Chapter 3a

Mid-Decade Great Power Geostrategic Dynamics

Evolving Strategies and Relationship Trajectories

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This chapter provides an overview of the evolving global strategies and trajectories among the three Great Powers. It describes the major elements of their formal strategies and informal strategic activities from 2020 through 2024. It then forecasts through 2030 the trajectory of strategic competition anticipated due to evolving Great Power security strategies and implementation focus—especially from the forecasted impact of the new America First 2.0 strategic framework emerging in early 2025. The chapter reviews America's ambitious 2021 to 2024 efforts to reenergize old alliances and build new strategic partnerships able to resist strategic coercion of individual states or a successful challenge to the tenets of the free and open international liberal order. It observes that America's partnership-building successes in the early 2020s were notable but now are under duress from the new and very different Trump administration strategic framework of America First 2.0, which places more emphasis on unilateral American application of power for self-interests than for maintenance of global principles or institutions. The chapter next evaluates India's status as an aspiring Great Power, concluding that while it is not one today or likely to be one by 2030, its latent potential makes it a critical factor in Great Power competition today and for the immediate future. The chapter analyzes the growth of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership from the beginning of the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War, noting its dramatic uptick while reviewing important limitations. Chinese, American, and Russian strategic activities are fragmenting global domains of trade, commerce, and information exchange that had been largely open and free for more than 30 years. Great Power strategies portend accelerating domain fragmentation and greater confrontation less over international norms and procedures and more over the shape and form of evolving spheres of Great Power influence. America First 2.0 strategic aims make Europe less likely to become a region of direct armed conflict between Russia and the United States, while the Indo-Pacific will remain a contested zone for America and China that is likely to feature trade wars and tariff struggles more

than armed clashes. Great Power competition in the regions of the Global South will continue but likely evolve from contested visions of future international order toward transactional competition for primary access to critical economic resources and markets.

Introduction

Time almost stood still at the beginning of the 2020s, as COVID-19 enveloped the globe and ground the most common interstate interactions to a total halt or transposed into an online format. The pandemic throttled much global trade and transit for almost 2 years and kept China shuttered from international travelers for a full 3. But the pandemic did not attenuate, much less eliminate, Great Power competition (GPC) among the United States, China, and Russia. Instead, Great Power rivalry accelerated and sharpened by mid-decade.

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If anything, COVID-19 and its aftermath accelerated geostrategic trends already obvious at the beginning of the 2010s. American and Chinese relations that were rivalrous before 2020 became more acrimonious during the pandemic's run. Russia's pugilistic pursuit of dominance in its "near abroad"—begun with invasions into the Republic of Georgia in 2008 and into Ukraine and Crimea in 2014—became even more determined and deadly with Vladimir Putin's armed incursion into Ukraine in February 2022 and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)'s response in support of Ukrainian sovereignty. Finally, Russia's increased reliance on China to offset U.S. and Western sanctions to punish Moscow's illegitimate 2014 annexation of Crimea and occupation of eastern Ukraine deepened as a second and larger wave of Western economic and diplomatic sanctions sought to isolate Russia and its military failures generated losses in manpower, munitions, and equipment irreplaceable by Russia alone.

This chapter focuses on the key features of modern Great Powers rivalries at mid-decade among the United States, China, and Russia. It traces the evolution of their national strategies and main geostrategic activities from 2020 through 2024 and then forecasts the likely strategic trajectory and future focus of their national aims and interests through 2030. It specifically addresses the emergence of Great Power strategic alignments and security partnerships, with special attention to the Sino-Russian nexus and the U.S.-led alliance enhancements and security partnership growth in the Indo-Pacific region, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) with Australia, Japan, India, and the United States and a trilateral security partnership for the Indo-Pacific region known as AUKUS (Australia–United Kingdom–United States).

The chapter explores the status of India as a potential Great Power and its jousting for influence around the globe and in the Indo-Pacific region. It evaluates the ongoing and likely future of growing Great Power confrontation over the proper configuration of global rules, norms, organizations, and institution and makes several observations about where Great Powers are at greatest risk of clashes given their competing strategic interests and policy preferences. The chapter concludes with several comparative insights and implications

about evolving Great Power strategic aims and narratives for outcomes from 2025 to 2030, thereby setting the stage for the subsequent chapter to assess the power tools available to each Great Power to pursue its strategic aims over the remainder of the decade.

In keeping with the framework established in chapter 2 of *Strategic Assessment 2020* and restated in chapter 1 of this volume at table 3a.1, this chapter and the next address Great Power strategies, capabilities, and willingness to use their power via a framework focusing on five competitive categories of interstate activities: political and diplomatic, ideological, informational, military, and economic.

Great Power Strategic Evolution From 2020 to 2024: Big Movements

As developed in *Strategic Assessment 2020* and restated in chapter 1 of this volume, the operational definition for a *Great Power* is a country with three main characteristics: *unusual capabilities* in comparison to other states, behavior that indicates *a willingness to use those capabilities* in and beyond the state's immediate neighborhood, and *the perception by other actors* in the system that the state has unusual capabilities and the will to use them, making it an actor that must be treated as a major power.[1] In the mid-2020s, only three states continue to fully satisfy this criteria: the United States, China, and Russia.

As in 2020, most geostrategic analysts, international relations scholars, and global power indices agree that in 2024–2025 the United States remains the most powerful of the three contemporary Great Power states.[2] Since Russia's February 2022 war with Ukraine, most Western analysts and American policymakers concur that while both are dangerous geostrategic rivals, China poses the greatest long-term challenge to American power and interests, while Russia poses an acute short-term one.[3] To this point, Beijing remains a rising, revisionist Great Power, while Moscow behaves ever more reliably as a faltering, disruptive, and opportunistic one. For more than a decade, Moscow and Beijing have become increasingly intertwined—with Russia ever more reliant on China to overcome the serious strategic and economic consequences set in motion by Putin's ill-considered war with Ukraine. In practical terms, Washington at mid-decade wrestles with how to understand and address the balance of competition and cooperation between its two Great Power rivals as they head in fundamentally divergent directions.[4]

These mid-decade dynamics and geostrategic debates establish the requirement for a detailed comparison of the evolving commonalities and differences among today's three Great Powers. This following section reviews the evolution of national strategy and geostrategic activities by each Great Power over the past half-decade to 2025. It compares these patterns with those of the rival Great Powers and assesses the evolving strategic alignments and security partnerships that each has established in context to forecast their implications through 2030.

U.S. National Strategy and Geostrategic Activities

The first Trump administration (2017–2021) formally acknowledged that America's post–Cold War "unipolar moment" was over and that the world already entered into a new geostrategic era—one dominated by Great Power competition.[5] The administration's December 2017 National Security Strategy jettisoned the legacy American foreign policy

premise of engagement, enlargement of the zone of democracy, and attendant cooperation with all nation-states of the world. This strategic approach dominated American thinking since the 1991 end of the Cold War and over a two-and-a-half-decade period of unrivaled U.S. military and economic power.[6]

Taking office in January 2021, the Biden administration did not have to accept its predecessor's geostrategic diagnosis of a new era of GPC or the Trump administration's approach to that competition. The administration's new national security framework had been accompanied by public criticism of previous American foreign policy and security thinking—especially the Obama administration's approach toward China where Joe Biden had been the Vice President with a large foreign policy profile.[7] Some analysts thought the new administration might choose to steer away from both the Trump administration's description of the international security environment and its policies for securing American interests in that environment.[8] But key members of candidate Biden's foreign policy team—including those who were prominent administration officials under President Barack Obama like National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan and Assistant Secretary of State for East Asian Affairs Kurt Campbell—signaled that the incoming Biden administration largely agreed with the Trump administration's diagnosis of the new international environment while disagreeing with the manner in which the Trump team pursued competition with its Great Power rivals.

While the Biden administration accepted the Trump diagnosis of a new geostrategic era of GPC, it introduced key distinctions in its proposed strategic response. The Biden administration ended the first Trump administration's "American First" policy and unilateral approach toward GPC that it believed too often resulted in "America alone." The Biden team instead implemented an approach that came to be known in many quarters as "strategic competition," which emphasized vigorous competition with both China and Russia while working closely with allies and partners and reinvigorating American domestic competitiveness and the attractiveness of partnership with the United States. The Biden administration approach believed that the United States would succeed in competition with China over time by working with friends and partners and avoiding the strategic error of posing stark binary choices to would-be partners and friends.[9]

In March of 2021, Secretary of State Antony Blinken framed the Biden administration strategic competition approach toward its most worrisome Great Power rival, China, this way: "Our relationship with China will be competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can be, and adversarial when it must be. The common denominator is the need to engage China from a position of strength."[10]

The Biden administration sought enhanced diplomatic engagement with its Great Power rivals from the outset. During 2021, U.S. State Department representatives hoped to moderate/contain Russian imperialist impulses and to enlist Moscow in a renewed and cooperative effort to constrain Iran's nuclear arsenal and resuscitate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.[11] These diplomatic efforts began haltingly and derailed quickly. From mid-2021 through early 2022, Russo-American interactions grew increasingly fraught as tensions grew over Moscow's growing demands that NATO cease deploying any troops or weapons in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and force Ukraine to permanently cede territories that Russia seized in Crimea and Donbas in 2014.[12]

Fearful of Putin's hardening rhetoric toward the future of Ukraine, which became ever more obvious from July 2021, Washington first warned Moscow against military aggression and then began openly sharing intelligence across Europe in late 2021, demonstrating that Russia was massing forces astride Ukraine poised for an invasion—one that began on February 24, 2022.[13] The Russian armed incursion into Ukraine set Russo-American relations on a path almost completely bereft of collaboration or cooperation and increasingly focused on intensified competition and overt confrontation over the fate of Ukraine and the future of the concept of national sovereignty. The Biden administration's National Security Strategy was delayed almost a year to revise America's assessment of Russia from a potentially manageable Great Power rival to one that was an acute, short- to mid-term threat to U.S. national security interests.[14]

The Biden administration approached China in early 2021 with both a sense of Beijing as a strategic competitor and a firm desire to find common ground for collaboration on items mattering most to collective global order and security, including climate change, global health, food insecurity, nuclear arms control and nonproliferation, and counterterrorism. But a March 2021 meeting between senior Chinese diplomatic envoy, Yang Jiechi, and Secretary of State Blinken with U.S. National Security Advisor Sullivan instead hardened an already frosty Sino-American relationship under the first Trump administration.[15] The so-called Alaska Summit set the tone for the early 2020s in the U.S.-China rivalrous dyad.

The United States embraced stiff competition with China and did not back off its criticisms of Chinese actions in places like Hong Kong and Xinjiang Province that threatened global rules and norms protecting individual rights and liberties. China accused America of being the world's bully, determined to deny China its rightful place in the Asia-Pacific and globally, and stated that Washington had no moral authority to dictate international public opinion and norms since it did not represent the world.[16] Potential Sino-American collaboration on shared global challenges took a backseat to intensifying global competition and confrontation. The October 2022 U.S. National Security Strategy called out China—and particularly the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)—as a repressive autocracy threatening the rights and freedoms enshrined in the post–World War II liberal order and promised to "out-compete China" while at the same time constraining Russia.[17]

The National Security Strategy also established both domestic and international components to the Biden administration approach to strategic competition. It described China as the Great Power with the vision, and increasingly the power, to change the free and open global order toward a more authoritarian one.[18] The American strategy also prioritized rejuvenation of existing alliances and partnerships with like-minded democratic and democratic-adjacent governments willing to contest the authoritarian challenges posed by China and Russia.[19] Domestically, the United States intensified investments in its industrial and innovation base to build a modern work force and assume leadership in the most promising and critical emerging technologies.[20]

The U.S. CHIPS and Science Act of 2022 put into motion an array of strategic American economic activities to outcompete China in the "industries of tomorrow," especially semiconductors and artificial intelligence (AI). By redirecting global supply chains away from reliance on Chinese high-tech products and components; tightening manufacturing

linkages with allies and partners; and investing in American domestic innovation, advanced manufacturing, and STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, the Biden administration announced its strategic intent to attain and maintain American leadership in nanotechnology, quantum computing, and clean energy in addition to semiconductors and AI.[21]

From 2021 through 2024, the United States advanced its strategic competition agenda globally, with unintentional assistance from Russian aggression in Eastern Europe and Chinese sharp elbows across the Indo-Pacific. The 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine provided impetus for renewed cohesion and resolve in the U.S.-led NATO and drove two long-standing neutral European nations—Sweden and Finland—to join the Alliance to better provide for their collective security against Putin's growing menace to the continent.[22] NATO's response, supported by Washington, to naked Russian violation of Ukraine's globally recognized sovereignty was giving over $55 billion in military assistance to Ukraine from 2022 through fall 2024.[23] Simultaneously managing Ukraine's right to self-defense with the imperative to avoid catastrophic—and potentially nuclear—conflagration between NATO and Russia, Washington's management of the first proxy war of the 21st century's inaugural GPC contributed to a historic loss of relative Russian power during almost 3 years of intense armed conflict. By the end of 2024, Russia had reportedly suffered 600,000 total casualties with more than 200,000 dead, signaling potentially devastating long-term impact on a country already struggling with population decline.[24]

In the Indo-Pacific region, the United States accelerated efforts to deter conflict with China, boost its regional relative military power with reshaped alliances and new partnerships, and confront what it described as increasingly provocative Chinese behavior.[25] Framed in its early 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy, the United States moved to protect a Free and Open Indo-Pacific from Chinese encroachment or economic blackmail with a reframed security architecture, dramatically increased diplomatic presence and activism, and alternative economic frameworks to those championed in Beijing.[26] Washington launched enhanced partnerships and new initiatives, most notably with the QUAD partnership and AUKUS. The United States also transformed long-standing bilateral alliances with Japan and South Korea into a less formal but substantive multilateral security partnership and encouraged informal advances in bilateral security initiatives with South Korea and India.[27] Washington has also deepened its partnership with Vietnam, upgraded alliances with the Philippines and Thailand, and enhanced its engagement with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations into a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.[28] The Biden administration advanced the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF), reaching agreements with 13 partners to strengthen integrated supply chains, develop clean energy and infrastructure, and enhance tax and anticorruption efforts.[29]

America's strategic gains in Europe and Indo-Pacific region during the first half of the 2020s were measurable and meaningful. But they were far from decisive in the evolving Great Power competition. America's Indo-Pacific partners remained deeply intertwined with China's economic engine. Thus, they accepted enhanced American security engagement but remained wary of choosing full partnership with Washington over Beijing. Europe's alignment with the United States against Russia was dramatic and quite stunning in support of Ukraine's sovereignty against Russian aggression. But Europe remained

fragmented in its approach toward China—angry with Beijing for its support of Russian aggression in Europe, wary of Beijing's predatory trade practices, but divided in how far to go with "de-risking" its supply chains from longstanding intertwinement with China.

Moreover, America's competitive posture in the so-called Global South came under increasing duress as COVID-19 receded, the global trade consequences of the Russo-Ukraine war unfolded, and the Hamas-Israel war erupted. Leaders, scholars, and citizens across the Global South began to more vocally condemn what they viewed as America's double standards underpinned by the skewed international system. Leaders in the Global South sought to diversify their economic and security partnerships, attract multiple sources of investment, and accelerate efforts to tackle global challenges like climate change and global health that hit them especially hard. In these areas, the United States at mid-decade found itself lagging compared to China, which used foreign aid, investment, and diplomatic engagement to make itself an attractive partner for many developing countries.[30] With Russian support, China generated increasingly effective anti-U.S., pro-Beijing media and publications programs in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.[31] Beijing advanced a new Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) with the premise that global "common aspirations" are "relative" and thus countries must "refrain from imposing their own values or models on others." China's GCI thus branded key elements of the U.S.-underwritten global liberal order as disrespectful of many national and tribal traditions across the Global South and a form of cultural hegemony that must be resisted.[32]

By the end of the Biden Presidency in January 2025, the future fate of the liberal international order's rules, norms, procedures, and institutions was framed in a manner that would see it heavily contested across the Global South in the second half of the 2020s. The United States had much work to do to counteract abrasive and impactful Chinese and Russian narratives there and at the same time redress growing demands across the Global South for a larger voice in the international system.

China's National Strategy and Geostrategic Activities

In 2021, CCP leaders adopted a new national security strategy for the People's Republic of China (PRC).[33] Although not public, its contents are reflected in authoritative Party documents such as Xi Jinping's 2022 National Party Congress Work Report and in speeches and articles by Xi and other senior Party officials.[34] These documents elaborate on Xi's 2013 comprehensive security concept, which placed political security (in terms of continued CCP rule) as the top priority and broadened the definition of security to encompass diverse elements including economic security, technology security, and resource security.[35] A May 2025 white paper titled "National Security in the New Era" then updated the earlier documents and provided the most current authoritative statement of China's security concerns and policy responses at mid-decade.[36]

The 2022 report cited considerable progress in raising living standards and building China's comprehensive national power while maintaining domestic stability in an increasingly complex international security environment. It praised CCP efforts to strengthen centralized Party leadership and pursue high-quality economic development and reform with a focus on building a "moderately prosperous society." The report stated, "We have worked with firm resolve to safeguard national security, fended off and defused major risks,

and ensured social stability. We have devoted great energy to modernizing our national defense and the armed forces. We have conducted major-country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics on all fronts."[37]

Combined, these documents described a new era under Chairman Xi's leadership where a more powerful China plays an increasingly important international role. They declared the era of peace and development and the "period of strategic opportunity" that marked the first two decades of the 20th century as over, replaced by a more complicated and more competitive international environment with serious risks to China's sovereignty, social stability, and development interests. Xi's discussion of risks prioritized the challenges China must be prepared to confront. "Political security" is the "fundamental task," "economic security" is "the foundation," "military, technological, cultural, and social security" are important pillars, and "international security" is the support.[38]

The CCP believes that it faces a hostile United States that seeks to constrain its economic development through tariffs and technology restrictions and undermine its political system through ideological subversion. China had hoped an increasingly multipolar world would feature more independent Great Powers and limit U.S. ability to assemble an anti-China coalition but observed that Washington had maintained close economic, diplomatic, and security cooperation with Europe and its allies in the Indo-Pacific. Beijing's ability to use cooperation on economic and nontraditional security issues to moderate Western policies toward China had declined significantly in the early 2020s, as concerns about unfair Chinese economic practices, aggressive military actions, and deteriorating human rights conditions have eroded support for positive relations with Beijing. At the same time, Beijing remained dependent on foreign powers as export markets and for critical food, technology, and energy imports.

The CCP's prioritization of political security includes extensive internal censorship of the Internet and social media coupled with a well-developed internal and external propaganda apparatus. The CCP always emphasized the Party's ability to control media inside China, but this effort expanded and enhanced the "Great Firewall," which controls the flow of electronic information inside China and across Chinese borders. The Party made extensive efforts to "tell China's story well" to external audiences, both through acknowledged PRC outlets such as Xinhua, CCTV, and *China Daily* and through Western social media. This included pressure on foreign media outlets to suppress negative stories about China and promote PRC talking points. Sometimes these talking points included spreading disinformation about the United States and promulgating Russian talking points about issues such as the Ukraine war and NATO expansion. The PRC actively worked with other authoritarian states to promote norms of cyber-sovereignty, the view that states should be able to control the flow of information inside and across their borders.

While proclaiming a continued commitment to globalization and economic openness, the CCP adjusted China's grand strategy to reduce reliance on developed country markets and technology sources and to increase the role of the domestic market and indigenous technology innovation in its economic development strategy. These changes reflect the close connection between economic growth and political stability and the need to adjust economic policy to respond to new challenges and opportunities. CCP theoretical writings describe public- and private-sector technology innovation in key sectors such as AI and

quantum computing as "new productive forces" that can power future economic growth. With proper leadership from the Party and support from the state, China believes it can build globally competitive industries based on mastery of new technologies. The current challenge, then, is to manage China's continuing vulnerability to Western economic, diplomatic, and military pressure, even as Beijing works toward a future where Chinese companies have attained global technology leadership and a more powerful China is less vulnerable. Increased economic outreach to developing countries (the Global South) through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and other foreign aid and foreign investment efforts were important means of reducing China's dependence on developed country markets and securing access to the resources, energy, and food needed to support future economic development.

China's economic growth and technology development also underpinned a significant improvement in the military capabilities of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) during the 2020s. For more than a decade, Chinese leaders adopted a patient approach to military modernization, coordinating military expenditures with economic growth and waiting for China's defense industries to become capable of producing advanced weapons before procuring large quantities of combat aircraft, ships, and submarines. This patience paid off notably in the early 2020s as the PLA fielded increasingly capable modern weapons that make it a formidable force when operating inside the first island chain of the Western Pacific, where land-based weapons can make full contributions to PLA combat power.[39] China has also embarked on a rapid nuclear expansion, with the number of deployed warheads growing from about 200 in 2020 to an estimated 600 in 2024.[40]

Chairman Xi focused the PLA on preparing to fight and win informationized wars using integrated joint operations. He imposed a major military reform at the end of 2015 that cut 300,000 troops and reorganized the PLA around five joint theater commands better prepared to plan and execute joint campaigns. The reforms included a focus on logistics and forces dedicated to warfare in the space, cyberspace, and information domains. Xi set a deadline of 2027 for the PLA to have the capabilities needed to mount an invasion of Taiwan and 2049 for the PLA to transform itself into a world-class military. Improved naval and coast guard capabilities have allowed the PLA to adopt a more aggressive posture toward China's maritime territorial disputes in the South China and East China seas, generating frictions with other claimants. Yet China avoided military conflicts in favor of gray-zone tactics that apply military and paramilitary coercion to strengthen China's claims while avoiding the use of lethal force.[41] The PLA remains focused on the Taiwan issue and Chinese territorial disputes in Asia, with relatively limited efforts to expand its presence outside the Indo-Pacific region.[42]

Although China's foreign policy is often couched in terms of lofty principles such as collective security, respect for sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, and noninterference in internal affairs for external consumption, in practice Beijing is highly sensitive to relative power and seeks to increase its own national power and to foster a global balance of power that will constrain the United States. China has sought to reduce its vulnerability to U.S. and Western pressure through a mix of Great Power diplomacy, engagement with neighboring countries in the Asia-Pacific region, and active efforts to engage developing countries in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America.

China has forged a strategic partnership with Russia based on common concerns about U.S. power, U.S. military alliances, and the ideological threat that democracy and human rights poses to their authoritarian systems of government. Although this partnership does not involve binding security commitments, it involves extensive military and diplomatic cooperation to try to balance, resist, and erode U.S. power. China has used Russian arms and technology to advance its military modernization and increasingly relies on oil, natural gas, and natural resources from Russia to fuel its economy. In return, China provided diplomatic and economic support to help Russia oppose NATO expansion and evade Western sanctions imposed after its seizure of Crimea in 2014 and invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The partnership is strengthened by common concerns about the political threat posed by U.S. promotion of democracy and human rights, including the shared belief that Washington seeks to promote "color revolutions" to overthrow the current governments in Beijing and Moscow.

China has been less successful in efforts to encourage the European Union (EU) and European powers such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany to play a more independent international role apart from the United States. Even as European countries sought to access China's market and benefit from opportunities to invest in China, Western concerns about human rights and political conditions in China remained obstacles. China's efforts to use trade and investment to woo countries in Southern and Eastern Europe aggravated European suspicions about China's intentions, with the EU declaring China an economic competitor and a "systemic rival" in 2019. China's efforts to use industrial policy, limits on market access, theft of intellectual property, and other measures to help Chinese companies move up the value-added chain and become globally competitive exporters gradually eroded political support for close relations with China and brought EU policies closer to those of the United States. These concerns were reinforced by Chinese de facto support for the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Similarly, China sought to use economic leverage to strengthen ties with Asian powers such as Japan and South Korea. These efforts had some success in improving bilateral relations and building economic cooperation but could not overcome the fact that both countries have significant security concerns about China and that China is unwilling or unable to replace the security guarantees that both countries receive through their alliances with the United States.[43] China has also sought to use multilateral forums such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Group 20 to foster stronger strategic relations with major regional powers such as India, Brazil, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and South Africa and to encourage them to act more independently from the United States.[44]

China's economic and diplomatic engagement with its neighbors in the Indo-Pacific region has been more successful, as Beijing has established positive diplomatic relations and become the largest market for almost all the economies in the region. These ties were cemented by Beijing's strategic partnership with Association of Southeast Asian Nations, establishment of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in Central Asia, and participation in a range of diplomatic dialogues and regional free trade agreements. These successes were offset by China's maritime and land border disputes with many Asian countries and concerns by many countries that Chinese regional dominance would compromise their security and sovereignty. As in Europe, the success of Chinese companies in using state

assistance to move up the value chain is coming partly at the expense of Asian companies and creating new tensions in bilateral relations. Northeast and Southeast Asia can best be described as a competitive battleground between the United States and China, with many states dependent on Washington for their security and on Beijing for economic prosperity. Asian countries do not want to be forced to choose between the United States and China but are coming under increasing pressure from both powers to curtail aspects of their cooperation with the other.

Even as it has practiced a realpolitik foreign policy, China has regularly articulated idealistic foreign policy principles to give its proposals more international appeal, especially in the developing world. These efforts include the five principles of peaceful coexistence articulated at Bandung (Indonesia) in 1955 and the new security concept put forward in the late 1990s. The latest iteration is the "community of common destiny" originally articulated in Hu Jintao's 2012 National Party Congress report, which called for the building of a "harmonious world of enduring peace and common prosperity." Xi has elaborated on this approach, which was described in 2018 as the "overall goal of China's foreign affairs work in the new era."[45] The community of common destiny brushes over conflicting national interests in favor of a shared commitment to resolve issues peacefully through dialogue and to rule out the use of force. These principles are, of course, in great tension with China's efforts to build a world-class military and refusal to give up even an inch of territory that China claims (both articulated in Xi's 2022 Party Congress report). This follows a familiar pattern in Chinese diplomacy—seeking to reach agreement on a shared set of principles and then using those principles to pressure partners to accede to specific Chinese proposals and to reject proposals China views as inconsistent with the shared principles.

Many analysts view the community of common destiny as an effort to articulate a Chinese alternative to the current rules-based international order.[46] China's diplomacy casts its actions as efforts to reform the current international order and proclaims its support for the United Nations (UN), which it views as the most legitimate international governance body. (Chinese support for the UN is partly due to its emphasis on the sovereign equality of states and partly because permanent membership in the UN Security Council gives Beijing the ability to shape UN actions and block the ones it opposes.) The community of common destiny is at the center of Chinese efforts to change the content of international rules and norms in ways that are more favorable to Chinese interests and that insulate the CCP from global forces it finds threatening to authoritarian control.[47]

China's overseas economic expansion began in the early 2000s and was formalized by President Xi in the BRI and the Digital Silk Road (DSR) in 2013 and 2015, respectively. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, Xi was reassessing these efforts. His review found many BRI programs behind schedule, suffering from quality control and maintenance problems, riven with distressed debt, underperforming economically, and lacking the management framework to produce profits or generate Chinese political and security influence. Downscaled versions of BRI and DSR continue as elements of Chinese economic power projection but have been recast as elements of three new initiatives to advance the vision of a community of common destiny.[48] Premier Li Qiang's 2024 work report stated that "China is ready to pursue the Global Development Initiative [GDI], the Global Security Initiative [GSI], and the Global Civilization Initiative [GCI] with other members of the international

community so as to promote the shared values of humanity, reform the global governance system, and build a human community with a shared future."[49]

The GDI: September 2021. CCP Chairman Xi announced this initiative at his virtual presentation to the UN General Assembly in September 2021, calling for efforts to "steer global development toward a new stage of balanced, coordinated, and inclusive growth."[50] China's GDI concept paper called for pooling efforts "to tackle challenges, promote post-COVID recovery, and seize opportunities so as to open up a bright future for achieving common sustainable development and building a global development community."[51] GDI couched Chinese overseas infrastructure development programs and funding (including the BRI) as supporting the UN Sustainable Development Goals program and engaging other development partners. Xi's speech highlighted various Chinese development initiatives and stated China's position that "a world of peace and development should embrace civilizations of various forms and must accommodate diverse paths to modernization."[52] GDI language about the priority of economic development as a prerequisite for promoting human rights highlighted the Chinese view that collective economic rights must take priority over individual political rights. The GDI proposal sought to cast China as an advocate for the developing world whose proposals—intended to advance Chinese national interests—were advancing UN goals. At the same time, China's proposals sought to shape the terms and conditions of UN development assistance, including by depicting political conditionality on development assistance as interference in the internal affairs of developing countries. Subsequent Chinese speeches under the GDI banner increasingly criticized U.S. export controls and tariffs as discriminatory measures that hurt the rights and interests of developing countries.

TEXTBOX 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The GSI: April 2022 and February 2023. In early 2022, President Xi announced the framework for a GSI, which brought together previous Chinese foreign policy principles under the banner of the six commitments:

- creating a "common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security"
- respecting sovereignty and territorial integrity
- abiding by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter
- taking the legitimate security concerns of all countries seriously
- resolving differences and disputes between countries peacefully through dialogue and consultation
- maintaining security in both traditional and nontraditional domains.[53]

These principles contain internal tensions, especially the notion of common (indivisible) security and respect for "the legitimate security concerns of all countries," concepts that had been used by Chinese diplomats to rationalize Russia's invasion of Ukraine as a reasonable response to concerns about NATO expansion. The priority areas for cooperation included traditional security issues, regional security issues, and nontraditional security

issues.[54] GSI was notable in highlighting cooperation to address domestic security issues raised in Xi's "overall security concept."[55]

The vagueness of the GSI proposal was intended to maximize its appeal to other countries. Chinese diplomats promptly sought to secure endorsements or positive references to GSI in a variety of joint statements and communiqués from international meetings, with mixed success.[56] Although the GSI concept paper did not explicitly mention the United States, Xi's speeches and remarks by Chinese diplomats framed it as an alternative to a U.S.-led order characterized by countries with a Cold War mentality that pursued unilateral policies and used alliances to pursue their own security at the expense of others.[57] GSI's focus on domestic security includes cooperation on domestic law enforcement tools and techniques that align with intrusive Chinese surveillance practices and preferences.[58] China's efforts to export its surveillance technology and training met with considerable success in authoritarian countries, producing a phenomenon where a number of states look to the United States for assistance with their external security and to China for assistance with internal security.[59]

The GCI: March 2023. In early 2023, President Xi elaborated the third initiative: the Global Civilization Initiative. This strategic vector invites the nations of the world to join China (and Russia) in condemning "universal values" preferred in the United States and the West that emphasize individual human rights. GCI labels the pursuit of universal values as disrespectful of the rest of the world's traditions and cultures—as a form of U.S./Western hegemonic cultural dictatorship, even racism. GCI encourages the states of the world to embrace China's framework for "cultural mutual respect" and promotion of a "relativism of values." China has sought to use a variety of governmental and nongovernmental mechanisms to win support for GCI principles, including extensive historical and cultural exchanges that highlight China's virtues and promote a narrative of moral relativism.[60] GCI advances President Xi's often stated position that "modernization does not equal Westernization."[61]

President Xi's clear-throated articulation of his GDI-GSI-GCI framework and the community of common destiny highlighted an increasing struggle over international principles, rules, and norms. China clearly seeks to erode international support for the current U.S.-dominated international order and to constrain the U.S. ability to mobilize other countries to cooperate in anti-China activities. Yet given the discrepancy between China's realpolitik internal foreign policy discourse and the amorphous principles of the community of common destiny, it is unclear whether Beijing really has a workable vision of a new global order—and whether China would be willing to take on the costs and commitments necessary to lead such an order. It remains to be seen whether China can successfully activate and synchronize the development-security-culture strategic framework its CCP chairman has proclaimed globally in the early 2020s to win support for this vision. Region by region, functional area by functional area, China's proclaimed strategic agenda must grapple with realities on the ground—and where the leaders and the people of a vast array of countries hold divergent views and several choices for their foreign policy allegiance.

Russia's National Strategy and Geostrategic Activities

Russia's national strategy in the early 2020s continued to center on overcoming its loss of influence globally after its geostrategic retreat at the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Led by President Putin, the Russian ruling elite clung to a view of Russia as a Great Power in an increasingly multipolar world order. Though Russia remained economically, militarily, and politically weakened relative to its Soviet predecessor, the rulers in the Kremlin emphasized that Russia remained one of the leading global power centers, with a right to a sphere of influence around its borders. They also rejected the idea of a global liberal or rules-based international order dominated by the West and run according to Western precepts. This revisionist strategic posture underwrote Russia's growing alignment with China, a fellow authoritarian country that also rejects Western global leadership and aspires to maintain a regional sphere of influence. At the same time, Moscow remained wary of growing overly dependent on China as a trade and investment partner, a global standard-setter, and an Asian regional hegemon.

The contours of Russia's official worldview were updated in its National Security Strategy (*Strategiya natsional'noy bezopasnosti*) of 2021.[62] More so that earlier iterations, the 2021 strategy argued that the Western-led global order was crumbling under its own weight and that Russia must be prepared to play a leading role in crafting a new system. Because of the role of the West and Western ideas in causing global turbulence, the 2021 Russian strategy downplayed the possibility of renewing cooperation with "unfriendly" Western states. Instead, it prioritized building relations with China, India, and states in the Global South that shared important elements of Russia's worldview, including opposition to Western democracy-promotion and "neocolonial mindsets." With its emphasis on upholding "traditional Russian spiritual-moral values and cultural-historical values," the 2021 strategy also emphasized the ideological dimensions of the confrontation with the West. As the Russian analyst Dmitri Trenin noted, the strategy suggests that in some ways, the main battle lines of the post-Western world are less between fixed blocs of states than within individual states and societies.[63]

The Russian 2021 National Security Strategy also observed that the

> *contemporary world is undergoing a period of transformation. The increasing number of centers of global economic and political development, [along with] the strengthening positions of new regional and global leading states is leading to change in the structure of the world order, the formation of a new architecture, rules, and principles of global order.*[64]

Amid these changes, the "[e]ffort of the Western states to preserve their hegemony" is among the main drivers of global instability and could lead to "efforts to resolve burgeoning interstate rivalries at the expense of finding internal and external enemies, the collapse of the economy and traditional values, and the violation of peoples' fundamental rights and freedoms."[65] Even before the 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, then, the Kremlin perceived a world in turmoil and a hostile West whose attempt to stand athwart the tides of history was driving the international system toward collapse.

While Russia heralded the emergence of a more multipolar world since the mid-1990s, its sharp break in relations with the United States and European Union after 2022 made the pursuit of alternative norms and institutions increasingly central to Russian foreign policy. To an increasing degree, Russia's strategic pursuits overlapped with Chinese efforts to reduce Western influence over the global system but was both more radical in its aims and less systematic in its implementation.

To the extent that Russia maintains a positive vision of an alternative world order, it is one based on a kind of Great Power concert but lacking overarching political norms related to democracy, human rights, or other aspects of the existing U.S.-led order.[66] Within Russia's envisioned order, a handful of major powers enjoy full sovereignty, which conveys the right to maintain and operate their own sphere of influence on the basis of what Russian analysts portray as a common civilizational identity. In their vision, civilization is destiny, and only "civilizational states" embody lasting identities and values and therefore maintain the right to set the terms of global interactions. Civilizational states protect a specific cultural and ideological history and are destined to project those features into their influence spheres.[67] In the Russian conception, civilizational states appear to include Russia China, India, Iran, Turkey, and Iran.[68] Smaller states without a unique civilizational pedigree like Ukraine in this conception lack the right to determine for themselves where they fit in the larger order created by and for the Great Powers. Meanwhile, Russian officials criticize the notion of a rules-based international order as biased in favor of the West and at odds with international law as embodied by the United Nations Security Council (ignoring Russia's own frequent violations of international law in Ukraine and elsewhere).[69]

A key element of Russia's strategic outlook is the idea that only Great Powers and civilizational states such as Russia are fully sovereign and are not bound to follow others' lead. Russia's long-standing resistance to integration with Western-led institutions centered precisely on the concern that doing so would require abrogating parts of Russian sovereignty.[70] Similarly, the Kremlin asserts a right to its own political model, without reference to supposedly universal norms of democracy or human rights. This construct manifests as efforts to control or limit foreign influence inside Russia, including a policy of "information sovereignty," under which the Kremlin maintains the right to control the information environment within the country (for instance by shutting down opposition-controlled media outlets, expelling foreign nongovernmental organizations, or restricting access to foreign websites).[71] Beginning in 2022, the Kremlin has also pursued a corollary of "technological sovereignty," or reducing dependence on foreign (mainly Western) technologies.[72] The targets of these sovereignty safeguards are primarily anti-Western; that is, while Moscow portrays the pursuit of sovereignty as a foundational principle of its engagement with the world, in practice it has shown far more tolerance in recent years for Chinese and other non-Western sources of influence.

In promoting this idea of itself as a civilizational state and Great Power, Russia reasserted pursuit of its own sphere of influence in the early 2020s—primarily in post-Soviet Eurasia but with a wider geographic ambit. Russian analysts and officials long asserted that a shared history and civilizational identity mean that the post-Soviet states are destined to share a common future with Moscow. It is in this context that the 2023 Russian foreign policy concept listed post-Soviet Eurasia, which it again referred to as the near abroad,

as Moscow's top regional priority.[73] The makers of Russian foreign policy long prioritized controlling, or at least overawing, the smaller post-Soviet states around Russia's Eurasian periphery.

In part, Moscow's pursuit of regional integration in Eurasia is about not only constructing a sphere of influence for itself but also building and legitimating non-Western multilateral institutions that embody nonliberal principles as a means of challenging the historical Western monopoly on global governance. Russian-led multilateral institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) are designed to perpetuate Russian dominance within post-Soviet Eurasia, irrespective of the wishes of the peoples and governments of the smaller states. It was, after all, Ukraine's opposition to joining the EAEU that lit the spark for the 2013–2014 Euromaidan and Russia's first round of military intervention. Moscow also designed these institutions as analogues to Western multilateral institutions such as the EU. Initially, Putin called for the EU and the EAEU to interact as equals in a bid to confer legitimacy on his project of Eurasian integration and to prevent smaller states like Ukraine from drifting more into the European/Western orbit.[74]

Beyond its immediate neighborhood, Russia devoted increased resources and attention in recent years to the Middle East and the Global South more broadly as targets of opportunity, where anti-Western backlash creates opportunities for low-cost interventions. Prior to 2022, efforts to project Russian power into the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere helped make Russia an indispensable partner for "other dictators threatened by revolution," or authoritarian states seeking to hedge against their traditional dependence on the United States.[75] The 2015 military intervention in Syria was the Kremlin's largest success in this realm—at least until the 2024 collapse of the Syrian Bashar al-Asad regime. Moscow also undertook a range of smaller low-cost interventions in several Sahel states while providing advisers and protection for leaders such as Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro.

From his return as Russian president in 2012 until the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Putin treated America and the West as Russia's main rival but expressed a willingness to collaborate with the United States on a narrow range of shared interests, including counterterrorism and nonproliferation.[76] Relations between Russia and the United States continued to deteriorate, however, because of diverging perspectives on European security and, in part, because of the two sides' shared perception that the other was engaged in impermissible interference in its domestic affairs. From 2012, Putin sought to crack down on the civil society organizations that he claimed were responsible—with Western help—for organizing protests after he announced his return to the Kremlin in the fall of 2011. Then the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and its aftermath became bogged down in accusations of Russian malign interference and trained a spotlight on a larger Kremlin campaign to destabilize Western democracies through support for anti-establishment parties and candidates in numerous countries.

Moscow continued its effort to roll back U.S. influence and sow dissension after the election of Joe Biden in 2020. Though President Biden sought what he called a "stable and predictable" relationship with Moscow to focus American strategy more intently on the Indo-Pacific region, the preparation for and conduct of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in late 2021 and early 2022 intensified the confrontation. As noted, the invasion of Ukraine was as much about rejecting a Western global order and reversing Russia's post–

Cold War loss of status as it was about the Kremlin's narrative of a common Russian and Ukrainian identity. Russia attributed Ukraine's stubborn military resistance to U.S. support and claimed the United States was engaged in a proxy war to "impose a strategic defeat" and "finish Russia once and for all."[77] The 2023 Russian foreign policy concept blamed the United States and its "satellites" of using the war in Ukraine to "aggravate [their] longstanding anti-Russia policy" aimed at "weakening Russia in every possible way, including [by] undermining its constructive civilizational role, power, economic, and technological capabilities, limiting its sovereignty in foreign and domestic policy, [and] violating its territorial integrity."[78]

The escalating confrontation between Russia and the United States was among the main drivers of an accelerating Russian rapprochement with China, which had become more fulsome after the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea sparked the initial round of Westen sanctions.[79] Just weeks before Russia's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Xi and Putin issued a new declaration proclaiming their bilateral partnership had "no limits."[80] Though it remains unclear if Xi knew of Putin's plans for Ukraine at the time of this declaration, China's rhetorical position on the war was cautious. But from 2022 to early 2025, Beijing was a key enabler of the Russian military effort and its main partner in sanctions avoidance.[81] Among other forms of support to Moscow, China expanded its role as a principal customer for Russian oil after the imposition of a G7 price cap designed to limit Moscow's oil profits and Beijing provided Russia with key dual-use items under Western export controls—including semiconductors, machine tools, components for drones, telecommunications equipment, and nitrocellulose for explosives.[82]

By the end of 2024, the Ukraine war cemented Russia's dependence on China as a source of critical imports and market for its natural resources.[83] Despite some points of Sino-Russian friction, Putin seemingly burned his bridges to the West in the early 2020s. Having spent more than a decade proclaiming that Russia was locked in an existential struggle with the West and having launched a bloody war to halt Ukraine's drift into the Western camp, Putin seemingly left himself few options for moving back toward normal coexistence, even with the reelection of Donald Trump in 2024 or the new leadership in other Western capitals.

From 2020 to 2024, Russia remained a contemporary Great Power with a peculiar mix of short-term power capabilities and long-run challenges. Its strategic approach doubled down on Russian legitimacy as a civilizational power and a Great Power state—themes featured in both the 2021 Russian National Security Strategy and subsequent 2023 foreign policy concept. As detailed in the following chapter, Russia leveraged a history of martial prowess with unique, global capabilities in several areas of military power, especially nuclear weapons, space and aerospace, and specialized but limited precision weapons and elite forces power projection through recently modernized air and sea platforms. Russia also generated considerable disruptive capacity over cyberspace and social media, promoting its own political, ideological, and informational narratives with a limited-aspiration, maximum-confusion campaign. At the same time, its extraordinary manpower and equipment losses in the Ukraine war, the turbulence generated in its economy by ratcheting Western economic sanctions, and its increasing reliance on China for an array of economic and military support revealed a withering power profile that threatened its Great Power status.

Russian activities over the remainder of the decade will demonstrate whether its strategic decisions in the early 2020s preceded a precipitous decline on the world stage or set the conditions for a durable if disruptive continuing presence.

Great Power Strategic Trajectories and Futures, 2025–2030

U.S. Strategic Trajectory and Future Focus

American strategy entered the last half of the 2020s at a major inflection point.[84] The 2024 election that secured Trump a second Presidential term confirmed two hardening realities in the American foreign policy psyche. The first was a durable political consensus that the paradigm of rivalrous Great Powers engaged in worldwide strategic competition is the main feature of the international environment.[85] However, the second was that the American political leadership and American polity remained deeply divided about how to pursue success in this global Great Power rivalry. The 2024 elections again exposed middle America's fatigue with key aspects of globalism and the burden of underwriting a liberal international order. This fatigue looms large over strategic decisions taken by the leaders of both American political parties.[86] As observed earlier in this chapter, the Biden administration committed America to revitalizing alliances and building strategic partnerships in defense of the free and open international liberal order and in opposition to the authoritarian preferences and state-dominated approach to safeguarding global interests.[87] The Biden team reinvigorated U.S. commitment to the long-standing Pax Americana framework, where American power underwrote a global liberal order and cultivated strategic partners and friends to sustain it.

By early 2025, it appeared unlikely that a second Trump administration had much interest in sustaining leadership of the constellation of strategic alliances and partnerships built out during the late 2010s (under Trump 1.0) and the early 2020s (under Biden) for the preservation of Pax Americana.[88] America's international partners and friends began confronting the unfamiliar and uncomfortable questions of what would happen if America moved away from its 80-year strategic commitment to the global, liberal international order and toward a strategic approach resembling the narrowly self-interested, frequently exploitive foreign policy that characterized many Great Powers throughout history? What would happen if the United States abandoned the idea that it had a special responsibility to shape and lead a global liberal order that benefits the wider world? As noted by American historian Hal Brands, these questions were unsettling, but given the outcome of the 2024 Presidential elections, they were no longer unthinkable.[89]

A Trump 2.0 version of an "America First" strategy for Great Power competition began to take shape in early 2025. As rolled out during the first 4 months of the new administration, this America First 2.0 strategy seemed unlikely to make the United States into the total global dropout that some had feared. Yet it presented a vision of American global engagement very different than anything in the post–World War II era. America First 2.0 appeared fueled by a dissatisfaction with the current global system, which despite being constructed and managed by the United States since World War, was viewed by President Trump and his supporters as unfairly disadvantaging the United States with unfriendly rules and restrictions. America First 2.0 challenged and promised to change most of the standing principles

of American foreign policy by utilizing the enormous U.S. military and economic capacity to reset international rules and reassert its relative power while reducing U.S. contributions and commitments to friend and foe alike.[90] In place of a Pax Americana, an America First 2.0 strategic framework began emerging as one where trade and financial relationships are transactional, security guarantees are conditional, soft power and influence by attraction unnecessary, and where U.S. strength dictates the conduct of transactional interactions aimed at enhancing the American bottom line.[91]

TEXTBOX 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

While not yet a formal strategy in early 2025, the America First 2.0 strategic framework seemed to anchor on beliefs that high economic tariffs would generate American wealth, indigenization of most American production supply chains would stimulate manufacturing and catalyze greater national technological advances, and a booming, increasingly self-contained economy would fund an ever more lethal military capability.[92] Its major components were rolled out in a series of Presidential executive orders, foreign policy proclamations, and economic initiatives. These indicated a desire to be unilaterally assertive on the global issues the Trump administration found strategically important, such as securing the Panama Canal, wresting control of Greenland from Denmark, and attacking the Houthi rebels (Iranian proxies in Syria) terrorizing Red Sea shipping.[93] At the same time, the evolving America First 2.0 strategic approach was far less concerned with defending global norms like human rights or democratic political processes, bearing the costs of providing international public goods, or protecting long-standing allies and security partners unless a specific American economic advantage was at stake.[94] As an example, the Trump administration began 2025 intent on ending the large American financial and security commitment to Ukraine in its conflict with Russia unless Kyiv first granted U.S. firms priority rights to extract and market earth minerals from Ukraine.[95]

The early 2025 outlines of an America First 2.0 strategic framework seemed to rest on at least five key pillars:

- Emphasize homeland security as its first and overarching strategic priority.
- Establish a dominant American sphere of influence across the Western Hemisphere and especially from Greenland in the north to Panama in the south.
- Tacitly acknowledge a Russian Great Power sphere of influence in Eurasia and Europe while explicitly looking to reset economic and diplomatic relations with Moscow in a more positive vein.
- Assertively challenge China's geostrategic rise with a worldwide campaign to arrest Beijing's global economic influence by breaking its dominance in critical technology supply chains and by projecting greater U.S. military power into the western Indo-Pacific region to deter Chinese territorial expansion and ensure American economic and military access while indirectly conceding a limited Chinese sphere of influence in its near abroad region.

- Conduct a new approach to global GPC with China and Russia across Africa, the Middle East, South America, the Southwest Pacific, and the Arctic and Antarctica based on a bilateral, transactional resource extraction and markets access approach that would prioritize direct American leverage with smaller states rather than through multinational engagements or institutional frameworks.[96]

Applying these five early signposts, the Trump 2.0 version of U.S. grand strategy seemed aimed at substantially increasing resources to the American military for defense of the homeland and deterrence of conflict with other Great Powers while at the same time reducing American multilateral global security commitments.[97] The administration's immediate security objectives emphasized a priority for homeland defense, including an expansive commitment to invest in a national missile defense system known as "Golden Dome."[98] It also declared defense of American borders from foreign encroachment and especially mass-immigration flows as a security imperative.[99] It invoked a rarely used wartime statute, the Alien Enemies Act, to declare the United States to be under invasion from foreign countries due to the presence in American of immigrants originating from them and dangerous illegal drugs transiting them—unlocking expanded Presidential powers for the use of Active-duty American military Servicemembers in border security and by arresting illegal immigrants.[100]

The elevation of these security priorities was noteworthy for, among other items, their unilateral focus and accusatory rhetoric toward traditional U.S. hemispheric security and economic partners to its north and south: Canada and Mexico. The initial Golden Dome executive order made it clear that it was intended to protect the United States, although Canada may have some future role in the project.[101] President Trump applied and then lifted a 25 percent additional tariff on imports from Canada and Mexico until both halted illegal immigrants and drugs from flowing into the United States.[102] The assertion of coercive American economic and military power against Canada and Mexico as a feature of America First 2.0 grand strategy indicated a break with long-standing practice and especially the Biden administration's emphasis on intensifying collaboration and partnership with American strategic allies and partners.[103]

Skeptical of the virtues of global trade for American prosperity and security, President Trump in April 2025 raised unilateral U.S. tariffs to levels not seen in more than a century. Unimpressed by America's long-standing strategy of bilateral and multilateral contributions to global economic development and democracy promotion, the Trump administration dismantled the U.S. Agency for International Development, Millennium Challenge Program, Voice of America, and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement on climate, the World Health Organization, and many other international forums.[104]

Many of the top Trump administration's foreign and security policymakers proclaimed that countering Chinese power was the top America First 2.0 security priority. But in early 2025, it remained unclear if President Trump fully shared that view. Early Department of Defense memoranda indicated that deterring China from military adventurism was an American defense priority but clearly subordinated to the defense of the homeland mission and without clarity about precisely what the American military was to deter China from

doing.[105] As of May 2025, the White House had generated no clarifying executive orders or open-source documents about its plans for deterring China despite a number of them detailing how the American military would defend the homeland. As a candidate, Trump accused Taiwan of stealing the U.S. semiconductor industry and cast doubt on whether he would defend Taipei with military force in the face of Chinese military aggression.[106] Unlike President Biden, Trump never promised to use military force to defend Taiwan, instead indicating that he would seek imposition of tremendous tariffs against Beijing should it invade. Shortly afar taking office, the new President suggested that he would seek a meeting with Chinese President Xi and Russian President Putin to discuss slicing all three countries' military budgets in half and capping nuclear arsenals.[107]

As of early 2025, it remained unclear whether an America First 2.0 strategic framework would go beyond displays of military force to deter Chinese military expansion in Asia or prioritize trade wars and transactional trade and commerce deals as the prime mechanism for Sino-American GPC moving forward. While the emerging American grand strategy seemed likely to entail persistent friction with China, it also was far less inclined to confront Beijing over liberal values or diplomatic and security threats to long-standing American regional allies in Asia. An America First 2.0 agenda seemed set to downgrade historic U.S. defense of liberal values. This would be reassuring to illiberal leaders and render Washington less inclined to confront Beijing or Moscow over violations of international norms or their coercion of small states thousands of miles from American shores.[108] America's global competition with its Great Power rivals during the second Trump administration could look much more like bilateral, transactional bargaining among self-ambitious states clashing for wealth and influence while casting aside extant American strategic partnerships and largely withdrawing from Washington's long-standing costly defense of liberal values and order.[109]

At mid-decade, the outlines of a dramatic shift away from 80 years of American foreign policy and strategy were apparent—and they were stark. It remains to be seen which parts of this America First 2.0 strategic framework will get formally codified into American strategic documents like its National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy. It is not altogether clear that the U.S. Congress or other sources of domestic political power and influence will accept the risks and potential consequences of such an abrupt break with past U.S. strategy.[110] These points of friction could temper the full adoption of America First 2.0 strategy, perhaps by retaining some critical aspects of American security partnerships and the U.S. role in collaborative international institutions.[111] There is reason to believe that the essential features of the international liberal order that America built over eight decades are durable enough to accommodate a moderated America First 2.0 that seeks to reform the features of that order rather than formally depart from it.[112]

This possibility notwithstanding, 2025 appears to be a watershed for U.S. strategy and America's role in the world. For three-quarters of a century, American foreign policy anchored on leadership of and robust support for a global liberal democratic order where multilateral collaboration was the norm. If fully implemented, an America First 2.0 grand strategy could revert to a pre–World War II Great Power era where the United States acts as an assertive unilateralist and old-school imperialist power. America First 2.0 seems to acknowledge that Great Powers are entitled to their own spheres of influence and keen

to expand American territorial control of the Western Hemisphere as base of America's own.[113] In this, it may be signaling a less confrontational approach toward the world's major powers, but one that will contest China's global rise with a growing military arsenal even as it seeks to reach a modus vivendi with China that would secure American access to Indo-Pacific markets in exchange for Washington's quiescence on a great deal of Beijing's regional core interests.

During its 4-year run, the Biden administration arguably set up the future of Great Power competition with Beijing and Moscow as one focused on which national vision for global rules, norms, and procedures would prevail. Increasingly, it became clear that this struggle would be primarily contested in the Global South and be one where America's Western allies and strategic partners must play a key role (see figure 3a.1). If fully realized, an America First 2.0 vision of GPC with China and Russia promises to fundamentally alter that framework by 2030. An America First 2.0 approach toward GPC will most likely be conducted against its rivals in regions outside their spheres of influence and for bilateral access to resources and markets that will fuel American economic growth, military stature, and status as a renewed, manufacturing powerhouse[114] (see figure 3a.2). The second Trump administration appears committed to this new course as the best way to rejuvenate American power and secure its vital interests. Many critics are less confident, fearing that the America First 2.0 approach will be a terrible unforced error that will, before the early 2030s, accelerate the end of the American century and usher in the beginning of the Chinese one.[115] Whatever the outcome of its evolution, the nations of the world confront one absolute certainty in 2025: U.S. support for a liberal international order can no longer be taken as a "constant," and American strategic preferences must be treated as a "variable" when calculating their long-term approach toward Great Power relations.[116]

China's Strategy Trajectory and Future Focus

At mid-decade, China continues to understand its national security in a framework based on concentric circles. Its primary focus is on internal security, by both maintaining political support from the Han majority and managing a host of separatist and nontraditional security challenges. For China, this includes preventing Taiwan independence, which it considers a domestic issue. The second ring involves countries and land and maritime disputes on its periphery in the Asia-Pacific region (the U.S. Indo-Pacific). China will work to maintain regional stability, achieve a satisfactory resolution of its territorial disputes, and reconcile the region to a dominant Chinese role. The United States stands as an obstacle to these ambitions, so China will work to erode U.S. power and influence in the region while seeking to avoid a direct confrontation. The third ring lies outside Asia, where China will seek to maintain access to resources and markets, protect its expanding overseas interests, and expand its influence in regional and global institutions while introducing alternative institutions where feasible. China's approach to relations with its fellow Great Powers will be to seek recognition of its status as a global player and deference to its interests in Asia and beyond. Beijing will try to avoid direct military challenges or confrontations where possible and compete in the economic, technological, military, and diplomatic spheres to improve its regional and global position.[117]

TEXTBOX 4 APPROXIMATELY HERE

The second Trump administration poses significant new challenges and new opportunities for Beijing. Although the contours of a U.S. grand strategy have not fully emerged, the second Trump administration's policy has adopted unprecedented measures to limit China's economic access to the U.S. market and U.S. technology, including high tariffs, tighter export controls, and restrictions on Chinese scientists and students studying in the United States.[118] At the same time, U.S. military strategy is focused on building capabilities to deter a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and protect the U.S. homeland, including the development of a Golden Dome missile defense system that would degrade China's nuclear deterrent. The administration shows little interest in cooperating with China on clean energy, global warming, or controlling North Korea, areas that helped stabilize Sino-U.S. relations in the past.

Xi's personality and nationalistic domestic politics in Beijing make China unlikely to show a public gesture of capitulation that President Trump has sought from other foreign leaders. Nevertheless, Xi will have to explore whether a deal to stabilize U.S.-China relations is possible without making fundamental concessions that would sacrifice China's economic development or give ground on sovereignty issues such as Taiwan. Xi is unlikely to risk the humiliation that leaders such as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky received in their meetings with Trump. Instead, lower-level interlocutors would have to negotiate an acceptable settlement that could be ratified in a carefully choreographed summit meeting. Such a deal might help stabilize U.S.-China relations but is unlikely to build trust or diminish strategic competition.

Given uncertain prospects for a deal with Washington, China is likely to focus on its strategic relationship with Russia and on building deeper ties with the European Union and major European powers, with countries in the Asia-Pacific, and with the developing world to strengthen its strategic position and deny the United States opportunities to exert coordinated pressure on Beijing. The U.S. pursuit of an America First 2.0 strategy centered on winning economic concessions from U.S. allies and trading partners and its transactional approach to the developing world will likely provide Beijing opportunities to pursue this approach. As the vice president of China's Foreign Affairs University, Gao Fei, wrote in June 2025, China aims to establish its vision for future world order in those spaces that the United States may choose to vacate in coming years:

> *At present, the global deficit in peace, development, security, and governance is aggravating, which stems from the fact that the international system and mechanism dominated by a few Western powers cannot adapt to the changes of the new era and needs to be solved by improving global governance. Some Western powers have abandoned their international responsibilities and changed from providing public goods to rent-seeking from the international community through public goods, further affecting the legitimacy and stability of the international order. As a responsible major country in the international system, China must demonstrate its responsibility as a major country and play a mainstay role in the face of great challenges to the international order.*[119]

Heightened concerns about U.S. economic and military pressure are likely to strengthen China's strategic partnership with Russia, both to keep the United States distracted by military threats in Europe and to allow Beijing to deal with Washington on strategic issues such as arms control from a position of strength. That said, China would like to see a negotiated settlement to the conflict in Ukraine that protects Russian interests and removes an obstacle to improved relations with European countries. China and Russia will coordinate their policies toward Washington, but the relationship will likely remain transactional and focused on opposition to the United States.

China is already increasing economic outreach to the European Union, highlighting joint opposition to unilateral U.S. tariffs and the need for cooperation to maintain an open global economy. China will seek to limit European willingness to cooperate with U.S. technology controls and highlight the potential for expanded economic, scientific, and technology cooperation to replace existing cooperation with the United States. Continuing European concerns about China as an economic rival and a systemic competitor are likely to limit China's gains.[120] Beijing will follow a similar course of action with Japan and South Korea, possibly even moderating its approach to territorial disputes to pursue deeper economic cooperation and moderate their willingness to cooperate in U.S. efforts to contain China. Beijing will stay on course in Southeast, South, and Central Asia, using its economic clout to increase its political and diplomatic influence around its periphery while casting the United States as an unreliable partner and a source of regional instability.

China's engagement with the developing world will continue to draw upon the emerging GDI-GSI-GCI framework and incorporate multilateral engagement through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the Gulf Cooperation Council, the African Union, and other regional organizations.[121] China will look to the Global South as an expanding market that lacks the leverage to push back through tariffs and as a more reliable supplier of energy and raw materials. China believes it can convert economic prowess and a willingness to share technology into durable political influence and attain future military access. Its approach will continue to pursue classic infrastructure development with BRI programs but complement these efforts with digital governance and internal security equipment and procedural training. China will continue to use robust bilateral academic and cultural exchanges to expand its influence with developing countries and gain acceptance for the Chinese world view and narratives about development and security. Developing countries have agency and will push back against excessive Chinese demands, but retrenchment of U.S. foreign aid and democracy promotion efforts is likely to present Beijing with less competition and considerable opportunities in the Global South.

Russia's Strategic Trajectory and Future Focus

At mid-decade, Russian strategy moves forward as curious mix of Cold War and imperial nostalgia. Putin's Russia pursues less ideological but still ambitious strategic outcomes. Its brash military move against Ukraine in February 2022 demonstrated the powerful will of Russia to reassert primacy in its near abroad and establish an unassailable sphere of influence by force there whenever Moscow deems it necessary.

Despite its troubles with the Ukraine war, Russia at mid-decade still seeks the elimination of U.S.-promoted rules, norms, and institutions around the globe. It pursues a strategic

approach of reactive resistance to U.S. leadership internationally, seeking a multicentric world that impedes and resists U.S.-led Western institutions. Simultaneously, it asserts regional power and authority based on bilateral, transactional military and economic relations advantages.[122] These activities represent Putin's desire that Russia be viewed as a global power despite Moscow's comparatively weak position across all but the military and informational dimensions of strategic interaction.[123]

Moscow remains particularly hostile to NATO and—increasingly—the EU, seeing them as pillars of a liberal order that it seeks to abolish. In this context, its 2022 military aggression into Ukraine backfired by both stiffening the will of the EU and its member states to confront Putin and frightening long-standing European neutrals Finland and Sweden to join NATO in search of greater security against the threat from Moscow. While the war seemingly succeeded in taking Ukraine's NATO membership off the table for the foreseeable future, in practice, Kyiv was far from joining NATO anytime soon even before February 2022. The Russo-Ukraine War also placed renewed focus on the centrality of the United States to European defense and exposed trans-Atlantic fissures, as Washington increasingly seeks to rebalance its commitments from Europe to the Indo-Pacific region—a development Moscow has long encouraged.

TEXTBOX 5 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Despite the intense focus on Europe and Ukraine, Russia's regional priorities at mid-decade focus on consolidating its ascendance in post-Soviet Eurasia and also projecting relevance in the Middle East, the Global South (Africa in particular), and the Arctic.[124] Outside of Europe, Moscow pursues its own version of multilateralism, prioritizing ties with non-Western and nonliberal groups like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS consortium.[125] The Russian government cooperates with China in these groups and on many bilateral issues. By producing deeper Sino-Russian strategic alignment, the war in Ukraine has led Moscow to tolerate a greater degree of Chinese (and other non-Western states') presence and influence in its traditional sphere of influence. At the same time, it remains wary of its Asian Great Power competitor and seeks to limit—or at least manage—Chinese influence in the former Soviet states.[126]

Projecting the image of Russia as a Global Power reinforces the Kremlin narrative about Russia's recovery from its 1990s-era nadir and compensates to some degree for economic stagnation and political repression at home. In contrast to the old Soviet Union or even the PRC, however, modern Russia has not generally operated according to a fixed ideological program, though it has promoted a range of disruptive ideological campaigns abroad as part of a political wedging strategy. In some ways, the war in Ukraine is producing a new ideological turn in Russian politics and foreign policy, with an emphasis on Russia's historic mission and civilizational conflict with the West.[127]

As chronicled in the following chapter, Russia's mid-decade power capabilities match well with its limited strategic aspirations and transactional aims; however, the future of Russia's Great Power status is somewhat questionable insofar as its power indicators are receding as the result of its war in Ukraine. Russia nevertheless remained a resilient international actor, capable of challenging U.S. (and Chinese) preferences at the global level and

maintaining at least vestiges of a Eurasian sphere of influence. With the outcome of the war in Ukraine still in doubt, Russia could well emerge wounded but having achieved many of its baseline strategic goals in Europe and Eurasia while continuing to pose a military threat to its neighbors and, thanks at a minimum to its nuclear arsenal, to rival Great Powers as well.

In its dealings with the other Great Powers over the remainder of the decade, Russian strategy should be expected to a pursue a kind of concert model, not unlike the 19th-century Concert of Europe. Central to this Concert of Europe model is the legitimacy of spheres of influence, which Russia seeks to consolidate for itself above all in Eurasia.[128] Because this vision remains congruent with that of Beijing, and because Putin's Kremlin does not presently see China as posing an ideological threat, Russia should remain able to make common cause with China despite a number of disputes and strategic suspicions.[129] Strategic alignment with China should also remain preferred for Putin this decade; in his mind the United States remains a dangerously revisionist and even revolutionary power that does not accept the legitimacy of Russia's political system and remains engaged in a campaign to weaken and surround Russia. That perception makes the prospect of any normalization between the United States and Putin's Russia unlikely—even if the United States concurs with the idea that Russia should have a defined sphere of influence.[130]

Another enduring aspect of Russia's pursuit of something like a Great Power concert and a sphere of influence for itself centers on checking (or even rolling back) Euro-Atlantic integration. Moscow opposed the idea of NATO expansion since the 1990s, preferring instead to build some kind of common European security umbrella that would allow it equal status with the United States.[131] As Russian forces mustered along Ukraine's borders in the fall of 2021, Moscow dispatched draft agreements on European security to the United States and to NATO. The crux of both drafts was that the only path to durable peace in Europe was for NATO to commit to halting future expansion—and to roll back the presence of its forces to where they were in 1997. While these agreements were clearly unacceptable in Western capitals, the Biden administration tried to engage all the same, proposing to resume negotiations on arms control and transparency.[132]

The Kremlin's rejection of this offer and insistence that the draft agreements constituted a "take it or leave it" proposition suggest that the decision to invade Ukraine had already been made and that Putin had already concluded that war offered the best path for securing a more favorable Russian balance of power with NATO.[133] Putin seemed to remain committed to these prewar terms in early 2025, as his conditions for an elusive peace deal with Ukraine reportedly required in part a "written" pledge by major Western powers not to enlarge the Alliance eastwards—shorthand for formally ruling out membership not just to Ukraine but also to other former Soviet republics like Georgia as well as non-NATO states in the Western Balkans.[134] Russian terms may even include a demand for reduced NATO military footprint in Eastern Europe.[135]

By early 2025, Russia exhibited unmistakable signs of a country converted over to a wartime footing with an intent to remain in that posture for the foreseeable future. From 2022 to 2024, the Kremlin dramatically expanded control over the economy, restricted personal expression, and primed the population for a generational war with the West.[136] With defense production driving economic growth and redistribution in favor of politically reliable

constituencies, it will be hard for the Kremlin to move away from a wartime footing even in the event of ceasefire in Ukraine. The Kremlin also tightened the reins on the Russian educational system, implementing a nationwide curriculum emphasizing Russia's special mission and almost ontological confrontation with the West.[137] Putin and the leadership surrounding him appear committed to raising a new generation steeped in anti-Western ideas and prepared to carry on an epochal struggle with the West for the foreseeable future.

While a limited Russian rapprochement with the United States may not be impossible, it seems unlikely to materialize in the rest of the 2020s, for the corollary of Moscow's positioning for a protracted conflict with the West has been its willing embrace of China as a partner in constructing a new, more "just" and "democratic" world order. Russian elites and officials recognize that their relationship with China is unequal and has grown even more so since the start of the full-scale war in Ukraine. Yet they accept this junior status because of the belief that China is on the same side of the larger struggle over world order. Of course, the changing dynamics of the Sino-Russian relationship have created tensions that will likely endure once the active fighting in Ukraine dies down.[138] But as long as Russia continues to see its most pressing and dangerous challenges coming from the West, it will have an incentive to downplay tensions with China in the interest of maintaining a united front.

Whither India as a Great Power?

India is the one country at mid-decade with the most latent potential to become a Great Power in terms of the three-dimensional definition found in chapter 1 of this volume. India retains undeniable aspirations to realize its potential as a global Great Power.[139] But at mid-decade India is not one. India has nuclear weapons but not yet the number or quality of delivery systems for global reach or the attendant political influence that would provide. Under Prime Minister Narendra Modi, India has expanded its policy horizons from its immediate geographic area and into selective venues seeking global influence. The universal appeal of Indian culture—demonstrated in the global popularity of yoga—has established some international credibility for New Delhi. So too did India's diplomatic activities during 2023–2024 that advanced its case as a champion for countries in the developing world (the Global South) in global organizations like the G20 and by hosting events like the Voice of Global South Summit.[140] But India's "coming out" as a state with global cultural influence and enhanced diplomatic reach does not yet overcome its dearth of economic, military, and wider political influence necessary for a majority of countries in the world to consider New Delhi a vital global actor.[141] Chapter 3b evaluates some of the specific shortcomings and strengths in India's power capabilities, demonstrating that its latent potential seems likely a decade or more away from Great Power status.

Although unlikely to become a global Great Power anytime soon, India is growing in stature as the premier strategic partner for the three Great Powers in the coming half-decade of accelerating rivalry. This allure for India's suitors must be informed by the reality that New Delhi will not accede to bimodal partnership frameworks, for in 2025 India remains secure in its historically grounded, slowly evolving grand strategy of "strategic autonomy."[142] As practiced over the past eight decades, New Delhi's tradition of strategic autonomy seeks

to secure Indian interests first, and without fear, favor, or deep reliance on any formal alliances. India has numerous bilateral strategic partnerships around the world at different degrees of engagement but none the equivalent of a political or military alliance.[143]

In addition to its adherence to strategic autonomy, India has one additional overriding strategic imperative now and into the future: It has a deep distrust of China and seeks to enhance strategic relationships that wrong-foot Beijing and keep China guessing.[144] The former Soviet Union—now Russia—has been India's primary strategic partnership against China for more than a half century. The United States has slowly become an additional strategic hedge for India in its security dilemma with China. India's strategic activity from 2020 to 2024 clearly demonstrated that it will pursue an autonomous policy of parallel strategic partnerships with Moscow and Washington in service of its main security interests against China. After the 2020 Sino-Indian border clash in the disputed Himalayan plateau of Doklam, India accelerated an already growing bilateral security partnership with the United States and soon agreed to stepped up collective security and stability activities across the Indo-Pacific in the QUAD with Australia, Japan, and the United States.

Despite its growing relationship with Washington, New Delhi did not jettison its long-standing security partnership with Russia. Instead of siding fully with the United States and its Western partners against Putin after Russia's early 2022 invasion of Ukraine, India adopted a neutral posture that lamented Putin's strategic choices and urged an end to the fighting but did not adopt UN resolutions of censure against Moscow or join in fully with economic sanctions to punish Russia for its aggression. In adopting this approach, India showcased its historic ability to manage "diverse partners who are often at odds with each other" but who bring unique advantages to India's major strategic aims—in this case against China.[145]

And yet Russia's increasing military and diplomatic reliance on China during 2023–2024 created growing worry in India.[146] The deep distrust between New Delhi and Beijing and their active border tensions complicate the balancing challenge in the long-standing India-Russia partnership central in India's tradition of leveraging Russia to keep China wary. Prime Minister Modi likely recognizes the opportunities for India to build on the limited but meaningful daylight that Putin's summer 2024 visits to North Korea and Vietnam exposed between China and Russia. India prefers these two countries bordering China to maintain autonomous relations with Moscow so that Russia's influence somewhat balances China's increasingly dominant footprint in Southeast and Northeast Asia. India's aspirations for greater stature in regional and global geopolitics still rely on strategic partnerships with the Great Powers and especially the United States and Russia in offset to rival China.

Alliances and Partnerships Into the Future: Sino-Russian and U.S./Western

The rapid evolution of a China-Russia Great Power strategic axis from 2020 to 2024 was arguably the most significant strategic development in modern GPC. The "friendship without limits" declared mutually between Russia and China in early 2022 was anchored on four pillars of common interests:

- animus toward the United States

- geopolitical priorities for Russia and Europe and for China in the Asia-Pacific that complement each other
- authoritarian domestic politics
- complementary economic strengths.[147]

China and Russia demand to be recognized as Great Powers and complain frequently that the United States has refused to do so to a degree satisfactory to President Putin or Chairman Xi. A two-theater war involving China and Russia would be the worst-case culminating scenario for the United States in ongoing GPC; China's support for the Russian war effort in Ukraine has raised concerns in the United States about the nature and extent of potential Russian assistance in the event of a conflict between the United States and China.[148]

Although undeniably durable, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership seems to have limits. China has benefited from Russia's war against Ukraine, and Russia has relied on China to sustain itself in the face of expulsion from the international economy and the dramatic consumption of Russian manpower and warfighting equipment. China's calibrated response to Russia's war against Ukraine was structured to maximize Chinese benefits while minimizing the risk from U.S. economic sanctions and may well serve as the prototype for Moscow's delimited assistance to Beijing in the event of a war over Taiwan. Conversely, given Moscow's greater risk tolerance and increasingly subordinate position in the bilateral relationship, it is not impossible that Russia could provide more substantial direct assistance (for instance, allowing China to relocate defense production to factories on Russian territory).

An overt Sino-American war would, of course, increase strategic risks for Russia. It would threaten global calamity. Eastern Russia's proximity to the theater of military action and the catastrophic risk associated with it would force a different cost-benefit calculation on Russian leaders from what they have had to consider in the context of mere Chinese-U.S. tensions. Although the prospect of Russian involvement on behalf of its strategic interests could act as a restraint on U.S. military action against China, Russia's direct military intervention in a Sino-American armed clash—especially over Taiwan—appears questionable for several operational reasons as well. The Russian and Chinese militaries have developed only a modest amount of interoperability. In addition, Russia has only limited conventional military capabilities in the Indo-Pacific region and especially if its confrontation with NATO continues.[149] More likely would be a Russian effort to distract and divert American forces by launching a parallel campaign in Europe or Eurasia, facing the United States with the possibility of a two-front dilemma.[150]

The limits to China's support for Russia at war and the anticipated limitations from Russia should China and the United States go to war highlight a long-standing belief that the Sino-Russian strategic partnership rests on an unstable foundation. There is a fundamental imbalance in the power capabilities between them that puts Russia in an increasingly perilous trajectory of precipitous relative decline vis-à-vis China.[151] Unless Russia's leaders are willing to accept the role of a perpetual junior partner to Beijing, Moscow must ultimately find a way to diversify its strategic dependency and resist the gravitational pull toward vassalization of its eastern territories and major slices of its domestic economy that

growing Chinese power would demand.[152] The overall state of relations between Russia and the United States will make Russian acceptance of a subordinate position in its entente with China more or less likely.

TEXTBOX 6 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Although the incentives for Russia to remain in firm strategic partnership with China seem likely to persevere for at least several more years, it is important to explore the underlying factors that could ultimately incentivize strategic distancing. Some of these factors are evidenced in the details of Russia's increasingly junior position in the relationship with China, as Moscow's reliance on Beijing grew during the Ukraine war. For one, a planned major gas pipeline between the two encountered major delays because Beijing demanded that Moscow generate most of the up-front capital costs for the project—and because China prefers balancing its consumption of Russian gas with deliveries from Central Asia and other producers. For another, Chinese management of bilateral financial transactions skewed heavily in favor of Chinese banks and brokerage houses, delaying and reducing payments to Moscow.[153] Then there was the historic Chinese perspective that Asia is a secondary region for Russia and that Moscow only turns to its East when it suffers setbacks and confrontations in dealing with the West—and before tacking back in the direction of the West when tensions subside.[154]

These factors should remind that Russia has long sought to demonstrate its agency as an independent regional power in relations with other Asian states, in part to avoid finding itself overly dependent on China in the region. Putin's actions during 2023–2024 reinforced this agency, especially his significant visits to North Korea and Vietnam in June 2024. These signaled to the United States that Putin was not isolated, despite his 2023 indictment for war crimes at the International Criminal Court. But they also signaled China. The signal was that Russia was not solely reliant on China for its relations in the Asia-Pacific region or (in the case of North Korea) for sustaining its military campaign against Ukraine. Although China remained a vital lifeline for Russia's survival in the face of Western resolve to punish Moscow for its invasion of Ukraine, Moscow could and would advance bilateral relations in East Asia independent of specific Chinese involvement.

In Pyongyang, President Putin deepened an already expanding military relationship with the signing of a bilateral defense agreement that provided North Korean ammunition, missiles, and even troops to Russia's war in Ukraine. The agreement also ended China's status as the sole international ally of North Korea, reducing some of Beijing's structural leverage with Pyongyang. In Hanoi, President Putin recommitted to a historic partnership with a country deeply collaborating with Beijing in economic relationship but with a long-standing security dilemma with China. Putin committed to a relationship with Vietnam, forbidding any other alliances that may harm one another's interests. In theory, this was Putin's signal to Beijing that Russia would not be a direct partner to Chinese confrontations with Vietnam over contested claims of sovereignty in the South China Sea.[155] Indeed, Russia has long provided attack submarines that Vietnam's navy uses to enforce its claims in the South China Sea, to Beijing's chagrin.

On the obverse side, from 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration pursued a deliberate foreign policy of growing bilateral and multilateral alliances and partnerships capable of offering alternatives to the policies and activities of China and Russia. It was clear about the importance it attached to U.S. alliances. At the same time, the Biden team understood that even those who supported these alliances over the past three decades often overlooked the need to modernize them for a geostrategic construct of GPC. The second Trump administration appeared unlikely to continue the Biden approach. Instead, and as detailed earlier in this chapter, an evolving America First 2.0 strategic framework began to set the United States on a course of greater unilateral action and increased willingness to apply American power, particularly its economic leverage, to extract favorable concessions from former friends and foes alike.

In the first half of the 2020s, the United States worked to strengthen strategic alliances and partnerships in material ways that improved U.S. strategic positioning versus its Great Power rivals. It mobilized a global coalition of countries to support Ukraine in its self-defense against Russia. NATO's support of Kyiv imposed enormous military costs on Russia, and the Alliance then expanded to include Finland and Sweden—two historically nonaligned nations. NATO also adjusted posture on its eastern flank, deployed a capability to respond to cyberattacks against its members, and invested in its air and missile defenses.[156] In 2025, the Trump administration backed away from commitments to Ukraine and to NATO, leveraging its relative military and economic power to extract mineral resource concessions from Kyiv for limited continuing support while pursuing restored economic interaction with Russia.[157] It also risked NATO cohesion and continental goodwill with wide-ranging tariffs against European goods—and while demanding Denmark make Greenland a direct protectorate of the United States.[158] Perhaps most critically, the evolving America First 2.0 strategic framework appeared to seek accommodation and even global condominium with Russia at the expense of Europe, viewing Moscow as both a culturally conservative friend and a geopolitical partner.[159] However, the longer the war in Ukraine drags on, the more remote any possibility of a Russo-U.S. rapprochement may become.[160]

In the Indo-Pacific theater, the Biden administration expanded an array of strong and growing security alliances and partnerships postured to counter growing Chinese influence.[161] Washington stimulated greater trilateral cooperation among the United States, Japan, and South Korea in the cause of deterrence against North Korean provocation and dissuasion of Chinese strategic coercion or intimidation in Northeast Asia. Washington generated AUKUS in a process that integrated the three countries' defense industrial bases to produce conventionally armed, nuclear-powered submarines and increase cooperation on advanced capabilities such as artificial intelligence, autonomous platforms, and electronic warfare in defense of a Free and Open Indo-Pacific against ongoing Chinese encroachment. The United States signed a new defense cooperation agreement with the Philippines that strengthened its strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific. The administration focused on institutionalizing the QUAD, joining the United States, Australia, India, and Japan in a multilateral framework to deliver various forms of regional cooperation on technology, climate, health, and maritime security.

It also invested heavily in a growing 21st-century bilateral strategic partnership with India—including four framework military and security documents and establishing an

invigorated economic and security partnership with a U.S.-India Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technology.[162] The second Trump administration fell in on these reformed alliances and security partnerships in a welcoming fashion but seemingly without the commitment to underwriting the costs of making them more multilateral or more militarily interoperable. It also leveled high trade tariffs against many of its key regional security partners—India, Japan, South Korea, Vietnam, for instance—risking their commitment to robust, multilateral cooperation with the United States in confronting China across the region.[163]

The Biden administration was similarly active from 2021 to 2024 in growing informal diplomatic and economic partnerships for the Indo-Pacific region that provided alternatives to expansive region-wide Chinese infrastructure investments and the diplomatic and security conditionally they bring. Although it never did sign on to the 11-country formal free trade agreement known as the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Biden administration did work to enhance trade and commercial integration and generate supply chain reliability and security with its 2023 introduction of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity involving 13 countries in the region.[164] Despite IPEF, America's economic and commercial strategic and multilateral partnerships across the Indo-Pacific region continued to lag its security ones during the early 2020s and left the second Trump administration with limitations and liabilities there, making it unlikely that U.S. economic influence in the Indo-Pacific could supersede China's before the end of the decade if at all.[165]

The emerging features of America First 2.0 during early 2025 do not promise improvement. Instead, the vast application of tariffs against American trading partners and strategic allies led to expanding financial frictions and weaker security cohesion.[166] For example, Japan's frustrated finance minister in early May 2025 hinted that Japan's holdings of American Treasury debt—the largest of any country in the world—may need to be considered as a point of Japanese leverage should floundering U.S.-Japan trade talks over reduction in Trump administration tariffs not produce constructive compromise.[167]

At mid-decade, the balance sheet comparison of Great Power alliances and strategic partnerships remains a work in progress. Under the Biden administration, America prioritized and met its mandate to grow globally and regionally relevant military, diplomatic, and security strategic partnerships.[168] The Biden team capitalized on the historic relative strength of the United States in building and sustaining closely coupled military and strategic partnerships. It was less successful generating multilateral economic partnerships to rival the influence of bilateral Chinese trade and investments.

Then President Trump's America First 2.0 strategic approach introduced great volatility and uncertainty about the future of those alliances and partnerships, leaving many to question if they could retain sufficient economic, diplomatic, and military cohesion to contest undesirable Chinese and Russian strategic activities. China and Russia drew much closer together in a strategic partnership born of common anti-American and anti-Western grievances and more tightly bonded by Moscow's desperate need to reorient its economic, diplomatic, and security activities away from Western sanctions and China's willingness to assure that Russia did not collapse as a Great Power under the weight of its missteps into Ukraine.

Should the evolution of America First 2.0 produce a United States with less animus toward Moscow over the Ukraine war and a desire to reintegrate Russia into a more robust economic relationship, then the Sino-Russian partnership could prove less cohesive or strategically important over time—though that prospect seemed questionable in early 2025, as Putin doubled down on Russia's commitment to the war in Ukraine and rebuffed repetitive Trump administration efforts to negotiate a ceasefire on anything but maximalist terms.[169] The second half of the 2020s will reveal which strategic partnerships prove more durable and influential in sustaining or enhancing the relative power postures of today's rivalrous Great Powers.

Implications and Risks for Armed Clash in Geographic Regions

Based on their evolving national strategies and trajectory of geopolitical activities at mid-decade, one can discern broad philosophical and specific regional dynamics in and between the three Great Powers today that are likely to remain salient over the coming 5 years. Some of these have to do with U.S.-Russia relations. Several involve U.S.-China relations. Others engage Chinese and Russian dynamics.

First, all three Great Power states have conspicuous perspectives and serious, albeit dissimilar grievances with the established rules, norms, and institutions of the standing global system known as the liberal international order. The United States was the dominant architect of post–World War II norms, rules, and institutions for international interactions and exchange—often referred to as Pax Americana. As of mid-decade, American preferences continue to dominate the contemporary global system and bear the hallmarks of a long-standing U.S./Western desire for multilateralism, the peaceful resolution of disputes, cultural pluralism, free and open global trade and finance, open and transparent communications, and individual human rights.[170] However, even during the tenure of President Biden, the American people grew more wary of the fiscal and human costs of maintaining and enforcing this global order. The Biden team was also unable to generate new rules about international issues such as currency valuation, the use of space, the policing of cyberspace, and others.[171]

The second Trump administration's America First 2.0 strategic framework seems unimpressed by the value of Pax Americana and resolved to halt underwriting it, much less bear any of the costs to reform it. Instead, the Trump administration seems inclined to turn American strategy toward a more unilateral and self-interested approach that leverages U.S. power in pursuit of America First 2.0 imperatives and pursues American strategic interests through unilateral, hard-nosed, transactional interactions with friend and foe alike.

Working with China and other states, Russia continues to reshape some international rules and norms that constrain its power. Russia remains unlikely to accept integration into institutions it did not design, as Putin still believes that "great powers do not dissolve into other integration projects but forge their own."[172] Contemporary Russia can be expected to support rules that legitimate authoritarian regimes while resisting those that assert a "duty to intervene" against totalitarian or abusive governments. Russian political and diplomatic interests remain aligned with tethering friendships and transactional state-to-state engagements with all states willing to entertain Moscow's presence—especially when those friendly states join Russian in opposing long-standing Western norms.

Paradoxically, though, Putin's Russia will work against norms of nonintervention and military restraint—actively cultivating paramilitary and proxy forces that violate fellow state sovereignty—in pursuit of dominance in its near abroad and when supporting allies and partners elsewhere in the world.[173] Its approach to cyberspace, social media, and other forms of mass communication will emphasize the counter-norm of information sovereignty while continuing to sow confusion and derision in the activities of competitor states.[174] Moscow will welcome the changes to American foreign policy and security strategy promised by America First 2.0, taking advantage of a more inward-looking Washington to achieve its longtime dream of an acknowledged geostrategic sphere of influence across Eurasia and Europe.

The PRC was not involved directly in the establishment of the post–World War II global order.[175] Beijing began engaging global institutions beyond the UN system as part of its reform and opening policy in 1978, with a focus on those that could directly benefit China's growth and development. China claims to act as a representative of developing countries in global institutions, even though its own status and interests have diverged as its power has grown. China benefited greatly from economic institutions that support trade and commerce, such as the World Trade Organization and the World Bank; however, China has also sought to use its status as a developing country to resist or evade some commitments and has taken advantage of gaps in international rule and norms in areas such as currency valuation. China has sought a greater voting share and increased influence in institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Asia Development Bank. But at the same time, it has also begun to develop parallel institutions such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank as vehicles for its interests.[176]

China has long called for reforms to promote its version of a more just international economic order and reform global governance to give developing countries more weight. In recent years, Beijing has become more active—especially in the Global South—in efforts to reorder the international system toward its preference for a "community of common destiny" that discards or deemphasizes elements of the current free and open liberal international order. China's tripartite framework of the GDI, GSI, and GCI promises a more cohesive and concentrated effort to shape global rules and norms for the balance of the 2020s.

The underpinnings of America First 2.0 foretell a meaningful change in the global competition among the Great Powers. Washington appears unlikely to expend any effort to sustain the norms of individual human rights, democratic governance preference, multilateral norms and institutions, or collective action in pursuit of "win-win" outcomes. The Trump administration will vigorously pursue favorable American economic, territorial, and security outcomes by wielding its economic clout and military prowess to maximum advantage irrespective of the ideology, governance structure, social makeup, or history with its negotiating partners. Interrelations are likely to be transactional, not generational.

America First 2.0 will make space for the expansion of Russian and especially Chinese preferences on the international stage. Russia's preferences for a sphere of influence across greater Eurasia and a global political landscape where American power is moderated by Washington's acceptance of multipolarity are likely to be realized by 2030. China's aspirations for the gradual expansion of a global "Community of Common Destiny for Mankind"

will face less resistance from Washington so long as China's trade and financial dealings with the United States favor America First 2.0 interests. Beijing might also consolidate a de facto sphere of interest in Asia and the western Pacific Ocean so long as it does not provoke military confrontation with the United States or stand in the way of American economic access there.

The changing dynamics of Great Power competition owing to the emergence of America First 2.0 will have implications for the strategic aims and outcomes likely across an array of geographic regions for the remainder of the 2020s. As demonstrated in table 3a.2, there are nine major global regions and environments where the three Great Powers will continue to compete. The strategies of each Great Power indicate differing levels of "interest intensity" in these regions. All do not have primary interests in all spaces. Only a few are venues where the Great Powers might make the very risky choice of direct armed clash with one of their main rivals. In figure 3a.2, a primary strategic interest intensity is defined as one in which the Great Power believes a significant risk to national security is found in that region and where it may accept direct armed clash with a Great Power rival to defend that interest over the coming 5 years (by 2030).

A secondary strategic interest intensity is one in which the Great Power believes it faces only a modest risk to its national security resulting from a negative competitive outcome in that region, so its preferred means of interaction with the other Great Powers will remain competitive but seek to avoid direct armed clash other than from accidental circumstances. A tertiary strategic interest intensity signifies that the Great Power perceives limited to no risk to its core national security interests in the event of unfavorable competitive outcomes there and where Great Power interactions could be focused on activities that feature some measure of collaboration as well as subdued or proxy-level competition—and only very rarely direct Great Power armed clash.

Table 3a.2 demonstrates that Great Power interest intensities across the nine main regions have changed from 2020 to 2025. The crossed-out entries in columns two, three, and four indicate where interest intensities from 2020 have evolved to in mid- 2025. Much of this evolution has been due to changing geostrategic circumstances for all the Great Powers. But a nontrivial amount of the change originates from the evolving elements of the America First 2.0 strategic framework emerging in early 2025.

As noted in this chapter's review of the main Great Power strategic interests, China retains its primary strategic interest, with high intensity, the Indo-Pacific region. The United States under President Biden had a declared strategic interest intensity at the highest level including the use of armed force—thus, a primary interest intensity. But it is not clear that President Trump shares the same resolve to use military force in the western Indo-Pacific. The second Trump administration seems keener to deter armed conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific and has publicly resolved to significantly increase economic confrontation in the form of elevated tariffs and financial sanctions should Beijing use military force against an American ally or partner in the region. But so long as America retains a reasonable degree of economic access to the wider Indo-Pacific, it is unclear whether Washington would be so affronted with a PRC embargo of Taiwan or isolation of the Senkakus from Japan that it would resort to armed conflict with Beijing. An America First 2.0 approach might quietly cede the PRC a sphere of influence in the western Pacific to minimize confrontation. Thus,

America's strategic interest intensity in the western Indo-Pacific has arguably declined from a primary one in 2020 to a secondary one in 2025—accordingly reducing the risks of a direct Sino-American armed clash there in the remainder of the decade.

Russia retains its primary strategic interest in Europe, with special sensitivity to dominance of its near abroad—not only Ukraine and Belarus above all but also the South Caucasus and, in part, Central Asia. While past American strategic interests in Europe—and particularly those associated with NATO—saw Washington willing to confront Russian imperial adventurism there with diplomatic countermoves and the use of proxy military forces to check Russian aggression, it is unclear that the emerging America First 2.0 strategic agenda is wedded to past American commitments to NATO. Instead, America First 2.0 appears poised to cede a soft sphere of influence to Moscow, leaving the Europeans increasingly on their own to defend against Russia and dropping American strategic interest intensity in Europe to a tertiary one through the remainder of the decade.

The United States retains a historic interest in primacy across the Western Hemisphere. This primary strategic interest intensity has if anything grown in the early months of the second Trump administration—with the President coveting direct control of Greenland and perhaps Canada and sharp insistence on exclusive economic and security oversight of the Panama Canal. An America First 2.0 strategy seems aimed to create a U.S. sphere of geographic influence in the northern American Hemisphere before the end of the 2020s. China and Russia lack any commensurate strategic interest intensities to rival those of Washington here, so the risks of direct Great Power armed conflict in this region should remain low.

As mentioned earlier in the chapter, Great Power strategic interest intensities across Africa and the Middle East seem poised to remain at no more than a secondary level for the remainder of the decade. With America First 2.0's reorientation of U.S. strategic competition away from the long-term struggle to sustain the global framework of liberal norms, rules, procedures, and processes and pivoting toward a transactional struggle to rebalance trade relationships, secure manufacturing resources, and export markets, all the Great Powers look poised to contest market access in these regions short of direct armed conflict for the remainder of the decade. And while both the Arctic and Antarctica are growing in strategic importance for the Great Powers in terms of natural resources, transit and trade, and strategic missile defense and space management, Russia is the only Great Power at mid-decade with a clearly articulated primary strategic interest in either one—the Arctic. Thus, robust GPC short of direct armed conflict should be expected in each region through 2030.

As was the case in 2020, two nontraditional competitive venues, space and cyberspace, remain those in 2025 where all three Great Powers have primary interests engaged now and into the foreseeable future. There is great and growing risk that intensifying competition in either arena could intensify confrontation and spur direct armed clash. In the absence of new norms and standards for cooperation, this medium of Great Power interaction risks an even greater set of malevolent and confrontational activities in coming years.

Major GPC Comparative Insights and Implications

This chapter's analytical review of Great Power strategic postures and geostrategic preferences at mid-decade reveals that a significant change in Great Power competition is likely during the remainder of the decade.

TEXTBOX 7 APPROXIMATELY HERE

America First 2.0 may never fully coalesce around its framework strategic objectives. If it does not, some of America's prominent historical role in the defense of the rules, norms, procedures, and institutions of the Pax Americana, multinational, liberal international order may persevere. However, to the extent that American First 2.0 does coalesce, it will accelerate the ongoing fragmentation of the globalized economic, communications, and security systems dominant for more than 30 years and operative across more than half the world for 50 years before that. Without the United States, no combination of other states can underwrite a globalized liberal system of systems by the end of the 2020s. Rather than a global order that constrains Great Power privilege, America First 2.0 appears poised to accept a regionalized one in which powerful nations pursue spheres of influence and throw their weight around inside their respective spheres—a largely transactional vision with limited use for multilateralism and a preference for the primacy of bilateralism.[177] International transactions will be mainly an opportunity for one-sided bargaining to improve America's relative position, and Washington will contest its Great Power rivals only outside of their de facto sphere of influence and in the pursuit of primacy in markets for resources and customers around the globe.

America First 2.0 must be expected to create space for China's promulgation of its preferred strategy for global order and stability—a Community of Common Destiny for Mankind. Beijing will welcome the likelihood that America First 2.0 will dilute U.S. credibility with its alliances and partnerships globally, for this will leave space for China to update international organizations and norms to ones that feature "Chinese characteristics" favoring state control of markets, state prioritization of law and order, and reduced individual rights.[178] China is likely to perceive opportunity to carve out greater control and influence over the western Indo-Pacific, believing that Trump's America First 2.0 strategy will not risk military clash over Taiwan or the South China Sea disputes but instead using them as a wedge to secure Chinese concessions on trade and finance. China should not be expected to capitulate on American economic demands, but it may be able to manipulate acceptable trade concessions for much greater political influence and military maneuver space in the western Indo-Pacific before the end of the decade. Finally, China will remain wary of a potential U.S.-Russia rapprochement that could reset global Great Power relations in an unfavorable manner for Beijing—one of its worst nightmares.[179]

For Russia, America First 2.0 may provide a long-anticipated opportunity to secure its major strategic aspirations: a sphere of interest in Eurasia where American power is absent, a fractured trans-Atlantic alliance, and a multipolar world where American power is reduced and Russia has a firm seat at the table of high power. President Putin welcomed President Trump's coercive and transactional approach toward Ukraine in early 2025 as well as internal upheaval in the United States, viewing these as opening steps to weakening U.S. power in Europe and firmly fragmenting NATO.[180] Scholars of Putin observe that he maintains an understanding of geopolitics as one best managed by spheres of influence, rejecting the idea that NATO should continue its expansion into what Moscow has long regarded as its own sphere. Putin and other Russian officials see an opportunity to reverse

many aspects of Moscow's defeat in the Cold War and create a new European and global order more amenable to Russian interests.[181] Russia also understands America First 2.0 as an opportunity to gain global opportunities absent for more than a decade. It believes that advancing commercial deals with the Trump administration, especially on energy, can unlock sanctions relief, legitimize Moscow again in global financial markets and organizations, free up Russian international diplomacy, and drive wedges between the United States and Europe.[182] All these new possibilities are on the table for Russia in its relations with the United States over the remainder of the decade so long as it does not antagonize President Trump personally or alienate key Trump advisors.[183]

At the same time, America First 2.0 changes are unlikely to fully cleave Russia from China as some have speculated. Successful negotiations with the Trump administration will give Russia many more degrees of strategic freedom on the world stage but not enough to see Moscow break with Beijing. If anything, the Kremlin anticipates finding itself at the fulcrum of the emerging U.S.-Russia-China triangle, similar to the position Washington held between Moscow and Beijing after the Nixon administration's rapprochement with China in the 1970s. Russia has spent the past 3 years accelerating the reorientation of its foreign policy away from the West, building new trade patterns, and investing in these partnerships to gain critical support for its military efforts. Like past Great Powers in multipolar systems, Russia is likely to tack away from China to preserve its strategic autonomy but not then abandon this autonomy with too close of a relationship with the United States, even under a leader less ideologically committed to the Russo-American confrontation than the post-2012 incarnation of Putin.

The respective strategies of the three modern Great Powers at mid-decade foretell an accelerating rupture of the liberal international order—Pax Americana—and the fragmentation into emerging spheres of influence for each of the Great Powers. Unless America First 2.0 is stillborn, the process of spheres of influence formation will evolve over the remainder of the decade. It is important to observe that spheres of influence are historically fluid, rarely static, and much less stable. They auger a transition back to the historical norms of past Great Power politics of earlier eras, and where cycles of dangerously destabilizing crises directly between two or among more Great Powers are sure to arise. It is unlikely that such direct, dangerously destabilizing crises will crescendo during in the remainder of the 2020s. But if they do, enough of the liberal international order may remain for it to be reasserted, perhaps restoring some measure of the multilateral cooperation, economic globalization, and U.S.-led or collective security arrangements that discouraged expansionist ambitions and Great Power wars for almost 80 years.[184]

Great Power Strategic Aspirations versus Capabilities: From What to Do to How to Do It

Chapter 3b moves beyond this assessment of the strategic objectives and trajectories of the modern Great Powers. It reviews and evaluates the array of power tools and capabilities that the United States, China, and Russia have now, or will soon possess, evaluating whether these are sufficient to achieve their strategic aims—with special attention to 2025 through 2030.

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TEXTBOX 1

"[At the] 20th Party Congress in 2022 . . . Xi Jinping excised [the] 20-year-old phrase 'a period of strategic opportunity' from his formal report to the Congress altogether. China was signaling that it was entering into a new era with different and more confrontational strategic assumptions about its external environment. The Party is too cautious to publicly and explicitly redefine the United States as its 'principal external contradiction'. . . . But given the systemic deterioration of the U.S.-China political, economic, and strategic relationship after 2017, and given Xi's remarkable public statement in 2023 that the United States and Western countries were now containing, encircling, and suppressing China, it is difficult to conclude that the Party—given its normal analytical processes—has not based this declaration on a new, formal, classified redefinition of the United States as the [country] with which China is now engaged in large-scale 'struggle.'"

—Ambassador Kevin Rudd, "The Interrelationship Between CCP Ideology, Strategy, and Deterrence," 2024 George Kennan Lecture Series, National War College, September 4, 2024

TEXTBOX 2

"China does not describe the GDI [Global Development Initiative] as altruistic charity but as a series of 'global development partnerships' for mutual benefit. Global development strategies such as the GDI carry normative power to set the standards and tone around rights and governance. By establishing the Global Initiatives (Development, Security, and Civilization) which emphasize noninterference, China is seeking to create a counter-narrative to the U.S.-backed 'rules-based international order.'"

—Samuel Garrett, "Has China's Global Development Initiative Replaced Its Belt and Road?" United States Studies Centre (Australia), September 7, 2023

TEXTBOX 3

"In less than three months, [President Trump] initiated bold diplomatic overtures to all three of Washington's main adversaries. He opened talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin about ending the war in Ukraine, is communicating with Chinese leader Xi Jinping about holding a summit . . . [and] his administration has made it plain that it intends to renegotiate the balance of benefits and burdens in Washington's alliances to ensure greater reciprocity."

—Wess Mitchell, "The Return of Great-Power Diplomacy," Foreign Affairs *104, no. 3 (May/June 2025)*

TEXTBOX 4

"China could turn U.S. diplomatic disarray under the second Trump administration into a strategic advantage. Beijing has long believed that periods of American distraction or disruption offer an opportunity for China to expand its influence. Chinese leaders have been actively courting Europe, Asia, and the Global South, positioning Beijing as a more reliable economic and diplomatic partner—especially as Trump's erratic tariffs, open musings about annexing foreign territories, cuts to U.S. foreign aid, and disregard for allies and international norms have alienated much of the world."

—Patricia M. Kim, "Xi Jinping's Moscow Visit Highlights China's Strategic Vulnerabilities," Brookings, May 5, 2025

TEXTBOX 5

"[E]ven if Trump's overtures to Putin yield a superficial thaw in the U.S.-Russian relationship, Putin's fundamental mistrust of the West will make a genuine reconciliation impossible. He cannot be sure that Trump will successfully push Europe to restore ties with Russia, and he knows that in 2028, a new U.S. administration may simply make another policy U-turn. Few American corporations are lining up to get back into Russia. And Putin will not divest from his strategic relationship with Chinese leader Xi Jinping. The Kremlin will continue to embrace Chinese technology (including tools of digital repression), maintain its reliance on China's markets and financial system, and deepen its security ties with Beijing, even if that puts it on a collision course with Washington."

—*Alexander Gabuev, "The Russia That Putin Made,"* Foreign Affairs *104, no. 3 (May/June 2025)*

TEXTBOX 6

"Although the China-Russia relationship remains solid, Xi faces challenges. . . . As competition with the United States intensifies, Beijing views Moscow as an essential, if risky, partner. . . . Chinese officials dismiss the prospect of a 'reverse Nixon'—the scenario in which Washington and Moscow reconcile relations, leaving China isolated. What has Chinese officials nervous is not a potential Trump-Putin rapprochement, but the tightening of ties between Putin and Kim Jong-un. The recently signed Russia-North Korea defense pact has only deepened these anxieties. Chinese analysts are increasingly uneasy about Russia's expanding and opaque military ties with Pyongyang and their potential to create instability right on its doorstep."

—*Patricia M. Kim, "Xi Jinping's Moscow Visit Highlights China's Strategic Vulnerabilities," Brookings, May 5, 2025.*

TEXTBOX 7

"Instead of trying to beat China and Russia, however, Trump now wants to persuade them to work with him to manage international order. What he is telling now is a narrative of collusion, not competition; a story of acting in concert. After a call with Xi in mid-January, Trump wrote on Truth Social, 'We will solve many problems together, and starting immediately. We discussed balancing Trade, fentanyl, TikTok, and many other subjects. President Xi and I will do everything possible to make the World more peaceful and safe!' Addressing business leaders gathered in Davos, Switzerland, that month, Trump mused that 'China can help us stop the war with, in particular, Russia-Ukraine. And they have a great deal of power over that situation, and we'll work with them.'"

—*Stacie E. Goddard, "The Rise and Fall of Great-Power Competition,"* Foreign Affairs *104, no. 3 (May/June 2025).*

Table 3a.1. A 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	Value and political system 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 resource based on the national economy. The innovation ecosystem of a national economy, including its access to and management of financial capital.

Table 3a.2. Geographic Regions and Great Power Strategic Interest Intensity, 2025–2030				
	United States	**China**	**Russia**	**Remarks**
Indo-Pacific	~~Primary~~ Secondary	Primary	Secondary	PRC sphere of influence; U.S. interest in economic access may remain feasible in short term.
Europe	~~Secondary~~ Tertiary	~~Tertiary~~ Secondary	Primary	Russian sphere of influence; PRC economic engagement; Some U.S. interest in economics and far less in NATO.
Latin/South America	Primary	~~Tertiary~~ Secondary	Tertiary	U.S. sphere of influence; PRC interest in economic access.
Middle East	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary	Unilateral bargaining for resources and markets.
Africa	~~Tertiary~~ Secondary	Secondary	~~Tertiary~~ Secondary	Unilateral bargaining for resources and markets; PRC has mid-decade advantage.
Arctic	Secondary	~~Tertiary~~ Secondary	~~Secondary~~ Primary	Intensified jousting for economic access by all; growing U.S.-Russia frictions; no viable norms and rules.
Antarctica	Secondary	Secondary	~~Secondary~~ Tertiary	
Space	Primary	Primary	Primary	Very high risk of confrontation and clash in this unregulated competitive space.
Cyberspace	Primary	Primary	Primary	Ongoing confrontation and concern about greater clash without new norms and rules.