

Fire controlman (left) and gunner's mate maintain Mark 38 25mm machine gun aboard USS *Porter* in Atlantic Ocean, March 5, 2019 (U.S. Navy/James R. Turner)



Global Risks and Opportunities

The Great Power Competition Paradigm

By Mark D. Miles and Charles R. Miller

When studying today's emerging great power competition paradigm, it is edifying to recall the most recent historical antecedents: the zenith of Europe's imperial period and the Cold War. From 1815 to 1914, it was rare for competition between the great powers of Europe to manifest militarily (the Crimean War being the notable exception), limited

at least in part by Great Britain's global reach and near-hegemonic power. Instead, Europe's great powers sought other domains of national power and geographic locations outside of the European core in which to compete—for example, the Russian and Austro-Hungarian empires in the Balkans or the British, Belgian, French, and later German empires in Africa. In some

geographies, the competition narrowed to a bipolar contest, as in the "Great Game" between the British and Russian empires in Central Asia. In that contest, information operations, economic diplomacy, and espionage were the primary weapons of statecraft, as was typical for a century when military force was rarely a first resort in inter-state competition and was never employed without accompanying diplomatic and economic levers of power.

Another historical era to which some compare the present great power competition paradigm is the Cold War between

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the United States and the Soviet Union. The coldest part of the Cold War was felt in Europe and northeast Asia where the North Atlantic Treaty Organization alliance, along with U.S. security guarantees, shared ideological perspectives, and relatively stable political arenas left little room for direct competition. But elsewhere—in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa—the struggle between the West and the Soviet bloc was anything but “cold,” as the two superpowers, their allies, and proxies competed across all elements of national power to gain sway with emerging or transitioning countries amid the unwinding of colonialist systems. Nowhere was the superpower competition more dynamic or more pivotal to the Cold War’s final outcome than in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Great Power Competition Today

The shift in emphasis in the National Defense Strategy and other guiding documents toward a transregional and inter-state competition conceptual framework reflects the reality of China’s rapid rise to the first rank of economic and military powers, Russia’s reassertion—by word and deed—that it deserves great power status after the perceived humiliations of the 1990s, and an openness to alternative economic and political models within the regions hosting the competition. This openness is both a result of internal trends emboldening national leaders to seek opportunities to protect their interests, and a perception that the United States—and the West in general—is retrenching, introspective, and capricious.

Amid these real and perceived changes, the United States is actively shifting its resources—military and otherwise—toward Europe and East Asia to ensure that we are poised to protect ourselves and our allies from our rivals’ revisionism. However, a look back to the 19th century or the more recent Cold War reveals that, as the frontiers nearest our competitors harden, inter-state competition will displace to those geographies that offer space and provide broader economic opportunities. Following

this model, we should expect that great power competition in the 21st century will encompass not only the Middle East and Central Asia, but also Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) regions and Africa.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy prioritizes competition with China and Russia and seeks to expand the competitive space while strengthening alliances and partnerships.¹ Formulating an effective response to China and Russia’s global activism will be challenging. To accomplish this in terms of great power competition, we must ensure a clear understanding of both powers’ strategic concept for these regions. Next, we must examine the available political, economic, information, and security “space” in which competition could occur and allocate resources against them according to national priorities. Finally, we must work with our strategic allies to promote efficiency of our combined efforts and find areas of mutual interest to build bridges with our rivals, ultimately reinforcing global institutions and avoiding the escalation of tensions into open hostilities.

China. Chinese President Xi Jinping amplified existing trends when he came to power in 2012 and adopted policies to accelerate the growth of China’s comprehensive national power in support of the country’s “great rejuvenation” by 2049 through the assertive use of all instruments of national power, including economic and military.² The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which joins a continental economic belt and a maritime road to promote cooperation and interconnectivity from Eurasia to Africa and into Latin America, is the central foreign policy tenet in support of this goal and aims to ensure China’s continued economic growth and connectivity to needed resources and global markets.³ Across Central Asia, China has invested in energy and transit infrastructure under the BRI umbrella to create the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, which includes the creation of economic zones and investment in Gwadar port and is the “flagship” component of BRI. The Middle East is important to BRI as well, as the region is one of China’s more important sources of crude oil

and has attracted billions in Chinese investment, including the Persian Gulf and Iran. Likewise, China has become a pivotal economic partner for Latin American countries through access to natural resources, foreign markets, and the diversification of Chinese firms, and it is fostering additional ties via a regular China–Latin America forum that includes 33 countries. China has invested billions in the LAC and sub-Saharan African countries, making Africa the second largest source of crude imports for China after the Middle East.⁴

Also associated with the BRI are China’s investments into regional commercial port infrastructure. This includes a joint venture with Egypt to develop the China-Egypt Suez Economic and Trade Cooperation Zone, the Shanghai International Port Group’s development of a commercial port in Khalifa (Abu Dhabi), potential future investment in Omani ports, the port development project turned military base in Djibouti, and economic support to the Panama Canal.⁵ Many observers believe the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) support base in Djibouti is a model for China to establish additional support bases and military facilities in its “string of pearls” strategy intended to underpin the security of Chinese economic interests and citizens. The location of China’s first overseas base and the other ports with concerted Chinese investment provides significant advantages that will affect the decision calculus and potentially the access of all actors in the region to key thoroughfares and infrastructure.⁶

As China rises as a global military power, its economic and domestic security interests have begun to require Beijing to adopt a limited security role outside of its traditionally claimed sphere of influence in the South China Sea. The base in Djibouti supports China’s long-standing counterpiracy efforts in the Gulf of Aden.⁷ In Central Asia, China created the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism in 2016 as a counterterrorism effort that includes joint patrols of the Afghanistan-China-Tajikistan border region and a military facility with People’s Liberation Army



Sailors man rails aboard guided-missile destroyer USS *Zumwalt* as ship pulls into Joint Base Pearl Harbor–Hickam, Pearl Harbor, April 2, 2019 (U.S. Navy/ Holly L. Herline)

presence in Tajikistan.⁸ China's comprehensive policy toward the LAC has included important elements of military and security cooperation to include bilateral and multilateral military-to-military engagements and exercises, trainings, forums, and humanitarian missions.⁹ In the private sector, China has leveraged private security companies to protect some of its BRI-related projects in unstable areas and its commercial fleet to support the PLAN for use as an asset to support military operations abroad.¹⁰

China has adopted several key messaging themes in an effort to enhance its influence within the regions. Beijing's narratives are designed to portray China as a nonthreatening, reliable economic partner that can provide countries in the region with the capital, technology, infrastructure, and equipment needed for greater prosperity and stability. Conversely, Chinese narratives cast the United States as a destabilizing and predatory influence.¹¹ Despite promises for

win-win development, China's predatory economic practices, tensions emanating from its preferential use of Chinese materials and labor, and infringements on host nation sovereignty often undermine these narratives and may impede implementation of key Chinese projects.

Ultimately, the lack of an overt political or ideological agenda, the availability of capital, and Beijing's willingness to invest in riskier projects with fewer restrictions make China particularly attractive to regional governments. Beijing largely employs a noninterference policy diplomatically and is nonconfrontational in international forums on topics regarding the Middle East.

Russia. The election of Vladimir Putin in 2012 and his return to the Russian presidency marked the beginning of a significant expansion in Russia's global reach. To enable this expansion, Moscow has relied on a wide array of diplomatic, intelligence, military, and economic tools to include cyber, trade,

energy, and finances to influence decisionmakers, political systems, and public attitudes in the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa. The Middle East reemerged as a priority for Russia in 2012 due to the region's economic potential to prop up Russia's lagging economy, domestic security concerns (especially terrorism) related to the region's geographical proximity, and the Kremlin's political objectives to create leverage to affect Western behavior, change the international order to avoid isolation, and shape domestic public opinion.¹² Russia's military intervention in Syria in September 2015 and subsequent perceived successes in this theater have motivated a more proactive and assertive Russian approach to the Middle East, exemplified by the Kremlin's attempts to affect the domestic political dynamics of the region as in Syria and Libya, defense of Iran in international forums, and offers to mediate talks for various regional conflicts and tensions. Thus far,

the Kremlin has reestablished itself as a regional power broker and cultivated relations with regional rivals with minimal backlash. As Moscow takes on a greater role in the region's internal dynamics, it is unclear if Russia will be able to maintain this diversity or support all of its efforts unilaterally.

Economically, the Middle East and Central Asia regions are critical for Moscow's interests due to the importance of hydrocarbons to the Russian economy and opportunities to circumvent or ease the impact of Western sanctions.¹³ Russia is building relations with its potential rivals in the energy sphere, particularly Iran and Saudi Arabia, and is competing for influence over resources that are also critically important to China in the Middle East, Central Asia, Africa, and Latin America.¹⁴ These economically important regions in the Middle East and North Africa are also essential to Russia's security calculus. The extended lease of Tartus Naval Base in Syria and investment in the Suez Canal area provide Russia with access to critical lanes of maritime communication leading to the Atlantic and Indian oceans and a platform to project naval power and monitor the flow of Middle Eastern oil and gas to Europe and the Far East. From this position, Russia can restrict Western flexibility in the region.

Russia's intervention in Syria and posturing with respect to Afghanistan highlight another security concern motivating its reemergence as a player: the threat to Russia and its claimed sphere of influence by the presence and participation of Russian-speaking and former Soviet state citizens in violent extremist organizations in these regions. Prior to Syria and the rise of the so-called Islamic state, jihadists from former Soviet states were more scattered, had more narrow objectives, and did not have the size and diversity currently represented. Syria provided the ground for networking among these entities and enhanced ties with international terrorist organizations.¹⁵ Moscow's concern for this threat is long term, although it is an area where Russia seems to be reluctant to directly intervene at this time. Instead, Russia is capitalizing

on the counterterrorism activities of the United States and its allies, while focusing its resources to achieve short-term goals to include securing a Moscow-friendly regime in Syria and reinforcing its hard power in Central Asia.

Politically, since 2015, Russian actions in the Middle East have demonstrated to regional regimes that Russia is a reliable, decisive partner devoid of the West's ideological restrictions and a diplomatic and military force to be reckoned with. This is especially true for Iran. Russia positioned itself as a key mediator in the Iranian nuclear issue and as a viable alternative to the West's perceived capriciousness with the Kremlin's backing of Iran through the reimposition of U.S. sanctions. The Kremlin responded quickly to partner requests for military equipment in the face of internal unrest and used its position in international forums to defend its partners. While Moscow has not sought to directly compete with the United States economically or politically in the region, the Kremlin is poised to capitalize on geopolitical space created by either U.S. policies or changes within the domestic spheres of partner countries. In this way, Putin casts doubt on the existing international order and casts himself as the defender of sovereignty and "traditional" values.

Although Russia has largely not sought to directly challenge the United States, Moscow uses the information space to reinforce regional narratives, cast Russia as a responsible actor, question the reliability of the West, and promote falsities that undermine the United States, such as emphasizing U.S. responsibility for regional instability and supporting terrorist organizations. Russia's information operations in the Middle East and Latin America utilize the state media RT, Sputnik Arabic, and Sputnik Mundo services, which maintain an online presence, utilize social media as a force multiplier and engagement mechanism, and encourage local authors with the requisite language and cultural familiarity to appeal to a wide audience.¹⁶ The Kremlin's narratives are generally most effective in uncontrolled media environments and among populations favorable to Russia,

to a Russian ally, or to groups in search of alternative explanations. In the Middle East, the largely state-controlled media restrict the effectiveness of Russian information operations, and the Kremlin's narratives are best received in populations with preexisting positive sentiment toward Russia, including Syria, Egypt, and Iraq. In Latin America, RT and Sputnik Mundo programming is readily available and often cited as main sources by official media. Moscow's propaganda outlets work to stoke anti-U.S. sentiment and support populist figures in Latin American elections.¹⁷

What's Next for Great Power Competition in the Regions?

The expanding need driven by the global reach of China's diplomatic, information, military, and economic initiatives, as well as Russia's objective to weaken or subvert Western security structures in the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa will challenge U.S. prosperity, security, and critical relationships in the respective regions. Deterring or defeating great power aggression is a fundamentally different challenge than the regional conflicts that have plagued these areas and formed the basis of U.S. planning constructs over the past quarter-century.

In an era of constrained resources and in the context of an evolving global dynamism, the United States is facing a multitude of questions, not least of which are: How do China and Russia's actions affect U.S. interests and foreign policy goals? What are the costs and benefits to the United States, and what role does it want to play? What roles in great power competition for Russia and China are acceptable to the United States? Finally, how can the United States compete against Russia and China in these key regions, and what are we willing to sacrifice, especially when the demands of buttressing our positions in Europe and East Asia compel a reallocation of forces away from some great competition areas?

While not exhaustive, some combination of the following lines of effort may help posture the United States to counter adverse Chinese and Russian activity and



Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopter assigned to 2-6 Cavalry Regiment, 25th Combat Aviation Brigade, sits on flightline under night sky on FARP 17, Pōhakuloa Training Area, Island of Hawaii, Hawaii, April 13, 2019 (U.S. Army/Keith Kraker)

present opportunities to U.S. security interests and alliances relative to great power competition.

Reassure Partners of our Commitment. Through our continued military presence, even amid a reallocation of resources that reduces our footprint, we demonstrate to our allies and partners our commitment to regional security and stability. Task-specific combined joint task forces, continual senior defense official–defense attaché engagement, international military education and training exchanges, and coordinated high-level visits all contribute to military presence. Continued long-standing military exercises signal our commitment and increase our readiness and capacity to cooperate with partners. In demonstrating our commitment, we must also be honest and forthright about our limitations and priorities within these relationships and understand that security, economic, diplomatic, and information space unclaimed

by the West is a potential opportunity for a competitor. Simultaneously, U.S. and host nation resources are not infinite, and competitor engagement in some sectors may be beneficial to U.S. goals.

Encourage Regional Integration and Military Interoperability. We should continue our diplomatic efforts to buttress existing regional coordination mechanisms, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council, and to advance deeper formal military and economic regional coordination, as with the Middle East Strategic Alliance, especially in light of China’s whole-of-government approach. Regional integration will help our partners resist hostile powers’ efforts to subvert their sovereignty.

Reinforce Regional Understanding of the Dangers of Chinese or Russian Practices. We must engage both diplomatic and informational means to spotlight the dangers of Chinese and Russian practices to partner governments

and publics. To that end, there are multiple instances of the Chinese debt trap and data theft, and the loss of sovereignty and freedom they bring. Likewise, we should increase awareness of how Russia uses disinformation to sow political discord and instability and should inoculate the public and governments against this threat. We should also ensure that Chinese and Russian human rights violations as well as repressive domestic policies toward Muslim populations (such as Chechens and Uighurs) are well understood by regional governments and publics.

Expose Areas Where Chinese and Russian Interests Diverge. Chinese and Russian goals for the region are largely aligned only in the short term and, in some areas (such as arms sales), they are already competing. We should remain alert to examples of divergence between Beijing and Moscow and seek opportunities to capitalize on these using diplomatic or informational levers. In

areas where U.S. interests converge with those of China or Russia, but not both, we should strive to cooperate within existing U.S. law and international institutions, promoting the mechanism and the bilateral relationship.

Seek Areas of Mutual Interest or Deconfliction with China and Russia.

Despite an overarching goal of deterring expanded Chinese or Russian influence damaging to U.S. interests, we must seek opportunities to capitalize on areas of mutual interest where we can and deconflict where we must. We share a goal with China and Russia to ensure the free flow of commerce and to deter piracy, so the potential remains for supporting efforts in these areas. With both countries, we also share a goal of defeating terrorism, although we must tread carefully given different views of both the targets and means for counterterrorism efforts. In Afghanistan, one could imagine China and/or Russia playing a positive role in the medium to long term.

The great power competition paradigm outlined in the National Defense Strategy provides a way to think strategically about inter-state competition in a multipolar world. Both history and a survey of current events demonstrate that the Middle East, Central Asia, Latin America, and Africa will be pivotal spaces for great power competition between the United States, China, and Russia. Military power will reassure our partners and allies, and military cooperation can catalyze greater regional integration. In a contest where diplomatic, informational, and economic power will be the decisive means, we must ensure our military power is fully postured to support our whole-of-government efforts. JFQ

Notes

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