

## Major Findings on Great Power Competition at Mid-Decade

*Strategic Assessment 2025: Great Power Competition at Mid-Decade* is the newest volume in a series of periodic and broad geostrategic analyses by the Institute for National Strategic Studies (INSS) over the course of its 40-year history as an integral part of the National Defense University. After a hiatus of more than a decade, and in recognition that the broad geostrategic environment had dramatically changed from the beginning of the 2010s through the start of a new decade, INSS resumed this analytical series 5 years ago with *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition*. In keeping with the precedent of this series, *Strategic Assessment 2025* begins with a summary of key findings.

Each chapter of *Strategic Assessment 2025* provides unique insights and analytical conclusions about the evolving nature of Great Power competition (GPC) at mid-decade. This section previews and consolidates many of the most significant and impactful determinations found in the book. Distilled to their essence, these major findings are provided in chapter order and with explicit reference to their chapter(s) of origin at the end of the finding. Readers are encouraged to move to the specific book chapter(s) cited with each finding to explore their development in more detailed text and with supporting references. Chapter authors have paid special attention to the use of key primary source reference documents and important secondary source books and articles in support of their major findings. Thus, readers should find value in accessing these sources for greater depth and perspective.

*Strategic Assessment 2025* is the successor—5 years removed—to *Strategic Assessment 2020*. The volume is not a linear progression from *Strategic Assessment 2020*, but it does evaluate the major and most salient changes in strategic GPC among the United States, China, and Russia over the first half of the 2020s. *Strategic Assessment 2025* therefore does develop key contrasts in GPC between 2020 and 2025 and offers informed insights into how the trends in GPC portend it will evolve during the remainder of the decade. Consequently, it may be useful to revisit 20 of the major insights from *Strategic Assessment 2020* (SA20) to benchmark the analyses and insights that follow in *Strategic Assessment 2025*. Most of these *Strategic Assessment 2020* major findings held up well over the 5 years since publication, but a few have aged out of relevance:

- The United States entered the emerging era of GPC as dominant. Its preferred norms, rules, and institutions for interstate interactions in 2020 set the patterns for all major categories of global activity. The emerging strategic aims of China and Russia are incompatible with those established by the United States. This has produced the return of a historically dominant pattern of GPC in the international

system. But the strategic challenges posed by China and Russia diverge significantly, portending a long-term Sino-American worldwide strategic competition, while the U.S.-Russia rivalry is more likely to feature a regional set of contestations (SA20, chapter 3a).

- China is the most serious—albeit currently least threatening—Great Power challenger to U.S. power and policy interests. China is the lone contemporary rising Great Power with the combination of a positivist strategic vision for the future and the ambition to push for changes in the international system both on a near-term basis and in the long run. Moreover, gross power indicators in 2020, and projections for the next 5 to 10 years, clearly indicate that China is the Great Power best poised to displace America from its long-dominant power position. While a net power comparison between the United States and China indicates that the power transition timeline is longer than some now fear, the Sino-American competitive dyad is likely to be the dominant Great Power rivalry into the future (SA20, chapters 3a, 3b).
- Great Power competitions and accompanying power transitions are rarely resolved without a holistic approach, managed within an appropriate strategic framework. They require leadership involvement, disciplined priorities, sustainable resourcing, and adaptive oversight. In 2020, Russia is a dangerous competitor in the near term, but the U.S.-China competitive dyad is the one that will determine the prospects for continued global stability and the contours of any geopolitical Great Power transition (SA20, chapters 3a, 3b, 14).
- China and Russia may continue a tactical entente over the coming 5 to 10 years, working together toward common near-term strategic interests to erode U.S. power, frustrate U.S. actions, challenge U.S.-dominated institutions, and question U.S.-underwritten norms and rules they deem threatening. However, divergent long-term Sino-Russian strategic interests make it unlikely they will form a long-term alliance. The United States should remain careful not to misunderstand tactical coordination between Beijing and Moscow that balances U.S. power as evidence of some deeper and lasting strategic cooperation (SA20, chapter 3a).
- All three contemporary Great Powers are dissatisfied with some aspects of the liberal international order and growing less willing to make compromises and sacrifices to keep it running. Thus, there is heightened potential for Great Power rivalry to reduce the effectiveness of global institutions in managing complex regional and global problems. The absence of Great Power *cooperation* to confront the early COVID-19 pandemic was symptomatic of this breakdown (SA20, chapter 3a).
- Over the next 5 to 10 years, U.S. economic and strategic interests in the Indo-Pacific region and in Eastern Europe most conflict with Chinese and Russian regional interests. Thus, the competition will be fiercest, and risks of misperception and violent confrontation greatest, there (SA20, chapter 3a).
- The United States, China, and Russia each face major internal structural, economic, and demographic challenges. The choices each state's political leadership makes about how to address these domestic dynamics as well as their international challenges will determine the future power they will possess and the future policy options they might pursue. Russia appears most likely to confront these challenges

first, then China, and then the United States, although national leadership choices will greatly impact the timing (SA20, chapter 3b).

- In the conventional military arena, the revolution of small, smart, and cheap greatly favors the United States over China or Russia. Operationally and tactically, the United States is on the defensive in both Eastern Europe and Asia. In the Indo-Pacific, the United States can move from easily targeted bases and platforms toward multiple locations and mobile systems that can disperse through the first island chain, denying China tactical military advantage for at least some time. In Europe, if the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies are willing to equip frontline states with a mix of inexpensive drones and improvised explosive devices—and invest in autonomous drones and cruise missiles—they can deter and defend in depth against the most challenging Russian security threats (SA20, chapter 5).
- To compete in the critical arena of information technology (IT), the United States must work with other developed nations, and in public-private partnerships, to reprioritize resources into key IT and capabilities. Simultaneously, America and its partners must effectively counter China's ability to steal intellectual property and Beijing's quest to control global information flows (SA20, chapter 6).
- The risk of an arms race in nuclear weapons, delivery systems, and missile defenses is growing as Great Power relations become more competitive and even confrontational. The systems of arms control treaties that for decades limited U.S. and Russian nuclear forces is under great strain and could collapse. China is investing more in nuclear capabilities—modernizing and expanding strategic systems and developing dual-capable theater-range platforms that would heighten nuclear risks in Indo-Pacific conflicts. Moreover, while the introduction of hypersonic vehicles by the Great Powers is unlikely to affect the balance of nuclear power in the next few years, as these capabilities are deployed in larger numbers, the risks to nuclear stability at both the strategic and theater level are likely to grow (SA20, chapter 8).
- China's superior ability to use market access and other economic tools to provide benefits means that Indo-Pacific countries will not give up their economic ties with Beijing even if Washington attempts to decouple from the Chinese economy. But Washington needs to be actively involved in regional economic affairs, both to advance specific U.S. economic interests and to shape rules and norms in the most dynamic region in the world. A policy that combines engagement with China and attention to nurturing a balance of economic power around Beijing as a hedge will best serve U.S. interests (SA20, chapter 9).
- The United States should build on its relative political-military advantages to sustain and strengthen its overall Indo-Pacific security position. Reinforcing present alliances, building military partnerships, extending cooperative training, and expanding interoperability are techniques that states of the region will embrace and that will work against unilateral Chinese efforts to intimidate or to erode the U.S. alliance system (SA20, chapter 9).
- Although best understood as a contemporary Great Power, Russia can be alternatively considered to be a “rogue,” “disruptor,” or “spoiler” state, like Iran

and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea. These are countries that lack the military and long-term economic power and/or transnational cultural appeal to match U.S. power globally or stabilize an alternative international political order. They are motivated by a combination of regime survival, aspirations for regional dominance and sometimes global relevance, and an inclination to confront the United States, which they all believe is the main obstacle to their own aspirations (SA20, chapter 10).

- “Rogue” states tend to confront the United States below the threshold of active armed conflict and across multiple domains in the contemporary era of GPC. As they do, their actions divert American attention and resources away from longer-term objectives, implying costs for the United States and benefits for China. However, Russian, Iranian, and/or North Korean provocative behavior is not uniformly beneficial for China (SA20, chapter 10).
- European cohesion and stability have long been a function of both American support and a collaborative Franco-German core. In 2020, that core is weak as Germany and France lack common positions on many critical issues, including on European defense. As Brexit moves the United Kingdom out of the European Union, much about Europe's way forward will be decided in Washington and Moscow. Europeans worry that the United States may detach itself from Europe—particularly NATO—even as Europe today remains unable to create an autonomous system of security and defense. While Europeans mistrust Russia generally, their perceptions of Russia as a security threat vary greatly. All know that Europe cannot alone defend member states from Russia. Should America move to detach from NATO, Europe may intensify accommodation with Russia—and even with China—believing this to be the least-worst path to the evolving competition among the Great Powers (SA20, chapter 12).
- The era of GPC will confront U.S. policymakers both with the challenge of how to shift greater resources and attention toward Russian and Chinese traditional spheres of influence—in the Indo-Pacific and Europe—and the challenge of whether and how to compete with Beijing and Moscow on a global scale. Washington will require distinct strategies for competing with Russia and China, a recalibration of U.S. interests across the world, and a discerning approach that reduces the prospects of pulling U.S. regional partners into an unrestricted zero-sum competition (SA20, chapter 13).
- Russia and China present distinct competitive threats to the United States around the globe. China's behavior is grounded in its global investment strategy and desire to shape an international political order more conducive to Chinese interests, even if not fully Sino-centric. Russia's desire to be a global Great Power is not grounded in a proactive vision for a new global geopolitical order (SA20, chapters 3a, 13).
- Few, if any, smaller states wish to be pulled into zero-sum U.S.-China or U.S.-Russia GPC. Thus, the United States should avoid imposing regional strategies that view Russian or Chinese activities as uniformly harmful to U.S. interests and detrimental to the stability of recipient states across these regions. Instead, Washington should emphasize America's strengths as an economic partner, the quality and quantity of

its military assistance, and the positive and benign nature of its military forward presence (SA20, chapter 13).

- The COVID-19 pandemic is far less likely to change the basic trajectory of emerging GPC than to accelerate it and expose underlying dynamics. The three contemporary Great Powers are likely to remain dominant rivals through at least the middle of the dawning decade. If any of the three might falter, Russia seems the most likely candidate, but the odds of that are long. China and the United States may joust over whose model best dealt with COVID 19 crisis, but the basic outlines of their strategic disagreements will remain, and the phenomenon of deglobalization and partial economic decoupling seems most likely to continue (SA20, chapter 15).
- As the COVID-19 pandemic recedes, Washington will face the same choice it confronted before: whether, where, and how to compete. As the dominant Great Power in a multipolar competition, the United States can contest or confront its Great Power rivals today with a resolve to sustain its global position and the standing rules, norms, institutions, and alliances of the current international order. Alternatively, it can abdicate leadership of the global order and allow Russia to trample it and then allow an increasingly powerful China to extend its own version of global norms, rules, and institutions. The former course entails risks of expanding confrontation and potential direct military clash, but the latter course would not necessarily avoid a military fight, especially if the United States comes to view an increasingly Chinese-ordered world as unacceptable (chapters 3b, 15).

Developed a half-decade later than these *Strategic Assessment 2020* key findings, the major findings from *Strategic Assessment 2025* follow.

## **Part I: Framing and Considering Past Eras of GPC (Chapters 1 and 2)**

- As established in *Strategic Assessment 2020*, throughout history Great Powers display three conspicuous attributes. They have unusual capabilities in comparison with other states; they use these capabilities to pursue broad and sustained policy interests beyond their immediate neighborhood; and, therefore, they are perceived by other states to be powerful and to have influence and are treated accordingly around the world. Each individual criterion is necessary, but none alone is sufficient. A Great Power is one that clearly meets all three criteria (chapter 1).
- As was the case in 2020, the United States, China, and Russia fit the Great Power description at mid-decade. However, history tells us that this triangular Great Power structure is not durable. One of these Great Powers could decline precipitously and fall from status, thereby altering the structure of global power distribution from three Great Powers to two or even one. Alternatively, another state might amalgamate power capabilities of sufficient quantity and quality to cross the threshold and become a Great Power (chapter 1).
- The number and arrangement of Great Powers in the international system condition the global geostrategic environment and frame the policy choices made by these

powerful rivals seeking to maximize individual wealth, influence, and security in conditions of uncertainty and anarchy. Less-powerful states retain agency to seek wealth, influence, and security, but within parameters defined by the preferences and the interaction of the Great Powers (chapter 1).

- Great Powers constantly joust for relative advantage in *military* stature. They also compete vigorously to amalgamate power and exert influence on other states and in multinational arrangements and institutions in four additional categories of interstate competition short of armed conflict: *politico-diplomatic*, *economic*, *ideological*, and *informational* (chapter 1).
- Power has absolute, relative, and transitional properties. At its essence, power exists in two major dimensions: “hard power” (or the *coercive* use of attributes like military capabilities and economic power for *payoff*), and “soft power” (which includes cooperative and collaborative interactions that attain influence by *attraction*: partnered economic arrangements, ideological appeal, cultural and social engagements, diplomatic acumen, reciprocal information exchanges, and even military-to-military cooperation) (chapter 1).
- Viable Great Powers exercise “smart power”: intermixing the coercive aspects of hard power and the persuasion and attraction of soft power to successfully attain national interests. The successful exercise of power to attain effective influence in the pursuit of national interests, in the face of resistance, and in the context of Great Power rivals seeking alternative and largely unacceptable objectives with their own power assets is increasingly at the heart of the evolving GPC among the United States, China, and Russia (chapter 1).
- Accelerating fragmentation of global domains is a feature of GPC. The fragmentation of globalized activities and processes, long a hallmark of the post-Cold War liberal international order, must be expected to continue for the remainder of the decade, spreading into multiple domains including but not limited to seaborne transportation, aerial transportation, and outer space interactions (chapters 1, 2, 14).
- The Global South is becoming increasingly important to evolving GPC. U.S. foreign relations during the Biden administration turned increasing attention to strategic GPC in the Global South, especially with China. The Biden administration referred to the cluster of Global South states as being at risk from China’s assertion of an alternative vision for global governance that could alter the U.S.-led global order into a better “value proposition” for the developing countries there. While it is unclear that the second Trump administration will sustain Biden’s intent to compete vigorously with China and Russia across the Global South for preservation of the norms, rules, and procedures at the center of U.S.-led international order, it is certain that Russia and especially China will exploit any U.S. absence there—particularly Beijing, in its quest for a new global order with “Chinese characteristics” (chapters 1, 3a, 11, 12, 13, 14).
- India increasingly has an important role in the future of GPC. At mid-decade, India is not a Great Power and is unlikely to become one anytime soon. However, India has outsized presence and influence at the center of many Great Power interactions.

India is a rising middle state with both strategic autonomy and an independent role to play in shaping the manner and degree to which the three Great Powers vie for geostrategic power and influence over the rest of the decade (chapters 1, 3a, 9, 11, 12, 14).

- American foreign policy is a variable rather than a constant in evolving GPC. The 2024 U.S. Presidential election disabused many global assumptions about the enduring core of American foreign policy. A plurality of American voters selected the Presidential candidate who reflected a weariness with the burdens of international leadership, skepticism in the value of global human rights and democracy promotion, and belief that global trade was less a “win-win” exercise and more of a zero-sum game. This was the second time American voters made such a choice in 8 years. Thus, America’s global partners, and its Great Power rivals, confronted a new reality at mid-decade: American foreign policy could no longer be considered a “constant” in greater or lesser support for Pax Americana. It now had to be considered as a “variable” and subject to change from U.S. Presidential administration to administration (chapters 1, 3a, 14).
- Great Power military alignments with other Great Powers in any era are normally temporal, shifting, and based more on shared immediate threat perceptions of another Great Power than on any long-lasting common purpose. Thus, the mid-decade Sino-Russian Great Power alignment remains best understood as challenging to American power and interests for as long as it goes; however, it inevitably will dissipate as the threat perceptions of the United States in Moscow and Beijing begin to diverge (chapter 2).
- Great Power military alignments with lesser states are the most durable and reliable for enhancing Great Power deterrence and defense against threatening Great Power rivals when they are based on conditions including a common threat perception, some ideological affinity, and a closely interwoven politico-military command structure. These types of alignments fare better than those based on coercion. History demonstrates that America’s long-standing alliance structures in NATO and with close partners in the Indo-Pacific region are uniquely valuable to American success in GPC. It remains to be seen whether the value of these American military alignments can be sustained from Washington during the remainder of the 2020s (chapter 2).
- Throughout history, Great Powers experience uneven forms of growth. Economic interdependence, once seen as beneficial, now looks risky as Great Power rivalries grow. Depending on rivals—or even partners—for trade and resources can threaten a country’s security and control. Intensifying Great Power economic competition inevitably generates an imperative for states to seek greater control over markets to arrest the vulnerabilities they perceive from economic interdependence and the potential for corrosive influence that such interdependence allows (chapter 2).
- The historical trend toward fragmentation of globalized economics through the mechanism of increasing economic barriers to trade and free-flowing finance is resonant at mid-decade and an inevitable by-product of the Sino-Russo-American strategic rivalry. This began before the U.S. Presidential election of 2016 and has

been accelerating since. Economic fragmentation therefore must be expected to continue and may ultimately—perhaps even before the mid-2030s—create the factors for regionally or functionally separated economic blocs that reject most globalized trade and financial flows (chapters 2, 3a).

- Under pressure from intensifying rivalry, Great Powers experience growing disagreements about the proper framework for and enforcement of standards for the conduct of international engagements. The historically dominant pattern is that intensifying Great Power rivalries fragment (or fracture) once-cohesive domains and collaborative interactions. At mid-decade, this pattern is evident. Today's Great Powers increasingly struggle over the role and relevance of U.S.-established international organizations and institutions (chapters 2, 3a).
- As with the global economic system, the intensifying duress from increasing GPC among the United States, China, and Russia will ultimately drive fragmentation of much of the world into blocs of opposing norms, rules, and institutions arranged around emerging Great Power spheres of influence. This pattern has been evident for more than a decade before 2025; thus, the second Trump administration might accelerate long-standing trends toward global fragmentation, but that trajectory did not originate with it (chapters 2, 3a, 14).
- Whether they coalesce rapidly or slowly, fragmenting Great Power spheres of influence will become increasingly isolated and impervious to outside actors and preferences (chapter 2, 3a, 14).

## **Part II: Overarching GPC at Mid-Decade: Evolving Assessments (Chapters 3a and 3b)**

- 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. These structures feature multilateralism, the peaceful resolution of disputes, cultural pluralism, free and open global trade and finance, open and transparent communications, and individual human rights. At mid-decade, American strategic preferences anchored on Pax Americana continued to dominate the contemporary global system (chapter 3a).
- From 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration strategy sought to defend and fortify Pax Americana against encroachment by China and Russia, doing so with an intensifying pursuit of alliance, partnerships, and the renewal of America's competitive economic edge. It achieved significant strategic outcomes by renewing and invigorating old security alliances and establishing new, more dynamic, and focused multilateral strategic partnerships (chapter 3a).
  - » But even during President Biden's tenure, the American people grew more wary of the fiscal and human costs of maintaining and enforcing Pax Americana.
  - » The Biden team also was unable to generate globally acceptable new rules about international issues such as currency valuation, the use of space, the policing of cyberspace, and others (chapter 3a).

- The second Trump administration introduced an *America First 2.0* strategic framework. As of early 2025, America First 2.0 seems unimpressed by the value of Pax Americana and resolved to halt underwriting it rather than renew or reinvigorate it. The Trump administration instead seems inclined to turn U.S. strategy toward a more unilateral and self-interested approach that leverages power in pursuit of America First 2.0 imperatives and pursues American strategic interests through unilateral, hard-nosed, and transactional interactions with friend and foe alike (chapter 3a).
- China's strategy has long called for reforms to promote its version of a more just international economic order and to reform global governance to give developing countries more weight. Beijing desires to reorder the international system toward its preference for a "community of common destiny" that discards or deemphasizes key elements of Pax Americana (chapter 3a).
  - » In recent years, Beijing has more actively pursued a community of common destiny globally.
  - » From late 2021, China has pursued its community of common destiny with three interlocking programs: the Global Development Initiative (an extension of its decade-old Belt and Road Initiative), the Global Security Initiative, and the Global Civilizational Initiative (chapter 3a).
- Russian strategy aims to reshape some international rules and norms that constrain its power, working with China and other states to achieve this outcome. Russian strategy will continue to work against Pax Americana norms of nonintervention and military restraint—actively cultivating paramilitary and proxy forces that violate fellow-state sovereignty—in the pursuit of dominance across Eurasia and the rest of Russia's "near abroad" and when supporting allies and partners elsewhere in the world (chapter 3a).
  - » Russia's 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 (chapter 3a).
  - » 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 (chapter 3a).
- Although undeniably durable, the Sino-Russian strategic partnership seems to have limits (chapter 3a).
  - » There is a fundamental imbalance in the power capabilities between China and Russia that puts the latter in an increasingly perilous trajectory of precipitous relative decline vis-à-vis China.
  - » 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 vassalizing its eastern territories and major slices of its domestic economy that growing Chinese power would demand (chapter 3a).

- » The overall state of relations between Russia and the United States over the remainder of the decade will make Russian acceptance of a subordinate position in its entente with China more or less likely (chapter 3a).
- While its precise contours and degree of implementation remain uncertain in early 2025, emerging 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 region will remain a directly contested zone for America and China that is likely to feature trade wars and tariff struggles more than armed clashes for at least the remainder of the decade. GPC across the regions of the Global South will continue to be important but, in an America First 2.0 approach, will likely evolve from contested visions of a future international order toward transactional competition for primary access to critical economic resources and markets (chapter 3a, 10).
- Although direct and destructive Great Power military confrontations are a relatively low probability during the remainder of the 2020s, the highest-risk areas for such confrontations are in the Indo-Pacific, in outer space, and in cyberspace. The three Great Powers have intense strategic interests in these areas. The dynamic Sino-American tensions over security primacy in the Western Indo-Pacific—along with the absence of accepted rules, norms, or confidence-building instruments among the Great Powers in outer space and cyberspace—place them at great risk for miscalculations or misunderstandings that could spiral into unintentional and unwanted direct Great Power war (chapter 3a).
- Overall American power capabilities versus its Great Power rivals grew between 2020 and 2024, with America's most notable gains coming from enhanced multilateral military alliances and strategic partnerships and via its rapid relative economic recovery from COVID-19. It also held steady or witnessed marginal improvements in relative ideological and diplomatic power factors throughout the period. However, the United States remained at a disadvantage to its rivals' strategies and tactics in purveying disinformation and in conducting cyber-espionage that exploited American informational openness and passivity for relative advantage (chapter 3b).
- China's mid-decade tools of power and latent capabilities confirm that Beijing remains the true near-peer Great Power challenger to American national interests and global policy preferences. Beijing's relative economic power suffered a setback during the early 2020s, and its diplomatic and ideological instruments continued to underperform. At the same time, China's relative military power grew, and its exploitation of informational advantages at home and abroad established its growing capability for global influence by coercion or persuasion (chapter 3b).
- Russia's power capabilities have been severely eroded by its war in Ukraine. Its economic, ideological, and political challenges will remain difficult over the remainder of the decade but will not prove fatal. At mid-decade, Moscow retained sufficiently robust military, economic, and communications advantages in its near abroad, Eurasia, and a limited but nontrivial ability to project these tools for influence in the Middle East, the Arctic, and in cyberspace (chapter 3b).

- Russian reliance on China for its economic and military survival seems likely to recede in the coming few years, and Moscow should be expected to tack away from China and toward America if the Trump administration chooses to reinstate Russia into the global market economy and accept that Russia has a Great Power sphere of influence in its near abroad (chapter 3b).
- Some of America's relative power advantages in late 2024 became less certain in early 2025, as others became more prominent. The second Trump administration's reorientation to an America First 2.0 strategic framework featured less focus on comparative American soft power strengths in ideology, diplomacy, and transparent communications and greater focus on the development and application of coercive military and economic power to deter strategic rivals and extract economic gains from rivals and partner alike (chapter 3b).
- While neither Russia nor China possesses the armed might to prevail in a protracted military clash with the United States for the foreseeable future, each knows the value of American military alliances and partnerships to America's formidable military stature. The two countries also know that a weakened American multilateral military partnership framework would enhance their relative power and disadvantage American strategic influence and deterrence, particularly in the Russian- and Chinese-desired spheres of influence in Eurasia and in the western Pacific Ocean, respectively (chapter 3b).
- China and Russia will welcome reduced American alliance cohesion should trade frictions or political disputes generate such an effect. They will also welcome a decline of traditional American advantage in soft power instruments enabling influence by attraction, including ideological appeal, humanitarian assistance, and global health support, should these wane during the second half of the 2020s (chapter 3b).
- China may find an opening to exploit any erosion of American soft power in a manner clearing a more direct path for Beijing to change long-standing liberal international norms, rules, and institutions in favor of those with "Chinese characteristics" by the early 2030s (chapter 3b).
- The Great Powers are increasingly using their military, economic, informational, and ideological tools to confront other Great Powers and coerce smaller states to extend their influence. "Sharp power," "gray zone operations," and "contested economics" are now major features of GPC and will be so for the remainder of the decade, driving increasing fragmentation of the global order into Great Power-aligned blocs or spheres (chapters 3b, 14).

### **Part III: GPC at Mid-Decade in Critical Functional Areas and Activities (Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8)**

- There is a consensus among government officials, academics, and business leaders that innovation-driven technology and advanced manufacturing will be a primary determinant of economic and military power during the next few decades. Key leaders of the United States, China, and Russia have all laid out plans to drive innovation in key technologies and manufacturing (chapter 4).

- In 2015, China published *Made in China 2025*. This plan focused government and industry on 10 key technologies that China seeks to dominate. As of mid-decade, China has seized the lead in electric vehicles, batteries, solar panels, 5G technology, high-speed rail, advanced networks, and ultra-high-voltage transmission lines. It is also making major investments in advanced manufacturing to prevent manufacturers from moving to countries with lower labor costs (chapter 4).
- The Biden administration's Office of Science and Technology Policy defined 18 critical technologies the United States must lead. The Special Competitive Studies Project (SCSP), a nonprofit dedicated to ensuring the United States sustains its position as an innovation and technology world leader, identified artificial intelligence (AI) as the most important new technology and the key to the competition. The SCSP reports that at mid-decade, the United States continues to lead in the areas of AI, biotechnology, and advanced computing. It can be competitive in advanced manufacturing and next-generation energy, but it has lost the competition for commercial advanced networks to China (chapter 4).
- While Russian leaders have consistently stated Russia must compete, Vladimir Putin's focus on internal economic control and the urgent demands of the 2022 Ukraine war essentially removed Russia from GPC in both technologies and advanced manufacturing (chapter 4).
- To compete successfully, the SCSP and other independent analysts conclude that the United States must continue its world-leading investment in research and development (R&D) overall while increasing its specific investment in R&D of fundamental scientific questions. It must increase focus and funding for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs starting in high school and continuing through postdoctoral studies and strive to increase the number of foreign university students enrolled in U.S. STEM programs by offering accelerated paths to U.S. citizenship. Government at all levels across the United States must improve infrastructure essential to support advanced manufacturing and renewable energy. As a society, the United States needs to encourage and assist more people to train as industrial workers to operate and maintain the evolving advanced manufacturing industrial base (chapter 4).
- At mid-decade, China is investing deliberately and heavily in three critical new information technologies to gain control over global digital information networks: 5G and 6G wireless communications, quantum computing, and AI (chapter 5).
- For more than a decade, China has pursued a recursive strategy that leverages massive state investments in IT producing protocols and procedures that are used for espionage and intellectual property theft to generate further advances in IT, which are used for even more effective espionage and intellectual property theft. This strategy aims for global high-technology dominance of data flows enabling long-term geopolitical and economic leverage rather than mere parity with the United States (chapter 5).
- China's domestic scientific and high-technology institutions developed out of a system based almost entirely on digesting stolen intellectual property (IP). At mid-decade, China still relies heavily on this approach. Reducing the flow of science and

technology to Chinese institutions by technical and legal means would significantly reduce their capability to innovate. It would likely take years or decades for China to redesign its technology institutions to work as well as they do now in a world without IP theft (chapter 5).

- Although not yet critically behind, the United States has a short window to contest China's state-led ascent in these three most critical technologies. Although it made some progress in constraining Chinese access from 2021 to 2024, the United States has much more to do. It must view data as a geostrategic commodity and do much more over the latter half of the decade to prevent China from dominating global digital information networks. Without such a deliberate American effort, China will attain a critical position of advantage in its rise as it attempts to replace the United States as the world's leading Great Power by 2030 (chapter 5).
- The second space race is primarily a Great Power contest between the United States and China, with Russia a major Great Power ally of China. Earth orbit and cislunar space are the arenas for ever-intensifying competition in outer space. Although there is no clear marker for winning this contest, failing to keep pace would represent losing (chapter 6).
- A “marathon rather than a sprint,” the second space race is a contest between rivals more evenly matched economically than in the first space race. Rather than ideological competition between democracy and communism, the new contest between the United States as a status quo Great Power and China as a revisionist power is driven by the value of achieving military and commercial advantage (chapter 6).
- Lasting dominance by any of the three Great Powers in either earth orbit or cislunar space is materially impossible because new investments in Fourth Industrial Revolution technologies may close or create gaps of capabilities. Small satellites launched in large satellite constellations, together with increasing deployment of space planes, represent the greatest changes in earth orbit. Second- or third-tier spacefaring powers may act as proxies for the Great Powers in earth orbit. Intensifying efforts to explore the lunar South Pole—perhaps as prelude to claiming it—represent the greatest change in cislunar space. Diplomatic bidding wars are likely for second- and third-tier states that have yet to join either the U.S.-led Artemis Accords or the Sino-Russian International Lunar Research Station (chapter 6).
- Preeminence or parity in outer space over the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be an important element in determining whether political development tends toward liberal or authoritarian national regimes. The rules, norms, and processes that ultimately prevail in space will shape the future of humanity on earth, determining not only where humans go but also what humanity becomes or fails to become over the next two centuries (chapter 6).
- The challenge of deterring strategic attack—nuclear or conventional—faces unprecedented complications because of the new geostrategic reality of a three-peer Great Power nuclear landscape that at mid-decade is increasing the risks of Great Power arms racing and crisis instability (chapter 7).

- From 2020 to 2024, Russia's nuclear weapons modernization, nuclear weapons drills, and threats to use nuclear weapons in the Ukrainian conflict; China's ambitious nuclear weapons development programs and rejection of strategic nuclear arms control talks; the American nuclear weapons modernization program; and now the Golden Dome missile defense initiative all play a role in challenging the framework of agreements, undermining the institutions, the rules, and the taboo that have prevented the use of nuclear weapons for 80 years (chapter 7).
- America's new pursuit of the elusive goal of a nationally integrated Golden Dome of missile defense will challenge the longstanding paradigm of nuclear deterrence by retaliation while not yet replacing it with a framework of nuclear deterrence by denial (chapter 7).
- Although not yet at a new paradigm in Great Power strategic deterrence in 2025, the three-sided nuclear weapons modernization buildup where deterrence by denial is being seriously explored by one of the Great Powers seems likely to become the catalyst for a new era of nuclear arms racing, greater crisis instability, and perhaps a new genre of nuclear arms control (chapter 7).
- Global environmental instability has emerged as one of the most critical international challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Rising temperatures and sea levels, increasing droughts, larger and more damaging storms, and more severe floods, along with other forms of instability, pose significant threats to global security and sustainability (chapter 8).
- The response to environmental instability is increasingly influenced by the geopolitical rivalries among the Great Powers. Each has competing interests and strategies for addressing the causes and effects of climate volatility. They increasingly approach environmental issues through the lens of national security and strategic advantage (chapter 8).
- U.S. climate strategy is complicated by efforts to compete with and counter China's influence, particularly in the realm of clean energy technology. As the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases, China has made significant strides in renewable energy but is constrained by its continued reliance on coal for its enormous domestic energy needs. Russia is heavily dependent on fossil fuel exports and demonstrates reluctance to transition away from hydrocarbons, even though climate volatility poses significant risks to its Arctic region. The second Trump administration seems destined to reshape GPC in the environmental arena as its evolving America First 2.0 strategic framework promises to prioritize U.S. energy dominance and American withdrawal from multilateral climate management efforts (chapter 8).
- The future of global climate sustainability depends on where the Great Powers can balance their competition with the imperative to address climate volatility collaboratively. At mid-decade, the prospects for vital enhancements in Great Power collaboration to mitigate climate instability remain tantalizingly obvious, but their pursuit very uncertain (chapter 8).

## **Part IV: Geostrategic GPC Across Critical Regions (Chapters 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13)**

- Across the Indo-Pacific region, America's vision for a Free and Open Indo-Pacific directly clashes with China's community of common destiny framework. The interplay of intense regional interests and tensions makes the Indo-Pacific the most dangerous geographic region for a potential direct Great Power armed conflict during the remainder of the 2020s. Four potential flashpoints for direct Great Power war stand out: Taiwan, the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the disputed Sino-Indian Himalayan border (chapter 9).
- At mid-decade, China retains a clear advantage in economic leverage across the region. It also continues to develop military tools and capabilities tailored for success in potential armed clash with the United States inside the first island chain. Despite this pronounced economic influence and growing military prowess, Beijing's regional neighbors continued to prefer American security assistance and to balance the U.S. and China off one another (chapter 9).
- During the early 2020s, the United States considerably expanded and integrated its diplomatic and military alliances and strategic partnerships across the region, retained ideological appeal with most countries there, and continued to command respect as a preferred security partner. Emerging during 2025, the second Trump administration's Indo-Pacific strategic framework appeared likely not only to sustain American military and political activism in the western Pacific Ocean but also demand greater burden-sharing from its security partners, be less generous about underwriting weaker regional partners, and be less supportive of specific economic or military equipment deals with partners unwilling to pay for the privilege of American partnerships. The Trump administration also may exercise caution in Taiwan, opting to avoid unnecessary provocation that might put the United States into a direct military clash with China and instead focus on economic confrontation with it (chapter 9).
- Despite its challenges with the war in Ukraine, Russia grew its strategic profile in the Indo-Pacific during the early 2020s with a modest appendage of military assets and diplomatic statements in support of Beijing and via a new and historic reciprocal military arrangement with North Korea. Moscow's allegiance to Chinese preferences in diplomatic initiatives and military exercises across the Indo-Pacific is likely to continue through 2030. But its direct support for any Chinese military activity is far less certain—especially in the case of a major armed clash along the Sino-Indian border involving Moscow's historic partner, India (chapter 9).
- There are opportunities for collaboration among the Great Power rivals in the Indo-Pacific despite the manifest tensions there. These require the establishment of military-to-military confidence-building measures, communications structures, and guardrails to assure that Beijing and Moscow understand that accommodation of continuing U.S. presence in the western Indo-Pacific is a better choice than overt armed conflict (chapter 9).
- Europe experienced significant impacts from the geopolitical changes wrought by intensifying Great Power rivalries during the first half of the 2020s. These

included a Russo-Ukrainian war and response, increasing isolation from Russia, and a heightened wariness of greater economic integration with China because of Beijing's brusque COVID-19 response and its tacit support for Moscow in the Russo-Ukrainian war. Greater European Union cohesion, tighter NATO collaboration, and a rejuvenated intelligence and security nexus with the United States characterized the other notable changes that overtook Europe during the early 2020s (chapter 10).

- The positive trajectory of European relations with the United States and against Russia and China hit a speed bump in early 2025 as the second Trump administration began to question the economic value and security returns from the transatlantic relationship. Confronted with new questions about American security intentions toward Ukraine, Greenland, Canada, and others, Europeans began to worry about the constancy of American foreign policy and fears grew that the U.S. security commitment to the continent would henceforth wax and wane depending on the political party in office in the United States, harming predictability in the relationship (chapter 10).
- Despite these worries, most Europeans prefer to sustain a robust security relationship with the United States—but one on a new footing where European nations spend, man, and equip continental militaries in a more robust manner as a complement to American military power rather than a free ride on U.S. military capabilities (chapter 10).
- Europeans at mid-decade mainly desire responsible and reciprocal trade and financial transactions with the United States, not trusting that this will be feasible in the future with China. Europeans also believe in the power and potential of a Euro-American partnership anchored on common political and social values—a partnership they know is impossible with either Russia or China (chapter 10).
- European preferences are an important counterpoint to the challenges faced by the transatlantic relationship during the early months of 2025. Absent some truly alienating policy choices from Washington, European preferences for a reinvigorated transatlantic partnership seem the most likely outcome from Europe's navigation of GPC during the last half of the decade (chapter 10).
- The term *Global South* refers to countries around the world that are alternatively described as “developing,” “less developed” or “underdeveloped.” Many of these countries—although not all—are in the Southern Hemisphere. Most contemporary Global South countries belong to the Group of 77 and the Non-Aligned Movement that arose during the Cold War. Thus, many states of the Global South pursue strategies of multi-alignment or active neutrality in the face of GPC. Even though India and China are in the Northern Hemisphere and no longer truly “developing” countries, they consider themselves members of the Global South (chapters 11, 12, 13).
- South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the wider Indian Ocean region frame an important arena for GPC in the Global South. A struggle for the future of global rules, norms, organizations, and institutions sits beneath the most conspicuous aspects of Great Power rivalry here (chapter 11).

- China's collective relative strengths across South and Southeast Asia anchor on its position of economic dominance, the diplomatic leverage it derives from this economic posture, and an increasingly active military presence in key waterways and airspace. The United States benefits from the relative ideological appeal of liberalism and capitalism; the preference of most countries for security partnerships with America; and the U.S. military presence, access, and reach. Russia lags its two rivals but does generate influence from its historic strategic partnership with India and collaboration with China on an anti-Western message program targeting leaders and the people in these regions (chapter 11).
- Washington's preference for world order anchored around a rules-based framework featuring global freedom of transit, the free movement of goods and services, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and the primacy of individual rights over state dominance came under increasing duress from Chinese preferences and Russian narratives during the early 2020s. China's alternative strategic construct featuring state sovereignty and collective order over human rights and political freedoms found traction in parts of South and Southeast Asia, but not India (chapter 11).
- New Delhi's fundamental security and political disagreements with Beijing make it a logical partner for America in competition with China in South and Southeast Asia and beyond. Despite a growing security and economic partnership with the United States at mid-decade, New Delhi remains a challenging strategic partner for America given India's divergent views about Russia and its resolve to resist formal alliances and retain its historical strategic autonomy (chapter 11).
- Adjacent but different, the continent of Africa and the region of the Middle East matter greatly in the unfolding GPC among the United States, China, and Russia. Over the past two decades, China has become the top economic partner for most countries in these regions, while the United States remained more focused on extending military security arrangements for the purpose of maintaining stability across Africa and the Middle East. Russia has expanded its security footprint and reinforced propaganda efforts with a focus on discrediting and dislodging European former colonizing states and the United States from once-privileged positions across Africa and the Middle East. Moscow retains underappreciated influence because of its Cold War support for Arab regimes and selected African autocrats as well as its role in the global energy markets (chapter 12).
- China hopes that Africa and the Middle East can someday become important new sources of demand for China's exports and drivers of its continuing economic vitality. It seeks support in those regions to advance its own distinctive interpretation of concepts such as human rights and Internet freedom. At mid-decade, Beijing also appears intent on building a network of strategic facilities (dual-use logistics hubs and military facilities) that could extend from the Indian Ocean through the Horn of Africa to the Atlantic coast of Africa (chapter 12).
- The United States and its strategic partners—especially India, Japan, and those from Europe—need to develop a more coherent and collective approach for dealing with Africa and the Middle East. Part of this approach will require refining and revamping international organizations, rules, and norms to better incorporate these countries

and to represent their views. From 2021 to 2024, the Biden administration set in motion initiatives to bolster democratic processes and improve global institutions to respond to regional needs, but these initiatives may be deemphasized in the second Trump administration taking shape in 2025 (chapter 12).

- Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is another major battleground in the Global South featuring intensifying competition among Washington, Beijing, and Moscow for the future of international rules, norms, procedures, and influence; democratic norms; and authoritarianism. Though LAC has long been a region of uncontested U.S. regional influence, over the past few years China and Russia have made significant gains. The U.S. faces a “decisive decade” in responding, and the actions or inactions will have ramifications for years to come (chapter 13).
- Chinese and Russian support for authoritarian regimes and the accompanying lack of government accountability and transparency, coupled with massive separate but parallel anti-U.S. disinformation campaigns, have significantly undermined the rule of law and democratic governance in LAC and undercut key strategic U.S. goals in the region (chapter 13).
- China is competing across a broad spectrum of diplomatic, military, economic, media information, and cyber/digital sectors—especially deep space exploration, 5G and digital infrastructure, electrical grids, port infrastructure, strategic waterways, and key extractive minerals such as lithium and copper. Russia is competing against Washington in narrow but strategically significant areas where it holds historical advantage—with anti-American disinformation, support for anti-American authoritarian regimes, and military equipment and training for troublesome regional states. The erosion of the historic U.S. competitive edge will likely continue over the next decade, with China best positioned to secure long-lasting gains (chapter 13).
- The United States cannot alone conduct asymmetrical competition with China across LAC or with Russia on a narrower but strategic set of interests. American strategic competition success against its rivals in LAC requires significant increases in financial commitments to the region and interagency commitments to long-term collaboration within the region and among like-minded international partners. In both Sino-American and Russo-American strategic competition across LAC, Beijing and Moscow have overlapping interests in displacing the United States and undermining democratic norms. To counter these aims, the U.S. interagency community should focus on broad, persistent, and coordinated actions both across the interagency community and with allies across the region (chapter 13).

## **Part V: GPC and Moving Forward (Chapter 14)**

- The United States will experience relative power decline but at a slowing tempo as Washington and its partners more severely limit formerly unfettered Chinese access to global markets and high-end technologies (chapter 14).

- China will continue a strategic rise in relative power but at a slower pace than before the United States began disengaging from selected sectors of the Chinese economy (chapter 14).
- Russia will decline. Its missteps in Ukraine will hasten a long-forecast relative power decay, but it will remain a Great Power. Washington and especially Beijing each will see self-interested value in preserving Moscow's Great Power status while jousting to gain the most from Russia's descent (chapter 14).
- Sino-American GPC will intensify in the remainder of the decade over increasingly contested global rules, norms, and procedures and in a manner that will fragment multiple globalized domains but is unlikely to produce a decisive outcome. These will be most heavily contested across the Global South (chapter 14).
  - » Fragmentation of globalized supply chains, functional domains, and cooperative networks will increase costs of interchange among the Great Powers and all states in the international system.
  - » Middle and lesser powers will seek opportunities to mix and match their allegiances—partnering with one Great Power on some activities and with another for separate interactions (chapter 14).
- India will accelerate an ascent toward Great Power status without attaining it. However, New Delhi will play an increasingly prominent role as a competition intercessor in the Great Powers' intensifying quest to win the struggle over contested rules, norms, and procedures for the emerging global order, especially across the Global South (chapters 11, 12, 13, 14).
- Whether they coalesce rapidly or slowly, Great Power spheres of influence will become increasingly obvious, grow in isolation, and become impervious to outside actors and preferences before the end of the decade. The second Trump administration's early 2025 foreign policy rhetoric indicates it may codify acceptance of Great Power spheres of influence leading to an acceleration of this fragmentation of globalization, but the inexorable trend toward global fragmentation is a multifaceted one and predates any single American Presidential administration (chapter 14).
- Direct Great Power war will loom as an unintended and undesirable outcome. However, it remains unlikely to erupt absent severe leader miscalculation of relative power ratios, excessively brittle war plans, or misunderstanding of where and when rival Great Power leaders would resort to a direct armed clash (chapter 14).