to develop and sell its Arctic resources and assets. From February 2022, and especially after President Xi's visit to Moscow in March 2023, China turned Russia's rupture with Europe into its own 30-year agreement on Sino-Russian energy exports from Siberia and the Arctic.[59] Beijing also secured other arrangements for deeper bilateral cooperation with Russia in the Arctic. At the same time, Moscow stopped short of accepting China's claim to be a "near-Arctic state," denying that Beijing has any inherent Arctic rights independent of Russian interests.[60]

Russia's Arctic policy is based on defending its sovereignty there and unlocking the region's economic potential for domestic advantage. Russia wishes to commercialize the Arctic with a focus on oil and gas exploration and the creation of a Russian controlled NSR as Arctic ice recedes. The Kremlin treats the route as a domestic maritime transportation corridor and thus views Russian military presence as key to its sovereign control.[61] Well prior to its full Ukraine invasion, Russia made the Arctic a focal point of its military modernization efforts, leading to a steady buildup of Russian forces there featuring a Russian Arctic fleet with sophisticated military technology.[62] Among its initiatives, Russia modernized its fleet of more than 50 icebreakers with 5 new, heavier, nuclear-powered ones that began fielding with the first two in 2021 and 2022.[63] Russia's Arctic military buildup continued even after its 2022 adventure into Ukraine and built further as NATO added Arctic states Finland and Sweden to membership in 2023–24. These dynamics increased risks of a potential military conflict between Russia and NATO in the Arctic as a spillover from the war in Ukraine. Fortunately, such a clash did not occur before 2025.

Enticed by prospects of a shorter, quicker shipping route from the Pacific to the Atlantic, a "Polar Silk Road," China secured observer status in the Arctic Council in 2013 and established several agreements with Arctic nations for joint research and commercial endeavors across the high north.[64] Then China published a 2018 white paper on Arctic policy arguing the area to be a multinational arena and claiming China as a "near Arctic state."[65] Beijing has actively pursued its right to scientific research, navigation, overflight, fishing, laying of submarine cables and pipelines, and resource exploration in the Arctic region. China also demonstrated the desire to become a stakeholder on the NSR, participate resource exploitation in the Arctic, and secure robust connectivity to Russia's Arctic holdings. As of mid-decade, China operates several scientific research stations in the region and has added two icebreakers to its fleet, which are capable of clearing paths for merchant ships in northern latitudes. China's Arctic-focused projects include building more icebreakers on its own and in partnership with Russia and generating polar capable liquified natural gas container ships. China has undertaken scientific expeditions to the Arctic that have both civilian and military applications. The presence of Chinese ocean observation sonar stations in the Arctic for scientific research are viewed as a dual-use threat.[66]

In mid-2023, a regular Sino-Russian Arctic shipping corridor officially launched along the NSR between Russia's northern ports and Chinese ones. In all, 80 voyages including cargo ships, cruise ships, and oil tankers reached Chinese ports via that Arctic waterway during 2023.[67] The early 2020s also observed China, in partnership with Russia, assert a more muscular claim to military and security operations in and around the Arctic region—to include those waters adjacent to the United States. In August 2023, a fleet of 11 Russian and Chinese warships sailed from the Sea of Japan through the Bering Strait into the Pacific Ocean, passing close to the U.S.-held Aleutian Islands off the Alaskan coast. In 2024, China sent four naval vessels close to U.S. waters off Alaska and flew nuclear-capable bombers in a joint exercise with Russian planes just off the U.S. air defense identification zone there and close to the Arctic. The United States took note of—and publicly expressed increasing concern with—the lack of clarity and increasing intensity of in Chinese and Russian joint strategic activities in and around the Arctic (see figure 1.4).

Prior to 2020, U.S. Arctic strategy focused on preserving a cooperative status quo that minimized competing territorial claims and maximized international cooperation on issues such as climate change and scientific research. The Biden administration's 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region focused on the areas of security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance. It emphasized the role of close alliances and partnerships in safeguarding these interests.[68] At the same time, the Biden administration recognized that increasing Russian military presence in the Arctic and China's Polar Silk Road ambitions meant that it must begin emphasizing military readiness, infrastructure, and NATO collaboration there.[69] Like the NSR in the Russian Arctic, melting polar ice along the Arctic's Northwest Passage from Alaska over Canada and into the Atlantic Ocean made it increasingly viable for commercial traffic. The potential for multi-month shipping opportunities and natural resource access there generated a greater sense of urgency for the United States, Canada, and the European/NATO states to better align their national security, economic, and environmental goals.[70]

This proved easier said than done. As of mid-decade, America and its Western circumarctic partners had not yet agreed on the fundamental nature of Arctic strategic goals, the relationship between NATO and the defense of Western interests in the Arctic, or the degree to which economic interests should relate to climate management ones.[71] With only two aging icebreakers, the U.S. Navy lacked sufficient specialty ships or tactical know-how to secure contested polar region. U.S. Coast Guard Arctic infrastructure was deemed aging and in disrepair, and its icebreaker-building program was underfunded and years behind schedule—rending both maritime Services unable to safeguard U.S. polar claims or year-round commercial shipping.[72] Moreover, the United States and its Western partners were uncertain about if or how to resurrect a collaborative framework to engage Moscow about the Arctic and were not resolved that the Arctic Council might again be resurrected with Russian participation—although some observers suspected that the Biden administration remained open to that future possibility.[73]

Moreover, U.S. and Canadian priorities in the Arctic demonstrated points of divergence. Biden administration Arctic security documents began emphasizing a defense-centric military posture there. Yet while Canada's Arctic foreign policy of late 2024 gave new some new emphasis to national defense and security, it held to historic commitments prioritizing

the protection of the Arctic environment and assuring the rights of its norther Indigenous population to share heavily in the fruits of any greater Arctic economic development and to have a say about whether greater militarization there was acceptable.[74] Divergent U.S. and Canadian interests in the Arctic are nothing new, but at the end of 2024, they were moving to center stage as Great Power competition across the high north accelerated.[75]

While the Biden administration remained resolved to work within a framework of alliances and strategic partnerships to safeguard and secure American economic and security arrangements in the Arctic, the Trump administration entered office with an alternative viewpoint. Citing U.S. national security requirements in the Arctic, President Trump began 2025 with public statements indicating that America would look to annex Greenland and absorb Canada as the 51st state.[76] This would be stark reversal of recent American preference for security through cooperative partnerships. It also suggested a new U.S. strategic logic of preferring sovereign, rather than multinational, American hemispheric defense for the high north. Acquisition of Greenland would indicate American mistrust of the island's future loyalties and seek to control it directly to assure that China does not gain a foothold astride the North American Arctic.[77] Absorbing Canada would directly secure American access to the Northwest Passage and give Washington sole control of security and defense decisions in Canada's Arctic north presumably with less allegiance to Canadian environmental and Indigenous population sensitivities.[78] Both moves would seek to limit China's presence in the Arctic and stand firm on refusing to grant China a formal seat at the Arctic Council table.[79]

While it is certain that Arctic competition among the Great Powers will increase in the immediate future, as climate change leads to increased northern trade routes and faster economic development of polar regions, it is unclear precisely how that competition will manifest during the remainder of the decade. At mid-decade, the Arctic capabilities of the democratic circumpolar states appear to be less robust than those of China and Russia. The United States has only two icebreakers, and Canada does not seem urgently focused on defending the Arctic's northern reaches.[80]

From 2025 through 2030, two pathways appear possible. If tensions between Russia and the West remain high due to the ongoing war in Ukraine, it is likely that Russia's joint ventures with China in the Arctic will expand and that Beijing will move closer to its goal of a Polar Silk Road, despite Russian wariness of such encroachment. Russia will welcome Chinese cooperation so long as Beijing accepts that the Arctic remains a domain of Russian primacy. However, if the Trump administration brokers an end to the Russo-Ukraine war and agrees to again do economic deals with Russian businesses, then perhaps American (and even European) companies will again engage with Russian Arctic projects.[81] If the Trump administration somehow manages to wrest sovereign control of Greenland and Canada, then the United States and Russia might consolidate their own "domestic northern sea lanes," ceding primacy to the other's sphere of influence and holding the upper hand in negotiations for Arctic access with China and Europe.[82] To hedge against this worrisome latter possibility, China will counter with sustained economic and diplomatic engagement with the other Arctic states in Europe and a promise of Chinese development and support for greater Arctic access.[83]

GPC in Antarctica

Once a region featuring peaceful scientific research and multistate cooperation, Antarctica is emerging as a new frontier for GPC. Over the past decade, China and Russia have increased their presence by establishing joint research stations and ventures for scientific dominance in Antarctica. These dynamics are beginning to challenge the 60-year-old Antarctic Treaty System (ATS), which is a 1959 international agreement that banned the use of Antarctica for military purposes.[84] ATS also allows mutual inspection of research bases. The United States and Russia are original ATS signatories. China became a full (consultative) member in 1985. All sides acknowledge that much scientific research in the region has a "dual use" scientific-military purpose and understand that technological progress is driving a race for resources increasingly in the direction of militarization.[85]

China is the latest Great Power entrant onto Antarctica, but it has impressively expanded its presence there with the stated goal of becoming a "polar great power" (see figure 1.5).[86] The State Oceanic Administration and the Polar Research Institute of China are the primary bureaucratic drivers of Chinese activity in Antarctica. The latter is charged with a vague "security" mandate on the continent. Chinese outposts in Antarctica serve a dual-use purpose. Chinese research stations on the continent are crucial to PLA efforts at intelligence and command/control and have assisted in Chinese missile interception methods. There is considerable speculation that Chinese research equipment is used to capture signals intelligence data from Australia and New Zealand—both members of the U.S.-led Five Eyes Intelligence Sharing Protocol. Antarctica also serves as a key region for Chinese space exploration and space management. China has extensive and growing economic interest in the region, especially the farming of Antarctic krill. With help from Russia, China has stalled agreements related to environmental protections that would threaten their fisheries or their pursuit of mining and drilling opportunities. China also has been pursuing its own definition of "sustainable development" of Antarctica that includes greater tourist and economic activities than commonly understood under the Protocol on Environmental Protection for the Antarctic (Madrid Protocol 2048) added to ATS in 1991.[87] That protocol provided for comprehensive protection of the Antarctic from mining or aggressive economic encroachment.

Disagreements over the future of Antarctica seem likely to increase Great Power tension and build toward a sober relook at the ATS in the not-too-distant future—certainly by the 2030s. It appears unlikely that China will fully militarize any Antarctic installations during the remainder of the 2020s, but Beijing will continue to put pressure on long-standing Antarctic norms and protocols. It will push against the ATS, but from the inside, bending ATS toward China's Antarctic agenda. Beijing will also use its growing Antarctic presence to extend its global interests and enhance its power projection capabilities beyond the Indo-Pacific region.[88]

As it has for decades, Russia remains a presence in Antarctica. Russian strategy for the Antarctic is not as important or detailed as its Arctic one but does align with Russia's Arctic policies in opposition to preserving that continent as nothing more than a scientific global common.[89] Russian actions indicate a desire to have a seat at the decisionmaking table on Antarctic issues and a fear of getting shut out of future decisions. Russia is more open about its dual-use technology footprint than China. Much of Russian Antarctic research has clear

military purposes in addition to scientific ones, such as its Global Navigation Satellite System (GLONASS), and an extensive hydrographic research program.[90] Russian economic goals, like those of China, center around Antarctic fishing and expanding resource exploitation. Like China, Russia has prioritized the economic upsides of opening Antarctic waters to commerce and poses a challenge to the ATS and its Madrid Protocol 2048.

Unlike China, Russian capabilities to conduct Antarctica commercial activities are limited, as it does not have the presence there that China does. Most Russian infrastructure on the continent dates to the Soviet era and has fallen into varying degrees of disrepair. Space-based research is a significant portion of Russian scientific activities, much of which is considered dual use or outright military activity disguised as scientific research. As mentioned, the Russian GLONASS system has a significant footprint in Russian installations, and this system could be used to monitor and enhance military activities. Russian hydrographic surveys of the Antarctic oceans, while scientific, also provide important naval intelligence reports. Russia views Antarctica as a space for geopolitical, geoeconomic, and geoscientific competition. Just as in the Arctic, Russia believes that its national interests must be safeguarded and protected in Antarctica from U.S. and Western threats, including by military means.[91]

Over the course of many decades, U.S. activities in Antarctica have been primarily research focused, with most government funding and oversight coming from the U.S. Antarctic Program and the National Science Foundation (NSF). The 2017 National Security Strategy and the 2018 National Defense Strategy did not mention Antarctica. The 2022 National Security Strategy mentioned it in the framework of preserving the continent for research in accordance with the Antarctic Treaty of 1959. Since 1959, all U.S. Presidential administrations have declared that Antarctica ought to be reserved exclusively for scientific research and immune from government claims of sovereignty or territorial rights.[92] Under the ATS, the United States could conduct research anywhere on the continent in spite of competing claims of sovereignty The Biden administration released an Antarctic Policy National Security Memorandum in May 2024 that again reaffirmed U.S. support for preserving the continent as a zone for research and environmental conservation.[93]

The NSF had the leading role for U.S. activities in Antarctica.[94] America's sustained preference for keeping the Antarctic as a zone for peace and science created tensions with Russia and China that most analysts expected would slowly intensify for the rest of the 2020s. However, the second Trump administration began moving in January 2025 to alter the long-standing U.S. focus on science and climate management in an open and free Antarctica. As part of its program of reductions to climate science programs across the U.S. Government, the new administration made large personnel and financing cuts in February 2025 to the NSF team that supported all American field research in Antarctica.[95]

The future of American policy in the Antarctic at mid-decade is uncertain. A Trump administration policy shift away from science and climate management cooperation could be matched by a push for more U.S. icebreakers and greater U.S. sovereign and secure presence on the continent. The second Trump administration could find itself more aligned with China and Russia about expanding commercial access to Antarctica while at the same time intensifying competition for sovereign territory and other claims there, perhaps even using military means. Such an approach would reverse decades of American Antarctic pol-

icy and seems likely to intensify and even militarize the U.S-China security competition in Antarctica and across the Arctic Ocean by the early 2030s.[96]

GPC and U.S. Homeland Security

The dominant construct for American homeland security during the past 30 years was that of defense from catastrophic terrorist attack. From the 1990s through the mid-2010s, only the very latent risk of unanticipated and unlikely nuclear exchange between the United States and Russia stood in the background behind the dominant paradigm of homeland protection from the threat of terrorism. The American homeland during those years was largely a security sanctuary. American airbases and seaports projected unrivaled American military power across the globe without fear of credible threat or reprisal.

The arrival of GPC changed all that. By the mid-2010s the American homeland faced increasing duress from a growing array of security threats: cyberattacks, new nuclear-armed states, advanced intercontinental strategic weapon designs, space weapons, and the growing perception that the government had lost control of its borders to unchecked immigration. During 2015–16, the Barack Obama administration went public with Federal Bureau of Investigation indictments against China-backed hackers blamed for industrial espionage, intelligence-gathering, and penetration into critical U.S. national infrastructure with an aim to disrupt or destroy it in the event of Sino-American hostilities. North Korea launched nuclear-capable missiles in 2017 with sufficient range to threaten the United States and signaled that other nuclear weapons–capable states might soon develop delivery means to threaten the American homeland, too.

In 2018, China commenced multifaceted nuclear weapons modernization programs that build out an increasingly capable triad to hold the United States at risk of a nuclear second strike in the event of any escalating armed conflict.[97] Russian state-enabled, military, intelligence, and criminal cyber agents conducted increasingly sophisticated cyberattacks and social media activity inside the United States—including disinformation campaigns—that weakened Americans confidence in their government to protect sensitive citizen data or deliver reliable public services. Russia and China unveiled stealthy unmanned aerial platforms and hypersonic missiles capable of evading U.S. missile defenses and aerial protection schemes rendering sovereign American airspace vulnerable to penetration.[98] America's Great Power rivals tested and deployed increasingly capable systems for disrupting and destroying commercial and military satellites including frequency jamming, lasers, maneuverable space objects, and increasingly capable direct ascent antisatellite weapons.[99] Finally, American homeland security became increasingly stressed by perceptions of a decade-long tide of illegal immigrants, lethal drugs, criminals, and terrorists crossing American borders—especially its southern border with Mexico.[100] U.S. concerns about terrorism heavily merged with worries about border insecurity during the first half of the 2020s.[101]

From 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration pursued a homeland security program focused on enhancing national cyber resilience and vigilance, modernization of the national nuclear triad for strategic deterrence, and combatting terrorism with overseas partner–led detection and prevention along with first-ever National Strategy for Countering Domestic Terrorism.[102] The second Trump administration seems intent on pursuit of a more muscular and sovereign approach to homeland security. Among the main initiatives

now anticipated for the Trump homeland defense program over the remainder of the decade are those tightly restricting immigration, establishing robust and militarized border security, and creating a nation-wide missile defense (or "Iron Dome").[103] As mentioned in the section on the Arctic, the administration's approach could feature annexation of Greenland, absorption of Canada as a U.S. state, and greater control of the Panama Canal with the aim of enhanced American homeland security from vastly expanded direct, sovereign control of the Western Hemisphere.[104]

President Trump declared a national emergency in January 2025 allowing U.S. military assets to help with deportations and expanded border security.[105] That same month, he issued an executive order, "The Iron Dome for America," launching a major initiative to deploy and sustain a next-generation missile shield for the U.S. homeland aimed to address the growing threat to the homeland from ballistic, hypersonic, and cruise missile attacks.[106] Notably, homeland cyber defense did not receive immediate White House–level attention, although Defense Secretary Peter Hegseth directed that U.S. Cyber Command stand down from its 7-year program of offensive cyber planning and operations against Russian cyber hacking and cyberattacks.[107]

Administration critics complained that the declaration of a national emergency was unnecessary to resolve the security challenges presented at U.S. borders and that the push for an American Iron Dome was both infeasible without deep buy-in from allies and partners and impossibly expensive to develop and deploy. Critics also questioned the logic of deescalating robust cyber competition with one of America's main Great Power rivals. These criticisms noted, the aggregate impression from early Trump administration actions in 2025 is that it will prioritize homeland security with close attention to tight, militarized border control operations with a futuristic national missile defense system while deemphasizing national-level cyber defense and offensive activities.

Transitions

The book now turns from framing the backdrop for evolving Great Power competition at mid-decade and into a description of several historical insights from past eras of GPC with resonance today. Chapter 2 describes major insights from historical strategic economic competition among and between Great Power rivals. It also analyzes the key patterns of alliance and strategic partnership formation under conditions of multistate Great Power rivalry. Finally, chapter 2 evaluates the durability of global organizations, institutions, rules, and norms when put under duress from Great Power competition between two or more rivalrous states undergoing relative power transition.

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Notes

[1] The author credits colleague Phillip Saunders for suggesting this phrase as a way to capture the growing global uncertainty about the trajectory of American foreign policy.

[2] Kurt M. Campbell and Ely Ratner, "The China Reckoning: How Beijing Defied American Expectations," *Foreign Affairs* 97, no. 2 (February 2018), 60–70, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-02-13/china-reckoning; Angela Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2019).

[3] Stent, *Putin's World*; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Strategic competition exists on a continuum of interactions between and among states, nonstate actors, and some super-empowered individuals. On one end of the spectrum is cooperation. *Cooperating states* are exceptionally aligned in geopolitical goals and means of achieving them, thus able to pursue means of attaining them harmoniously. *Collaborating states* have similar goals and a general agreement on the means of achieving them. *Competing states* recognize that some but not most of their major goals are compatible and simultaneously disagree on the best means for attaining mutual gains in their remaining aligned goals. *Confrontational states* are characterized by incompatible aims in almost all major goals and in general conflict about what constitutes legitimate means for attainment of national goals. On the far end of the interaction continuum is the undesirable environment where state goals are perceived as so incompatible, and even threatening, that the dominant form of state-to-state interaction devolves into armed conflict. See a detailed discussion in Thomas F. Lynch III, ed., *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition* (Washington, DC: NDU Press, 2020), "Introduction," https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/2404286/1-introduction/.

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TEXTBOX 1:

"China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity. They are determined to make economies less free and less fair, to grow their militaries, and to control information and data to repress their societies and expand their influence. . . . These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false."

—National Security Strategy of the United States of America, December 2017

TEXTBOX 2:

"The United States is failing in the global South. Its popularity and influence have waned, and policies that recent U.S. administrations have designed to close the gap have fallen short. . . . Countries in the global South have attempted to press the United States for better engagement n multilateral forums. But addressing the trust deficit through these postwar institutions has not been effective because they have become part of the problem. They have failed to adapt to a new distribution of power, fueling charges of hypocrisy and breeding competitive multilateralism. Antagonistic alternatives—from the expanded BRICS to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization—are vying for influence. Neither American nor Western leadership is the only game in town, and more than ever, the United States must earn its partnerships with rising powers such as Brazil, India, and Indonesia."

—Leslie Vinjamuri and Max Yoeli, "America's Last Chance with the Global South," Foreign Affairs (November 15, 2024)

Table 1. Framework for Assessing the Aspects/Categories of Competition

Competitive Aspect/Category	Main Competitive Elements
Political and Diplomatic	Levels of influence in multilateral institutions, key posts held that control multilateral institutions, number, and strength of political alliances.
Ideological	Values and political systems' appeal.
Informational	The manner and degree of transnational communications—open and transparent vs. closed and restrictive; extent of denigration of "the other" in mass communications; ability to manage internal messages and project external messages.
Military	Size, posture, professionalism, and technological edge of armed forces; cohesion and capacity of military alliances.
Economic	Size, technological breadth, diversity, and resources based on the national economy; the innovation ecosystem of a national economy, including its access to and management of financial capital.