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Understanding Competition

Great Power Rivalry in a Changing International Order— Concepts and Theories

It now appears that U.S. national security policy for the foreseeable future will be oriented around the idea of competition—often paired with such modifiers as *strategic* or *great power*—with at least two primary competitors, China and Russia.¹ The 2017 National Security Strategy and the public summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy were built around this theme.² The March 2021 Biden administration Interim National Security Guidance did not build its whole program around competition, but did conclude that the proposed national security agenda would “allow us to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation. The most effective way for America to out-compete a more assertive and authoritarian China over the long-term is to invest in our people, our economy, and our democracy.”³

The idea of competition has been central to other U.S. national strategy documents, such as the 2018 Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning and the 2019 Joint Doctrine Note 1-19.⁴ It has been the focus of service concept papers from the Army and the Marine Corps.⁵ It has featured prominently in the public statements

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of senior U.S. officials. It has been the subject of dozens of essays and argument in the wider national security community.

This Perspective was finalized, moreover, under the grim shadow of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with all the implications that holds for a much more hazardous U.S. confrontation with Russia. Russia's aggressive actions have substantially ratcheted up the intensity of this rivalry and, absent a dramatic change of government in Moscow, are destined to poison the relationship for some time to come. The invasion is also likely to have profound echo effects through the international system, and the parallel rivalry between the United States and China, in ways that are not yet clear. But the essential long-term competitive dynamic will remain, adding more urgency to the need for the United States to understand just what it means by a national security strategy built around strategic competition.

Despite all this attention and the urgency of current events, there remains no clear understanding of what precisely the term *competition* means or what it implies for U.S. national security strategy. A review of official U.S. documents turns up dozens of different definitions and

ways of understanding the concept. Recently, the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) issued formal clarification downplaying the use of the term *great power competition* in strategy documents in favor of *strategic competition*,⁶ but neither term was defined, and the import of this change was not immediately clear. Other U.S. government officials have suggested that references to *strategic competition* apply only to the contest between the United States and China, that the United States faces one true strategic competition amid other challenges.⁷ Some observers have begun to employ other phrases: It has become common to term the U.S.-China contest as a *new Cold War*, even while some warn that the analogy is misleading.⁸

Today, therefore, five years after it first appeared in official U.S. strategy documents, the idea of competition remains ill-defined in the minds of many U.S. national security practitioners and scholars. The term begs but does not answer the most important questions about national statecraft: the list of core U.S. vital interests, the baseline goals or objectives of U.S. foreign policy, and the means and ways used to pursue those objectives. The answers to those questions might have been affected by the tragic war in Ukraine and Vladimir Putin's apparent willingness

to take extreme risks, but the importance of answering them—understanding what sort of competition we face and what our objectives are—has become even more pressing. Recognizing that various competitions are underway, or issuing justified condemnations of aggressive action, gets us no closer to answering those questions—which remain worryingly underaddressed in recent U.S. strategic statements.

Indeed, an obsession with the concept of competition, which is best viewed as a condition rather than a policy or strategy, can be dangerous. For a nation to announce that it is embracing competition says nothing about *how* it will do so—that is, what specific theories of success it will employ—or what it will prioritize, the key questions for national strategy. The risk is that repeated use of the term will imply a degree of strategic direction that does not exist and serve to mask the absence of a true U.S. national strategy that specifies goals and means.

This Perspective tries to bring some coherence to the discussion by reviewing U.S. government strategy documents, published RAND research, and select other sources to help clarify what international competitions are all about. And amid current debates about the proper role of DoD in this competitive environment, this Perspective examines the specific aspects of competition that are essential to achieving U.S. defense objectives and the tools in the DoD arsenal that can be brought to bear in this domain.

Four Types of Competition

The notion of competition itself has a certain commonsensical meaning: some contest in which two or more people or groups are struggling for a common result or prize.

Many basic definitions tend to be somewhat tautological, defining *competition* as *the act of competing*. A previous RAND report suggested that competition in the international sphere could generally be defined by the presence of three essential ingredients. First, there must be some measurable or perceived contention (in other words, the participants have to see themselves as competing). Second, the contestants must be seeking to enhance their power or position in relation to one another. And third, the thing the contestants are struggling over must be in limited supply or significant for some other reason. The report offered a resulting general definition of competition as “the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status.”⁹

Beyond that most general conception, scholars assessing the nature of world politics have identified at least four broad levels or types of competition. These are an ongoing, persistent degree of interstate competition to maximize power or influence; more-pointed rivalries between states seeking system leadership; fully militarized rivalries between aggressive states willing, even anxious, to use force; and the concept of competition most in discussion today—organized campaigns of actions to gain advantage short of major war.

These categories speak to an important distinction: In its most basic form, competition is a *condition* or situation, not a policy or strategy.¹⁰ The basic reality of the international system is that nations compete in different ways, for different ambitions. *How* they do so—the objectives they choose, the mixes of tools they assemble to achieve those goals—is the question of strategy. Arguing that the United

States confronts a strategic competition merely highlights a reality; it does not reflect an actual policy choice or coherent strategic perspective.

The existence of worsening international rivalry, for example, could imply a need for a great power to retrench its major commitments and avoid overextending itself in peripheral matters to preserve strength for the main contest. Or it could highlight a very different need—for a great power to reaffirm and bolster its global deterrent posture. It could call for a rapid military buildup, or not; it could point to the need for an accelerated move to a new way of fighting wars, or not. In short: The existence of an intensifying competition does not itself endorse any specific strategy or policy.

What it does demand, though, is a sober, objective assessment of the *nature* of any competition. Scholars of warfare are fond of quoting Carl von Clausewitz to the effect that “the first, the supreme, the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”¹¹ The same could be said about this topic: The first and most essential task for any nation is to understand the character of the rivalry in which it is participating—not mistaking the rivalry for a competition that may be very different in kind, scope, or intensity.

World Politics: An Environment of Generalized Competition

In its most general usage, the term *competition*, as applied to world politics, is seriously underdefined (or, in the par-

lance of international relations scholars, *undertheorized*).¹² Nearly all theories of international relations hold that the global community of states embodies some degree of competitive power- and influence-seeking. In this sense, most theory assumes a constant degree of competition of one kind or another. But this is usually taken for granted and not sharply delineated as a distinct concept. It typically relies on dictionary-level understandings of the term, with basic meanings, such as *the act of competing* or *a contest for some honor, prize, advantage* or *trying to do better than others*.

Realist scholars of world politics, for example, have long argued that competition is the underlying fact of life in the international system. Some point to human nature and a claimed “drive for power” essential to human beings.¹³ Others stress the role of an international system of states without a central authority, which impels states to overprepare for their own defense, remain strongly suspicious of the motives of others, and thus spark spirals of hostility, misunderstanding, and eventually conflict.¹⁴

In this most generic sense, states compete over many things, many of which do not pose national security threats.¹⁵ They compete in athletics—at the Olympics and world championship tournaments. They compete for prestige, as when nations such as Canada make substantial investments in foreign assistance and philanthropy to maintain an image as a generous donor nation. They compete for the more pointed objective of status in global hierarchies.¹⁶ They compete to attract investment and economic production.

States’ efforts to excel need not always be viewed as inherently competitive. One useful distinction from the literature is between states that seek *absolute* versus *rela-*

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tive gains. If states try to enhance their position in areas that are not zero sum—for example, economic power—many states can improve their position at the same time, without intense competition at the level of nation versus nation. Nations can become richer working together. This has, of course, been part of the theory behind the postwar economic order (and earlier economic orders as well): By creating an environment in which all states can thrive in absolute terms, the resulting positive-sum system makes competitive spirals less likely.¹⁷

Yet there are limits to any positive-sum approach to national advantage. States still seek relative gains within such a system—for example, by helping firms in specific industries compete and grab market share from rivals in other countries. States implement trade policies designed to achieve advantage relative to others. They make domestic investments aimed at enhancing their relative economic position.

Still, the fact that states can pursue gains in a non-zero-sum way, if the larger trade and rule-based system allows it, highlights an important theme. *The character of the international system of any era*—whether it is more or less rule-based, more or less institutionalized,

more or less zero sum—*sets the context for competition*. The realist assumption about competition is only partly true: States escape the grip of power-oriented, zero-sum competition all the time. They form alliances (which can be temporary and shifting) and long-term regional blocs (as in the European Union). They form centuries-long friendships and organized systems of trade and finance. They work together to solve common problems (such as piracy and climate change), although always imperfectly and with a strong degree of self-interest. They sometimes band together to pursue normative goals, as in humanitarian relief efforts.

World politics, in other words, is not now and has never been a wholly competitive affair. It has pockets of mutual self-help, cooperation, coordination, even outright altruism. Indeed, the reaction of the world community to the Russian invasion of Ukraine demonstrates the degree to which most countries share basic norms and values and, in many cases, are willing to take powerful actions to coordinate in their defense. The most-comprehensive grand strategies have always sought to promote national interests by making best use of this full spectrum of global behaviors, from cooperative to competitive to conflictual.¹⁸

An important lesson for present U.S. national security strategy is that American sponsorship of a rule-based order can dampen competitive urges and enhance the U.S. position.¹⁹ Hal Brands notes that competitors often use “strategies that shape the world in ways that frustrate the opponent’s plans and expose its weaknesses.” During the Cold War, he notes, “America outplayed the Soviet Union by remaking the world around it—by turning a weak and divided community into a vibrant coalition whose achievements Moscow could not equal.”²⁰

This is one reason so many countries today explicitly call out the importance of a rule-based order in their national security strategies. Especially for smaller and medium powers, institutions and norms that provide greater stability and predictability to world politics are highly desirable. Even for great powers, creating a larger context supportive of their goals and values is a critical component of any strategy for competition.

In sum, then, the generic term *competition* certainly describes much of what goes on in world politics. Yet its use begs a dozen subsidiary questions: What kind of competition is it? Over what relative ambitions? With what intensity is it waged? With what tools? These are the sorts of questions that help define the main factors of competition, which are discussed below.

Bilateral Rivalry

A second concept that can shed light on the challenge of competition is much better defined—the notion of international rivalry. Rivalries are especially intense competitions, typically involving relatively equal contestants, and most often contested over regional or global primacy of some

kind.²¹ Whereas competition in the broadest sense refers to the generalized reality of world politics, rivalries are specific bilateral contests between opposing powers. Rivalries play an outsized role in shaping the degree of conflict in world politics: One study found that just a few dyadic (bilateral) rivalries caused most wars.²²

Even though this term has a stronger theoretical pedigree than *competition*, not all scholars agree on how to define a rivalry. Still, most definitions do tend to include a few key features: intensity, duration, a clash of relative peers, and mutual perceptions of hostility.

One scholar has defined rivalries as “a situation of long-standing, historical animosity between two countries with a high probability of serious conflict or crisis.”²³ The RAND analyst Timothy Heath adds that the term typically implies a strong degree of inherent incommensurability of aims: “Rivalry assumes a ‘zero-sum game’ over incompatible goals in which one side seeks to ensure its own security at the expense of the other.”²⁴ Heath and William Thompson add, “Strategic rivalries come in a grim package deal that includes strained and hostile relations, serial crises, and in some cases wars.”²⁵

Some scholars contend that, to count as a rivalry, a clash has to constantly threaten war and generate a significant number of militarized disputes.²⁶ These differences in definition lead scholars to generate overlapping, but widely divergent, rosters of historical rivalries: One study identified 63 enduring rivalries,²⁷ another found 110,²⁸ and a third counted 120 (in addition to 170 “proto-rivalries,” or shorter-term rivalries).²⁹ Short of war, other scholars emphasize the importance of persistent, unresolved disputes lasting many years as essential to a true rivalry.³⁰

Heath's detailed assessment summarizes several other main aspects of international rivalries.³¹ These include the following:

- *The presence of either “spatial” or “positional” disputes, or both.* Some rivalries are characterized primarily by contests over territories or sovereignty (spatial issues), but among truly great powers, rivalries often focus on broader positional disputes over control or “issues of status, influence, and hierarchy in a given order or system.” Such disputes are “exceptionally difficult to resolve” and generally recede only when one of the rivals abandons the contest for systemic supremacy.
- *The risk of a “proliferation of intractable dispute issues.”* Over time, rivalries can generate a profusion of disputes across many issues, causing a spiral of hostility.
- *A tendency toward destabilizing arms races.* Rivalries often spur mutual military buildups, which exacerbate threat perceptions and increase the risk of war.³²
- *A constant risk of militarized disputes.* Rivalries are often characterized both by a history of arms conflict and a persistent risk of crises which threaten to spill into war.

Russia's terrible aggression in Ukraine, then, as much as it seems so out of place in the 21st century, fits into the classic pattern of great power behavior in rivalries. Such contests have often featured militarized disputes, local aggressions, and proxy wars. This “grim package,” as Heath and Thompson put it, has produced many such uses of force in the past. This is in no way to normalize or justify

Russia's action, which is barbarous and inexcusable, both in the invasion itself and the way it is being conducted. It is merely to stress that rivalries, as understood in studies of world politics, are perilous things, prone to aggression and violence.

One factor seems especially critical to the existence of a rivalry: Both states involved must *believe* that they are engaged in one. Thompson suggests that true rivalries emerge when each state believes that the other poses a determined threat to its interests, goals, and values.³³ Other scholars have emphasized the related point of expectations; Paul Diehl and Gary Goertz suggest, for example, that “rivalries consist of two states in competition that possess the expectation of future conflict.”³⁴ Without such mutual perceptions of overall hostility or expectation of war, a rivalry would be constrained or partial.

An interesting example of such a limited rivalry is the U.S.-Japan relationship of the 1980s. The two countries were treaty allies at the time, and still Japan's powerful economic momentum—and apparent determination to become “number one” in the global economy—sparked a wave of analyses in the United States warning of a coming clash. Some worried that economic rivalry would spill over into geopolitical and military realms.³⁵ One especially zealous book from the period was called *The Coming War with Japan*—and that was published in 1991.³⁶

Most historical rivalries have occurred between established great powers. As the box on power transition describes, however, some unfold during a period of transition from one leading world or regional power to another. Some scholars believe that rivalries that emerge during such transitional periods pose special dangers of war.

Power Transition: A Special Variety of Rivalry

One form of rivalry that has generated a substantial literature, indeed even a whole theory of international politics, takes place during a power transition—when a rising and emerging power is overtaking an established one. This power transition theory has been widely applied to the U.S.-China relationship, with the United States in the role of the established power and China nominated as the emerging and overtaking one.^a

This model holds that rivalries associated with a power transition are especially likely to lead to war. The established power seeks to hold to its position and forcibly keep the emerging power down. Rising major powers are sometimes fueled by dangerous cocktails of resentment (for being treated as a second-class country to that point) and burgeoning nationalism. Underlying contests for power become especially volatile during a power transition when control over the whole international system seems to be at stake.

Some scholars have traced discussions of this dynamic back to the relationship between Athens and Sparta, which helped produce the Peloponnesian War. These scholars often cite a famous quote from Thucydides in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*: “It was the rise of Athens, and the fear that this inspired in Sparta, that made war inevitable.”^b It is this basic notion—a rising power provoking fear and hostile reactions from an established one, and the resulting suspicions and confrontations producing war—that lies at the heart of power transition theory. Graham Allison, in applying this analysis to the current U.S.-China dynamic, has referred to the danger simply as the “Thucydides Trap.”^c

The concept is not without its critics. Others have compiled lists of power transitions that did not lead to war.^d The scholars Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino produced one of the best-known critical assessments, arguing that basically none of the great power wars they surveyed was generated by a power transition.^e One famous example is the U.S.–United Kingdom relationship from the late 19th century through the mid-20th: The United States overtook the United Kingdom as the world’s leading power, but the two cooperated to manage the international system rather than falling into a rivalry. Clearly, many other variables are at work than simple power trajectories.

Some scholars point out, too, that the Thucydides connection may be misleading. The historical concept itself can be contested: Many historians simply deny that Thucydides meant to suggest that the primary cause of the Peloponnesian War was the fear of a rising power by an established one.^f Some commentators have stressed that the U.S.-China rivalry has many complex factors not present in the ancient case.^g

There is some reason to believe, in fact, that what is going on in the U.S.-China relationship is not a classic power transition at all. China’s economic, technological, and military powers are growing—but the United States is much bigger than some other countries (such as the United Kingdom) that were surpassed by emerging states and will retain tremendous inherent power. China’s growth is slowing; some projections suggest that the U.S. economy may remain bigger than, or as big as, China’s when measured by market exchange rates.^h The United States has a decisive advantage in global military posture and, especially, in alliances and the general alignment of world politics.

Power Transition: A Special Variety of Rivalry—Continued

What is underway might not be a power transition so much as the emergence of a true peer actor on the world stage, with China rising to match, but not wholly surpass, the United States.ⁱ It is too early to know for certain; China seeks a degree of regional hegemony grounded in dominance of regional and in some cases global economic networks. It believes, in other words, that it is driving itself into the role of world leader, and thus engineering a power transition. But China's power may remain strongly matched by the United States (and an affiliated collection of other states). Its bellicosity is generating substantial blowback and efforts to balance its power. It is not clear how much of the classic power transition dynamic would apply to such a context. Some scholars even worry about the opposite problem: that China's power trajectory stalls and looks ready to begin falling backward, prompting desperate action while it still has a window of opportunity.^j

On the other hand, the current trajectory of the U.S.-China contest does betray warning signs that very much align with the expectations of classic power transition theory. The degree of nationalism in the rising power, burgeoning mutual suspicions and worst-case assessments, explosive trigger points of possible larger conflicts, and many other elements of the worsening bilateral relationship show hallmarks of what the theory would predict. These parallels highlight the very real risk of intense rivalry and perhaps conflict in this relationship.

^a A canonical statement of the theory is in Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

^b Quoted in Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.

^c Allison, 2015.

^d Woosang Kim and James D. Morrow, "When Do Power Shifts Lead to War?" *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 36, No. 4, November 1992.

^e Richard Ned Lebow and Benjamin Valentino, "Lost in Transition: A Critical Analysis of Power Transition Theory," *International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2009.

^f The China scholar Arthur Waldron put it bluntly in a review of Allison's claims: "Let us start by observing that perhaps the two greatest classicists of the last century, Professor Donald Kagan of Yale and the late Professor Ernst Badian of Harvard, long ago proved that no such thing exists as the 'Thucydides Trap,' certainly not in the actual Greek text." The real mechanism, he suggests, was not a war started "by the resident power, Sparta, out of fear of a rising Athens." In fact "Athens had an empire, from which it wished to eliminate any Spartan threat by stirring up a war and teaching the hoplite Spartans that they could never win. The Spartans . . . wanted no war, preemptive or otherwise." Arthur Waldron, "There Is No Thucydides Trap," *SupChina*, June 12, 2017.

^g Albert Wolf, "What Thucydides's Trap Gets Wrong About the United States and China," Modern War Institute at West Point, July 25, 2017.

^h An outstanding recent survey of evidence on this point is Derek Scissors, *China's Growth Spurt Ends: What's Next?* Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 2021.

ⁱ See, for example, Ali Wyne, "Questioning the Presumption of a U.S.-China Power Transition," *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2019.

^j Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, "China Is a Declining Power—and That's the Problem," *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2021.

Brands has emphasized some of the more general characteristics of rivalries as competitive situations. They are by nature interactive—a seemingly obvious point but one often forgotten in recommendations for unilateral actions or strategies that do not take account of the rival's likely ripostes. Because rivalries are such broad-based

geopolitical dynamics, moreover, they tend to be comprehensive and multidimensional, drawing in all instruments of statecraft. Great powers that develop a better theory of success and strategy to support that theory, and that more effectively integrate these components, tend to have an advantage. Brands also emphasizes that rivalries almost

always unfold over a long period. Therefore, they demand patience and wisdom over a long series of incremental steps, as well as attention to the strategic implications of time—differentiating short- and long-term perspectives and initiatives, for example.

In many ways, then, *rivalry* is a better term for the current U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China contests than *competition*. There are surely more constraints on great powers today, in terms of nuclear risks and deep economic interdependence, than was the case in earlier eras.³⁷ But the basic dynamic captured by this term seems increasingly in evidence. Rivals in world politics are (usually) contending for leadership of the international order. They struggle for control of a region or the globe and for dominant influence over critical rules in geopolitical and economic spheres. A rivalry is a more pointed, seemingly zero-sum collision than a mere competition. In describing the situation that the United States finds itself in today regarding these two other great powers, therefore, rivalry is the better concept.

The Engines of Militarized Rivalries: Revisionist States

Although most bilateral rivalries involve some degree of security clashes, not all types of great powers are equally likely to engage in militarized disputes. Research on world politics has identified a category of especially aggressive states that wield armies as persistent tools of statecraft, often aiming at the conquest and subjugation of neighbors or even distant peoples. This sort of militarized aggressiveness, true most recently of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan in the 1930s, is often the image some scholars and policymakers have in mind when they worry about the

military ambitions of a modern China or Russia. It constitutes a third major variety of competition.

Many scholars have emphasized that major wars don't typically result—at least not recently—merely from generalized competition among states, especially democracies. Typically, what is needed is some sort of aggressive state dissatisfied with its position and prepared to take large-scale military action to redress the balance. Scholars sometimes refer to this form of militarized aggressor as a “revisionist” state.³⁸ Revisionists can come in many flavors and degrees, but the distinction here is a fully militarized revisionist with expansive goals of conquest. Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan are classic modern examples of the type. Saddam Hussein's Iraq could also be viewed as a regional revisionist, waging repeated wars of aggressive predation against his neighbors.

Yet very few states have reflected the pure conception of a militarized revisionist or predator prepared to undertake wide-ranging campaigns of military conquest, and almost none does today. Russia is now closest to this category, of course, but even today's Russia does not represent the sort of comprehensive threat of invasion and conquest posed by earlier militaristic revisionists. Russia does not appear to have vital interests or urgent ambitions tied up in the control of major areas of foreign territory apart from a select set of its most immediate neighbors. The military strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) looms to the West, ruling out large-scale territorial grabs. The risk of nuclear escalation renders large-scale war a disastrous prospect. Russia's economy would be devastated by large-scale war.

This still leaves Russia as a revisionist of a very aggressive and provocative sort—and in the wake of its invasion

Is the United States Facing a New Era of Great Power Competition?

Another term that has become commonly used to describe the emerging competitive environment is *great power competition*.^a This is yet another shorthand for a global contest of major powers. It might not, however, adequately describe the emerging environment.

Like the term competition generally, the notion of great power competition does not have a strong grounding in theory. There is no accepted definition for what it is, apart from an abstract sense of rivalry among the great powers of the era. The term does not tell policymakers anything beyond the fact that multiple great powers are competing. All the critical questions about those competitions—how intense they are, what they are over, what tools the rivals use—are left unspoken.

Some critics also worry that the term doubles down on the confusion between a situation in world politics and a strategy to deal with that situation. To say that a state is engaged in great power competition seems to imply that it has chosen a strategy when it has not—and thus foreclose debates about what the real strategy should be. Daniel Nexon, for example—while readily admitting that competition is a daily reality in the international system—worries that, by distracting attention from debates over true interests, sensible goals, and optimal means, “a fixation on great-power competition is likely to undermine, rather than enhance, U.S. power and influence.”^b

Indeed, there is good reason to question the degree to which the current situation is a great power competition as traditionally understood.^c Classic European versions of that pattern involved a crowd of multiple great powers aligning and realigning with and against one another. Today’s international system, by contrast, is made up of a predominant core of industrial democracies and several challengers. The term also traditionally referred to global contexts in which political-military power was dominant. Today, economic and informational influence are just as important, and the nuclear revolution has placed real constraints on military ambitions.

A recent report from CNA helpfully suggests that it may make more sense to view the current era as “one of great power relations” rather than of competition. “By making competition a ubiquitous descriptor,” the report argues, “we risk ignoring other important aspects of great power relations that account for opportunities for cooperation with adversaries when it is in the U.S. interest, and competition with other great powers if needed.”^d This is an especially important correction because so many aspects of current great power *relations*, beyond the clashes among the rivals, work to the U.S. advantage, notably the commitment of many leading democracies to key elements of a rule-based order.

The term *great power competition*, then, is an imperfect concept to describe the emerging 21st-century reality. The United States needs statecraft to make the pattern of great power relations work for its interests to the highest degree possible and to compete with specific rivals where necessary.

^a On the origins of the term, see Uri Friedman, “The New Concept Everyone in Washington Is Talking About,” *The Atlantic*, August 6, 2019.

^b Daniel Nexon, “Against Great Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 15, 2021.

^c Michael J. Mazarr, “This Is Not a Great Power Competition,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 29, 2019.

^d Cornell Overfield and Joshua Tallis, *Great Power Relations: What Makes Powers Great and Why Do They Compete?* Arlington, Va.: CNA, January 2020, p. ii.

Even more than Russia, China is determined to shift the international system away from the United States and toward itself.

of Ukraine, one whose ambitions and willingness to use force are obviously greater than had been assumed. It seeks to rebalance the international order away from the United States and then dominate a specific set of neighboring countries. Russia is willing to take aggressive actions to achieve these goals, as its invasion of Ukraine has made urgently clear. Russia could undertake similarly coercive military posturing toward other states on its periphery and flex its military muscle in smaller ways in the Middle East and Africa. But the sum of these ambitions remains well short of the classic militaristic revisionists of history, most recently Germany and Japan of the 1930s.

China, too, has significant revisionist ambitions. Even more than Russia, it is determined to shift the international system away from the United States and toward itself, displacing the United States as the acknowledged leader in world politics. Its territorial ambitions, in Taiwan and the East and South China Seas, are extensive and ambitious and are matched by only a handful of great powers histori-

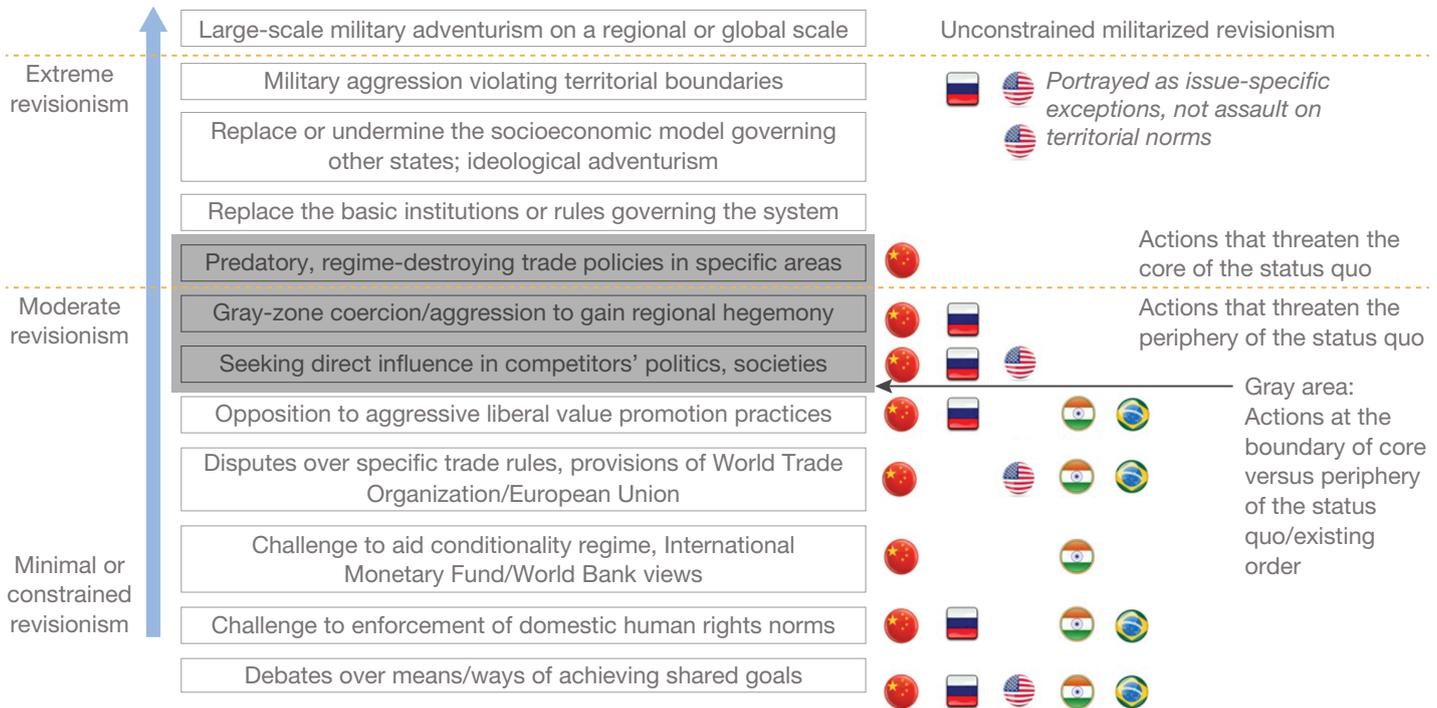
cally. It has been willing to employ economic coercion and military intimidation in pursuit of these goals.

Yet China, too, remains a constrained revisionist and does not appear to be on the verge of threatening large-scale military adventurism throughout the region. For one thing, China's self-conception is as a legitimate leader of world politics, not a military predator. It confronts risks of escalation from any localized aggression to major war, which could involve nuclear weapons. Its economy could be devastated by the implications of any major war. Its historical approach to achieving regional hegemony, while forceful, has usually stopped well short of dispatching navies and armies across the breadth of the Pacific.

It is worth stressing that, as will be explained below, both China and Russia view *the United States* as the world's most unqualified revisionist country. Many American officials view the United States as a classic status quo power, committed to guarding the stability of the existing order. U.S. rivals see a very different country—one that has supported “color revolutions” in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, undertaken forcible regime change, and used economic coercion to reshape the international order. Some of the behavior of U.S. rivals, especially Russia, is grounded in precisely this perception that the United States is an aggressive great power seeking ways of overturning regimes hostile to its goals.

These qualifications highlight a larger point: A state's revisionist impulses and behavior are not binary qualities; they exist on a spectrum. Figure 1 lays out an ascending scale of revisionist behavior, from minimal revisionism to extreme militarized revisionism. The icons indicate which of several countries—notably the United States, China, and Russia—engage in each. As it suggests, none of the three

FIGURE 1
Degrees of Revisionism



SOURCE: Reprinted from Mazarr et al., 2018, Figure 2, p. 24.

main rivals counts as a militarized revisionist, and revisionist practices form a complex and mixed picture in each case.

This is not to suggest that war between these three rivals is impossible. Conflict is entirely plausible, because of the places where the United States is engaged in direct conflicts of interest with Russia and China, because of the

ever-present risk of inadvertent escalation, and because of the stark lack of trust on both sides of these bilateral relationships.³⁹ The war in Ukraine, and the actions by NATO member countries to support Ukraine in the conflict, have greatly exacerbated these risks. The three countries are vying for control of the international order, a form of

positional rivalry that has in the past been associated with conflict.

Competition as Advantage-Seeking Short of War

Traditional international relations theory views competition as a natural state in world politics that can become especially intense during periods of direct bilateral rivalry. In the current national security and defense policy discussion, however, when people refer to competition, they often mean something more specific: the use of tools of statecraft to gain advantage below the threshold of major war. Competition therefore means, in essence, *other than war*, and its use in this manner blurs the distinction between descriptions of the strategic environment and forms of national strategy. This is the fourth and final way of understanding this term—and one that is deeply enmeshed in current U.S. national security debates.

This fourth concept of competition is not mutually exclusive with any of the others. A great power can—and almost always will—undertake general international competition, discrete bilateral rivalries, and even more aggressive militarized forms of rivalry using tools and techniques

short of war.⁴⁰ Seeking advantage in this twilight or gray zone is an inherent component of all competition. Because of the strategies and competitive advantages of U.S. rivals, however, this set of tools has taken on new importance as one essential centerpiece of any U.S. strategy for competition.

The Gray Zone

This focus on competition as describing national strategies short of war emerged in part in reaction to Russian and Chinese actions in recent years. Both understand the tremendous risks and costs of war in the industrial and nuclear age and would prefer to achieve their goals without major conflict. Both countries have as a result developed concepts of national competitive advantage designed to employ multiple tools of peacetime activities to achieve their strategic objectives. But in the present parlance, the term *competition* has also become synonymous with this arena of national rivalry short of war.

Competition (or, as it is sometimes phrased, *the competition phase*) has thus become the successor to the *gray zone*, as well as *hybrid warfare*, *political warfare*, and a range of other terms used to describe this intense, campaign-like contest for influence, power, and prestige

The United States, China, and Russia are vying for control of the international order, a form of positional rivalry that has in the past been associated with conflict.

without going to war.⁴¹ Extensive RAND work has documented the elements of this gray zone competition,⁴² which includes economic, diplomatic, informational, and covert intelligence aspects. One message of this work is that gray zone activities are organized into intentional, gradual campaigns to achieve long-term advantage that differ from ad hoc peacetime statecraft. But gray zone contests have a significant role for military capabilities and forces, forms of military diplomacy, engagement, presence, and signaling that play an essential role in the larger effort.

The concept of integrated campaigning tends to blur the distinction between peacetime and wartime competitive activities. The 2018 Joint Concept on this topic defines “integrated campaigning as Joint Force and inter-organizational partner efforts to enable the achievement and maintenance of policy aims by integrating military activities and aligning non-military activities of sufficient scope, scale, simultaneity, and duration across multiple domains.”⁴³ Such an imperative of integration clearly applies across U.S. instruments of statecraft—but it also applies to the linkage of the competition and warfighting components of any rivalry.

This is true in part because many actions being taken in this contest short of war are designed to shape the outcomes of any potential conflict. China’s development of economic leverage over other Asian nations helps it deter them from granting access to U.S. military forces and would similarly dissuade them from supporting U.S. efforts in any conflict. Widespread cyber intrusions serve more than peacetime harassment purposes: They also potentially seed malware and lay other groundwork to achieve much more destructive effects in war. Nations use training missions and rotational deployments to gain intel-

Adversary, Enemy, Competitor, Rival

Many recent assessments of the U.S. strategic situation have employed different terms to describe Russia and China. Some call them competitors, some rivals—and some official documents and scholarly assessments have begun to use much more pointed terms, such as adversary or enemy, to describe these countries. This proliferation of descriptors has only added to the rhetorical confusion about the true character of the emerging competitive era.

Such terms as enemy and adversary have historically been used to describe countries or groups with which a state was engaged in a formally defined war. Countries that were rivals for global influence, viewing each other with suspicion but strictly avoiding hostilities, seldom describe each other in this way. During the Cold War, many U.S. officials and commentators certainly labeled the Soviet Union as an enemy—but its ideology of global conquest, its support for communist movements in dozens of countries, and the imminent military threat it posed to Western Europe all made it a more urgently threatening opponent than a typical geopolitical rival.

In today’s context, some justify the use of these more hostile terms by claiming that Russia and China already believe themselves to be “at war” with the United States (and its friends and allies) in some metaphorical sense. But this is only true in a sense akin to classical rivalry, not real war. If the term war is to mean anything, it must imply a degree of violent clash of wills that is well beyond what is underway today and what Russia and China appear to prefer. For the time being at least, it may be best to avoid terms such as enemy or adversary in describing Russia and China to avoid an unnecessary degree of emotionalism and paranoia about these contests.

The reach of today's technologies means that the nature of the rivalries may be very different—more conflictual, more threatening to homelands, with more constant risk of crisis and escalation.

ligence on potential conflict areas. In these and other ways, the ongoing contest *short of war* is also highly relevant to the potential *conduct* of war—which is one reason why DoD traditionally has played such a significant role in the competition phase, but it is also why integrating defense efforts with those of the Departments of State, Treasury, and Commerce and other elements of the U.S. government is so critical.

The Changing Understanding of Conflict

A larger trend also bears on our understanding of competition, especially in the requirements it implies in the gray zone: the changing character of warfare. Russian and Chinese views of world politics and their rivalries with the

United States have increasingly tended to blur the distinction between peace and war, focusing instead on a linked spectrum of actions taken to gain strategic advantage. At the same time, a growing literature on the changing nature of war describes many emerging tools of statecraft that, in parallel technological ways, blur the same boundary. Taken together, these trends create a form of rivalry not limited to preparing for major warfare but involving a whole *competition continuum*.

One implication is that today's geopolitical rivalries are not easily compared with earlier eras. The reach of today's technologies means that the nature of the rivalries may be very different—more conflictual, more threatening to homelands, with more constant risk of crisis and escalation.⁴⁴ Both Russian and Chinese sources routinely speak of homelands and societies as a primary focus of modern warfare, subject to all manner of virtual and kinetic attack. And this homeland-centric combat begins even before the shooting starts, leading to a situation of perpetual conflict that only occasionally breaks out into actual warfare.

More recently, Chinese sources have laid special emphasis on the information domain as the linchpin to this comprehensive field of conflict in both peace and war. Many Chinese documents use the term *information dominance*, which implies that the side that dominates various elements of the information contest will win the war.⁴⁵ Some of these information-related concepts have worked their way into Chinese thinking on a broader spectrum of conflict, including higher-end warfare, in reaction to U.S. networked warfare concepts. A 2018 RAND report described one leading concept of this type, the idea of *system confrontation* or *system destruction* warfare, which is based on the view that

war is no longer a contest between particular units, arms, services, or even specific weapons platforms of competing adversaries, but rather a contest among numerous adversarial operational systems. This mode of fighting is unique to modern warfare, as are the battlefields on which conflict is waged. This is referred to as *systems confrontation*. . . . Systems confrontation is waged not only in the traditional physical domains of land, sea, and air, but also in outer space, nonphysical cyberspace, electromagnetic, and even psychological domains.⁴⁶

In the Russian case, early suggestions of a formalized Russian doctrine of gray-zone or hybrid warfare gave

way to more limited and nuanced understandings.⁴⁷ But in both official statements and an extensive literature in unofficial sources, Russian sources depict an emerging practice of wide-ranging efforts to undermine the social stability of rivals in political, informational, economic, and other domains. This is a vision of comprehensive warfare waged across all elements of national power and cohesion, designed to ruin the will and social coherence of an adversary.⁴⁸

Like their Chinese counterparts, Russian experts also emphasize an ongoing information confrontation as the centerpiece of a spectrum of ongoing conflict. This notion refers to

This Is Not an Infinite Game

One of the most popular phrases recently employed in U.S. strategy documents bearing on competition is *infinite game*. Drawn in part from the ideas of the strategy consultant Simon Sinek,^a the idea is that the United States should view the competition especially with China as a never-ending contest. U.S. strategy should be based on this assumption rather than seeking “victory” in a defined period.

Rivalries in world politics can certainly persist for extended periods, and the United States should take seriously the need to succeed over the long term. But in its literal formulation, the claim is contradicted by history: All historical rivalries have been finite games. Each one has ended or faded gradually away, or waxed and waned, or taken a fundamentally new shape. Leading scholars of the concept of rivalry have documented dozens of cases of their conclusion,^b and Charles Kupchan has documented several specific ways in which rivalry gives way to “stable peace.”^c

Many rivalries that once seemed permanent, such as intra-European hatreds, have given way not only to stable peace but formalized international institutions linking the former enemies. Even rivalries that recur in some form for centuries, such as that between China and Japan, have shifted dramatically over time. To say international competition is an infinite game is much the same as saying that states seek power and influence: The claim is true in some fundamental manner, but the way in which it manifests itself in specific situations is so varied and complex that the general statement provides little meaningful guidance.

^a Simon Sinek, *The Infinite Game*, New York: Portfolio Press, 2019. See also Simon Sinek, “Do You Know the Game You’re Playing?” webpage, undated.

^b Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013.

^c Charles A. Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010.

The vulnerability of national information networks is only growing.

the goal of inflicting damage to information systems, processes, and resources, as well as to critically important structures and other structures; undermining political, economic, and social systems; carrying out mass psychological campaigns against the population of a State in order to destabilize society and the government; as well as forcing a State to make decisions in the interests of their opponents.⁴⁹

One result of this expanded tool kit for conflict is that, compared with traditional concepts of warfare, even in fights over distant territories, homelands that might have remained immune to direct fighting now become more exposed in peacetime and vulnerable in expanded and nontraditional ways during wartime.⁵⁰ Through cyber means, large-scale disinformation campaigns, direct meddling in political processes, harassment campaigns using chemical or biological tools, and eventually radical new kinetic strike systems capable of reaching homelands (such as very long-range drones), rivals can attack the safety and well-being of citizens within competitors' territories. This trend threatens to undermine any security provided by the deterrent effect of the territorial integrity norm in world politics through a thousand cuts, intensifying destructive threats to homelands as a regular practice in international rivalries.⁵¹

The vulnerability of national information networks is only growing. A recent RAND report warned of the rise of what it termed *virtual societal warfare*,⁵² defined as efforts to manipulate or disrupt the information foundations of the effective functioning of economic and social systems. As countries become more dependent on an integrated internet of things and algorithmic decisionmaking, and as techniques of manipulating information, reality, and perceptions become more sophisticated, the informational threat to homelands will continue to rise and become more complex.

One possibility is that states may come to see these tools as alternative means of attacking rivals that can take the place of large-scale warfare in the tool kit of nations seeking to impose their will. If these trends continue, the nature of conflict will continue to become more muddled, the line between peace and war more diffuse. Geopolitical rivalries in the 21st century may take different forms than in early modern periods or even during the Cold War. On the other hand, the rising vulnerability of homelands could destabilize rivalries in new and dangerous ways that ultimately make large-scale conflict more rather than less likely.

Understanding the Character of a Rivalry: Five Key Factors

It may be most accurate to say, therefore, that although a generalized degree of competition is underway, the United States is engaged in a classic rivalry with both Russia and China. Those rivalries have not yet become fully militarized and need not do so. A leading element of both rival-

ries is that Russia and China are employing multiple tools to engage in an ongoing strategic campaign short of war to advance their interests.

Yet rivalries can take many forms, and that conclusion only begs more questions about the true nature of the emerging contest—questions that help define the true character of any geopolitical rivalry.

The first such defining issue is *what the rivalry is most essentially about*. Some historical rivalries have been about territorial (or spatial) factors, such as the domination of a continental land mass—the British-French or French-German rivalries for hegemony in Europe, for example. Others have been mostly about ideological influence: The U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Cold War was a fight to establish the dominant system of ideas in world politics, with a zero-sum flavor suggesting that one side or the other's system was destined to fall or that permanent coexistence was impossible. Some rivalries are more about reputation and prestige in a less systemic way.

One primary issue of contention about the U.S.-China rivalry today, for example, is the degree to which it is defined by ideological elements. Most observers depict China as a very different sort of power from the Soviet Union—seeking influence, to be sure, but unconcerned about the ideological makeup of its client states. China is happy to work with democracies, as long as they accede to its wishes. It is not trying to overturn other governments and impose a model along the lines of the Chinese Communist Party. Others disagree, though, viewing the rivalry as inherently a clash of ideologies.⁵³

To the extent that it *is* an ideological clash, the United States ought to have an immense competitive advantage: As Figure 2 indicates, when measured by such criteria as

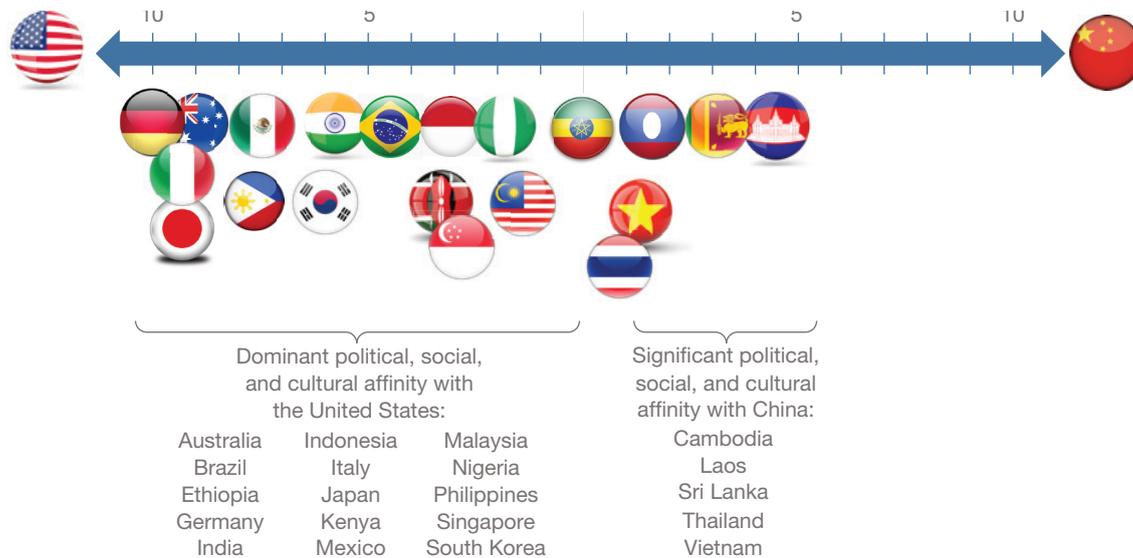
shared values and popular culture, most linchpin countries in the world tilt heavily toward the United States on what one RAND report termed an *affinity index*.⁵⁴

Others place the technological competition at the center of the U.S.-China rivalry. Timothy Heath and William Thompson, for example, surveying both the economic and the military role of breakthrough technologies, argue that whichever country achieves technological predominance is likely to prevail in the larger rivalry.⁵⁵ Still other assessments contend that the rivalry with China is centered on efforts to gain predominant influence over the essential rules, norms, and institutions of international politics.⁵⁶

A second critical defining question has to do with *the objectives of the contestants*. What do the great powers in a competition truly want? Do they have aggressive intentions of dominating world politics or seek at least regional hegemony? Are their goals primarily defensive? Do they seek economic power but not military? One key aspect of this question is whether any of the contestants seek dominion over surrounding nations or territories to a degree that would justify military force. Are any of the contestants militarized revisionists? The objectives of just about every great power in history have been at least somewhat distinct, meaning that every competition has a somewhat unique flavor.

Answers to those first two questions will inform an understanding of a third issue: *How can we define success in the competition?* For example, success for Britain in its competition with France did not have to include the collapse of the French government and occupation of the country by British troops. (The British army was never large enough to accomplish such a thing in any case.) The security of Britain, persistent control of potential threats

FIGURE 2
Measures of Affinity of 20 Sample Countries



Variables in Index
(by degree of weighting)

- Regime type (Freedom House rating)
- Bilateral history (positive/negative)
- National policies on shared values
- Public opinion
- Political culture ties
- Popular culture ties
- Language ties, trends

Essential Findings

- Most countries are full democracies (the leading indicator of affinity).
- Several have histories of war or conflict with China and strong historical ties with the United States.
- Public opinion on affinity favors the United States and is growing.
- U.S. popular culture and the English language still dominate Chinese alternatives.
- Some Asian countries have overlapping elements of political culture with China.

SOURCES: Reprinted from Mazarr, Frederick, et al., 2021, Figure 5.1, p. 54. Also see Freedom House, "Countries and Territories," webpage, undated.

NOTE: See Mazarr, Frederick, et al., 2021, for information about the public opinion sources, unpublished RAND field research, and other sources on cultural and language ties that the authors used to create this figure.

to the homeland (for example through domination of the seas), maintenance of a constant balancing coalition to prevent French domination of all of Europe, and a handful of other factors could add up to success. In the Cold War, on the other hand, some significant mellowing of the Soviet system, if not its outright collapse, was probably an essential aspect of any outcome that could be viewed as a true success for the United States.

The historical record demonstrates that great powers can lose many battles in a long-term rivalry, and even some wars, and still prevail in a larger bilateral competition. Rome failed on many specific battlefields on the way to becoming the Western world's dominant hegemon for more than five centuries and suffered multiple invasions and occupations of the city itself before the final eviction of the last emperor in 476 AD. Britain lost its share of naval battles and, of course, failed in its campaign to maintain control over its North American colonies. Yet it went on to reach the apogee of its power a century later. The United States suffered its most profound loss in any war—in Vietnam—just 15 years before it achieved comprehensive victory in the Cold War. Success in an overall competition or rivalry, clearly, does not demand success in every battle, war, or subordinate contest.

A fourth defining question seeks to describe the *degree of intensity in the rivalry*. This aspect would assess how extreme and zero-sum the rivalry is, as measured by such indicators as a history of violent conflict, the level of publicly expressed mutual resentment, the degree of hostile nationalism on one or both sides, the exacerbating effect of war-prone domestic interest groups, the number of incompatible interests and claims, and other variables. A bilateral rivalry might be said to count as high intensity when both

sides believe that they cannot fulfill their vital interests or essential objectives without undermining the other and when both sides are willing to take elaborate and potentially violent actions to do so.

Some bilateral competitions are limited in their zero-sum intensity. A classic example is the contest between Britain and the United States, which produced two wars but, by the late 19th century, had settled into an emerging mutual respect and growing sense that the two had many common interests. Some European rivalries from the classic era of great power politics, such as those between Russia and Austria-Hungary or France and Prussia or Germany, were extremely intense at some moments and faded into a much less hostile competition at others. Some broader competitions, such as a vibrant economic contest, can even be productive, pushing each contestant to develop stronger economic policies and fundamentals and ultimately generating better improvement for all.

The U.S.-China rivalry, while becoming more forceful since about 2010, is still not as intense as the heights of the Cold War. Heath surveyed major variables governing the intensity of rivalries and found most of them to be moderate rather than severe, with some even in the weak category. He concludes, “An assessment of the relevant indicators suggests the U.S.-China relationship remains at a ‘medium’ level of intensity, which suggests a worrying, but overall moderate risk of crisis.”⁵⁷

A fifth and final characteristic asks *how stable the competition or rivalry is*, according to objective factors that determine stability. A stable competition is one in which rivals rarely if ever go to war or march to the brink of war, even though they may perceive themselves to be in a bitter competition and seek to undermine each other's power on

a persistent basis. This factor overlaps to a degree with the issue of intensity, but it is not the same: A rivalry can be intense yet remain stable, with a tendency to recover from crises and not escalate to the brink of war.

A recent RAND report developed a framework for understanding the stability of a rivalry and applied it to the current U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia relationships.⁵⁸ The authors characterized a stable competition by two dominant realities: Contestants share some vision of a mutually acceptable status quo, and the rivalry tends to recovery from crises and disputes to a stable equilibrium. As Figure 3 shows, the report defined many key inputs to such stable outcomes, variables that tend to determine when a competition will be stable or unstable. The report concluded, even before the recent war in Ukraine, that both U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China rivalries had become highly unstable.

U.S. Goals and Objectives

As noted, one of the most critical defining characteristics of any rivalry or competition relates to the objectives of the competitors. The next section describes Russian and Chinese goals and strategies. All too often, American assessments of strategic competition sidestep issues of goals or end states and rush immediately to recommending ways of competing. Yet if the United States starts down such a path, it ought to know where it is headed—how it defines success and what acceptable end states look like.

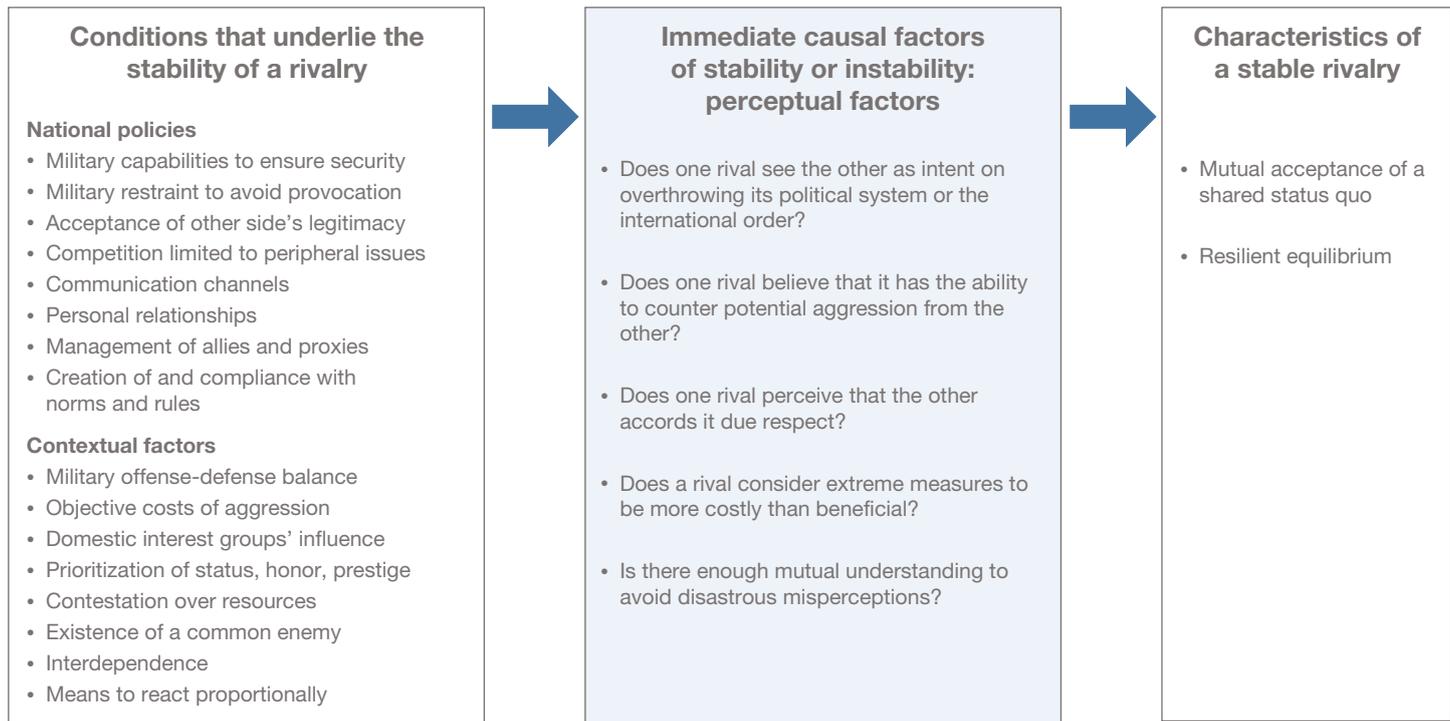
Most official strategy documents are of limited help. National security strategies and similar statements tend to offer vague and generic lists of qualities or values the United States seeks but not a specific sense of how the

rivalry itself is meant to play out. In the current cases, for example, what does success look like regarding China? Does success demand an end to Chinese Communist Party rule? Is it dependent on keeping China from gaining control over Taiwan? Or can the United States succeed in broader social and geopolitical ways? More often, such questions are left unanswered or assumed as a negative quality—if the United States prevents certain Chinese actions, it “succeeds.”

Even the terminology of this question can be problematic. *Victory* and similar words probably have a limited place in a long-term rivalry. Even the Cold War, which ended with the collapse of the U.S. rival, inaugurated a continuing rivalry with Russia. The United States “won” the Cold War in one discrete sense but did not achieve permanent victory in the same way as it did in World War II. Even if these are not truly infinite contests, speaking of an *end state* does not make sense when these rivalries may persist for decades if not centuries. Moreover, some critical U.S. goals—to nurture the sources of domestic economic dynamism, for example—are indispensable foundations for competing effectively but are more properly viewed as general national objectives independent of any rivalry.

The issue of U.S. goals and objectives and favored end states in the strategic competition will remain an ongoing source of debate—and rightly so, because those understandings must adapt in the face of Chinese and Russian policies. Nonetheless, a review of U.S. national security strategies and related documents suggests a four-part conception of success. In these rivalries, a future that would constitute success for the United States would consist of

FIGURE 3
Elements of Stability in Strategic Rivalries



SOURCE: Reprinted from Mazarr, Charap, et al., 2021, Figure S.1, p. xi.

1. safeguarding the security of the U.S. homeland, including political institutions and information environment
2. sustaining technological and economic advantages and strengths sufficient to ensure that one or more major rivals does not come to dominate the 21st-century information economy
3. preserving a global system and regional orders representing free sovereign choice and a lack of hegemonic and coercive influence by U.S. rivals
4. arriving at a sustainable balance of competition and cooperation with U.S. rivals, including major elements of an agreed and shared status quo and important sources of equilibrium in the relationships.

But the larger question of how the United States conceptualizes success goes beyond any list of individual goals. Its vision for these rivalries must nest within broader theories of the evolution of world politics, the nature of the rule-based order, beliefs about globalization and trade, and other issues. In other words, the U.S. theory of success in these rivalries must be a subset of its grand strategy—its theory for providing security for itself. The absence of anything like a grand strategy for some time makes it more difficult to decide on the meaning of these rivalries for U.S. interests, as well as the definition of what success would look like.

These questions go to the heart of U.S. foreign and national security policy. Today, for example, intensifying debates are underway between proponents of continued U.S. global predominance (or *overmatch*) and those who advocate a far more restrained global posture involving significant degrees of retrenchment. These divergent perspectives would define success in the rivalries in very different ways. Advocates of retrenchment, for example, might be happy with outcomes focused on preventing direct aggression against the American homeland. Advocates of U.S. global engagement demand more-stringent criteria for success, including preventing rival manipulation of their neighbors.

An overlapping debate deals with the nature of U.S. international reputation and credibility and the degree to which failing to defend against specific forms of aggression will trigger a cascade of doubts in American power and aggression by Russia, China, and others emboldened by their seeming success. As one author has argued, “Ukraine and Taiwan both show how easily U.S. weakness—or even the mere perception of weakness—could unravel the strained networks and alliances that support the American world order and usher in a new era of global conflict and instability.”⁵⁹ Others disagree, suggesting that extensive scholarship undermines the argument that a loss in one dispute or place will have cascading implications for credibility. U.S. decisions in these rivalries will be partly governed by such considerations, even independent of the unique stakes in particular clashes.

The United States will also need to decide on the precise role of human rights in its foreign policy and what it is willing to do to promote them. It has fallen into rather ambitious post-Cold War habits of sometimes-forcible democracy promotion and protection of human rights, habits that may be misaligned to a world in which more-powerful U.S. rivals are willing to disrupt such pursuits. A United States willing to promote rights in more voluntary and limited ways—providing assistance to democracies

The United States will also need to decide on the precise role of human rights in its foreign policy and what it is willing to do to promote them.

in transition rather than heaping sanctions and threats of military action on violators, for example—would have a somewhat different conception of success in these rivalries.

Partly informed by these debates, the United States could seek to achieve the four basic goals listed above in different ways, under different theories of success. Three of the four, in fact, do not require much confrontation at all: safeguarding the security of the homeland, sustaining domestic social and technological strength, and preserving the ability to cooperate with rivals where necessary. Much depends on what the United States understands by its concepts of free sovereign choice (reflected in such stated goals as “a free and open Indo-Pacific”⁶⁰) and just how absolute that goal must be. It could be conceptualized in limited or ambitious ways, and the U.S. view of success or failure in the rivalries would shift as a result.

Deciding on the character of success in these rivalries will therefore depend on the resolution of larger strategic debates in the United States. Perhaps surprisingly, it is more challenging, at this point, to identify clear U.S. objectives in these rivalries than it is to lay out Chinese and Russian concepts of success. Each of those regimes now has a reasonably well-formulated vision of world politics, the nature of its rivalry with the United States, and what it wants to see changed in the current system.

Chinese and Russian Perspectives on the Rivalries

Speaking about competition in generic terms will therefore provide only a limited perspective on any specific bilateral rivalry. To get more fidelity, the United States needs to consider the specific goals, interests, and strategies of

its current rivals and understand the way in which they conceptualize the rivalries. Extensive work by RAND and other institutions has examined this question regarding China and Russia.

Both U.S. rivals view the competition as part of a long-term, persistent clash that has many of the characteristics of a conflict. Both take seriously the threshold of true large-scale warfare, recognizing its risks and hoping to achieve their goals short of that threshold. But both conceive themselves to be in an extended contest with the United States that is something other than true stable peace.⁶¹ Recent notions of competition or rivalry are thus, for China and Russia, nothing more than a description of the baseline condition of world politics under the shadow of dominant U.S. power. Such perceptions have intensified in recent years—providing, for example, some of the background for Russia’s security fears, bordering on paranoia, which led it to the tragic decision to invade Ukraine.

Chinese Views of Competition

In describing China’s starting point for conceptualizing competition, RAND researchers Timothy Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark argued:

Chinese officials, scholars, and commentators generally agree that competition with the United States has become unavoidable owing to broad structural trends, particularly changes in the distribution of global power and the evolving structure of China’s economy. Beijing’s pursuit of regional primacy and global leadership also appears to be driven by the conviction that U.S. leadership threatens Chinese interests, that it is increasingly ineffective, and that

it unfairly privileges the United States and the West over the needs of the rising non-West.⁶²

The researcher and government official Abraham Denmark describes China's basic ideas about competition in similar terms. The existence of such a contest is to be expected, many Chinese writings suggest, for fundamental reasons:

The question “how does China think about competition with the United States” therefore involves a critical assumption: that China's leaders think about competition as a strategic option that they could either accept or reject. However, this is an erroneous assumption, as China's leaders operate within a set of deeply-rooted, persistent, and consistent set of assumptions about the strategic environment that leads China's leaders to see competition as an essential, inevitable aspect of the nature of international politics itself.⁶³

Chinese writings on the subject do not assume that this rivalry must end in conflict. China seeks to achieve its objectives, if possible, through operations short of war.⁶⁴ Denmark describes the “the acme of China's approach to foreign policy” as the idea that, although “Beijing is increasingly comfortable with the use of coercion and military threats to achieve its ends (deterrence), it would much rather build relationships that encourage countries to naturally and willingly oblige the interests of the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] (deference).”⁶⁵ Heath, Grossman, and Clark point out that most writings on Chinese strategy and doctrine, while accepting the inevitability of intensified interstate disputes, do not contend that war is inevitable—if China handles its rising power cleverly and, as some docu-

ments and officials argue, if the United States properly accepts its emerging subordinate position.⁶⁶

That still begs the question of what happens if China's goals prove unachievable short of war—if the United States will not accept a subordinate position or even an emerging parity, and if the United States and others will not accede to Chinese-claimed core interests on such issues as Taiwan. China's preference to realize its goals through peaceful means is no guarantee that war will not occur. It is when some of those goals, most especially control of Taiwan, cannot be realized through peaceful means that the true test of China's risk tolerance will emerge. (This is precisely the dynamic underway with Russia and Ukraine as of this writing in early 2022. Russia's security-related risk tolerance appears to have become dangerously high.)

Nonetheless, partly because China does seem intent on avoiding war at least for now, RAND assessments of Chinese treatments of competition note that many Chinese sources place economic and diplomatic competition at the top of the pyramid.⁶⁷ It is by reshaping the economic context in Eurasia, Africa, and the Middle East around trade and investment from China that Beijing hopes to solidify its strategic position. This primarily economic muscle will be backed up by diplomatic engagements that are based on a fundamentally hierarchical conception of world politics in which other states must accept their subordinate position to China. Military power backs all these moves, but most assessments of China's approach contend that the country would prefer to leave actual aggression as a last resort.

China has therefore evolved a robust suite of measures short of war—or competition-phase or gray-zone activities. Through these tools, Beijing seeks to achieve

China has significant peacetime military plans to expand the regional dominance of its own military and achieve some degree of global military engagement and reach—although how much remains subject to debate.

specific peacetime objectives, as well as to set the theater for conflict if it were to occur, in part by influencing the health of U.S. partnerships and alliances and constraining U.S. peacetime access. The importance of this gray-zone phase of competition is beginning to be enshrined in U.S. joint concepts and doctrine.⁶⁸ The Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning argues that “the Joint Force must be ready to counter or defeat the efforts of hostile actors seeking to undermine our interests without triggering an overt conflict.”⁶⁹ There is no question that China has significant peacetime military plans to expand the regional dominance of its own military and achieve some degree of global military engagement and reach—although how much remains subject to debate.

Beijing’s willingness to engage in more-direct military adventurism is constrained by its desire to exercise lawful, respected power at the apex of world politics. China’s classic conception of itself is as an inherently *legitimate* global leader, one that wins deference in part through overwhelming levels of power relative to smaller states but also by winning respect and even admiration.⁷⁰ In this sense, China’s use of seemingly abstract and propagandistic phrases, such as *new type of international relations* and

win-win cooperation, represents more than just public relations. Deeply embedded in China’s strategic discourse and self-conception is the idea that the world system it seeks to create is just and legitimate—at least in its own eyes.⁷¹ This has not kept Beijing from increasingly pugnacious threats but may continue to impose constraint on the degree of aggressive military action that Beijing views as appropriate.

Much of the debate about the character of China’s goals in the rivalry centers on one overarching question: Just how completely is Beijing seeking to rule regional or global affairs? Will it be satisfied, for example, with anything short of complete sovereign control of the whole South China Sea? What level of military predominance does it require? As with most rising powers, it is very probably true that there are no definitive answers to these questions. Different Chinese officials and scholars surely have different views on such questions, and the country’s final answer to the scope of its goals is yet to be determined.

One recent RAND assessment of Chinese-language sources looked for evidence of specific goals and objectives in Chinese strategy. The authors explain that they found several consistent goals in Chinese strategy and expert discussions:

China's standard for successful competition with the United States thus entails the following conditions by midcentury: (1) War with the United States is avoided, although this does not exclude the possibility of militarized crises or conflicts of a limited scope (e.g., proxy wars); (2) the United States respects China's authority as the global leader, even as the United States remains a powerful, but clearly inferior, nation; (3) the United States largely refrains from harming Chinese interests; (4) China has established primacy across much of Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, principally through patronage of client states; (5) U.S. primacy has been reduced to the Americas, although it may still maintain a military, economic, and diplomatic presence worldwide; (6) the United States and China manage their differences according to norms upheld by China; and (7) the two cooperate on shared concerns on terms defined largely by the Chinese.⁷²

These broad concepts still leave much room for interpretation, and other U.S. experts continue to debate the likely extent of China's competition goals.

In another recent study, Nadège Rolland offered a wide-ranging assessment of these goals. She stresses repeatedly that much is left to be settled: "Less obvious is exactly how Beijing proposes to . . . make the world order more fair and reasonable. The closer one gets to the inklings of an affirmative vision, the more elliptical and deceptive the discourse becomes."⁷³ The CCP's ambitions are elaborate and include such notions as "re-ascendance to the top of the pyramid of world power" and a "an eagerness to assert the CCP's unchallenged power." It aims to reset the global discourse on key norms and values away from what it perceives as Western-dominated ideas and to gain an

increasingly dominant voice in international processes and institutions.

But what these mean in practice, as Rolland explains, is only now starting to take shape and remains, as yet, rather unformed. Beyond its calls for a reform of the current system in a fairer and more reasonable direction, the Chinese leadership has not yet openly expressed a positive vision of what it wants the world to look like, nor has it publicly offered a clear set of ideas to support such a vision.

Even the concept of *tianxia*, often taken as a reference to historical Chinese concepts of hegemonic rule over vassal states, has been defined in many ways and could embrace a range of possible outcomes.⁷⁴ Just how much power China seeks, what level of shifted global normative order it would live with, remains uncertain. Rolland ends up suggesting that China seeks a "partial, loose, and malleable hegemony":

The new international order that the Chinese political elites seem to have in mind may be defined as a partial, loose, and malleable hegemony. It is partial because the vision seems to imply the existence of a sphere of influence, as opposed to an ambition to "rule the world." Left unclear is the size and extent of the sphere of influence on which China would exert its power. This order is loose because the vision does not seem to imply direct or absolute control over foreign territories or governments. And it is malleable because the countries included under China's hegemony do not seem to be strictly defined along geographic, cultural, or ideological lines. Immediate neighbors and far-flung countries, Asian and non-Asian powers, and democracies and autocracies

cies could all be included, as long as they recognize and respect the primacy of Beijing's authority and interests.⁷⁵

Just what that means in practice, of course—just how partial, loose, and malleable Beijing is ultimately willing to be, and what limits it will accept on its regional predominance—will emerge only over time, under a complex set of influences.

As assessments by Rolland and others make clear, moreover, China's stated worldview contains some evident contradictions that are already generating a significant gap between its rhetoric and behavior. Its vision for world politics embodies a future of true sovereign equality in which all states have a voice and can shape their own future—and yet, somehow at the same time, a future in which other countries recognize China's position atop the hierarchy and accede to its wishes. China's vision claims an equality of cultural models and asserts China's cultural preeminence. It insists that China's historical and developmental paths are unique and not subject to Western archetypes—but also that they should serve as a model for other developing nations. And perhaps of most relevance to the ongoing rivalry, China outlines a plan for the peaceful pursuit of its objectives (and a desire to fashion a “community with a shared future for humankind,” a phrase frequently used by the CCP), while at the same time demonstrating a growing willingness to use force to impose its very parochial and sometimes repressive demands.

Even amid such debates, there are areas of agreement on the nature—and potential limits—of China's goals. There is little evidence that it seeks territorial expansion beyond those few specific sovereign claims it has already made. For now at least, even the most-urgent warnings

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about Chinese intentions do not speak of fleets sailing to invade the Philippines or a total war against Japan. Beijing has no global agenda for overturning dozens of governments and replacing them with ones modeled after China's. Beijing is generally happy to work with any regime type or political party if it assents to Chinese demands. (It may still seek to shape political outcomes in countries that it perceives to be violating its interests.)

Nor is it clear whether Beijing hopes to acquire a global military architecture on anything like the current U.S. model. For the time being, although China is certainly interested in modest additions to its worldwide military footprint, it does not appear to seek to replicate anything like an American version of global military posture and power—an ambition that would not be feasible in any case due to the resource requirements, basing access, and alliances required to establish such a thing. Most evidence today, moreover, suggests that Chinese leaders and national security experts understand that war with the United States

would be an immensely costly enterprise with uncertain outcomes for the CCP and do not wish to court such a war if they can possibly avoid it.⁷⁶

In sum, then, China is approaching the current competition or rivalry from the standpoint of a country that sees itself either as *the* rightful dominant power in the world or as one of a small handful of dominant powers. China is determined to reclaim a role and voice in the international system appropriate to its degree of power and, in the view of many Chinese officials and scholars, the inherent superiority of Chinese society and culture. In the process, China is set for an ongoing contest for regional and global supremacy with the United States, a competition that is baked into the current structure of world politics. Yet there are limits to China's ambitions in this competition, and at least for the time being China does not approach the level of militaristic revisionism as several 20th-century major powers.

Russian Views of Competition

Russia's understanding of its rivalry with the United States is even more conditioned by powerful constraints. Russia's situation does not allow it to have China's ambitions for becoming the world's leading power. Russia's economic and technological limitations, demographic challenges, financial constraints, and other issues dictate more-modest aspirations. But Moscow is determined to be recognized as one of the leading powers in a more multilateral (or, as Russian documents put it, *plurilateral*) world, to express its power globally,⁷⁷ to gain higher degrees of control over developments on its periphery, and to regain authority as the unquestioned hegemon on its own periphery. These objectives, building on essential goals of regime survival and territorial security, have shaped Russian strategies and goals in its rivalry with the United States. They have been expressed in violent form in the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

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as knitted into the very structure of world politics and specifically the implications of the hangover of U.S. hegemony. One recent RAND survey of Russia's grand strategy explained that, from the Russian perspective, "Lacking a strategic competitor after the end of the Cold War . . . the United States and its Western allies embarked on a quest toward universal liberal democracy through interference in the affairs of nation-states, using both military and non-military means."⁷⁸ Russia's current approach to the rivalry is in its own mind defensive—creating space for Russian interests and preferences within an American-dominated system, challenging and fracturing that system where possible. Shifting this dynamic will not be easy: As in the case with China, some Russian officials and experts already expected a transition to a more multipolar world to be dangerous even before the war in Ukraine.

For Russia, what is at stake in the rivalry is similar in some respects to what is at stake for China: the ability to safeguard Russia's interests and regime within an often hostile international system, in part by acquiring growing influence over its rules and norms. "The transition will be characterized by growing interstate tensions as competition between rising and declining powers increases. This competition will largely center on the question of how the key principles of the international system will be defined and by whom," according to a RAND report.⁷⁹ Beyond that broad objective in world politics, specific Russian goals in the rivalry include being recognized as a great power, exercising dominant influence in the post-Soviet Eurasian space, and enhancing its relationships with emerging powers in a more multipolar world.

Yet as that RAND report indicates, Russian officials and experts understand the limits to some of these objec-

tives. "It is also important to consider what Moscow's stated view of the future world is not," the report concludes. "Russia does not claim to seek to replace the United States as the sole superpower, nor do Russian strategic documents express a plan to recreate the Soviet Union; there are no mentions of imperialist ambitions or doctrinal directives for using military force to achieve dominance over neighbors." For example, "In a significant departure from Soviet-era documents, Russia's stated strategy today makes no mention of exporting the country's domestic model to other states."⁸⁰

Indeed, Russian documents and analysts often expressed a rhetorically idealistic vision of what a more multipolar world will mean, at least from their own perspective. "Russian stated strategy," the RAND report concludes,

envisions a future polycentric world characterized by predictability, cooperation, and stability and led by great powers. Under this new, more equitable, and mutually beneficial system, great powers will be the centers of gravity in their respective regions, red lines will be clearly delineated and understood, problems will be negotiated collectively as needed, and there will be no unilateral actions whereby one great power achieves its national security at the expense of another.⁸¹

Like China's more-romantic language about *win-win cooperation* and related concepts, this Russian rhetoric must be understood in part as an effort to shape global views of Russian power. For Russia, the implications of such friendly-sounding phrases include severely degrading NATO and reducing the elements of the U.S. military foot-

print in Europe close to Russia, as well as other actions the United States would perceive as hostile and dangerous.

Russia has developed many tools to pursue its objectives in the ongoing rivalry. A leading one is information operations, which has been a long-standing strategy and has taken new significance at a time when many Russian officials and experts believe that information narratives and systems constitute the fulcrum of major-power contests.⁸² This emphasis on information comes in part from the Russian notion of *reflexive control*, which is an ongoing effort to manipulate an opponent's view of the world to suit Russian goals.⁸³ Russia has also used security cooperation and proxy conflicts to advance its goals. Where necessary, as in Georgia and Ukraine (in 2014 and now 2022), Russia has actively intervened in neighboring countries to prevent what it saw as unacceptable outcomes.

Like China, Russia embraces the idea of a contest short of war waged with campaign-like efforts. As one RAND study concludes,

Russia's 2014 Military Doctrine reflected these beliefs about the changing nature of warfare, with particular emphasis on the blurring of the line between nonmilitary and military methods. Furthermore, according to the Doctrine, information (both as a tool and as a warfighting domain) is assuming greater prominence in modern conflicts and could be used to threaten Russian sovereignty and national interests. As the 2014 Doctrine noted, "there is a new tendency to shift military dangers and military threats into the information space and internal sphere of the Russian Federation."⁸⁴

Russian approaches to the rivalry with the United States thus have many similarities with China's, as well as

some differences. Russia clearly has more-modest global ambitions, in line with its potential power. But its willingness to take risks, and the directness of its challenge to existing norms, now appears to be significantly greater. This may be a product in part of Russia's degree of resentment at the current global context and its frustration at the trajectory of its power since the Cold War. The intensity of a competition varies with the degree of pride and anger at work in the contestants—and Russia certainly has become a bitterly aggrieved power.

Russia's astonishing use of force in Ukraine also opens the possibility that its essential perspective on the rivalry, and perhaps its ambitions, have changed in more-radical ways—that it is becoming a more classic militaristic revisionist, for example. That is certainly possible, although it is too early to tell. Russia's invasion of Ukraine reflects an extremely high-risk, violent act to advance interests that were already well established in the competition: control over the security context of its near abroad. It may be that the larger fundamentals of Russia's approach to the rivalry remain unchanged. Even if that is the case, the war contains perilous risks of escalation that could put the United States and NATO on a military collision course with Russia in ways that depart from the current character of the rivalry and pose new dangers of wider war. Such risks, again, reflect exactly the sort of dangers that tend to arise in strategic rivalries that include militarized disputes.

The Essential Character of the Emerging Rivalries

These assessments of China's and Russia's goals, strategies, and conceptions of their competitions with the United

States offer insights into the essential character of each of the two rivalries. There is a range of opinion on each of the main components of the rivalries, and this Perspective does not propose to resolve them or offer a single comprehensive vision of what the rivalries are essentially about. Table 1 summarizes some of the main contending views.

Whatever one concludes about those issues, the United States does appear to confront two long-term rivalries

with significant potential for instability. But in both cases, especially given that the competitions are centered on economic, technological, and global-order issues, the United States has at least two potent competitive advantages. One is its vibrant socioeconomic system, which generates significant growth, innovation, and creativity. The other is the international coalition of allies, friends, and others interested in sustaining key global norms and some version

TABLE 1
Essential Nature of U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia Rivalries: Contending Views

Issue-Defining Nature of the Rivalry	U.S.-China Rivalry	U.S.-Russia Rivalry
What is the rivalry most essentially about?	Most assessments agree that the rivalry is partly a struggle for position as paramount leader in world politics and economics, and thus about control over the international order. Some commentators see overall competition as being mostly about either ideology or technology.	Some observers view the rivalry to be more about prestige and recognition as a peer great power with an equal voice in world affairs than territorial threats. Others believe that Russia has larger ambitions to destabilize the West and gain a more predominant position.
What are the basic objectives of the contestants (in these cases, the U.S. rivals)?	Most assessments agree that China seeks recognition as the unquestioned leading power in the Asia-Pacific and a predominant economic-technological status at least in Eurasia. Assessments differ about the degree to which it seeks the ability to dictate norms and rules in hegemonic fashion and the ejection or weakening of U.S. military power from the region.	Russia seeks more-limited objectives than China—specifically, control over events in its near abroad, limits to U.S. and NATO regional military power, and recognition as a great power.
How is success defined?	Success for both includes avoiding a catastrophically destructive war, preserving their political systems, maintaining sufficient hegemony over their immediate regions, and reshaping the norms and institutions of the international order to favor their interests, goals, and power.	Success for the United States requires mitigating Russian hostile effects on Western democracies and avoiding war; for Russia it demands preservation of the regime and the security of Russian territory, as well as a degree of global influence, though how much remains disputed.
How intense is the rivalry?	RAND work and some other assessments suggest that the United States and China may have few interests that are both vital and irreconcilable and that key indicators of intensity remain moderate rather than severe. However, China’s determination to achieve several specific goals, and the U.S. commitment to resist that path, is lending the rivalry an ever-increasing intensity.	The rivalry had become rhetorically very intense and involves mutual threats to domestic political security, which is a highly sensitive issue. Bitter resentment of the West in Russia, worsening mutual images of hostility, in particular among some influential senior Russian officials, and now the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine have generated a dangerous level of intensity.

of a rule-based order. Neither China nor Russia has meaningful allies, whereas the United States sits at the hub of a dominant global coalition. The more Beijing and Moscow push against this, the more opposition they generate. The United States can use this dynamic as the foundation for its responses to Chinese and Russian ambitions.

It would be wrong to suggest that these rivalries make world politics into a tripolar competition. There are other prominent actors on the field, some with vastly more economic heft than Russia, whose goals and objectives will play a critical role in shaping the international environment. The European Union, which collectively has a significantly higher gross domestic product (GDP) than China and more than ten times that of Russia; Japan, the world's second-largest economy (in real terms); and India, projected to be one of the three dominant world economies by 2050, are just three examples. Figure 4 offers a snapshot of current global power alignments in the U.S.-China rivalry. The overall picture remains highly favorable for the United States, even as China's defense buildup has shifted some elements of localized military balances. This assessment, moreover, was made before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which has sparked increased defense and security efforts by European nations and linked the United States even more tightly to many other countries.

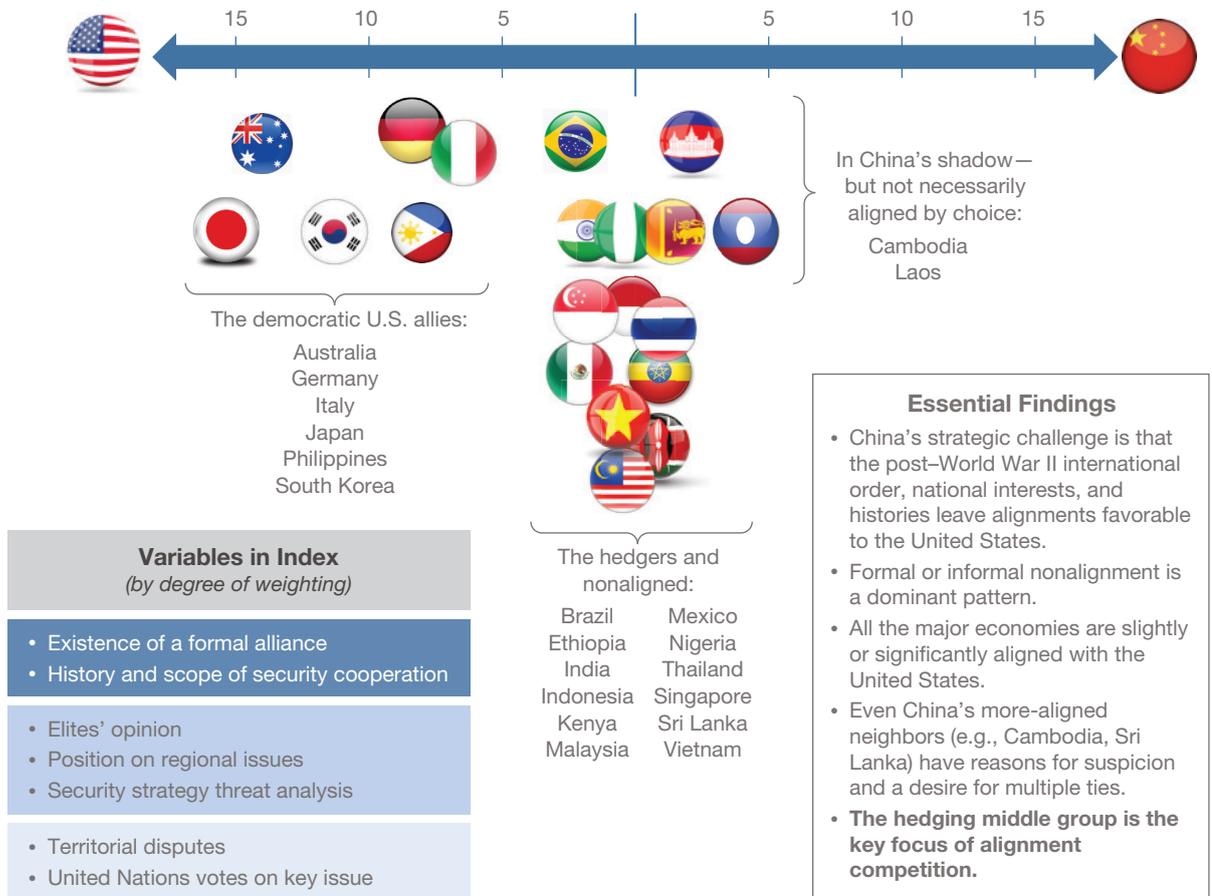
The U.S. competitions with China and Russia do not exist in a vacuum. They are unfolding in the shadow of a larger international community whose interests, goals, and values are vastly more aligned with the United States than with either of its rivals. That fact must shape U.S. strategy and could provide decisive in shaping long-run outcomes in world politics.

One of the most critical unresolved questions is the precise ways in which the objectives of the three contestants interact with one another over time. Compared with the U.S.-Soviet standoff in the Cold War, the United States arguably has fewer irresolvable conflicts with either China or Russia. Most of the more-explosive disagreements stem from areas near China or Russia where the United States seeks to assert the primacy of international norms of conduct over Beijing's and Moscow's self-interested wishes. As U.S. foreign policy objectives evolve, those points of dispute could intensify, or they could ebb. There is some uncertainty, therefore, in the likely degree of intensity, and specific issues of contestation, in these rivalries.

Defining America's Competitive Challenge and the Role of the Department of Defense

Much of the work RAND has published over the last several years suggests that the outcome of any major rivalry will be determined by two fundamental factors. One is the domestic dynamism and vitality of the competitors, as well as the degree to which their societies become engines of competitive advantage, including economic and technological vitality. In most large-scale rivalries—and certainly in the Cold War—the ultimate story of success and failure has more to do with a contest of societies than a long series of individual clashes. “Competition is a test of systems as much as statecraft,” Brands concludes. “It is a measure of whose political, social, and economic model can best generate and employ power.” In such contests, “the cardinal sin

FIGURE 4
The Current Status of Geopolitical Alignments



SOURCE: Reprinted from Mazarr, Frederick, et al., 2021, Figure 9.1, p. 126.

is to pursue policies—foreign or domestic—that undermine a nation’s vitality.”⁸⁵

The other most decisive factor in a rivalry is maintaining a favorable international balance of power and alignment. Nations that can shape the surrounding geopolitical context, and indeed the larger socioeconomic environment, to their benefit gain tremendous competitive advantage. This can be true in terms of formal alliances, international economic networks and institutions, prevailing norms, and many other aspects of the context.

The U.S. success in the Cold War can be largely traced to prevailing in these two fundamental areas. The United States and its democratic allies had much more dynamic societies and economies than the Soviet Union, and Washington created a world whose institutions, geopolitical alignments, and norms tilted heavily in the U.S. direction. Success in the current rivalries is likely to depend very highly on these same factors. The United States today remains in a reasonably good position in both of these areas, although it confronts many serious domestic challenges that are already undercutting its competitive position.

Safeguarding national interests in an international rivalry, especially but not solely if it escalates to major war, also demands the maintenance of a potential military capable of achieving the goals a nation sets for it. U.S. military power is a major element of the global balance of power, and that in turn shapes the context for major rivalries. The leading DoD role in the rivalry is therefore to sustain credible American military power that can achieve the objectives set for it by national strategies.

It is worth stressing, however, that the nature of those goals—and the requirements the U.S. military must meet—are likely to evolve. These issues are the focus of current debates over U.S. foreign policy and grand strategy: Just what must the nation be prepared to fight for? What roles and missions must the U.S. military be designed to perform? U.S. defense requirements in these rivalries cannot be discovered in the abstract. They exist only in relation to specific commitments, strategies, and concepts. Answering those questions in ways that safeguard essential U.S. interests, including the stability of the international system, without overextending American power may be one of the central challenges for U.S. strategy today.

U.S. military power is a major element of the global balance of power, and that shapes the context for major rivalries. The leading DoD role in the rivalry is therefore to sustain credible American military power.

Russia's attack on Ukraine has placed these questions into a new and dangerous context. On the one hand, Russia's unjustified aggression has highlighted the risks of some of the more ambitious goals reflected in U.S. conceptions of the competition. The aggression could have implications for the defense requirements of the competition, but it is too early to tell. Given the damage to the Russian military occurring in this war, the potential medium-term costs of remaining in Ukraine, the depleted stocks of Russian of precision weapons, and the rising defense efforts of U.S. European allies, U.S. military requirements in Europe might not escalate significantly. The world, and especially Europe, has been awakened to the seriousness of the Russian challenge. This is not simply a bilateral rivalry, if it ever was: It is now a global response to Russian aggression.

RAND work on these rivalries highlights another conclusion: The struggle below the threshold of armed conflict, always important in rivalries, is especially critical today. These most general sources of competitive advantage short of war tend to emphasize economic, social, and diplomatic instruments of power. Some have suggested that, as a result, this wider competition is no business of DoD. DoD builds forces to fight and win wars, the argument goes. It should leave contests short of war to the departments of government that are responsible for the economic, diplomatic, and informational aspects of that contest. Competition is for others; DoD is about warfighting.

There is a degree of truth to this claim. Some descriptions of DoD's roles in U.S. strategic challenges seem to assume that it will become the catchall for any activities short of war: competing to set influential narratives, engaging in cybersecurity and conflict, conducting military diplomacy, and much else. Partly these arguments stem

from a stark lesson of the past 20 years, during the counterinsurgency campaigns that formed a major focus of U.S. defense policy since September 11, when military forces looked to other parts of the government to provide critical functions in the war on terror and counterinsurgency only to find that the "whole of government" often could not or would not respond. But especially when U.S. military capabilities are being challenged as never before by rising Russian and Chinese technology and forces, spreading DoD across military and nonmilitary challenges will dilute its effectiveness at all of them.

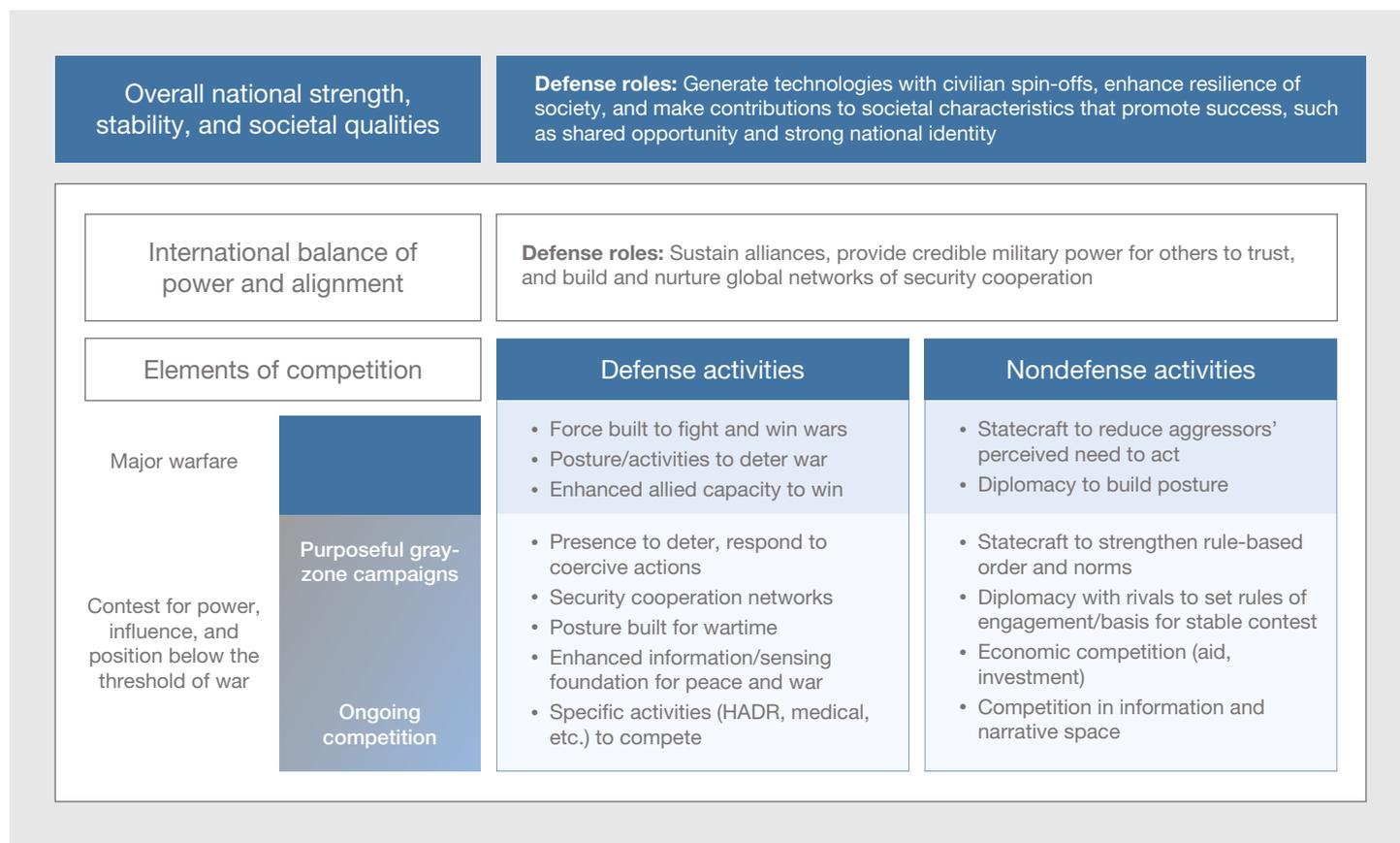
And yet the preceding discussion hopefully indicates that DoD must be concerned about many aspects of this contest short of war. In part this is true because U.S. rivals are seeking—in a paraphrase of two oft-quoted ideas from Sun Tzu—to win without fighting and to set the conditions for victory in any future war before it ever begins. To lose the competition short of war, then, is almost by definition to lose the next war before the first shot has been fired. In part it is true because, in some areas, such as security cooperation, arms transfers, and even humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) operations, military capabilities have an unavoidable role to play.

It is simply too narrow a conception of U.S. defense roles and mission to conclude that DoD exists to fight and win wars and that it ought to leave other elements of the broader rivalry to others. The history of such rivalries and many aspects of the current U.S. contests with China and Russia highlight the fact that there is a spectrum of issues, in peace, crisis, and war, and DoD has an important role in each of those contexts. This is not to say that DoD should take over primary responsibility for a nonmilitary issue, such as the competition in narratives, the contest for eco-

conomic influence, or even cybersecurity writ large. But it does suggest that DoD and military services should identify those specific areas of the peacetime competition to which they can make important contributions and that are especially relevant to laying the groundwork for effective warfighting.

Figure 5 attempts to summarize core DoD roles in a strategic rivalry. These include efforts to fight and win wars, efforts that have indirect effects on many other aspects of the competitions. But they also include many roles, missions, activities, and capabilities for the day-to-day struggle short of war.

FIGURE 5
Evaluating a Strategic Rivalry: Main Components



Such roles are critical in part because of the approach U.S. rivals are taking to these contests. One example of winning without fighting relates to China's pursuit of regional hegemony in economic and geopolitical terms. It is pursuing this through a variety of means, including economic predominance and eventual regional military superiority. Whatever impressive military capabilities the United States had built would turn out to be irrelevant: Regional states would gradually disconnect from U.S. alliances, partnerships, and cooperative arrangements as dictated by Beijing, without a shot having been fired. U.S. defense assets have a role to play in preventing this outcome—through continuous military cooperation and engagement activities, for example, which signal to regional partners that the United States is there to stay.

Beyond achieving their goals short of war, Russia and China are also using peacetime activities to set the conditions for succeeding in a war if one does happen. They are doing this by creating vulnerabilities and dependencies among U.S. partners, for example, which would keep them from participating in a conflict in support of the United States. Russia and China are enhancing their posture in areas ranging from the Black Sea to the South China Sea. Perhaps most dangerously, they are setting the conditions for effective cyberattacks to cripple U.S. military operations in the event of conflict. If the United States does not compete effectively in key areas of the contest short of war—fighting for the alignment of major powers, for example, and access and support from many partners—it will simply not be able to prevail, at least in a major conflict in the Asia-Pacific region.⁸⁶

Then, too, there are many important elements of the contest short of war that are taking place in explicitly

military lanes. Russia and China use arms transfers and military engagement and training missions to win influence and create dependencies in target nations. They bring foreign students to their professional military education institutions and provide direct military support to proxies in conflict around the world.

The contest short of war is therefore of critical interest to DoD. Table 2 summarizes a few of the major stakes that the defense enterprise has in this competition. Although much of China's influence-seeking will take place in the economic realm, the outcome of many competition-phase clashes will carry important implications for U.S. military objectives in peace and war.

As Table 2 suggests, there are critical roles in peacetime competition for military services doing what they have always done. This includes training and advising, exercises, senior-leader engagements, humanitarian response and medical aid missions, and other missions. This analysis therefore points to a very specific, critical, but limited role for DoD in the contest short of war that is a part of the larger rivalries with Russia and China.

The war in Ukraine has, if anything, underlined the importance of DoD's role in competitive activities short of war. It was precisely these efforts—in terms of security assistance, train and advise missions, Foreign Military Sales and military aid deliveries, and cooperative efforts in such areas as cyber and defense institution building—that improved Ukraine's ability to resist Russian aggression. In cases like this, in which the United States will not be willing or able to undertake a direct military role in countries threatened by Russian or Chinese coercion or aggression, peacetime support and cooperation will be the leading defense tool to deter and respond to attacks.

TABLE 2

Department of Defense Stakes in the Competition Below the Threshold of Conflict

Examples of U.S. DoD Roles and Missions	U.S. and Rivals' Goals and Objectives	Examples of Rival's Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sustain and improve access • Improve posture, especially facilities and sustainment basis, for wartime • Build relationships and knowledge of the context • Preposition equipment and supplies 	Set the conditions for successful warfighting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhance basing and access agreements • Conduct ongoing activities that establish de facto control of militarily critical areas • Build relationships and knowledge of the context that will constrain U.S. wartime access and operations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transfer arms to enhance partner and ally capability • Train and advise and conduct exercises to improve proficiency • Take steps to improve interoperability to enhance capacity to fight together 	Enhance the deterrence and warfighting capabilities of partners and allies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent the United States and others from strengthening countries in the periphery of rivals • Take measures that undermine the military capability of U.S. partners and allies (e.g., cyberintrusions)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Solidify assurance and credibility of U.S. pledges to strengthen alliance and shape alignment • Avoid competitor inroads into partner military 	Shape alignment of critical countries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use arms transfers and military relations to weaken U.S. alliances and partnerships and develop partnerships • Maintain ongoing peacetime presence to intimidate and shape wartime calculations of key countries • Deploy troops to peacekeeping operations to gain local influence and global reputation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribute military capabilities and assistance to help friends win local conflicts • Signal support of partners to influence choice to reject rivals' coercive demands • Directly intervene to respond to coercion or harassment 	Achieve specific national objectives short of war	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use security cooperation, arms transfers, and other military engagements to help achieve economic or political goals • Influence the outcome of local conflicts through support of proxies • Acquire control of contested territories through ongoing gray-zone campaigns of presence and intimidation

What this suggests for the defense enterprise is not a radical overhaul aimed at prioritizing activities short of war. Most of the capabilities required for peacetime competition activities already exist in the services. Indeed, the most important shortcoming in the U.S. capacity to compete might not be in forces, systems, or resources. It may well lie in the lack of strategy, planning, and holistic coordination of the instruments of statecraft the United States

already possesses. The United States does not now possess an institutional capacity for organizing and implementing a campaign-like approach to a rivalry, from the gray zone or competition phase through planning for crises and war.

The results of these shortcomings are clear. Broad strategic concepts are developed within one department or agency and not shared among others. U.S. approaches to

specific countries end up being a hodgepodge of different strategies implemented by different offices.

Half a century ago, in a famous RAND report, the former head of the U.S. Civil Operations and Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) program in Vietnam, Robert Komer, interrogated the reasons for U.S. failure. A leading factor, he argued, was the absence of “any integrated conflict management to pull together all the disparate aspects of the GVN [Government of Vietnam]/US effort.” The United States and its ally conducted the war “with essentially a peacetime management structure—in largely separate bureaucratic compartments.” This failure “contributed to the proliferation of overlapping GVN and US programs—to the point where they competed excessively for scarce resources and even got in each other’s way.” At the core of the U.S. problem, Komer concluded, was that in terms of accountability, below the level of the President, “everybody and nobody was responsible for” the war.⁸⁷

Despite a doctrine and plan that presumed tight integration of military and civilian efforts in the pacification effort, Komer continued, Washington did not create “any specialized planning or operating agencies for counter-insurgency. Nor was there much overall coordinating or supervisory machinery for pulling together disparate programs within the U.S. government.” The U.S. government operated in classic bureaucratic stovepipes, “with little room for large scale activities that cut across traditional agency lines.”⁸⁸ This lack of coordinated planning also had the effect of aggravating a destructive over-militarization of the U.S. approach by leaving DoD as the only agency in the field that could plan and execute large-scale, integrated operational activities.

The United States can find strategic advantage precisely in such a holistic mindset—in using peacetime activities to shape potential wartime contexts decisively in its favor.

The lack of substantial interagency integrated planning mechanisms today risk having the same destructive effect on U.S. efforts to succeed in competition missions short of war. The United States has various engagement plans for specific countries, from embassy country-team strategies to security cooperation plans. But they are often not integrated or centrally coordinated. Other problems lie in how the services plan for the use of their capabilities: Allowing more flexibility and the application of boutique mission tasks, even for a small number of units, would help open the space for more-effective and more-tailored military roles.

Emerging rivalries with China and Russia will demand contributions from DoD across a wide spectrum of activities. These include preparing to fight and win wars. But

The United States must boldly seek competitive advantage but do so in ways that are often cautious, discriminate, and patient.

the activities also include critical roles and missions during peacetime. Indeed, the United States can find strategic advantage precisely in such a holistic mindset—in using peacetime activities to shape potential wartime contexts decisively in its favor. In the national security realm, that will be the essence of strategic acumen.

Yet a holistic approach does not imply unrestrained commitments. Strategic overreach—failing to set priorities and trying to do too much—is a clear recipe for failure in rivalries. Succeeding in rivalries is as much about what nations decide not to do, husbanding their resources for more critical tasks, as it is about the initiatives they undertake. Brands argues that the “essence of long-term competition” is “strategic choice. Countries must choose where to focus and where to economize; they must deftly apply limited means while forcing a competitor to squander its own.” Partly as a result, he argues, such competition “is often unsatisfying and indecisive by nature. It plays out over years, decades, generations. It rewards the incremental strengthening of position rather than the quest for quick, decisive triumph.”⁸⁹

One of the most pressing challenges for the United States in these rivalries, in fact, may be cultivating an

ability to make hard choices and exercise patience after decades of having the freedom to think in much more absolute and uncompromising terms. Successive U.S. administrations since the end of the Cold War have had the luxury of operating with a degree of primacy almost unique in the history of great power rivalry. That time is coming to an end. More-traditional imperatives of strategy and statecraft are becoming critical once again—prioritization, long-term thinking that places short-term demands into context, and an ability to compromise in ways that ultimately advance one’s goals.

Those requirements highlight an inherent tension in the U.S. approach to these rivalries. The United States must boldly seek competitive advantage but do so in ways that are often cautious, discriminate, and patient. U.S. Cold War strategy eventually reflected both sides of that equation, although often as much by happenstance as by design. The need for discrimination and prioritization may be an especially difficult habit to reacquire for a United States that has become accustomed to a remarkable degree of geopolitical primacy. But such a long-term, flexible, and patient mindset remains an essential component of the statecraft required to succeed in a prolonged rivalry.

Notes

¹ Long-standing confrontations with North Korea, Iran, and global extremist groups remain national security priorities but, because of the power imbalances involved, are not generally viewed as true competitions. Some go so far as to place Russia in the second group, describing it as a regional power harassing the United States and other democracies rather than a true peer competitor. Others consider Russia a true great power with the potential to engage in a global rivalry with the United States. For an example of the latter argument, see Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, “The Myth of Russian Decline,” *Foreign Affairs*, November–December 2021.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017; U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018.

³ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Guidance*, Washington, D.C.: White House, March 2021, p. 20.

⁴ Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Concept for Integrated Campaigning*, Washington, D.C., March 16, 2018; Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, *Competition Continuum*, Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, June 3, 2019.

⁵ “Military competition,” the Army concept paper explains, “encompasses the range of activities and operations employed to achieve political objectives and to deny adversaries the ability to achieve objectives prejudicial to the United States”; Headquarters, Department of the Army, *The Army in Military Competition*, Washington, D.C., U.S. Army Chief of Staff Paper #2, March 1, 2021, p. 1. Also see Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4, *Competing*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Marine Corps, December 14, 2020.

⁶ Critics immediately pounced on this semantic guidance, suggesting that it did not serve to clarify much of anything and that appending the term *strategic* did not add any useful meaning. See, for example, Cornell Overfield, “Biden’s ‘Strategic Competition’ Is a Step Back,” *Foreign Policy*, October 13, 2021.

⁷ Daniel Lippman, Lara Seligman, Alexander Ward, and Quint Forgy, “Biden’s Era of ‘Strategic Competition,’” *Politico*, October 5, 2021.

⁸ Joseph S. Nye, “When It Comes to China, Don’t Call It a ‘Cold War,’” *New York Times*, November 2, 2021. Hal Brands has usefully emphasized that “although the Cold War isn’t a precise match for today’s competitions, it isn’t such a bad one, either.” It was a global rivalry that

embodied issues of ideology and geopolitics; it was “a contest of systems and a test of strategy”; it demanded understanding the rival and mobilizing the government for the effort; it “forced hard choices about how to employ U.S. power.” In these and other ways, the Cold War does offer important analogies to the present moment. Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great Power Rivalry Today*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2022, p. 10.

⁹ Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018, p. 5. The scholar Hal Brands recently offered a similar approach, defining long-term competition as “an ongoing, open-ended contest for influence between great powers”; Brands, 2022, p. 4.

¹⁰ Becca Wasser and Stacie Pettyjohn, “Why the Pentagon Should Abandon ‘Strategic Competition,’” *Foreign Policy*, October 19, 2021. The current debate about competition as a form of advantage seeking short of war blurs this distinction somewhat, as we will see, but the classic use of the term in the literature on world politics merely described the nature of the context for international relations.

¹¹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard and Perter Paret, eds. and trans., Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1989.

¹² Mazarr et al., 2018, p. 3.

¹³ Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, brief edition, New York: McGraw Hill, 1993.

¹⁴ John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2001. The Marine Corps conceptual publication on competition begins with this same basic idea. It argues, “Nations and other political actors pursue their interests constantly and in a variety of ways. Competition results when the interests of one political group interact in some way with those of another group. These interactions take place in a dynamic environment. Each move an actor makes towards fulfilling an interest changes that ecosystem. Any interaction of interests changes the situation as well.” Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 1-4, 2020, pp. 1–3.

¹⁵ One recent essay defined *strategic competition* in such broad and encompassing terms, arguing that it prevails “when two actors in the international system have incompatible high-priority interests and one or both actors engage in behavior that will be detrimental to the other’s interests.” Daniel Burkhart and Alison Woody, “Strategic Competition: Beyond Peace and War,” *Joint Force Quarterly*, Vol. 86, No. 3, 2017.

¹⁶ Jonathan Renshon, *Fighting for Status: Hierarchy and Conflict in World Politics*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2017.

¹⁷ This was a prominent theme of a certain strand of “defensive” realist and institutionalist thinking—the idea that, even in an overall environment rife with competition and without an ultimate arbiter of disputes, states could still serve their own selfish interests by finding cooperative exceptions to the rule of competition. See, for example, Robert Jervis, “Cooperation Under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, Vol. 30, No. 2, 1978; Charles L. Glaser, *Rational Theory of International Politics: The Logic of Competition and Cooperation*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010.

¹⁸ A good recent example comes from the new U.S. strategy for the Indo-Pacific, which explained that the United States “will also seek to manage competition with the PRC [People’s Republic of China] responsibly. We will cooperate with our allies and partners while seeking to work with the PRC in areas like climate change and nonproliferation. We believe it is in the interests of the region and the wider world that no country withhold progress on existential transnational issues because of bilateral differences”; White House, *Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States*, Washington, D.C., February 2022, p. 5.

¹⁹ Michael J. Mazarr and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Testing the Value of the Postwar International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2226-OSD, 2018.

²⁰ Brands, 2022, p. 30.

²¹ Karen Rasler, William R. Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly, *How Rivalries End*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013, pp. 1–2.

²² Zeev Maoz and Ben D. Mor, *Bound by Struggle: The Strategic Evolution of Enduring International Rivalries*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002, p. 3. In fact, looking across all the thousands of individual dyadic links in the global system (individual bilateral relations between a pair of states), it turns out that less than 1 percent of them are responsible for more than 80 percent of the major wars during the last two centuries. Michael P. Colaresi, Karen Rasler, and William R. Thompson, *Strategic Rivalries in World Politics: Position, Space and Conflict Escalation*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008.

²³ Brandon Valeriano, “Becoming Rivals: The Process of Rivalry Development,” in John A. Vasquez, ed., *What Do We Know About War*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2012.

²⁴ Timothy R. Heath, “US-China Rivalry: Great Power Competition in the Post-Industrial Age,” in Lowell Dittmer, ed., *New Asian Disorder: Rivalries Embroiling the Pacific Century*, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2022, p. 142.

²⁵ Timothy R. Heath and William R. Thompson, “Avoiding U.S.–China Competition Is Futile: Why the Best Option Is to Manage Strategic Rivalry,” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 13, No. 2, April 2018, p. 99.

²⁶ Paul F. Diehl and Gary Goertz, *War and Peace in International Rivalry*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000, pp. 19–25; D. Scott Bennett, “Security, Bargaining, and the End of Interstate Rivalry,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 2, 1996. Also see D. Scott Bennett, “Integrating and Testing Models of Rivalry Duration,” *American Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 1998. Others have modified the term, referring to what they call *enduring* or *strategic* rivalries, but they generally had the same idea in mind—bilateral contests that constantly threaten to descend into military clashes; see Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson, 2008; Charles S. Gochman and Zeev Maoz, “ Militarized Interstate Disputes, 1816–1976: Procedures, Patterns, and Insights,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 1984; Paul F. Diehl, “Contiguity and Military Escalation in Major Power Rivalries, 1816–1980,” *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 47, No. 4, 1985.

²⁷ D. Scott Bennett, “Measuring Rivalry Termination, 1816–1992,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1997, pp. 227–254.

²⁸ Maoz and Mor, 2002.

²⁹ James P. Klein, Gary Goertz, and Paul F. Diehl, “The New Rivalry Dataset: Procedures and Patterns,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 43, No. 3, 2006.

³⁰ Bennett, 1996. Another source similarly points to four defining characteristics of a rivalry: two states that have fought repeatedly, who cannot fundamentally resolve the sources of their conflict, who retain mutual expectations of hostility, and who have not fought continuously. See Colaresi, Rasler, and Thompson, 2008, pp. 10–12.

³¹ Heath, 2022, pp. 142–144.

³² Toby Rider, Michael Findley, and Paul Diehl, “Just Part of the Game? Arms Races, Rivalry, and War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, 2011.

³³ William R. Thompson, “Identifying Rivals and Rivalries in World Politics,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 45, No. 4, December 2001, pp. 558–559.

³⁴ Diehl and Goertz, 2000, pp. 19–25.

³⁵ For a brief review of several books that made this case, see Robert B. Reich, “Is Japan Out to Get Us?” *New York Times*, February 9, 1992.

³⁶ George Friedman and Meredith LeBard, *The Coming War with Japan*, New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991.

³⁷ Timothy Heath surveys such factors as demographic and economic constraints, the changing balance of interest in rivalry between elites and broader citizenries, the declining value of territorial conquest, and the possibility for a non-zero-sum contest for technological and economic supremacy in the postindustrial world. He concludes that “history may have introduced new constraints [on rivalries] unknown in previous eras. Distinctive features of the post-industrial era raise the possibility that the U.S.-China rivalry may persist as a tense, friction-filled competition that nevertheless carries a low risk of escalation to great power war.” Heath, 2022, p. 153.

³⁸ There is an extensive literature on revisionist states. See, for example, Jason W. Davidson, “The Roots of Revisionism: Fascist Italy, 1922–39,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 4, 2002; Walter Russell Mead, “The Return of Geopolitics: The Revenge of the Revisionist Powers,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 3, 2014; Randall Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security*, Vol. 19, 1994. Analyses that apply the concept specifically to China include Scott L. Kastner and Phillip C. Saunders, “Is China a Status Quo or Revisionist State? Leadership Travel as an Empirical Indicator of Foreign Policy Priorities,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 2012; Alastair Iain Johnston, “Is China a Status Quo Power?” *International Security*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2003.

³⁹ For a new assessment of the factors that destabilize strategic rivalries, and what they say about U.S.-Russian and U.S.-China rivalries today, see Michael J. Mazarr, Samuel Charap, Abigail Casey, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Alyssa Demus, Bryan Frederick, Arthur Chan, John P. Godges, Eugeniu Han, Timothy R. Heath, Logan Ma, Elina Treyger, Teddy Ulin, and Ali Wyne, *Stabilizing Great-Power Rivalries*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A456-1, 2021.

⁴⁰ As Brands has argued, it is part of the very idea of a true rivalry that it blurs the boundary between peace and war, a blurring intensified by the use of many of these gray-zone tools; Brands, 2022, p. 7.

⁴¹ Another term widely used in defense circles is *Phase 0*. This refers to the phasing of military operations, with Phase III being major combat operations. Phase 0 is peacetime actions before crisis or mobilization.

⁴² That work includes Ben Connable, Jason H. Campbell, and Dan Madden, *Stretching and Exploiting Thresholds for High-Order War: How Russia, China, and Iran Are Eroding American Influence Using Time-Tested Measures Short of War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1003-A, 2016; Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018; Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2942-OSD, 2019; Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Becca Wasser, *Competing in the Gray Zone: Russian Tactics and Western Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2791-A, 2019; Ben Connable, Stephanie Young, Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, Raphael S. Cohen, Katya Migacheva, and James Sladden, *Russia’s Hostile Measures: Combating Russian Gray Zone Aggression Against NATO in the Contact, Blunt, and Surge Layers of Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2539-A, 2020; Michael J. Mazarr, Joe Cheravitch, Jeffrey W. Hornung, and Stephanie Pezard, *What Deters and Why: Applying a Framework to Assess Deterrence of Gray Zone Aggression*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3142-A, 2021.

⁴³ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. 6.

⁴⁴ For one example, see James M. Acton, “Cyber Warfare and Inadvertent Escalation,” *Daedalus*, Vol. 149, No. 2, Spring 2020.

⁴⁵ This was laid out, among other places, in China State Council Information Office, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” white paper, Beijing, July 2019. See also Elsa Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Thinking on the Three Warfares,” *China Brief* (Jamestown Foundation), Vol. 16, No. 13, August 22, 2016.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and System Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People’s Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern Warfare*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1708-OSD, 2018, p. ix.

⁴⁷ Michael Kofman, “Russian Hybrid Warfare and Other Dark Arts,” *War on the Rocks*, March 11, 2016; Mark Galeotti, “I’m Sorry for Creating the ‘Gerasimov Doctrine,’” *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2018; Mark Galeotti, “The Mythical ‘Gerasimov Doctrine’ and the Language of Threat,” *Critical Studies on Security*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019.

⁴⁸ Andrew E. Kramer, “Russian General Pitches ‘Information’ Operations as a Form of War,” *New York Times*, March 2, 2019.

⁴⁹ Alexander D. Chekov, Anna V. Makarycheva, Anastasia M. Solomentseva, Maxim A. Suchkov, and Andrey A. Sushentsov, “War of the Future: A View from Russia,” *Survival*, Vol. 61, No. 6, December 2019–January 2020, pp. 35–36. Many recent RAND reports have assessed this risk. See Miriam Matthews, Katya Migacheva, and Ryan Andrew Brown, *Superspreaders of Malign and Subversive Information on COVID-19: Russian and Chinese Efforts Targeting the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A112-11, 2021; Miriam Mathews, Alyssa Demus, Elina Treyger, Marek N. Posard, Hilary Reininger, and Christopher Paul, *Understanding and Defending Against Russia’s Malign and Subversive Information Efforts in Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3160-EUCOM, 2021; Todd C. Helmus, James V. Marrone, Marek N. Posard, and Danielle Schlang, *Russian Propaganda Hits Its Mark: Experimentally Testing the Impact of Russian Propaganda and Counter-Interventions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A704-3, 2020.

⁵⁰ Of course, in prior eras of total warfare, some national homelands suffered unimaginable destruction, as in the strategic bombing campaigns (including the eventual use of nuclear weapons) that targeted German and Japanese cities in World War II. The comparison here is to earlier eras of great power contestation over third parties or other territories; if a country remained immune to direct military attack, its homeland would be undamaged. That is no longer the case.

⁵¹ Michael J. Mazarr, “Virtual Territorial Integrity: The Next International Norm,” *Survival*, Vol. 62, No. 4, 2020b.

⁵² Michael J. Mazarr, Ryan Bauer, Abigail Casey, Sarah Heintz, and Luke J. Matthews, *The Emerging Risk of Virtual Societal Warfare: Social Manipulation in a Changing Information Environment*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2714-OSD, 2019.

⁵³ Andrei Lungu, “The U.S.-China Clash Is About Ideology After All,” *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2021. For various perspectives on the question, see Jessica Chen Weiss, Daniel Tobin, Toshi Yoshihara, and Andrew Mertha, “Are the United States and China in an Ideological Competition?” *Freeman Chair Blog* (Center for Strategic and International Studies), December 13, 2019.

⁵⁴ Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Emily Ellinger, Kelly Elizabeth Eusebi, Bryan Rooney, Andrew Stravers, and Emily Yoder, *Understanding Influence in the Strategic Competition with China*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A290-1, 2021.

⁵⁵ Heath and Thompson, 2018, pp. 105–107.

⁵⁶ Michael J. Mazarr, “The Essence of the Strategic Competition with China,” *PRISM*, Vol. 9, No. 1, October 2020a.

⁵⁷ Heath, 2022, p. 150. The variables he examined were the degree of mobilization of resources against the rival, threat perception, number and intensity of specific dispute issues, level of arms racing, the degree to which each side was rushing to assemble alliances against the other, and the degree to which the bilateral rivalry was becoming multilateralized.

⁵⁸ Mazarr, Charap, et al., 2021.

⁵⁹ Michael Schuman, “China Is Watching Ukraine with a Lot of Interest,” *The Atlantic*, January 13, 2022.

⁶⁰ U.S. Department of State, *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision*, Washington, D.C., November 2019.

⁶¹ One expert concludes that “China’s leaders do not accept the strict distinctions between war and peace that are broadly accepted in international law and across much of the international community. Instead, they generally see a broad continuum of relations between major powers in which tension, turbulence, incidents, and even conflict are seen as natural and normal tools to be used in an international system that is fundamentally competitive.” Abraham M. Denmark, “Trends of the Times: Foundations of Beijing’s View on Competition with the United States,” in Robert Elder, Nicole Peterson, and Belinda Bragg, eds., *US Versus China: Promoting “Constructive Competition” to Avoid “Destructive Competition”*, Washington, D.C.: Strategic Multilayer Assessment, U.S. Department of Defense, May 2021, p. 33.

⁶² Timothy R. Heath, Derek Grossman, and Asha Clark, *China’s Quest for Global Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 2021, p. 79.

⁶³ Denmark, 2021, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Connable, Campbell, and Madden, 2016; Morris et al., 2019. U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command notes, “Vulnerable fault-line states are the principal targets of Chinese and Russian offensive operations short of armed conflict, which are calculated to avoid triggering a decisive U.S. response.” U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, Ft. Leavenworth, Kan., TRADOC Pamphlet No. 525-3-1, December 6, 2018, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Denmark, 2021, p. 32.

- ⁶⁶ Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, pp. 80–81, 88–91.
- ⁶⁷ Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, pp. 87–88.
- ⁶⁸ Joint Doctrine Note 1-19, 2019, p. 1.
- ⁶⁹ Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018, p. 1.
- ⁷⁰ On the importance of legitimacy in strategic rivalries, see Stacie E. Goddard, *When Right Makes Might: Rising Powers and World Order*, Cornell, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2018; Ian Hurd, “Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics,” *International Organization*, Vol. 53, No. 2, Spring 1999.
- ⁷¹ China has, in addition to material power goals, Nadège Rolland contends, “an ideational aspiration, a desire to be acknowledged not only for wealth and the material power that grows out of it, but also as a guiding polestar that others can look up to, learn from, and eventually assimilate or follow for their own sake.” Nadège Rolland, *China’s Vision for a New World Order*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report #83, January 2020, p. 51.
- ⁷² Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, pp. xv–xvi.
- ⁷³ Rolland, 2020, pp. 4–6.
- ⁷⁴ Rolland, 2020, pp. 17, 32–35.
- ⁷⁵ Rolland, 2020, p. 49.
- ⁷⁶ Heath and coauthors conclude that “Chinese authorities frankly acknowledge the inevitability of competition but reject the notion that conflict is inevitable. This perspective suggests that Beijing recognizes the importance of having a balanced and nuanced competitive strategy that avoids disastrous missteps” and a Chinese approach in which one priority is that “[w]ar with the United States is avoided”; Heath, Grossman, and Clark, 2021, pp. xiv–xv. See also Mazarr, Charap, et al., 2021, pp. 196–202. It is certainly true that elements in the Chinese military appear to have very aggressive views and may be less hesitant about the idea of going to war. See, for example, David Lague, “Special Report: China’s Military Hawks Take the Offensive,” Reuters, January 16, 2013.
- ⁷⁷ Bruce McClintock, Jeffrey W. Hornung, and Katherine Costello, *Russia’s Global Interests and Actions: Growing Reach to Match Rejuvenated Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-327-A, 2021.
- ⁷⁸ Samuel Charap, Dara Massicot, Miranda Priebe, Alyssa Demus, Clint Reach, Mark Stalczyński, Eugeniu Han, and Lynn E. Davis, *Russian Grand Strategy: Rhetoric and Reality*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4238-A, 2021, p. 18.
- ⁷⁹ Charap et al., 2021, p. 19.
- ⁸⁰ Charap et al., 2021, pp. 29, 31.
- ⁸¹ Charap et al., 2021, p. 28.
- ⁸² See Kier Giles and Anthony Seaboyer, “The Russian Information Warfare Construct,” working paper, Toronto: Defence Research and Development Canada, October 2019.
- ⁸³ Timothy L. Thomas, *Russian Military Thought: Concepts and Elements*, McLean, Va.: MITRE Corporation, August 2019, Chapter 4.
- ⁸⁴ Charap et al., 2021, p. 26.
- ⁸⁵ Brands, 2022, p. 8.
- ⁸⁶ Russia has now set back its long-term effort to use such activities below the threshold of war to gain competitive advantage and set the conditions for successful warfighting. European nations are now working energetically to uproot mechanisms of Russian influence and will be on guard for any future gray-zone activities.
- ⁸⁷ R. W. Komer, *Bureaucracy Does Its Thing: Institutional Constraints on U.S.-GVN Performance in Vietnam*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, R-967-ARPA, 1972, pp. ix, 14, 75.
- ⁸⁸ Komer, 1972, pp. 75–76.
- ⁸⁹ Brands, 2022, p. 8.

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About This Perspective

U.S. national security policy for the foreseeable future will likely be oriented around the idea of competition—often paired with modifiers such as *strategic* or *great power*—with at least two primary competitors, China and Russia. This Perspective tries to bring some coherence to the discussion by reviewing U.S. government strategy documents, published RAND Corporation research, and select other sources to help clarify what international competitions are all about. And amid current debates about the proper role of the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) in this competitive environment, the Perspective examines the specific aspects of competition that are essential to achieving U.S. defense objectives and the tools in the DoD arsenal that can be brought to bear in this domain.

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