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Research Report

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The Return of Great Power War

Scenarios of Systemic Conflict Between the United States and China

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About This Report

This report explores scenarios of systemic conflict between the United States and China in a hypothetical situation in which China has nearly reached the point of global primacy. To help illuminate how a U.S.-China war of power transition might unfold in such a circumstance, the authors examine trends in warfare and geopolitics, the behavior of select past great powers, and relevant patterns in interstate conflict. From these data, the authors formulate two scenarios of systemic low-intensity and high-intensity U.S.-China conflict.

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Summary

This report explores scenarios of systemic U.S.-Chinese conflict in situations in which China has neared the point of global primacy. To help illuminate how war might unfold in such a circumstance, the authors examine trends in warfare and geopolitics, the behavior of select past great powers, and relevant patterns in interstate conflict. From these data, the authors formulate two scenarios of systemic war—one that is low-intensity and another that is high-intensity.

The intensification of strategic rivalry between the United States and China introduces political and security challenges that in key ways exceed what U.S. policymakers faced during the Cold War. Although the immediate risk of conflict remains low and U.S.-Chinese relations are far less hostile than U.S.-Soviet relations tended to be, the two countries contend over a much broader range of issues than was the case during the Cold War. China and the United States routinely feud over an array of political, economic, technological, and ideological issues. The two countries also maintain a tense standoff over dangerous flash points near China and argue over the role of human rights, democracy, and individual freedoms in international politics.[1] Moreover, unlike the Cold War, which saw the United States enter the contest near the zenith of its economic might, in the current rivalry, the nation is in a period of relative decline. Even though its economic growth trajectory is slowing, Chinese national power continues to accrue at a rate faster than that of the United States. If the trends continue, the Chinese economy could exceed the U.S. economy in nominal terms by the 2030s, although Chinese per capita gross domestic product (GDP) will continue to lag.[2] A U.S. military facing flat budgets will in such a situation confront an increasingly powerful and modern Chinese military.[3] The same trends raise the risk that China could become emboldened in its approach to such long-standing flash points as the South China Sea or Taiwan and possibly provoke conflict.[4] Nor is there likely to be a quick and easy resolution to this imposing

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[1] Ashley J. Tellis, Alison Szalwinski, and Michael Wills, *Strategic Asia 2020: U.S.-China Competition for Global Influence*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2020.

[2] "China Set to Surpass U.S. as World's Biggest Economy by 2028, Says Report," Reuters via CNBC, December 25, 2020.

[3] Ely Ratner, Daniel Kliman, Susanna V. Blume, Rush Doshi, Chris Dougherty, Richard Fontaine, Peter Harrell, Martijn Rasser, Elizabeth Rosenberg, Eric Sayers, Daleep Singh, Paul Scharre, Loren DeJonge Schulman, Neil Bhatiya, Ashley Feng, Joshua Fitt, Megan Lamberth, Kristine Lee, and Ainikki Riikonen, "Rising to the China Challenge: Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific," Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, January 28, 2020; William Braun III and David Lai, *U.S.-China Competition: Asia-Pacific Land Force Implications*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, November 2016; Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan S. 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.

[4] Zhu Bo, "The Risk of China-US Military Conflict Is Worryingly High," *Financial Times*, August 25, 2020.

strategic challenge. Owing to deep structural drivers, the U.S.-China competition is expected to last many years, if not decades.[5]

Should China successfully realize its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an ambitious Chinese-led effort to develop a massive trade and infrastructure network spanning much of Africa and Eurasia, the United States could one day find itself confronting a peer rival for global leadership possessing far greater power than the Soviet Union ever held. If, under such conditions, U.S.-China relations deteriorated into open hostility, the risk of militarized crises and conflicts across many parts of the world could rapidly grow. The dangers of a global confrontation could be amplified by the advent of new, poorly understood civilian and military technologies and unprecedented historical developments. As one example, the ability of cybertechnologies to inflict massive damage and dislocation raises problematic new escalation risks. Chinese success in extending a network of client states could also result in confrontations and crises involving U.S. interests that do not exist today. Many questions about such an important and dangerous situation arise. How might China's national and security goals change if it were to engage in systemic conflict with the United States? How might the People's Liberation Army (PLA) operate and modernize its forces in such a situation? Where and how might conflict involving Chinese and U.S. forces unfold? What distinctive features of the Chinese military might enable or impede its ability to fight a systemic war with U.S. forces? While the answers to these questions remain ultimately unknowable, this report aims to encourage a preliminary consideration of them.

We aim to analyze potential U.S.-China systemic conflict under conditions in which China has neared the point of global primacy through a careful synthesis of current and historical data on relevant factors, anticipated trends, and research-grounded speculation. For this report we considered academic and research findings regarding the potential trajectory of international security and warfare in coming years, China's approach to future warfare, relevant experiences from preceding great powers, and historic patterns of interstate conflict.

Drawing from these findings, we then developed two scenarios of U.S.-China systemic conflict. The first scenario consists of pervasive low-intensity, or indirect, conflict. The primary means of fighting consists of combat by the militaries of partner countries or favored nonstate groups, as well as paramilitary and defense contractors. These proxy U.S.-China conflicts could be waged as part of intrastate or interstate conflicts. The fighting would take place against the backdrop of considerable international fragmentation and the proliferation of nonstate threats, which would add its own stresses on the two militaries. Extensive conflict that involved partners of both countries could raise demand for military assistance to cope with their own threats as well. The militaries of the two contending great powers could find

[5] Ryan Hass and Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Order from Chaos: Responsible Competition and the Future of U.S.-China Relations," Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, February 6, 2019; Graham Allison, "The U.S.-China Strategic Competition: Clues from History," Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, February 2020.

themselves under immense pressure to respond to the competing demands while sustaining their low-intensity war efforts against one another.

The low-intensity conflict scenario envisions these clashes as occurring primarily along the BRI routes that China has prioritized as the geographic basis of its international power. While avoiding direct conventional war with one another, relevant Chinese and U.S.-backed military units could support partners in combat operations against the rival power and its own partners. The two militaries could also engage each regularly in cyberspace and in the information domains. Conventional military forces would continue their buildup and preparations for major combat operations but operate primarily as deterrent forces or participate in limited operations such as those against nonstate actors or other forces backed by the rival power but in which the risk of escalation to high-intensity great power war remained low. War waged primarily through indirect means would leave open the possibility of U.S.-Chinese cooperation on some shared concerns, in a manner somewhat evocative of how relations between the Soviet Union and the United States stabilized despite their waging indirect conflict against one another through proxies around the world. If the combatants successfully avoided escalation and maintained the conflict at a low enough level, they might be able to sustain some trade and investment with each other. The result could be a chronic state of conflict featuring minor positional changes in influence in different parts of the world but also considerable stability. The stalemate could last years. Yet, despite the apparent stability, the risk of escalation would remain substantial because either side could tire of the persistent conflict and risk major high-intensity operations to bring the war to a conclusion.

The second scenario consists of a high-intensity war and expands on many features of the low-intensity conflict. Indeed, it envisions considerable continuity with the low-intensity systemic war scenario. The two sides would continue to maintain low-intensity war efforts as low-cost means of distracting and bleeding away vital military and other resources for the rival power. As in the previous scenario, a gridlocked and fractured international order could yield an expansion of nonstate threats, potentially endangering the interests of both China and the United States.

Amid this situation of low intensity war and international fragmentation, the militaries in this high-intensity scenario initiate direct hostilities. Although traditional flash points such as Taiwan provide the most plausible proximate cause, others are possible. New flash points could emerge over time as well. The advent of high-intensity combat operations would introduce a new phase in conflict, and the two sides could rush to exploit the possibilities after a perhaps years-long period of chronic, indecisive low-intensity conflict. Although either side might begin the high-intensity war with restrained goals in mind, the urge to escalate into a broader war of decision regarding the issue of systemic leadership could be difficult to resist. For example, China's ambition to shatter U.S. power could motivate it to rapidly escalate an initial clash arising from a crisis in Asia by striking U.S. military assets and facilities throughout the theater. The war in the first and second island chains could thus be

characterized by extensive air, maritime, and missile attacks.[6] China's willingness to engage in high-intensity operations in other parts of the world might similarly seek as a goal the degradation of U.S. combat power and ability to sustain major war. The possibility of kinetic and nonkinetic strikes on the homelands of both countries cannot be excluded either.

A high-intensity war to decide the issue of systemic leadership would thus likely feature extensive combat around the world and across all domains. It would likely involve many combatants as partners of one side or the other. The war could include a variety of overlapping war aims for China beyond the severe weakening of U.S. power. China could carry out amphibious or other ground operations in nearby countries to protect clients, punish adversary governments, and secure territory. In countries close to China's borders, such as in Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, the PLA could carry out direct interventions to bolster the efforts of rebel groups and governments engaged with U.S.-backed forces. If U.S. military forces operated in those regions, there could be risks of direct engagements, especially in regions along China's land borders, such as Southeast Asia.

Outside these areas, China's eagerness to secure an Indian Ocean route could lead it to deploy major joint combat formations to seize vital choke points in the Middle East, perhaps in conjunction with a coalition of client military forces that might include paramilitary and contractor armed groups. With a de facto alliance with Russia, China could also rely more on overland routes to transport larger combat forces, opening opportunities to deploy larger combat formations farther afield. PLA forces could also step up combat support to client states in Central Asia and the Middle East to threaten any groups aligned with the United States.

Direct combat operations between Chinese and U.S. forces beyond the Middle East would be more difficult for the PLA to carry out, owing to the limitations of its power projection capabilities. However, in our scenarios we do not rule out the possibility of some sort of clash involving both militaries in those areas. Chinese military assets based on the Mediterranean coast in North Africa or on the coasts of East Africa or West Africa could engage passing U.S. naval and air assets as well, as might Chinese naval ships that escort merchant ships through the Arctic. In a climate of major war featuring contested environments, the PLA would struggle to safely transport large volumes of military equipment to more distant locations. PLA bases, assets, and personnel in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East could come under attack by U.S.-backed forces. To support its clients in these areas, China could seek to provide weapons such as air defense missiles, unmanned combat systems, and other portable weapons and equipment. Small numbers of PLA troops could also travel to help advise and direct the efforts of client militaries. But client states and nonstate groups would, in this scenario, bear the brunt of the fighting in the most distant regions.

This report concludes with some observations and hypotheses about how the PLA might perform in the posited combat scenarios. It also reviews key challenges and vulnerabilities

[6] The first island chain consists of the maritime space extending roughly from the Chinese mainland to the Yellow, East, and South China Seas bound by nations such as Japan and the Philippines. The second island chain extends this maritime region to the arc of islands stretching from Guam to Micronesia.

that could affect the PLA's battlefield performance. The implications and recommendations herein would apply chiefly to a hypothetical conflict situation in which China had neared global primacy. However, the conclusions could inform defense planning for potential contingencies even today. Our first finding is that planners may need to consider a broader range of contingencies for low- or high-intensity war when contemplating possible combat involving China. Most defense planning scenarios focus on flash points such as Taiwan within an assumed context of U.S. primacy. These scenarios tend to envision a relatively contained set of combat operations that concludes with the resolution of China's attempt to subjugate the island. This approach might make sense in a situation in which China experienced significant inferiority compared with the United States, such as Iraq did when the United States defeated its efforts to annex Kuwait in the first Gulf War. But China could consider combat options in a dramatically different way in conditions in which it had grown powerful enough to more aggressively contend for global primacy. In such circumstances, the drive to escalate an initial clash to a broader war of power transition could be difficult to resist, regardless of the outcome of the initial battle near a flash point such as Taiwan.

Second, planners may need to consider U.S.-China conflict less as a single battle or war than as a series of sequentially related, geographically dispersed clashes between U.S.- and Chinese-aligned forces. A systemic war could last years, involve many participants, and span virtually all domains, even if it stayed at the level of low-intensity conflict. The possibility that U.S. military forces might be severely stressed by competing demands for security assistance by allies and partners or to tackle severe transnational threats should be considered as well. Third, the United States should consider bolstering its ability to wage indirect war, given our conclusion that a scenario of indirect, low-intensity conflict is more plausible than that of high-intensity war. Fourth, the analysis of high-intensity war has underscored the importance of ensuring the U.S. ability to defend and secure vital choke points in the Middle East and along the Indian Ocean. Fifth, U.S.-China conventional conflict scenarios outside the first island chain could consist mainly of engagements between intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance sensors and modest-size units of long-range strike systems, as well as potential clashes involving irregular and proxy forces. Planners who seek to anticipate such scenarios may want to focus on weapons and platforms that help gain the information advantage and mitigate long-range strike capabilities. Alliance building to develop counterinsurgency capabilities could be useful as well.

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Abbreviations

A2/AD	anti-access/area denial
AI	artificial intelligence
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DoD	Department of Defense
GDP	gross domestic product
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PAP	People's Armed Police
PGM	precision-guided munition
PLA	People's Liberation Army
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SLOC	sea lines of communication

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

This report explores scenarios of systemic U.S.-China conflict in a situation in which China has neared global primacy. To help illuminate how a U.S.-China war might unfold in such a circumstance, the authors examine trends in warfare and geopolitics, the behavior of select past great powers, and relevant patterns of interstate conflict. From these data, the authors formulate two scenarios of systemic U.S. China conflict war—one that is low-intensity and another that is high-intensity.

Background: An Intensifying Great Power Competition

Following the end of the Cold War, the United States of America enjoyed a position of global supremacy unsurpassed in human history. At the height of its power, the United States accounted for a quarter of global economic activity, deployed the world's most advanced military, and experienced unmatched political and cultural influence.[1] Currently, however, the nation's unipolar moment is ending. By virtually every measure of national power, the strategic position of the United States has weakened as its economic growth rate has slowed relative to that of many other countries, including China. Whether and how much longer the United States can retain its position of global leadership has proven a topic of intense debate.[2] At the very least, experts acknowledge that U.S. primacy can no longer be regarded as uncontested.[3] The 2021 Interim National Security Strategy acknowledged that the "distribution of power across the world is changing" and characterized China as the "only competitor" that could "mount a sustained challenge to a stable and open international system."[4]

[1] William S. Wohlforth, "The Stability of a Unipolar World," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1999.

[2] Stephen M. Walt, "American Primacy: Its Prospects and Pitfalls," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2002; Hal Brands, "Choosing Primacy: U.S. Strategy and Global Order at the Dawn of the Post–Cold War Era," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2018.

[3] Eric S. Edelman, *Understanding America's Contested Primacy*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2010.

[4] White House, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," press release, Washington, D.C., March 3, 2021.

Second only to the United States in the size of its economy and with a leadership eager to realize the nation's revitalization, China stands as the nation's only credible contender for global leadership. It should be noted that China's ability to surpass the United States as a global leader is far from clear; there are ample reasons to doubt the prospect. Decades of robust growth obscure a Chinese economy encumbered by severe weaknesses. Moreover, the nation faces a gloomy demographic outlook and restrictive political geography. The apparent strength and resolve of the central political leadership scarcely conceals fragility arising from an overly centralized and repressive authoritarianism.[5] China also does not appear to have an ambition to replicate U.S.-style global leadership, which may not be feasible in any case. Yet the possibility that China overcomes many or most of these formidable obstacles and begins to more aggressively contend for global primacy cannot be completely ruled out either. Given the potential implications for U.S. security of such an outcome, an analysis of what conflict under such conditions mean for America's security seems prudent.

The intensification of U.S.-China strategic competition introduces political and security challenges that in key ways exceed what U.S. policymakers faced during the Cold War. Although the U.S.-Soviet zero-sum ideological conflict may be absent, the United States faces a far stronger contender in China than it ever faced in the Soviet Union. Moscow posed a powerful military challenge in Europe and owned a massive nuclear arsenal. It also exercised significant international political influence, especially among decolonizing Third World countries. But outside these areas, Soviet power lagged that of its American competitor by wide margins. Its economy never reached more than a fraction of that of the United States. The Soviet military maintained robust ground forces in Europe, but it suffered an overall technological inferiority and lacked the ability to project power globally.

By contrast, U.S.-China competition has rapidly expanded beyond the military to technological, ideological, political, and economic domains. The two sides continue to face dangerous flash points near China and argue over the role of human rights, democracy, and individual freedoms in international politics. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) has grown into a formidable force possessing impressive technological capabilities, even if it continues to lag the U.S. military in key ways.[6] Moreover, unlike during the Cold War, which saw the United States enter the contest near the zenith of its economic might, in the current rivalry, the nation is in a period of relative decline. Even as its growth trajectory slows, Chinese national power continues to accrue at a faster rate than that of its American competitor. The size of China's economy could exceed that of the United States in nominal terms by the 2030s, although experts continue to debate that possibility.[7] If current trends continue, a U.S. mili-

[5] Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, Cortez A. Cooper III, Sale Lilley, Chad J. R. Ohlandt, Eric Warner, and J. D. Williams, *China's Grand Strategy: Trends, Trajectories, and Long-Term Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2798-A, 2020.

[6] Tellis, Szalwinski, and Wills, 2020.

[7] "China Set to Surpass U.S. as World's Biggest Economy by 2028, Says Report," 2020.

tary facing flat budgets could confront an increasingly powerful and modern Chinese military.[8] The same trends raise the risk that Chinese leaders could become emboldened in their approach to long-standing flash points such as the South China Sea or Taiwan and might risk conflict to achieve their goals.[9] Nor is there likely to be a quick and easy resolution to this imposing strategic challenge. Owing to deep structural drivers, the U.S.-China competition is expected to last many years, if not decades.[10]

Defining a Leading Great Power

Should China successfully realize its ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), a Chinese-led effort to develop a massive trade and infrastructure network spanning much of Africa and Eurasia, the United States could one day find itself confronting a peer rival for global leadership possessing immense national power. Theorists of international relations have long concluded that the struggle for international primacy among rival great powers tends to be prone to systemic conflict. It is this moment of near global primacy—that is, a moment at which China as a peer power begins to more aggressively contend for the mantle of global leadership—that we focus on in this report. But before we can proceed with analyzing such a situation, we will clarify what we mean by *global primacy* and why this could drive systemic conflict.

In every age, one country or set of countries tends to stand out as the most powerful. Yet how to define and measure the strength of these high performers remains much disputed. Scholars have employed a variety of terms to communicate different aspects of national strength, such as *great powers*, *world powers*, or *first-rate powers*. Typically, scholars use the term *great power* to refer to a class of powerful countries with the ability to profoundly shape international politics. Paul Kennedy has highlighted the importance of economic and military power as essential to this class of nations.[11] Realist theorist Kenneth Waltz, by contrast, proposes five criteria for defining a great power: population and territory; resource endowment; economic capability; political stability and competence; and military strength.[12] William Wohlforth and Steven Brooks argue against the concept of "polarity" in favor of a method that measures national power in terms of military, economic, and technical capacity.[13]

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[8] Ratner et al., 2020; Braun and Lai, 2016; Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018.

[9] Zhu, 2020.

[10] Hass and Rapp-Hooper, 2019; Allison, 2020.

[11] Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers*, New York: Vintage Press, 1989.

[12] Kenneth Waltz, "The Emerging Structure of International Politics," *International Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Autumn 1993.

[13] Stephen G. Brooks and William C. Wohlforth, "The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers in the 21st Century: China's Rise and the Fate of America's Position," *International Security*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2015.

Among the great powers, different configurations with different risks of conflict are possible. Some theorists have argued that a diffusion of power among states, such as in "multipolar" situations, may offer the best prospects for international stability.[14] Other theorists have focused on the dynamism of situations featuring a high degree of concentrated power. Specialists in power transition scenarios in particular have claimed that great power wars fundamentally aim to decide the issue of hegemony and leadership in a system or subsystem.[15] For these scholars, the terms *preeminence* or *primacy* describe a country that enjoys the first rank, or highest-level status, among other countries. Such countries have an unusually high concentration of national power, as measured by a greater share of economic, military, and political power than any other country. Such powerful states also are typically understood to have greater international influence than others. For such states, scholars have highlighted qualities such as the possibilities of domination and control. The term *hegemon*, often associated with a variant of realist international relations theory that emphasizes the role of a single, dominant hegemonic power, refers to the idea that one country exercises political, economic, or military predominance or control over other states. Robert Gilpin, a foremost theorist of the role of hegemons, has argued that the international order is most stable when there is one hegemon and that, as the power of the incumbent hegemon wanes, dissatisfied rising hegemons will contend for a position of primacy. The clash between the incumbent and rising hegemons will, according to this theory of "hegemonic stability," result in war.[16] A. F. K. Organski, in particular, has developed the theory of "power transition warfare," in which the status quo and rising hegemons fight to decide the issue of international primacy.[17] The theory of power transition warfare between rising and declining great powers has found some empirical support.[18] However, the theories have been criticized as well. One criticism of the term *hegemon* is that it implies that a country can exercise a level of oppressive domination and control that most countries might find intolerable and that few countries can exercise in practice. Chinese official documents routinely hurl the accusation of hegemonic behavior against the United States with this argument in mind.[19] Another criticism of realist theory is its lack of attention to the structure

[14] Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, New York, N.Y.: McGraw Hill, 1948.

[15] Jack Levy, *War in the Modern Great Power System, 1495–1975*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1983.

[16] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

[17] A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968. See also Graham Allison, *Destined for War? Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* New York: Houghton Mifflin Publishing, 2018.

[18] Andrew Q. Greve and Jack Levy, "Power Transitions, Status Dissatisfaction, and War: The Sino-Japanese War of 1894–1895," *Security Studies*, Vol. 27, No. 1, 2017.

[19] A sample of typical Chinese media commentary that makes this criticism can be seen in Dang Sen, "Abuse of Power Weakening U.S. Hegemony," *China Daily*, August 27, 2020. Virtually all Chinese defense reports also invoke this term when describing threats to the nation's security.

and dynamics of the world economy.[20] Critics Richard Lebow and Benjamin Valentino have also questioned the theory, arguing that power transitions have been "remarkably rare" and "tended to happen peacefully."[21]

Political scientists have offered alternative terms to describe a supremely powerful nation, such as that of a *leading power* or *system leader.* Associated with the theories of world systems or long cycle theory, such terms emphasize the role played by an exceptionally capable nation in organizing and leading the global economy. These experts tend to emphasize the way economic power underpins global military and political power. Immanuel Wallerstein's "world systems" theory describes a group of core leading economies that dominated the global economy.[22] Long cycle theorists George Modelski and William Thompson have defined global system leaders as specialists in "long-distance commerce and advanced industrial production," which also provide "political and military leadership at the global (intercontinental) level."[23] The systems approach has drawn attention to the critical role that powerful nations play in leading and organizing global economic activity. They also offer an intriguing explanation for the connection between economic predominance, geopolitical primacy, and wars of power transition. The systems-based approach has endured some criticism, however, for focusing excessively on technological and economic capabilities and underemphasizing the importance of political and military power.[24]

Both schools of thought have their advantages and disadvantages. The hegemonic stability/realist approach notes the importance of preponderance in economic, political, and military power among top-tier powers. It also emphasizes the importance of international influence as an aspect of strength. The system leader school complements these insights with its valuable insight into the way internationally preeminent nations organize and shape the structure of the global economy. We wish to capture these insights in our understanding of global primacy. Accordingly, we use the term *leading great power* to mean a country that has achieved a level of global preeminence—first rank—in terms of concentrated economic, political, and military power. Such a nation exerts a preponderant international influence and is also dominant in organizing and leading the global economic system. *Global primacy* is used interchangeably as the condition that characterizes the situation of the leading great power.

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[20] Terry Boswell and Mike Sweat, "Hegemony, Long Waves, and Major Wars: A Time Series Analysis of Systemic Dynamics, 1496–1967," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 2, June 1991.

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

[22] Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, Vol. III: *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730–1840*, New York: Academic Press, 1989.

[23] George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Leading Sectors and World Powers: The Coevolution of Global Economics and Politics*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996, p. 58.

[24] Boswell and Sweat, 1991.

Defining Systemic Conflict Among Rival Leading Powers

Although both the hegemonic stability/realist and system leader schools of thought disagree on definitions and key points of emphasis, they agree that the global leading power tends to exert a stabilizing influence when at the height of its power, but that its ascent or descent is likely to coincide with considerable instability and/or conflict. The period of instability accompanying the rise or decline of great powers is, per Organski, often referred to as one of "power transition."[25] Since we are interested in analyzing potential scenarios of U.S.-China conflict, we focus on such a hypothetical period of Chinese ascent and U.S. relative decline. In our hypothetical scenarios, China may not have decisively achieved a position of global primacy yet, but it is poised to do so. Its situation may be described as one of nearing global primacy, but still in the processing of contending with the United States for that position. By many, but perhaps not all, measures of national power, China would have roughly equaled, slightly surpassed, or fallen just shy of those of the United States. China may be nearing or have gained a modest edge over the United States as a leading organizer of the global economy as well. In such a situation, Beijing's claims to have secured global primacy would strike many people as plausible, though the claims could be debated given the intensity of U.S. efforts to fend off China's challenge. It is important to emphasize how this hypothetical situation differs from today. In 2022 China may be regarded as a serious competitor to the United States, but few would regard as credible any claim that it has neared the point of displacing United States to become the leading global power.

We focus on this hypothetical moment of aggressive Chinese efforts to contend for global primacy because it carries the highest risks of major war according to the established findings of international relations theory.[26] How the two countries manage that moment could carry immense implications for both countries and for the world. Although the possibility of a peaceful power transition exists, in this report we focus on the possibilities of systemic conflict. A key assumption of the report is that the United States has both the capability and the determination to resist its supersession and that both sides thus face compelling incentives to resort to force to assert or defend global primacy. Because this type of conflict is intricately related to the question of international leadership, it would not likely be resolved by a single battle. Rather, the conflict would assume a chronic, systemic form. As in past examples of power transition warfare, the two countries could fight in multiple engagements over a relatively long span of time, perhaps lasting for many years, and in a geographically unconstrained manner. Extensive conflict could involve many partner nations and manifest in various forms of interstate and intrastate conflict with varying levels of involvement by the two rivals as well. The escalation risks would remain high due to the underlying drive for supremacy. Conflict would thus assume a serial, persistent condition that could endure

[25] Organski, 1968; Allison 2020.

[26] David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, *Transition Scenarios: China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013; Allison 2020.

for years and that would end only when one side exhausted its ability to keep fighting and accordingly acknowledged its subordination to the other.

An adversarial China that had neared a position of global primacy could pose an exceptionally formidable challenge to the United States, which has not fought a great power from a position of parity or inferiority since the War of 1812. By the mid-1800s, the U.S. economy had already surpassed in size and wealth that of the United Kingdom—the leading great power of its day. By any economic measure, the United States became the world's most powerful nation by 1916, although Washington resisted assuming global responsibilities commensurate with its strength until after World War II.[27] The United States fought formidable Central and Axis power adversaries in the two World Wars, but its industrial might gave it an insuperable advantage. Even against the Soviet Union, the United States competed from a position of strength, with an economy many times more productive and richer than that of its communist rival. Lessons from past wars are also constrained by the fact that those wars happened in the past. Distinctive features of geopolitical arrangements, the state of military technology, and the nature of war all shaped past rivalries and conflicts in ways that may not be relevant today.

Under conditions of a China nearing global primacy, the onset of U.S.-China hostilities could raise the risks of militarized crises and military clashes across many parts of the world. The risks of a global confrontation could be amplified by the advent of new, poorly understood civilian and military technologies and unprecedented historical developments. As one example, the ability of cybertechnologies to inflict massive damage and dislocation raises problematic new escalation risks. Chinese success in expanding a network of client states could also result in confrontations and crisis situations that appear implausible today.

Systemic U.S.-China conflict would clearly carry significant implications for the security of the United States, yet to date there has been little serious effort to analyze them. Key questions include: How might China's national and security goals change in a systemic conflict with the United States? How might the PLA operate and modernize its forces in such a situation? Where might conflict involving Chinese and U.S. forces unfold? How might the two militaries fight each other? What distinctive features of the Chinese military might enable or impede their combat operations against U.S. forces? While the answers to these questions remain ultimately unknowable, this report aims to encourage a preliminary consideration of them.

Sources and Methodology

The exploration of hypothetical conflict situations that do not exist today and may never happen poses important methodological challenges for research. What data can we draw on for such hypothetical reasoning? On what basis can we make our judgments? We acknowledge

[27] Adam Tooze, *The Deluge: The Great War, America, and the Remaking of the Global Order 1916–1931*, New York: Viking, 2014.

up front that such research unavoidably involves considerable conjecture, and we qualify our findings accordingly. This report aims to provide a form of informed speculation; it is not a prediction. It is designed to provoke thought and consideration of potential futures beyond the most immediate and obvious trends. Yet, to be valuable, such analysis should be as rigorous and data-informed as possible. We carried out our analysis through a methodology that synthesized current and historical data on relevant factors with research-grounded speculation. For this project, we considered academic findings regarding China's approach to future warfare, key trends in international politics and warfare that will likely persist through the next few decades, and relevant experiences from previous great powers. Drawing from these findings, we then hypothesized how the Chinese military could fight in low and high intensity systemic conflicts.

We sought in particular to understand and represent Chinese perspectives as much as possible. However, the limitations of publicly available Chinese-language sources on these topics should be noted up front. Political sensitivities discourage Chinese scholars and experts from exploring in detail the possibilities of a broader, global U.S.-China war. To be sure, PLA scholars have discussed the operational challenges of fighting a "strong enemy," which is usually a thinly veiled reference to the United States. However, such sources tend to discuss more general imperatives for military readiness or to consider potential contingencies within the context of existing flash points such as Taiwan.[28] To date we have found virtually no credible publicly available sources that examine more speculative scenarios of U.S.-China conflict, such as chronic, long-term war, wars of power transition, or U.S.-China conflict scenarios outside the first island chain. Some PLA scholars do acknowledge the possibility of major war with the United States, but they do not examine the possibility in depth, perhaps owing to their judgment that such conflict is improbable or perhaps due to political constraints. In light of such limited sources, we have extrapolated possible Chinese political and military strategy precepts and directives to inform our analysis, but we acknowledge that such an approach must be treated as speculation, not fact.

The first part of this report outlines a series of research findings regarding broad trends related to international politics and war, patterns of interstate conflict among rising great powers, and findings regarding the drivers of great power war. Chapter Two sets the context by outlining key geopolitical and military trends that experts have regarded as likely to persist for several decades. It explores how these trends could affect the prospect for U.S. China conflict under conditions in which China nears global primacy. In Chapter Three we examine patterns in the conflict behavior of leading great powers for insight into the potential forms that systemic U.S.-China conflict might take. We analyze in particular the experiences of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States as global powers. Although the Soviet Union never exercised hegemony on the scale of the United Kingdom or the United States, it did exert considerable influence over large swaths of Eurasia, and its role as the most

[28] Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Dare to Face the 'Strong Enemy强敌': How Xi Jinping Has Made the PLA Talk About the United States," *Sinocism*, March 4, 2021.

successful communist state offers potential insight into how China's military might behave in a moment of near global primacy as well. To more clearly illuminate the potential pathway to U.S.-China conflict and the characteristics it might manifest, we also consider the experience of past great power rivalries in Chapter Four. We highlight in particular key patterns that have recurred in similar situations of power transition, such as the tendency toward heightened threat perceptions, issue spiral, arms races, alliance-building activity, and the multilateralization of conflict. We contend that similar developments would likely accompany the onset of U.S.-China hostilities.

The second part of the report builds on this literature review to explore scenarios of hypothetical U.S.-China conflict under conditions of Chinese near primacy. In Chapter Five we explore how China's military might position itself to fight a systemic war with the United States. Since the PLA would have to fight with the military it has built, we briefly review key features of the military's mission, global footprint, and mode of operation before considering how these might affect the PLA's ability to wage systemic war. Chapter Six focuses on a scenario characterized by low-intensity systemic conflict. Ranging from persistent cyberconflict and economic conflict to proxy conventional wars along the proposed routes of the BRI, it paints a picture of a conflict-plagued, yet paradoxically stable, U.S.-China relationship. In this relationship, some level of trade and cooperation could persist amid largely indirect war.

Chapter Seven analyzes a more escalatory possibility featuring conventional U.S.-China high-intensity war under conditions of Chinese near primacy. In this scenario, efforts to control escalation below the threshold of conventional war have failed. To analyze this possibility, we briefly consider how Chinese wars to gain territory, such as Taiwan, could rapidly expand into a larger-scale war of decision. We also consider more limited hypothetical conflicts in other locations along China's periphery and beyond the first island chain. As formulated by our analysis, these conflicts could take place along the Indian Ocean, in the Middle East, and in Southeast Asia. A major driver could be China's desire to establish its credibility as a military power and as a security guarantor for clients. Its motives could overlap, perhaps, with resource concerns. Alternatively, China could seek to dominate rival Asian powers and decisively demonstrate China's military superiority over the United States as part of its bid for leadership. In most conceivable scenarios, these wars would involve clashing coalitions. Any war involving the militaries of both China and the United States would carry a high risk of escalation extending to the nuclear, outer space, and cyberspace domains. A conventional high-intensity war could also occur alongside the continuation or aggravation of low-intensity conflicts around the world.

The report concludes with some observations and implications in Chapter Eight. We also offer some recommendations based on our findings. The prospects for China gaining primacy in the Asia-Pacific region and as a global leader merit all the debate and analysis that they have garnered, and the fact that the possibility of such an outcome cannot be fully discounted underscores the importance of thinking through what such a future might mean for U.S. security. It is our hope that this report contributes to the stimulating of a deeper consideration of this important topic.

CHAPTER TWO

Geopolitical and Military Trends

A starting point for analyzing potential U.S.-China systemic conflict is to describe such a strategic environment as well as we can. No one can know what the future holds, but we can perhaps narrow the range of possibilities by outlining some of the most plausible features. In this chapter we focus on key geopolitical and military trends, as identified by both Chinese and Western analysts. In each section we describe a trend and consider some of its implications for potential U.S.-China systemic conflict. As much as possible, we include both Western academic estimates that underpin each identified trend and Chinese sources that discuss similar trends. We then modify the analysis with assumptions to better accord with our focus on potential U.S.-China conflict scenarios.

Geopolitical Trends

Several key geopolitical trends that are anticipated to endure for several decades could carry significant implications for scenarios of potential U.S.-China systemic conflict. These trends include the decline of the developed world and rise of the developing world; growing international fragmentation and disorder; competition for resources and markets; the evolution of the global economy; the transition to multipolarity; and elevated risks from great power competition. For each trend, we consider evidence noted by Chinese and Western sources. We then explore the implications for our hypothetical scenario of U.S.-China conflict.

Shifting Global Balance of Power

Chinese and Western scholars have noted broad international trends in global power that will likely shift away from the industrialized West, which has dominated world politics for much of modern history. The collective rise of the developing non-West and the shrinking share of global economic power of the West open the possibility that China could grow powerful enough to contend for global primacy. These broad trends also shape and constrain U.S. options for defending its international position.

Looking only at the economic dimension of national power, a 2017 study by Pricewaterhouse Coopers asserts, for example, that by 2050 the developed nations in the Group of Seven (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States) could see their share of world gross domestic product (GDP) fall to 20 percent, while those of an

"emerging seven" (Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia, and Turkey) could exceed 50 percent of world GDP, adjusted for purchasing power parity.[1] RAND researchers have highlighted similar possible geostrategic trends, including the polarization and retrenchment of the United States; a stronger China that is causing other states, particularly in Asia, to consider whether to bandwagon with or balance against China's rise; a revanchist Russia; and a less united and weaker Europe.[2]

Chinese scholars regard such trends as carrying tremendous historical significance. They acknowledge that the shift in global power from the developed world toward the developing world could result in greater short-term international instability but could also unveil unprecedented opportunities for China in the long term. Chen Xiangyang, a professor at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, argues in a 2020 paper that strategic trends favoring the rise of China and the East and the "decline of the West" have "accelerated." He notes the failure of Europe and the United States to solve many pressing global problems and underscores the reality of their waning power.[3] An article by the deputy dean of Renmin University's School of International Studies, Fang Changping, has similarly judged that world politics and the global economy have "entered a new stage of flux." He cites as key reasons the relative decline of American power and "rising populism and nationalism, the resurgence of strong-man and identity politics, and imbalanced economic development," which, he asserts, have "eroded people's identities and loyalties attached to the nation-state" and "intensified economic and geopolitical conflicts."[4]

Many Chinese scholars judge that the receding strength of the West provides an opportunity for China to grow its influence with countries that are receptive to its model of governance and development. As Yang Jiemian, a scholar at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, observes, "There is a disconnect between countries' commitments to the construction and reform of international mechanisms and their implementation. China hopes to be at the forefront of bridging this gap." Yang notes that major non-Western countries have "increased their political awareness and self-confidence" and concludes that China's "socialism with Chinese characteristics" could appeal to countries that wish to accelerate development with a minimum of dependence on the United States.[5] Chinese scholars, according to

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[1] Pricewaterhouse Coopers, *The World in 2050: How Will the Global Economic Order Change?* London, February 2017.

[2] Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chandler, Shira Efron, Bryan Frederick, Eugeniu Han, Kurt Klein, Forrest E. Morgan, Ashley L. Rhodes, Howard J. Shatz, and Yuliya Shokh, *The Future of Warfare in 2030: Project Overview and Conclusions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2849/1-AF, 2020.

[3] 陈向阳 [Chen Xiangyang],年国际形势展望 ["Outlook for the International Situation in 2020"], 半月谈 [*Biweekly Conversations*], February 5, 2020a. All translations are the authors' own.

[4] 方长平 [Fang Changping], 中国的周边安全环境未来走势及其背后逻辑 ["The Future Trend of China's Surrounding Security Environment and the Logic Behind It"], 国务院发展研究中心 [Development Research Center of the State Council], November 2, 2018.

[5] 杨洁勉 [Yang Jiemian], 当前国际大格局的变化、影响和趋势 ["Changes, Influences and Trends of the Current International Order"], 现代国际关系 [*Modern International Relations*], March 20, 2019.

several Western observers, generally appear increasingly hopeful about prospects for shaping the international order over the long term.[6]

In sum, this trend provides the fundamental basis for the possibility that China could near the point of contending directly for international leadership. Although far from certain and perhaps unlikely owing to China's many weaknesses, the possibility cannot be ruled out. This sets up a key assumption of the scenario, which is that China has become strong enough that it is willing to risk conflict with the United States to secure its position as the top global power.

Increasing International Fragmentation and Disorder

A symptom of an international system in transition away from a U.S.-led unipolarity is its increasing fragmentation and disorder, a trend recognized by both Chinese and Western analysts.[7] The 2019 report *China's National Defense in the New Era* states that "global and regional security issues are on the increase." It cites problems of eroding international arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament efforts, the intensification of arms races in Asia and other regions, the spread of extremism and terrorism, and the increase in nontraditional security threats involving cybersecurity, biosecurity, and piracy.[8] A report from the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence similarly anticipates a more uncertain and fractured international order and describes an evolving international order that features "uncertainty about the United States, an inward-looking West, and erosion of norms for conflict prevention and human rights."[9]

Increasing international fragmentation poses both challenges and opportunities to China. Beijing has already had to confront the reality of internal breakdown in some of its partner countries. The PLA Navy sent a frigate to safeguard evacuees in Libya in 2011, and the PLA conducted a larger noncombatant evacuation operation in Yemen in 2015 for more than five hundred citizens of various countries.[10] Chinese officials have had to grapple with persistent civil strife in key BRI partner countries such as Pakistan.[11] Chinese articles have also pointed to the dangers posed by the Syrian civil war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, unrest in Africa, and the Iran nuclear issue, all of which pose some level of threat to Chinese energy

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[6] William Callahan, "Chinese Visions of a World Order: Post-Hegemonic or New Hegemony?" *International Studies Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2008.

[7] Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World*, New York, N.Y.: Portfolio Publishing, 2012.

[8] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, Inc., July 2019a, p. 3.

[9] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress*, Washington, D.C., 2021.

[10] Ankit Panda, "China Evacuates Foreign Nationals from Yemen," *Diplomat*, April 6, 2015.

[11] Adnan Aamir, "The Baluchistan Insurgency and the Threat to Chinese Interests in Pakistan," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 4, February 15, 2019.

sources, markets, and natural resources.[12] In the Asia-Pacific, Chinese analysts have argued that rising regional competition between China and the United States is likely to result in increased regional instability.[13] To illustrate, scholars point out that China's neighbors such as India and Japan attach importance to economic cooperation with China while simultaneously deepening security ties to the United States.[14] They also note that regional confrontations, such as those involving North and South Korea, remain complex, featuring the involvement of several great powers and other regional powers.[15] Chinese analysts also assess that regional hot spot issues remain contentious and that the risks of conflict in the India-Pakistan disputes and those regarding the Senkaku Islands and Taiwan may have increased.[16]

But China, Russia, and others have also taken advantage of greater international disorder to secure gains. In 2022, Russia launched a large-scale invasion of Ukraine. China and Russia in particular have successfully advanced their interests through measures short of war, also known as *gray zone operations*. A recent RAND report notes that adversary use of gray zone tactics through paramilitary forces and emerging military and communications technologies can destabilize states with increasing ease.[17]

The fragmentation of the international order shapes the future operational environment in which U.S.-China conflict might emerge. It creates greater uncertainty and therefore increases the risks of miscalculation. The exacerbation of long-standing security issues, the spread of diverse threats, and the weakness of global governance mechanisms raise the prospect that nontraditional and traditional threats could overlap and aggravate one another, a trend already well demonstrated in the case of Syria, where civil conflict, fueled by mass migration owing in part to the effects of climate change, has intensified interstate feuding between Russia and the United States. In the future, China's deepening involvement with troubled states along BRI routes raises the possibility of conflict scenarios that arise, perhaps suddenly, from unexpected sources. Escalation in such volatile and confusing situations may become unpredictable. Tensions, crises, and conflict involving Chinese- and U.S.-backed forces could occur within the context of nontraditional threats and issues that complicate and aggravate conflict tendencies. In this analysis, the United States may need to find ways of responding to traditional and nontraditional threats even as it manages a systemic conflict with China.

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[12] 张洁 [Zhang Jie], 新时期中国周边安全环境评估 ["Assessment of China's Surrounding Security Environment in the New Era"], *周边外交* [*Periphery Relations*], February 16, 2019; Yang, 2019.

[13] Zhang, 2019.

[14] 张蕴岭 [Zhang Yunling] and 任晶晶 [Ren Jingjing], 年中国周边安全热点问题观察及未来走向 ["Observations and Future Trends of China's Surrounding Security Hot Spot Issues in 2016"], 当代世界 [*Contemporary World*], April 5, 2016.

[15] 祁怀高 [Qi Huaigao] and 李开盛 [Li Kaisheng], 未来十年东北亚地缘政治结构的变化及其影 ["Changing Geopolitical Structure in Northeast Asia in the Next Decade and Its Influence"], 世界经济与政治 [*World Economic and Politics*, No. 432, August 14, 2016.

[16] Yang, 2019.

[17] Cohen et al., 2020, p. 21.

Competition for Resources and Markets

Another geopolitical trend that could affect conflict scenarios involving China and the United States concerns the competition for resources and markets. China's ability to garner natural resources as its energy demand continues to grow could influence its military operations abroad. According to a 2016 North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) report, energy security will remain a major concern for most countries, with large resource deposits located in unstable regions of the world.[18] The U.S. Energy Information Administration projects that global energy demand will increase 50 percent by 2050, with demand led by growth in Asia.[19] This will likely result in competition for resources, which in turn will lead to instabilities in different regions, from the Arctic to the Middle East and from South America to the South China Sea.[20] In addition to energy, the increase in technical and electronic products requiring rare earth minerals has created another area of competition, such that countries willing to endure the high environmental costs of recovering them could manipulate access to the minerals for coercive purposes, as China has done in the past. Of the 33 minerals that the U.S. Department of the Interior listed in February 2018 as essential to the U.S. economy, China was the top producer of 19 and the top supplier of 12.[21]

Competition for energy is another trend that will likely persist for the foreseeable future. China currently imports oil and gas from more than 40 countries. In 2019 China imported approximately 10.1 million barrels per day of crude oil, which met approximately 77 percent of its needs, and China's imports of natural gas could grow from 23.8 percent in 2021 to 46 percent by 2035.[22] Most of China's oil and natural gas imports come primarily from Africa, Central Asia, the Persian Gulf, and Russia. Beijing has become adept at intertwining its search for diverse sources of energy to support its economic development with its desire to increase political and economic influence. The clearest example of this is the BRI, Xi Jinping's ambitious project aimed at linking China to more than 60 countries across Asia, Africa, Europe, and Oceania through infrastructure projects, energy cooperation, and technology deals (Figure 2.1).[23] Through the BRI, China has increased overland oil supply via pipelines from Kazakhstan and Russia. In 2019 approximately 34 percent of China's natural gas

[18] NATO, *Global Energy Security: Mega-Trends and Challenges*, Brussels, September 2016.

[19] Ari Kahan, "EIA Projects Nearly 50% Increase in World Energy Usage by 2050, Led by Growth in Asia," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 24, 2019.

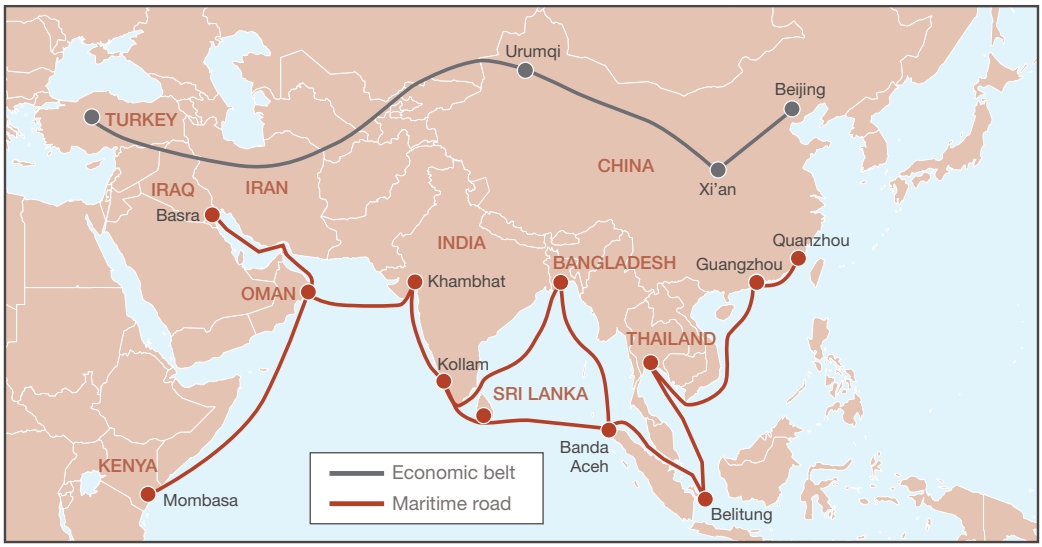
[20] "Russia Comes in as China's Top Crude Oil Supplier, Ahead of Saudi Arabia," Reuters via CNBC, January 25, 2019.

[21] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2020, p. 67.

[22] Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 133; Chu Daye, "Surging Global LNG Prices to Inflate Chinese Costs, but Diversified Sources Offer Relief," *Global Times*, August 22, 2021.

[23] Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," New York: Council on Foreign Relations, last updated January 28, 2020.

FIGURE 2.1
Map of Belt and Road Initiative



SOURCE: Xinhua, "Oman Wants to be China's Key Partner in Belt and Road Initiative, China Envoy," July 1, 2015.

imports came from Turkmenistan via a pipeline that runs through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. While China has sought to diversify energy suppliers and reduce dependency on strategic choke points, it will continue to rely on sea lines of communication (SLOC) such as the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca for most of its hydrocarbon deliveries. The large volume of oil and natural gas imported from Africa and the Middle East will make securing strategic SLOC a priority for China for at least the next 15 years.[24] In 2019, approximately 77 percent of China's oil imports and 10 percent of its natural gas imports transited the South China Sea and the Strait of Malacca.[25]

China's energy security interests extend to the Arctic region. China has invested in the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline and financed the liquid national gas project in Yamal.[26] This, combined with the opening of the Northern Sea Route, has provided the foundation for future energy cooperation between China and Russia. China's Polar Silk Road, part of the BRI, is expected to serve as a vehicle for increased Sino-Russian investment and coopera-

[24] Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 133, 134.

[25] Vipin Arora, George Pantazopoulos, and Henry Tolchard, "China's Projected Energy Consumption Mainly Depends on Its Overall Growth Rates," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, July 25, 2018.

[26] In early December 2019 the first phase of the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline was commissioned, transporting natural gas from Russia's Chayandinskoye gas field to China's border in Amur Oblast. The contract for this pipeline is for 30 years and stipulates that 38 billion cubic meters of natural gas be delivered to China each year.

tion in building Arctic infrastructure to support commercial transit and resource exploration along the Northern Sea Route.[27]

Competition for natural resources and energy will likely persist even if China and the United States were to escalate their rivalry into conflict. Efforts to control access to vital resources could overlap and exacerbate related crises and wars, especially in countries holding important energy reserves, such as those in Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, and possibly the Arctic regions. China's desire to ensure secure supplies could conflict with demands by U.S. allies and partners for access to the same resources. The result could be mutually reinforcing sources of tension and fighting, which could add another layer of intractable conflict to a U.S.-China systemic war.

China's Growing Leadership in the Global Economy

As has been noted, the evolution of the global economy is expected to feature the growing strength of developing countries and receding strength of the industrialized West. Experts have described how the world economy may rely more on China and developing countries for future growth. Chinese sources in particular have highlighted the importance of the BRI, the massive Chinese-led trade and investment infrastructure project connecting Africa, Eurasia, and parts of Latin America. Both a Nineteenth Party Congress report and a 2019 foreign policy white paper promote a new version of globalization centered on the BRI.[28] Although BRI projects have come under considerable criticism for their role in encouraging unsustainable debt and other problems, most Western experts agree that the future evolution of the global economy will likely feature a larger role for emerging economies, many of which are BRI partners. The World Bank estimates that implementation of major BRI projects could increase global trade by 1.7 to 6.2 percent and raise world incomes by 0.7 to 2.9 percent.[29] But a world economy that features greater Chinese leadership could face its own challenges. China and other countries may need to commit military resources to help manage the security challenges posed by disorder and fragmentation in the developing world. Future growth also faces challenges from economy-related issues. The Nineteenth Party Congress report, for example, notes that the "gap between rich and poor countries continues to widen." It also observes that global economic growth has remained slow.[30] Western scholars have similarly highlighted trends toward imbalanced global economic development and inequality,

[27] Mariia Kobzeva, "A Framework for Sino-Russian Relations in the Arctic," Calgary: Arctic Institute, University of Calgary, May 5, 2020.

[28] Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China and the World in the New Era*, Beijing: State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, September 27, 2019b.

[29] World Bank, *Belt and Road Economics: Opportunities and Risks of Economic Corridors*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, June 18, 2019.

[30] Xi, 2017.

slowing growth, a reduction in the economic interdependence that has traditionally served as a restraint on interstate violence, and weakened norms and international institutions.[31]

Although the global economy could experience deceleration and fragmentation, international commerce would still depend on vital SLOC and maritime trade routes. China's overseas trade will continue to depend on several major commercial shipping routes that pass by regions such as the Bay of Bengal, the North Sea, the South China Sea, the Strait of Malacca, and potentially the Arctic.[32] China has long had concerns about the vulnerability of maritime trade routes to piracy.[33] The BRI's Maritime Silk Road, which seeks to better connect China and open new trade routes through strategic access to global ports and waterways, will also create maritime vulnerabilities such as greater exposure to piracy and terrorism.[34] The increasing importance of digital services and technologies means that infrastructure for information technology could also become a more important aspect of the global economy. As but one example of the increasing importance of the digital economy, China's digital payments accounted for 40 percent of the world total and were worth US$790 billion in 2016.[35] Although the future expansion of the digital economy is constrained by a large rural workforce that cannot be easily absorbed into the digital economy, cyberspace will likely remain important for China's economic security.[36]

China's role in leading the "new economic globalization" centered on BRI provides a strong incentive for its military to increase efforts to build military partnerships with clients. The PLA could increase operations to counter nontraditional threats and help build partner capacity in select countries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, as well as along maritime routes through the Indian Ocean and South China Sea. The Arctic region could play a more important role in global commerce, raising the risk of militarization in that area. U.S. allies and partners may find themselves in disputes with Chinese client states, which could result in proxy conflicts between China and the United States. The overlap of resources and markets with BRI routes suggests that prospects for conflict could be higher in all these areas.

Shifts in International Partnerships

Although Western countries may, in general, see their collective share of world GDP decline while that of the developing world increases, major developed countries are expected to con-

[31] Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021.

[32] China Power Team, "How Will the Belt and Road Initiative Advance China's Interests?" Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, last updated August 26, 2020.

[33] "China Raises Security Warning on Ships Plying Malacca Strait," Bloomberg, July 30, 2019.

[34] "Full Text of the Vision for Maritime Cooperation Under the Belt and Road Initiative," Beijing: State Council of the People's Republic of China, June 20, 2017.

[35] Jonathan Woetzel, Jeongmin Seong, Kevin Wei Wang, James Manyika, Michael Chui, and Wendy Wong, *China's Digital Economy: A Leading Global Force*, New York: McKinsey Global Institute, August 2017.

[36] Timothy R. Heath, "The 'Holistic Security Concept': The Securitization of Policy and Increasing Risk of Militarized Crisis," *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 2, June 19, 2015.

tinue to remain key players in the future world order. Both Chinese and Western sources agree that the world is moving away from a unipolar system dominated by the United States. However, they continue to debate what might come next. Chinese analysts anticipate the advent of an international system characterized by multipolarity. Fang Changping defines multipolarity as "power distributed more evenly among the major countries and an increased willingness on the part of major countries to act independently of the United States."[37] Chinese scholars and others perceive multipolarity as providing China more freedom to maneuver while decreasing vulnerability to hostile action by the United States.[38] Multipolarity is also viewed as one of the driving forces behind the reshaping of an international system that China views as primarily dominated by and benefiting the United States. As Yang Jiemian observes, "The multipolarization of international power has been a long-term, historical process of development that is only beginning to see the gradual balancing of international influence between the East and the West in sectors long dominated solely by Western powers, including economy, politics, science and technology, culture, education, and public opinion."[39] Western scholars have also noted the fragmenting of Western power and the increasing might of rising major powers around the world. Analysts no longer regard the prospect of a postunipolar world as implausible and instead debate the implications of a world characterized by bipolarity, multipolarity, or with "no hegemon."[40]

While Chinese scholars describe the benefits that their country receives from a trend toward multipolarity, they also appear to recognize the challenges it brings. Fang Changping notes that multipolarity creates uncertainties for China in the security environment, particularly relating to the U.S.-China bilateral relationship:

> Multipolarity is advancing global interconnectedness in ways that support China's goals of "peace and development" but is also giving rise to several new issues of instability, including rising global inequality, regional hot spot issues, and nontraditional security threats. . . . The uncertainties in the security environment and development issues resulting from regional multipolarization make Sino-U.S. relations a primary factor in determining the stability of China's peripheral and overall external security environments.[41]

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[37] Fang, 2018.

[38] Roy Kamphausen and R. Lincoln Hines, "Introduction," in Roy Kamphausen and David Lai, eds., *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2014, p. 30.

[39] Yang, 2019.

[40] Robert Kagan, "The Twilight of the Liberal World Order," Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, January 24, 2017; Marky Rosenberg, "Experts Get Multipolarity All Wrong," *Foreign Policy*, June 24, 2019; Raphael S. Cohen, Eugeniu Han, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Geopolitical Trends and the Future of Warfare: The Changing Global Environment and Its Implications for the U.S. Air Force*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2849/2-AF, 2020; Bremmer, 2012.

[41] Fang, 2018.

In this understanding of multipolarity, Europe and the United States may remain friendly with one another, but would operate autonomously rather than as close allies. Other rising powers in the developing world, such as Brazil, India, or South Africa, could also play increasingly important roles in international politics.[42] In short, some partnerships may grow weaker, while new ones may emerge for either China or the United States. This may result in a more dynamic and fluid set of international coalitions in a situation featuring intense U.S.-China rivalry and even conflict. Multipolarity could also allow China to expand its informal relationships with countries outside the region, such as in Latin America. There are also risks that multipolar competition could become more destabilizing. One Chinese article notes that the United States is engaging in "technological and institutional innovation in pursuit of absolute military superiority," while France, Germany, India, Japan, and the United Kingdom are rebalancing and optimizing the structure of their military forces. This, combined with advances in artificial intelligence (AI) and other military technologies, means that China's military security is vulnerable to "technology surprise and a growing technological generation gap."[43]

In a multipolar world featuring a China nearing global primacy, China and Russia could become close partners. There has already been an increase in military cooperation between the Chinese and Russian armed forces over the past several years.[44] In June 2019 the two nations upgraded their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership."[45] Chinese scholars generally anticipate that the bilateral relationship will grow even stronger.[46] Over the next several decades, the two countries could expand the scope and scale of military exercises, increase joint air and naval patrols in the Indo-Pacific region and potentially in areas closer to Russia, and increase cooperation in sensitive defense fields such as strategic missile defense, hypersonic technology, and nuclear submarine technology.[47] Increased China-Russia cooperation could also seek to undermine arms control treaties, and this might accelerate an arms race with the United States. If the U.S.-China competition were to turn hostile in the future, China and Russia could collaborate to support operations against the United States and its allies and partners along BRI routes. The two nations could be joined by others that have antagonistic relations with the United States, such as Iran and North Korea.[48]

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[42] 陈向阳 [Chen Xiangyang], 中国当以多极外交引领疫后多极格局 ["China Should Lead the Postpandemic Multipolar World with Multipolar Diplomacy"], 中评网 [*China Commentary*], August 19, 2020b.

[43] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, Inc., July 2019a, p. 6.

[44] For example, in September 2019 the PLA participated in the Russian Tsentr-2019 (Center-2019) exercise, which focused on joint training between the two militaries. Xu Yi, "Expert: China-Russia Military Relationship Enters New Era," China Military Online, December 13, 2019.

[45] "China, Russia Agree to Upgrade Relations for the New Era," Xinhua News Agency, June 6, 2019.

[46] 盛勰 [Sheng Sai], 浅析国际安全形势变化与未来趋势 ["Analysis on the Changes and Future Trends in the International Security Situation"], 黑河学刊 [*Heihe Journal*], Vol. 233, No. 5, September 20, 2017.

[47] Huang Panyue, "China Russia Missile Defense Cooperation Needed," *Global Times*, October 15, 2019.

[48] Cohen et al., 2020, pp. 15, 18.

The shift toward a multipolar international order raises the prospect of a more changeable and unpredictable geopolitical contest in which coalitions shift and partnerships grow or recede in unexpected ways. In such a coalition, Russia could play an especially prominent role. The United States would likely retain friendly relations with powerful entities such as the European Union and Japan, although the degree of alignment may differ. China's appeal as a patron state could grow under conditions in which it had neared global primacy, because it would be better positioned to provide benefits to other countries. A China enmeshed in a global rivalry with the United States would also be highly motivated to cultivate international support. Embattled governments around the world burdened with domestic difficulties or confronting bitter feuds with their own rival states could appeal to Chinese patronage for assistance.

A key factor that could determine the extent of China's network of clients would be how much each country judged Chinese assistance to be more valuable and meaningful than what the United States could offer. This scenario assumes that U.S. power continues to experience relative decline, to the point that its willingness or ability to furnish goods and benefits to its partners and allies had eroded considerably. In such a situation, some disillusioned U.S. allies and partners could decide to abandon their former patron in favor of a position of neutrality or even switch to a more lucrative Chinese patronage. Although countries might hope to remain neutral, autonomy could be difficult to sustain in the face of intense pressure from Beijing and Washington, both of which could be expected to demand some level of support in exchange for material benefits of any type. In many ways, this dynamic would simply replicate a historical pattern featuring an acutely polarized international system, such as occurred in the World Wars and between the United States and Soviet Union in the Cold War. The pattern goes back to the 1700s and 1800s in Europe, where many smaller states aligned themselves with powerful great powers partly in hopes of securing the benefits of patronage. Indeed, studies have found that a rapid expansion in the number of alliances and partnerships tends to precede wars among great powers.[49]

Elevated Risks from Regional and Global Competition

A turn toward hostile rivalry (see Chapter Five) could result in a heightened risk of conflict at both the regional level and beyond. Currently, Chinese and Western scholars tend to regard the risk of war among the great powers as still relatively low. A 2017 RAND report assessed the prospect of war between China and the United States as unlikely, though the study did note an uptick in conflict risks.[50] Similarly, a commentary by Chinese media outlet CGTN rejected as improbable the possibility of U.S.-China war, though it regarded some sort of

[49] Levy, Jack S., "Alliance Formation and War Behavior: An Analysis of the Great Powers," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 25, December 1981.

[50] James Dobbins, Andrew Scobell, Edmund J. Burke, David C. Gompert, Derek Grossman, Eric Heginbotham, and Howard J. Shatz, *Conflict with China Revisited: Prospects, Consequences, and Strategies for Deterrence*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-248-A, 2017.

proxy clash as slightly less unlikely.[51] At the regional level China seeks more sway over its neighboring regions and promotes an order in which U.S. influence does not dominate.[52] Both countries have outlined competing visions for the Asia-Pacific's emerging economic, political, and security order. They continue to face risks of a military crisis over flash points related to Taiwan and the East and South China Seas.[53] Chinese leaders have denounced U.S. alliances and protested U.S. surveillance flights along Chinese borders, the U.S. Navy's Freedom of Navigation Operations, and other activities.[54] Feuding extends to the global level as well; for example, China and the United States have stepped up disputes regarding trade and technology.[55] Since the 2010s, China has sought more significant revisions of global rules and norms, both alone and in conjunction with Russia.[56] In June 2018 Xi identified "leading the reform of the global governance system with the concept of fairness and justice" as one of the ten priorities for China's diplomacy.[57] In our scenario of Chinese near global primacy, the changes in the relative balance of power between China and the United States and their structural differences at both the regional and global levels are the most fundamental drivers of a systemic war.

Implications

These geopolitical trends provide the general outlines of the geopolitical environment within which a hostile U.S.-China rivalry might emerge. The future geopolitical situation could feature a more unstable international environment in which countries compete more aggressively for energy and other resources. A stronger China in partnership with Russia and other developing countries could face off against the United States and its allies and partners. A China nearing global primacy could have far greater international military presence and a larger group of military partners than it does today. Pervasive feuding at the regional and global levels raises the risk that conflict between China and the United States could spread beyond the Indo-Pacific to other regions around the world and in global domains including cyberspace and information technology. Table 2.1 shows the implications of key geopolitical factors for potential conflict.

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[51] Li Yun, "Assessing Risk of Military Conflict Between China, U.S.," CGTN, September 26, 2020.

[52] Cohen et al., 2020, p. 17; Office of the Director of National Intelligence, 2021.

[53] Emre Demir, "Fragmented or Integrated Asia: Competing Regional Visions of the US and China," *Rising Powers Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2018.

[54] Brad Lendon, "Tensions Heat Up in South China Sea as US Makes Significant Show of Force," CNN, last updated July 6, 2020.

[55] Torsten Riecke, "Resilience and Decoupling in an Era of Great Power Competition," Berlin: Mercator Institute for China Studies, August 20, 2020.

[56] Phillip C. Saunders, "Implications: China in the International System," in Roy Kamphausen and David Lai, eds., *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2014, p. 312.

[57] Nadege Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, January 2020, p. 13.

TABLE 2.1
Implications of Key Geopolitical Factors for Potential U.S.-China Conflict

Geopolitical Development	Implication for Potential U.S.-China Conflict
Shifting balance of global power	China's ascent and the United States' relative decline raise the possibility of a power transition war; China is better positioned and incentivized to build a coalition of support among developing countries.
Increasing international fragmentation and disorder	China and the United States must manage a variety of transnational challenges even as they fight each other; there is the potential for overlap in traditional and nontraditional threats.
Competition for resources and markets	Intensification of competition for energy, natural resources, and markets could result in shifting partnerships for China and the United States in the event of conflict; there could be an overlap of fighting for resources and competition for influence and leadership.
China's growing role in the global economy	Growing importance of Chinese-led trade and investment along fragile BRI routes could raise the prospect of potential conflict scenarios involving Chinese- and U.S.-backed forces along those routes; increased importance of the digital economy raises the risk of conflict in cyberspace.
Shifts in international partnerships	There could be the possibility of a closer Chinese-Russian partnership against the United States; security partnerships for both sides could be potentially more fluid and changeable as both the United States and China compete for support.
Elevated risks from regional and global competition	The conflict could span regional and global levels, including conventional clashes over Taiwan, the first island chain, proxy conflicts along BRI routes, and in cyberspace and other global domains.

Military Trends

Complementing our understanding of the geopolitical trends, analysis of anticipated developments in warfare could illuminate how China and the United States might fight under a situation of Chinese near primacy. These trends go beyond traditional comparisons of forces; instead they involve military changes that are expected in coming decades and that could profoundly shape U.S.-China confrontation and conflict. Thus, we review a protracted great power war, society as a domain of warfare, concealment and stealth, gray zone operations, outer space as a contested environment, and war from a distance. As much as possible, we include perspectives from both Chinese and Western sources.

The Heightened Risk of a Protracted Great Power War

Some Western scholars argue that future conflicts between great powers would focus on waging a limited war, because seeking victory through unconstrained warfare would lead to catastrophic destruction. Conflict between great powers could thus be protracted.[58] As used by these experts, the term *protracted war* refers to a form of conflict characterized by long duration and limited means and ends. Such a conflict would aim to avoid the escalatory risks

[58] Andrew Mumford, "Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict," *RUSI Journal*, Vol. 158, No. 2, 2013.

of direct conventional war in favor of indirect conflict that blurs the line between military and nonmilitary domains. The potential for a protracted great power war is further increased by other trends discussed in this chapter, including the intensification of geopolitical competition, conflict over scarce resources, and the resort to measures other than war to achieve security goals. One study from the Center for a New American Security concludes that for future conflicts, limited protracted wars could include "peacetime preparation that is likely to blur with protracted, sometimes domestic, internal security operations, peacekeeping and counterinsurgency or counterterror missions." The study judges that "attacks will resemble raids" in that "armed forces will probably be deployed on the receipt of specific intelligence in highly mobile and exceptionally rapid operations." These small-scale operations would address only local, immediate threats while leaving the broader struggle unresolved.[59] This approach differs from that of many previous great power conflicts, in which countries mobilized large numbers of troops and equipment to decide wars through major combat engagements.

Frederick Kagan has argued that protracted war increases the possibility that states will incorporate economic warfare into their strategies to exhaust the opponent and degrade their will to fight.[60] His and other studies highlight the importance of economics in protracted war. Adversaries could seek to disrupt trade and logistics in the initial stages of conflict and could carry out blockade operations and commerce-raiding operations during the more advanced stages of conflict. Given the rise of global logistics chains and just-in-time inventory systems, even small disruptions in the velocity of trade could trigger large-scale economic challenges.[61] Although the risk of protracted conflict remains low in general, China's growing military capabilities, robust nuclear inventory, and economic clout increase the likelihood that any prospective U.S.-China conflict could resemble a protracted war, a possibility we explore in more detail in Chapter Six's low-intensity conflict scenario.

Chinese scholars acknowledge the possibility of a great power war between China and the United States but regard it as unlikely. While they do translate and discuss Western writings on protracted war, they have tended to downplay its relevance for China. A search for the term *protracted war* on Chinese academic study databases turns up a handful of recent articles that used the term in a metaphorical sense of long-term struggle. An article published in the military newspaper *PLA Daily* invokes Mao Zedong's classic work *Protracted War* to suggest that China must adopt a new development pattern and avoid playing by rules set by the United States to advantage itself.[62] Instead of seeing future war through the lens of protracted war, Chinese military analysts tend to focus on four different kinds of conflicts that

[59] Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr., *Protracted Great-Power War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, January 2020.

[60] Frederick Kagan, "Protracted War and the Army's Future," in Gary J. Schmitt and Thomas Donnelly, eds., *Of Men and Material: The Crisis in Military Resources*, Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2007.

[61] Krepinevich, 2020, p. 35.

[62] 潘宏 [Pan Hong],《论持久战》的新时代回响与史鉴价值 ["The New Era and Historical Value of 'On Protracted War'"], 中国军网 [*PLA Daily*], September 4, 2020.

they judge as more likely for the PLA: (1) a large-scale, high-intensity defensive war against a "hegemonic" country attempting to slow down or interrupt China's rise; (2) a relatively large-scale, high-intensity anti-separatist war against Taiwan independence forces; (3) a medium- to small-scale and medium- to low-intensity conflict related to territorial disputes or Chinese near borders; or (4) small-scale, low-intensity operations intended to counter terrorist attacks, preserve stability, and/or preserve the regime.[63] The acknowledgment of large-scale, high-intensity war against the United States is striking, but such sources do not explore the possibility in any depth, perhaps owing to political sensitivities. Instead these sources tend to refer to war in a general, abstract sense, unmoored from specific scenarios involving U.S. forces. Reflecting this tendency, the experts tend to emphasize the technological dimensions of "future war," such as AI and systems-of-systems warfare featuring information systems, long-range precision strikes, and advanced technologies. They do not discuss how the PLA would use these against U.S. forces in specific scenarios, however.[64]

Society as a Domain of Warfare

Increasingly, warfare is no longer solely confined to the military. The intersection of multiple emerging technologies, from surveillance technologies to AI, algorithms, machine learning, and virtual reality, is creating the potential for aggressors to disrupt and manipulate the information-based foundation of society. As a result, the barriers between military and civilian, and between peacetime and wartime endeavors and responsibilities, are blurring.[65] The potential economic devastation that could accompany such war could deter adversaries from escalating to this level. If deterrence failed, conflict could be waged between and among networks, targeting and disrupting the whole of society, according to Western analysts. As Robert Johnson, an Oxford University specialist in the changing character of warfare, observes, "Future forces will make use of stealth, systemically operating through communications networks and through the exploitation of the vulnerabilities of society. They will use information warfare to spread fear and panic but also wage kinetic warfare on and among civilian populations. Their aim will be to destroy financial systems, infrastructure, and the willingness to sustain resistance."[66] China could also carry out information operations that target U.S. elections, political processes, and governmental institutions or that contribute to broader societal disruption and the shaping of U.S. public opinion.[67]

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[63] 军事科学军事战略研究部 [Military Strategy Research Department, PLA Academy of Military Science], 战略学 [*The Science of Military Strategy*], 3rd ed., Beijing: 军事科学出版社 [Military Science Press], 2013, p. 101.

[64] 李炳彦 [Li Bingyan], 世界新军事变革大势与未来战争形态 ["The General Trend of the New Military Revolution in the World and the Future War Pattern"], 光明日报 [*Guangming Daily*], January 27, 2016.

[65] Michael J. Mazarr, Ryan Michael Bauer, Abigail Casey, Sarah Anita 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, p. xv.

[66] Robert A. Johnson, "Predicting Future War," *Parameters*, Vol. 44, No. 1, Spring 2014, p. 75.

[67] Mazarr, Bauer, et al., 2019, p. 10.

Chinese military analysts have written about society as a domain of warfare since the mid-2000s. Indeed, the concept is embedded within the PLA's operational idea of information dominance, which asserts that the side with the information advantage will win the war. The idea that cybertechnology and information operations can be used in wartime to target civilian infrastructure and shape an adversary's societal thinking has been discussed in authoritative PLA sources since at least 2009.[68] The PLA's Three Warfares concept, a doctrine that calls for employing military assets to wage public opinion and psychological and legal warfare, illustrates the importance China places on seizing the information initiative and continuously shaping the narrative in both peacetime and wartime, including use of information operations and propaganda campaigns to degrade adversary decisionmaking and mobilize support for China's objectives.[69]

Developments consistent with this trend can already be observed in the activities of hackers, activists, and informal propagandists being employed by China or Russia as part of their disinformation campaigns and cyber activities against the U.S. government and business interests.[70] Chinese export of surveillance technology around the globe further creates opportunity to disrupt information networks and collect data that can be used to shape information operations.[71] As a result, any future conflict involving the PLA will almost certainly not remain within the military domain. In addition to the geographic expansion of U.S.-China competition given the geopolitical patterns discussed in Chapter One, the competition, should it turn hostile, would likely broaden to include societal targets.

Concealment, Stealth, and Proxy War

Along with the information-based societal disruption and the challenges that related activities present, future conflicts appear poised to rely more on concealment or stealth. According to scholars who analyze patterns of conflict, methods of stealth and concealment include smaller organizations, as opposed to large armies, operating from other countries or attempting to remain concealed within populations or remote terrain. They also include "war by proxy," where smaller groups and proxy actors assert the right to wage war, equipped with significant combat power. A technology trend, the "miniaturization of combat power," enables smaller and more effective weapon systems with increased explosive power that can be carried by individuals. As Robert Johnson has observed, "The deduction of this trend is

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[68] 党崇民 [Dang Chongmin] and 张羽 [Zhang Yu], eds., 联合作战学 [*Science of Joint Operations*], Beijing: PLA Press, 2009.

[69] 迈向网络强国建设新时代 ["Toward a New Era of Network Power Building"], 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], May 23, 2018.

[70] Examples include the cyberattacks on Anthem, Marriott International, and the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, as well as Microsoft's allegation of Chinese and Russian hackers targeting U.S. election candidates. See Donie O'Sullivan and Zachary Cohen, "Russian, Chinese and Iranian Hackers All Targeting 2020 Election, Microsoft Says," CNN, September 10, 2020.

[71] Samantha Hoffman, *Engineering Global Consent: The Chinese Communist Party's Data-Driven Power Expansion*, Canberra: Australian Strategic Policy Institute, October 2019, p. 4.

that every city, port and province is a potential battlespace."[72] The increase in the number of private security contractors and private military companies participating in security on behalf of states with interests overseas further illustrates this trend. Smaller, more dispersed, and well-armed groups make the conduct of proxy warfare easier, with nonmilitary or paramilitary groups and individuals trained and equipped by both state and nonstate actors.

An illustration of this trend may be seen in China's increasing reliance on the paramilitary People's Armed Police (PAP) to secure interests outside its borders, particularly in Central Asia and along the borders with such countries as Afghanistan and Tajikistan.[73] China is also hiring private security companies, both foreign and Chinese, to protect overseas factories and infrastructure projects in Africa and Central Asia.[74] Furthermore, the use of proxy cybersecurity groups by China, including advanced persistent threat groups, many of which are contracted by the Chinese Ministry of State Security, is another means of concealment because these groups' activities are often unattributable.[75] These activities will continue and are even likely to increase as the U.S.-China competition tightens and China potentially expands its network of client states, particularly along the BRI.

Gray Zone Operations

The term *gray zone operations* refers to operations that seek to achieve military goals primarily through nonmilitary means or use coercion to achieve national objectives below the threshold of war. Gray zone activities involve contractor, paramilitary, and proxy forces to coerce adversaries without provoking a military conflict. They also include nonkinetic means such as information warfare, economic coercion, or cybersecurity activities. Gray zone operations have become more common since the early 2010s. They are cheaper than conventional forms of conflict and carry lower risk of escalation, yet have proven remarkably successful: Iran has used these tools to advance its interests in the Middle East, and Russia has used them in Eastern Europe.[76] In addition, countries are gaining a larger gray zone "toolbox," including capabilities in emerging technologies such as AI-enabled cyberlearning, machine learning, and unmanned vehicles that can coerce and intimidate without the presence of military forces. Though they

[72] Johnson, 2014, pp. 75, 76.

[73] Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," in Nadege Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019, p. 73.

[74] Alessandro Arduino, "China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of a New Security Actor," in Nadege Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2019, p. 92.

[75] For examples of the challenges of attributing attacks to China's ATP groups, see Threat Connect, "APT40 Is Run by the Hainan Department of the Chinese Ministry of State Security," January 1, 2020; Barth Bradley, "APT40 Hacking Group Linked to 13 Alleged Front Companies in Hainan, China," *SC Magazine*, January 15, 2020.

[76] Cohen et al., 2020, pp. 21, 52.

are below the threshold of war, these operations can increase regional instability and the risk of escalation through miscalculation.

Gray zone operations have played a pivotal role in advancing China's interests in the East and South China Seas, as they have been used to further strengthen Chinese administration of disputed waters, island features, and resources. They also serve to establish Chinese civilian and military maritime presence as normal in the hope that the United States, regional nations, and the broader international community will accept China's presence in disputed areas and hence its claims to those areas.[77] While gray zone operations have occurred mainly in the maritime domain, they may provide a model of how China could pursue gray zone tactics on land—for example, in border disputes with India, where China has deployed a combination of military and civilian presence near or in disputed territory; gray zone forces include the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia and the paramilitary Chinese Coast Guard (CCG).[78] Chinese literature also discusses use of AI and cybertechnology to enhance and shape information operations, which are used in gray zone conflicts.[79] Given the relative success of gray zone operations in the Indo-Pacific region, China and the PLA will likely rely on gray zone actions and capabilities in future U.S.-China competition to support China's objectives in other parts of the world and should conflict erupt.

Cyberspace and Outer Space as Contested Environments

Scholars also point to cyberspace and outer space as contested environments in conflicts over the coming decades.[80] China and the United States already contend with each other in the cyber domains, and both sides have also built cyber-military units to defend their interests.[81] While the United States has been the dominant player for decades in outer space through investments in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and satellite capabilities, future U.S. dominance is threatened as China and Russia improve their counterspace ties (i.e., employment of weapons to degrade or destroy space assets). In addition, the private sector is increasingly exploiting outer space for commercial use, including launching microsatellites for imagery and communications purposes.[82] This provides opportunities for other countries, including China, to capitalize on commercial technology—such as navigation and surveillance—that will improve the PLA's global operations.

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[77] Andrew Erickson and Ryan Martinson, eds., *China's Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, Providence, R.I.: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2019.

[78] CCG has recently been placed under PAP, ostensibly putting it directly under control of the Central Military Commission. However, questions remain as to how formal the line between CCG and PLA is. The reforms are still evolving, so these questions will not likely be resolved soon.

[79] 孙伟 [Sun Wei], 智能化作战政治工作制胜机理初探 ["A Preliminary Study on the Winning Mechanism of Intelligent Warfare Political Work"], 政工学刊 [*Political Studies Journal*], No. 8, August 2019.

[80] Cohen et al., 2020, p. 30.

[81] Lyu Jinghua, "What Are China's Cyber Capabilities and Intentions?" Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 1, 2019.

[82] Cohen et al., 2020, p. 22.

China is actively investing in its military capabilities for outer space and cyberspace. The PLA has been modernizing its satellite communications infrastructure; space-based survey, mapping, and navigation systems; and an increasingly diverse range of space launch vehicles.[83] China has a growing fleet of maritime surveillance satellites and dual-use oceanographic and hydrological satellites, as well as an expanding constellation of Beidou navigation satellites—all of which, Chinese scholars note, diminish China's reliance on the U.S.-produced global positioning system. The Beidou constellation achieved global navigation coverage by 2020.[84] These space-based capabilities are supported by infrastructure on the ground that ensures network connectivity, including spacecraft and space launch vehicle manufacture, launch, command and control, and data downlink.[85]

To address the increased vulnerability of space-based capabilities to attack, the PLA has also been developing counterspace capabilities, including an antisatellite capability that it tested in 2007 and 2014.[86] An additional concern noted by Western experts discussing outer space as a contested warfighting domain is that China's missile capabilities are undergirded by space-based surveillance and sensors that can work with over-the-horizon radars and other air- or ship-based sensors to find targets. Therefore, any future conflict involving China in which long-range missiles or hypersonic weapons come into play would likely spread to outer space.[87] For any future low-intensity or proxy conflicts between the United States and China, space-based and navigational capabilities obtained from China by countries along the BRI digital Silk Road would augment the PLA's command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and navigational capabilities, as well as providing intelligence and data-gathering capabilities to Beijing.[88] This would potentially extend China's ability to conduct military operations or support proxy forces in a future U.S.-China conflict.

Long-Range Precision-Guided Munitions

Another military trend noted by experts is that developments in long-range precision strike and multiuse platforms enables countries to place forces at risk from vast distances. New

[83] Mark A. Stokes, *Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on "China in Space: A Strategic Competition?"* Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, April 25, 2019.

[84] Ryan Woo, Liangping Gao, "China Set to Complete Beidou Network Rivaling GPS in Global Navigation," Reuters, June 11, 2020.

[85] Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China, 2019: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, p. 49.

[86] Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019, p. 50.

[87] Larry M. Wortzel, *What the Chinese People's Liberation Army Can Do to Thwart the Army's Multi-Domain Task Force*, Arlington, Va.: Institute of Land Warfare, Association of the United States Army, Land Warfare Paper 126, July 2019, p. 9.

[88] Michael S. Chase, "China's Digital Silk Road," in Nadege Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019.

generations of antimissile technology and semiautonomous vehicles have spurred developments in multiuse platforms that are able to operate on land, sea, air, and electronically.[89] These enable an aggressor to conduct military operations without having to deploy forces close in, and it also increases the costs of response to the targeted country.

China has made efforts to exploit this military trend through the diffusion of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) and highly accurate extended-range delivery systems, such as ballistic and cruise missiles.[90] These include hypersonic antiship cruise missiles, as well as a robust inventory of ballistic missiles, many of which can be adapted to use hypersonic warheads.[91] The PLA also fields approximately 200–300 conventional medium-range ballistic missiles, which increase the range for precision strikes against land targets and naval ships operating out to and beyond the first island chain, and a series of nuclear and conventional intermediate-range ballistic missiles that are road-mobile and increase the capability for near-precision strike as far as the second island chain.[92] Conceptually, PLA scholars discuss target-centric warfare as part of their operational systems concept, which uses precision strike capabilities and intelligent munitions to paralyze an enemy's operational system while limiting nontarget collateral damage.[93] Increased integration of PGMs and other long-range missiles into the PLA's arsenal means that the Chinese military could feasibly target U.S. forces and supporting client states from afar should the U.S.-China competition turn violent. However, the vulnerability of space-based and airborne ISR systems to both kinetic and nonkinetic strikes could mitigate, to some extent, the effectiveness of long-range strike capabilities.

Implications

This section has examined future patterns of conflict and military developments that bear on the PLA's approach to supporting Chinese primacy in the U.S.-China competition. These future patterns of conflict point to several common themes that are likely to affect such a competition. First, they will expand the competition, both geographically and into other domains, including outer space and society. Second, these developments point to a range of ways in which China can support proxy groups or client states through dispersion, concealment and stealth, gray zone operations, and the use of cybertechnology and other emerging technologies to cause societal upheaval. These possible scenarios in turn potentially increase the possibility of low-intensity or proxy conflicts in a U.S.-China competition. Table 2.2 summarizes these military developments and their implications for potential U.S.-China conflict.

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89 Johnson, 2014, p. 76.

90 Krepinevich, 2020, p. 7.

91 The DF-17 and DF-26 missiles are in this category. International Institute of Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2019*, London: Routledge, 2019, pp. 235, 256–257.

92 Wortzel, 2019, p. 6.

93 Dang and Yu, 2009, pp. 3–6.

TABLE 2.2
Implications of Military-Related Developments for Potential U.S.-China Conflict

Military Development	Implication for Potential U.S.-China Conflict
Heightened risk of protracted great power war	There is potential for chronic, limited war that includes economic warfare, smaller and more dispersed military forces, and wider geographic range.
Society as a domain of warfare	The conflict could expand beyond the military domain to include media, information, and cyberspace operations.
Concealment, stealth, and proxy war	There is potential for U.S.-China proxy conflicts involving state-backed forces, paramilitary, and/or defense contractors.
Gray zone operations	Gray zone operations along BRI routes could be used to support China's objectives or shape the environment.
Cyberspace and outer space as contested domains	C4ISR and navigation that augments PLA combat operations across the world could expand; militarization of cyberspace could increase.
Long-range PGMs	The PLA could target U.S. and its partner military forces from afar with long-range PGMs and/or unmanned systems.

Summary

This chapter has examined key geopolitical trends and patterns of conflict that are likely to affect the PLA's support to Chinese primacy. Several implications arise from this discussion that will be discussed in the remainder of this report. First, the possibility of U.S.-China conflict owes in large part to broad historical trends related to the changing balance of power between China and the United States. To date, both countries have ensured that the competition remains peaceful. Although the current risk of conflict remains low, the possibility that tensions will escalate to hostilities cannot be fully discounted.

Second, the broad geopolitical drivers raise the possibility that should U.S.-China competition turn hostile, Chinese cooperation with Russia could become even closer. The rise of the East also points to the possibility that China will be able to broaden the competition to other geographic areas by expanding its network of supportive client states in the developing world—most likely along BRI routes. This in turn could increase the potential for military crises and incidents involving China and possibly the United States across a much broader geographic region than is the case today. China's deepening energy dependence could also lead to an expansion of Chinese military presence in Africa and the Middle East, which could provide Beijing with military options should a U.S.-China conflict erupt.

The military trends discussed in this chapter carry important implications regarding the potential trajectory of U.S.-China conflict as well. The risks of escalation provide a strong incentive for the two great powers to resort to more indirect methods of fighting, including economic warfare, information operations, and cyberwarfare. The overlap of unsettled and disordered geographic regions with China's pursuit of infrastructure development along the

BRI, the competition for resources, and an emerging mode of war featuring the blurring of military and society in conflict and the involvement of nonuniformed forces raise the prospect of low-intensity proxy wars. Improvements in space-based capabilities could allow China to field forces farther away and bolster its confidence to carry out combat operations abroad. The long ranges of advanced PGMs and the advent of new technologies suggest conflict could be waged at greater distances and also involve more dispersed forces.

CHAPTER THREE

Insights from the Wars of Past Global Leaders

In a situation featuring Chinese near primacy, the possibilities of U.S.-China conflict could be dramatically different from what we regard as plausible today. What sort of conflicts might the two countries fight in such a hypothetical situation? Where might the conflicts occur? Would the two sides carry out the struggle through indirect means, or would the fighting be primarily conventional? One challenge in estimating how the Chinese military might seek to carry out conflict against the United States in a condition featuring a China nearing global primacy is that China is not today close to contending with the United States for such a status. We lack direct evidence of how China in a position of near global primacy might fight the United States.

One potential source of data that could help us imagine this possibility lies in the experience of past great powers that achieved some form of international primacy. In this chapter we examine historical examples of leading great powers, focusing on the features of highest interest for our research purposes. After delineating relevant cases, we consider the geographic foundations of their international power, the principal methods that each country used to exert control, the reach and strength of their militaries, and the patterns of conflict experienced by each of the great powers. The observed patterns of past leading great powers could illuminate key aspects of potential U.S.-China conflict, including how China might seek to assert its primacy, where Beijing might be most willing to risk conflict, and what types of conflict China might be willing to wage against the United States.

Which Are the Leading Great Powers?

As presented in Chapter One, we define China's pursuit of global primacy in terms that draw from both realist/hegemonic stability theory and systems leadership theory. Given their different definitions and points of emphasis, it should perhaps be unsurprising that the two schools of thought disagree on the historical list of great powers. Both groups agree only that the United Kingdom and the United States have reached the summit of global

power.[1] The consensus owes principally to the unusual degree of concentrated political, military, and economic power each has possessed. By contrast, scholars have not arrived at a consensus on the leading great powers for the preindustrial age, in part because countries rarely experienced such immense concentrations of national power. For example, some countries such as Portugal in the 1500s succeeded as mighty trading powers but lacked a powerful military and had far less political influence on the affairs of continental Europe than did rival land powers such as Spain. Similarly, the Hapsburg Empire in the 1600s may have been a dominant military power, but it lacked economic dynamism and could not compete economically with the Dutch Republic and other vibrant trading nations.[2]

We will avoid the disputes over preindustrial great powers and instead base our analysis primarily on the cases of the United Kingdom and the United States. To these two undisputed examples, however, we will add a third great power for comparative purposes—the Soviet Union. The inclusion of the Soviet Union with global leaders such as the United Kingdom and the United States is not unproblematic. The Soviet Union lacked the concentration of comprehensive national power and global reach that the United Kingdom and the United States enjoyed, and its share of the global economy never reached more than a fraction of its chief rival, the United States. However, the Soviet Union's formidable military arsenal, political influence, and substantial population do, by most criteria, meet the threshold for a great power. More relevant to our purposes, including the Soviet Union can be useful for analyzing China's pursuit of global primacy. Prior to China's ascent, the Soviet Union was the only great power to have been led by a communist party. Since China under Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule has frequently absorbed many lessons and imitated various aspects of the Soviet Union, the experience of the Soviet Union it its prime could offer insights into China's case.

To facilitate analysis, we aim to more clearly define the periods of primacy experienced by the three countries. We define *period of primacy* as the time when the leading great power became the undisputed globally dominant power or, in the case of the Soviets, the undisputed Eurasian regional power. In the case of the United States and the United Kingdom, we measure this economically, by noting the years when the country in question had the single largest share of world GDP. The two nations saw their largest share of world GDP in the years 1945–1973 and 1815–1873, respectively. The United States outperformed the United Kingdom by some measure, as it was responsible for between 30 and 40 percent of world GDP at the height of its strength and GDP remained above 25 percent through 1973. Even in the 1990s and early 2000s, the United States retained an impressive 20 percent of world GDP by itself. By comparison, the United Kingdom at its height accounted for about 15 percent of

[1] Boswell and Sweat, 1991, p. 125.

[2] Boswell and Sweat, 1991, p. 124.

world GDP.[3] The Soviet Union's economy performed relatively poorly compared with that of its Western competitors, never rising above 3 percent of world GDP. However, it dominated the economy of Eastern Europe as a regional power. At its height from the late 1940s through the mid-1970s, the Soviet Union experienced its highest rates of per capita GDP growth due to rapid capital accumulation.[4]

In comparison with these historical precedents, China has not arrived at a point of global primacy, despite decades of rapid growth. We tentatively mark the late 2030s as a hypothetical period of Chinese near primacy, which assumes the country's economy overtakes that of the United States. Some economists project that China could have the world's largest economy by 2030 and that this share could continue to grow through 2050.[5] Others reject this as implausible.[6] Resolution of this issue lies beyond the scope of this report. For purposes of analysis, we will assume that the size of China's GDP overtakes that of the United States in nominal terms in the late 2030s, although it continues to lag in terms of per capita GDP. We have no way of judging how long a hypothetical period of hegemony could last, although past precedents suggest a range between 30 and 60 years. We emphasize that these are merely planning assumptions, not predictions.

Bookending each country's period of primacy are phases of ascent and decline; each country in our sample shared a similar position in the international system relative to other countries. Periods of ascent are characterized by expanding economies and improving internal state capacity. Each of the countries had a minor share of world GDP, but that share grew relative to that of their competitors. According to such criteria, countries can be on the ascent for a very long time. To narrow the focus of analysis, we have selected periods of time when the international system featured multipolarity and there was no clear dominant power. For the United Kingdom, this corresponds roughly with the period 1763–1815, when numerous European powers vied for supremacy; for the United States it was 1873–1945. The Soviet Union's phase of ascent in Eastern Europe may be marked from its formation in 1922 until the end of World War II.

China overcame enormous difficulties stemming from civil war, foreign invasion, and economic disaster to establish the People's Republic of China in 1949. However, the Maoist period saw uneven economic growth and considerable political disarray. By the early 1970s, China still remained one of the world's poorest countries, but the turn toward market reforms in 1979 coincided with a dramatic increase in GDP growth, which averaged

[3] "Maddison Historical Statistics," web database, University of Groningen, last updated November 2, 2020.

[4] Mark Harrison, "The Soviet Economy, 1917–1991: Its Life and Afterlife," Vox EU, November 7, 2017.

[5] Uri Dadush and Bennett Stancil, *The World Order in 2050*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 2010.

[6] Joseph Nye, "China Will Not Surpass the United States Anytime Soon," *Financial Times*, February 19, 2019.

nearly 10 percent annually through early 2018.[7] China's international political and military power lagged behind its economic strength through the 1980s and 1990s, but by the early 2000s its growing national power became clear; the era of U.S. unipolarity was nearing its end.

For the purposes of our analysis, periods of decline can be defined as periods when new competition from rival states erodes the position of the leading great power. After all, no country remains supreme forever, though the duration of their respective tenures may vary considerably from one to another. In economic terms, a period of decline means that the leading global power no longer has the single largest share of world GDP or that its share had declined from the peak it enjoyed during its years of primacy. The United Kingdom's share of global GDP declined after 1873, when it experienced greater competition from rivals, including Germany and the United States. The United States saw its share of world GDP decline significantly beginning in the 1970s. Although it retained the single largest economy for decades afterward, its position began to be more actively contested by China in the early 2000s.[8] As a regional power, the Soviet Union's economy stagnated in the late 1960s, and by the mid-1970s Moscow experienced a severe economic slowdown; this was followed by poor economic performance in the 1980s, which eventually led to the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[9] Of course, since the period of Chinese hegemony is based on speculation, we have no way to judge when it might enter its period of decline.

These definitions and time frames provide us with a sample of previous great powers with which we can now compare China and its prospects (see Table 3.1). The sample also provides some case studies for comparative analysis, which we will carry out in the following section.

TABLE 3.1
Periods of Ascent, Primacy, and Decline for Select Leading Great Powers

Country	Primacy Type	Years of Ascent	Years of Primacy	Years of Decline
United Kingdom	Global	1763–1815	1815–1873	1873–1939
United States	Global	1873–1945	1945–1974	1974–present
Soviet Union	Regional	1911–1944	1945–1976	1977–1990
China	Global?	1979–2030s?	Late 2030s?–?	?

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Go, 2012; "Maddison Historical Statistics," 2020.

[7] Congressional Research Service, *China's Economic Rise: History, Trends, Challenges, and Implications for the United States*, June 25, 2019.

[8] "Maddison Historical Statistics," 2020.

[9] Harrison, 2017.

Key Features of Past Leading Great Powers

Having identified our cases, we now compare them in terms of geographic foundations of primacy, methods of control, military reach and strength, and patterns of conflict. In this section we also consider how China's case might compare with these precedents.

Geographic Foundations

Past leading great powers may have exerted influence across continents, but scholars of past empires have noted how the dominance of each was structured by specific geographic regions.[10] The geographic regions most essential to sustaining a leading great power typically featured a dense network of trade, investment, security, and political relationships. The geographic regions most essential to the success of one global leader have generally differed from those of its predecessor. This is because rising powers tend to build their partnerships in countries that are less vital to the status quo power, due to the lower risks of provoking conflict with the leading power. The British Empire, for example, depended on a ribbon of territories through the center of Africa and the Middle East, a massive colony in South Asia, and several islands in the Caribbean and Pacific regions.[11] The United Kingdom gradually assembled its empire through conquest, cultivation of client states, and other forms of statecraft over the span of several centuries, with British power reaching its zenith in the mid- to late 1800s. Economically each of the geographic regions contributed vital trade resources and industry. The Caribbean furnished sugar, and India provided cotton and other manufactured goods and commodities. The United Kingdom also profited handsomely from trade in tea and exotic commodities from its outposts in China and the Pacific. To secure its overseas interests, it maintained colonies and supported client states with a modest expeditionary army augmented by native levies. It also maintained a robust navy to ensure secure sea lines of communication for its far-flung empire.[12]

By contrast, the geographic foundations for U.S. primacy lay in the Americas, western Europe, and East and Southeast Asia, with Japan being the most important Asian partner.[13] Economically, the United States traded with these regions and built up industrial ties with western Europe, Japan, Latin America, and other Asian countries. With colonialism discredited after World War II, the United States protected its interests in these regions through the formation of alliances: NATO in western Europe, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO)

[10] Halford John Mackinder, "The Geographical Pivot of History," in *Democratic Ideals and Reality*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 1996.

[11] Ernest Young, "Some Geographical Problems of the British Empire," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Vol. 162, No. 1, July 1932.

[12] Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, London: St. Martin's Griffin, 1997.

[13] Aaron Major and Zhifan Luo, "The Political-Military Foundations of China's Global Ascendancy," *Journal of World Systems Research*, Vol. 25, No. 2, 2019.

in the Middle East, the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Southeast Asia, and bilateral alliances formed with countries such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, South Korea, the Republic of China on Taiwan, and Thailand. The United States fielded a large military presence abroad in bases hosted by its allies, and naval dominance allowed it to ensure security for global commerce and energy supplies originating from the Middle East. But the United States also protected its interests through support for client states and occasional smaller-scale military interventions, as it did in Latin America during the Cold War.

The Soviet Union never reached the heights of global power exercised by the United Kingdom or the United States. However, it did achieve primacy across parts of Eurasia, and especially Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Moscow maintained friendly ties with a handful of communist nations in Asia, such as North Korea and Vietnam, and in Latin America. Economically the Soviet Union traded with its communist allies and partners through the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance.[14] To protect its interests, Moscow formed an alliance with satellite Eastern European states, the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union also provided military training, arms sales, and other forms of security assistance to communist partners and Moscow-aligned insurgencies across the developing world.

China has not yet attained the summit of global leadership, but it has already made clear the geographic areas that it regards as most essential to its international position: Africa, the Caribbean, Central, South, and Southeast Asia, eastern and southern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East are the principal areas designated as part of the BRI, which has largely coincided with the patterns in trade, investment, bilateral and multilateral collaboration, and infrastructure development promoted by Beijing (see Table 3.2). Importantly, these are also areas that have tended not to be critical to U.S. power. Following the pattern set by the preceding cases, China has concentrated its build up of partnerships in areas neglected by the United States.

An illustration of the importance placed on these geographic regions can be seen in China's investment patterns. In the 1990s Beijing focused on areas largely neglected by the incumbent world leader and expanded its foreign directed investment in Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. However, Chinese foreign directed investment patterns diversified in the early 2000s to extend to Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and the United States.[15] These countries also experienced substantial increases in trade, reflecting their importance to China as sources of raw materials and technology and as markets for finished goods.[16] China's increasing dependence on energy imports has reinforced the importance of these geographic regions. The 2000s have also seen a significant expansion of China's partnerships for oil imports, much of which have involved Latin America, the Middle East, Russia, and coastal southwestern

[14] Michael C. Kaser, *Comecon: Integration Problems of the Planned Economies*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967.

[15] American Enterprise Institute, "China Global Investment Tracker," web database, undated.

[16] Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development, *China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment, and Finance Landscape*, OECD Business and Finance Outlook, Paris, 2018.

TABLE 3.2
Geographic Foundations of Leading Great Powers

Leading Great Power	Geographic Foundation
United Kingdom	Caribbean; India; Middle East; sub-Saharan Africa; posts in China and Pacific Islands
United States	Americas; western Europe; Northeast Asia; Southeast Asia
Soviet Union	Eastern Europe and Central Asia
China	Africa; Caribbean; Central, South, and Southeast Asia; eastern and southern Europe; Latin America, Middle East (aspirational)

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Mackinder, 1996; Major and Luo, 2019; Young, 1932.

Africa.[17] China's presence in these regions also extends to collaboration on a variety of issues, including manufacturing, production, research, infrastructure construction, among others.[18] Indeed, Chinese officials have characterized "collaboration" as the "key" to the BRI Initiative, to distinguish it from the traditional trade and investment activities typically undertaken by countries everywhere.[19] China shares with the United States extensive trade and investment ties with Europe and Japan, for example. China also maintains robust trade and investment ties with the United States. However, China's involvement in the infrastructure development, technological research and development, and manufacturing processes of the richest nations is limited. By contrast, China has sought to cultivate a closer cooperative relationship with its BRI partners. As Chinese involvement in relevant countries has deepened, China's security interests have also increased. Beijing has focused on military diplomacy to bolster its security ties with its partners; relevant activities include arms sales, military training and exercises, senior leader visits, port calls, and other forms of security assistance, all of which have seen a dramatic increase in scale and scope since 2000, especially in countries along BRI routes.[20] China has maintained a continuous naval presence in the Gulf of Aden to combat maritime piracy, and Beijing established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.[21]

Methods of Control

Leading great powers stand apart from other wealthy, powerful countries in their ability to influence and determine events in other countries. By definition, countries that enjoy primacy

[17] Jeff Barron, "China's Crude Oil Imports Surpass 10 Million Barrels per Day in 2019," Washington, D.C.: U.S. Energy Information Administration, March 23, 2020.

[18] Nadege Rolland, *A Concise Guide to the Belt and Road Initiative*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, April 2019.

[19] "Collaboration Is Key for the Belt and Road Initiative," Reuters, December 13, 2018.

[20] Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, *Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2017.

[21] "China Formally Opens First Overseas Military Base in Djibouti," Reuters, August 1, 2017.

have a greater ability to influence other countries than countries that do not. Thus they not only have power in the form of superior resources but also exhibit power over other countries to make them comply with their preferences to varying degrees. Compliance may be imperfect, and control may be weak, but there should be evidence that the preeminent power has the ability to either direct or influence the behavior of subordinate countries.

Julian Go, a theorist in imperial formations, has distinguished between two forms of control. The first, formal control, consists of a relationship in which a great power directly controls and administers a subordinate state, usually a colony.[22] This tends to take the form of laws that delineate the inferior rights and obligations of the dependent state. Officials from the mother country also directly administer affairs in the subordinate state. By contrast, informal control relies on indirect methods that nominally respect the sovereignty of the dependent power. However, in practice, the leading great power relies on many instruments and tools to exercise influence. These may take the form of incentives offered through alliances, bribes, blackmail, and intimidation. They may include support for coups, assassination, military invasions, and other actions to overthrow a recalcitrant regime and install a more compliant government. The degree of control under informal control varies greatly by situation and relationship and in general is considerably weaker than that exercised under formal control. Informal control offers its own advantages, however: It generally carries far less cost and risk to the leading great power since there is no need to maintain costly and politically contentious occupying armies; It is also more sustainable politically, since the subordinate country maintains the appearance of its sovereignty and independence. This latter point is especially important since the advent of the world decolonization movement, which has resulted in global norms against formal empire.

The British Empire exercised both forms of control throughout its ascent, height of primacy, and decline. It established colonies in Africa, India, North America, and elsewhere. However, it also maintained informal forms of control through protectorates, in which the United Kingdom acknowledged the sovereignty of the country and permitted local leaders to rule. In exchange, the protectorates provided military access and support to London. The United Kingdom also maintained clients in the Caribbean, the Middle East, Oceania, Southeast Asia, and sub-Saharan Africa. British authorities exercised control through a variety of methods, including offering financial aid and investment, arms sales, military assistance, and training, and occasionally through coercive acts including military demonstrations or even large-scale military interventions.

The United States practiced a mix of formal and informal control in the early decades of its ascendance. It supported client states in Latin America in the late 1800s, for example, but also seized the Philippines as a colony from Spain in the Spanish-American War. However, after World War II, U.S. ascendancy coincided with an evolution in the international system premised on the rejection of colonialism. In a global order defined by nation-states,

[22] Julian Go, *Patterns in Empire: The British and American Empires, 1688–Present*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

the United States supported national independence movements and then used techniques of informal control—such as financial, military, and advisory aid—to bolster friendly political regimes.[23]

During its early years, the Soviet Union engaged in war to conquer and annex provinces. After World War II, however, ideological opposition to colonialism and advocacy of national liberation, as well as a lack of accessible territory not "claimed" by other nations, discouraged Moscow from pursuing formal methods of control. From its period of regional primacy to its dissolution, the Soviet Union relied on informal methods of control. Moscow recognized the nominal autonomy of countries in the Eastern bloc, yet the reality of military occupation, economic dependence, and lack of autonomy on the part of the satellite communist states underscored the extent of Soviet domination. Moscow controlled the installation of sympathetic leaders and ensured that the military and intelligence services of Eastern bloc countries were populated with individuals loyal to Moscow. When countries demonstrated too strident an opposition to Moscow's preference, the Red Army invaded, as happened in Czechoslovakia in 1968. The Soviet Union thus exercised informal control of an unusually assertive variety.

China shares with the Soviet Union an ideological opposition to colonialism, and it also lacks accessible territory not "claimed" by its neighboring nations. Unlike the Soviet Union, though, it rejects the principle of military alliances, which Moscow maintained with the Warsaw Pact. Accordingly, China has relied on informal techniques of control, including offers of financial assistance, infrastructure investments, and various forms of security assistance, such as arms sales. Between 1999 and 2010 China went from having fewer than ten arms export partners to more than 20. From 2015 to 2019, China was the fifth largest exporter of arms.[24] This expansion in the "harder" forms of militarism has been exceeded by an even more rapid expansion of "softer" forms of political and military engagement. Chinese economic developmental aid expanded rapidly, with the number of countries receiving some kind of developmental assistance nearly doubling, from 47 in 2000 to 93 in 2012.[25] This same period is also marked by the PLA's extensive engagement in military diplomacy. While systematic data on these activities are available only for the years after 2002, researchers see this level of activity with a large number of partner countries as marking a significant expansion in the PLA's international engagement when compared with that of earlier decades.[26] China has also stepped up the use of coercive instruments, including threats of economic sanctions, diplomatic retaliation, and—possibly—support for at least one coup.[27]

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[23] Major and Luo, 2019, p. 440.

[24] Georg Mader and Stephen Elliot, "SIPRI: Biggest Arms Exporters and Importers," European Security & Defense, March 12, 2020.

[25] Charles Wolf, Xiao Wang, and Eric Warner, *China's Foreign Aid and Government-Sponsored Investment Activities: Scale, Content, Destinations, and Implications*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-118, 2013.

[26] Major and Luo, 2019.

[27] "Myanmar Coup: China Blocks UN Condemnation as Protest Grows," BBC, February 3, 2021.

To date, these methods have yielded at most a modest bounty in terms of Chinese influence and control. Polls indicate that China's efforts to win international backing have generally fallen short, especially in the developed West.[28] Scholars have dismissed the possibility of Chinese international power by noting the enduring limitations of its appeal.[29] But some of the limitations of Chinese influence can be explained by the fact that it remains a weaker country compared to the United States. China may be able to provide considerable economic assistance to countries, but it cannot provide the forms of diplomatic and military assistance that the United States can with its broad network of partnerships, which is one of the main benefits of being the incumbent global leader. So long as the U.S. position seems secure, countries around the world have a strong incentive to favor U.S. over Chinese power.

Much of this would change in our scenario since it features China nearing global primacy. The collaboration currently underway in countries along BRI routes would in our hypothetical situation become more fruitful, resulting in a more substantial and persistent Chinese presence in the infrastructure, manufacturing, and technological development of its partner states, as well as in their diplomatic and political activities. Indeed, in our scenario, the degree of collaboration would have advanced to such a degree that many of the states would become dependent on China, which would mark their transition from "partners" with the autonomy to reject Chinese demands to "clients" that would be less able to reject the same demands. A more successful and wealthier China would be better positioned to offer a broader array of benefits to its clients, and it would be politically and militarily more capable of providing a competing, though not necessarily symmetrical, set of benefits to what the United States traditionally offered. Importantly, U.S. relative power would have waned, thereby eroding its ability to furnish benefits to its own allies and partners. In an era of fragmentation and disorder, governments disillusioned with Washington's inability or unwillingness to provide substantial aid could either adopt a neutral stance or turn to Beijing as a patron.

Even so, it is possible that in our scenario China does not achieve the level of international support enjoyed by the United States. Regarding countries on its periphery, China probably would not even exercise the type of tight control that Moscow held over the Eastern bloc. Chinese informal control could thus be considerably weaker than that seen in the other cases, with clients experiencing a higher degree of autonomy. One way China could mitigate the weaknesses of its control might be to generally support illiberal or authoritarian regimes that could suppress any popular discontent with pro-Chinese policies. Beijing might find this approach appealing as well due to its own political preferences. In short, Beijing in such a hypothetical future would rely primarily on informal control during its period of hegemony and as its primacy declined (see Table 3.3).

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[28] Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "Unfavorable Views of China Reach Historic Highs in Many Countries," Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, October 6, 2020.

[29] David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

TABLE 3.3
Methods of Control of Leading Great Powers

Leading Great Power	Control During Ascendance	Control During Primacy	Control During Decline
United Kingdom	Formal and informal	Formal and informal	Formal and informal
United States	Formal and informal	Informal	Informal
Soviet Union	Formal and informal	Informal	Informal
China	Informal	Informal?	Informal?

SOURCE: Go, 2012.

Military Reach and Strength

In this section we briefly evaluate the structure of military power for the countries in our sample. In particular, we are interested in the ability of each country to employ its military force to uphold its international influence and leadership. A robust military capable of power projection is essential for protecting vital shipping lanes, defending clients, and deterring attacks against overseas national interests.[30] To assess a country's ability to project power abroad, we will examine the ability of a country to protect vital shipping lanes through naval power and the ability to fight threats to national interests abroad (see Table 3.4).

In terms of naval power, we are interested in a country's strength relative to rival nations. One way to measure this is to consider its share of major naval combatants during the period of primacy. If the share of a single country is over 50 percent of the global total, then the country may be said to have a globally predominant navy. By this standard, the United Kingdom had a globally predominant navy during the height of its primacy, from around 1820 through the late 1860s. The U.S. share of global power surpassed 50 percent from the end of World War II through the 1990s.[31] The Soviet Union, by contrast, never achieved naval predominance. Reflecting its fundamental orientation as a Eurasian land power with little need to protect global shipping lanes, the Soviet military consisted primarily of a vast ground force, augmented by a modest navy that focused principally on submarine missions to deter the West and a surface fleet that sailed occasionally to Moscow's clients in the developing world.[32] China appears poised to develop in a direction somewhere between the Western and Soviet examples. Unlike the Soviets, China's prosperity is much more dependent on access to the global economy; accordingly, Beijing has shown a much stronger interest in developing a robust navy. The PLA Navy has undergone a dramatic expansion in past decades, and since at least 2020 it has surpassed the U.S. Navy to become the largest navy in the world in terms

[30] Modelski and Thompson, 1996, p. 52.

[31] Modelski and Thompson, 1996, pp. 114–115.

[32] Lyle Goldstein, John Hattendorf, and Yuri Zhukov, "The Cold War at Sea: An International Appraisal," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 2005.

TABLE 3.4
The Assessed Military Power of Leading Great Powers

Leading Great Power	Naval Primacy (over 50 Percent Global Share)?	Ability to Sustain Major Combat Operations on Another Continent?
United Kingdom	Yes	Yes
United States	Yes	Yes
Soviet Union	No	No
China	Doubtful	Possible

SOURCES: Modelski and Thompson, 1996; Goldstein et al., 2005; Koda, 2017.

of the number of major naval vessels. Similar to the UK and U.S. precedents, the PLA Navy is building ships for long distance, oceangoing voyages, including aircraft carriers, cruisers, and replenishment vessels.[33] However, it is unclear if China can achieve a level of naval predominance experienced by its Western predecessors. China faces stiff competition from the U.S. Navy, as well as the substantial navies of India and Japan. Even decades from now, it seems doubtful that China will have achieved global predominance on the scale experienced by the United Kingdom and the United States.[34]

For leading great powers that seek to exert influence on military affairs around the world, possession of a powerful navy is a necessary, but insufficient, precondition. A global leader must also be able to deploy and sustain major combat forces in another continent for weeks, months, or longer. Both the United Kingdom and the United States demonstrated such a capability, with the former fielding expeditionary forces fighting wars as far away as Burma, China, and South Africa in the nineteenth century. The United States not only deployed vast armies to both the European and Pacific theaters in World War II but also fought major wars in Korea and Vietnam during the Cold War. The Soviet Union, by contrast, did not demonstrate the capability to wage major combat operations on another continent. After World War II, the Soviet military supported client states with military advisers in Africa and other developing countries, and it projected major combat forces into neighboring countries, as it did in the Soviet-Afghan War. However, Moscow did not fight any major wars on other continents. China appears poised to evolve into a force somewhere between the Western examples and that of the Soviet Union.[35] China has not fought a war beyond its periphery and currently lacks the capability to maintain major combat operations on another continent. But it has built its first overseas military base, in Djibouti, and it is significantly increasing its expe-

[33] Yoji Koda, "China's Blue Water Navy Strategy and Its Implications," working paper, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, March 20, 2017.

[34] Michael Beckley, "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 42, No. 2, Fall 2017.

[35] Joel Wuthnow, Phillip C. Saunders, and Ian Burns McCaslin, "PLA Overseas Operations in 2035: Inching Toward a Global Combat Capability," *Strategic Forum*, No. 309, May 17, 2021.

ditionary capabilities. In addition to the growing naval fleet, it is expanding the PLA Navy Marine Corps to 100,000 personnel and is adding large transport aircraft.[36] Chinese political and military thinkers have also expressed a clearer intent to field military forces abroad to protect the country's growing array of interests when compared with what the Soviets could do.[37] Yet even with the expanded capability, China will likely continue to field a far smaller expeditionary force than the United States possesses today, owing to a lack of allies, tightening budget constraints, and other factors.[38]

In terms of military might, China's potential evolution as a leading power suggests a trajectory between its Western precedents and that of the Soviet Union. China's navy and power projection capability will very likely far surpass that of the Soviet Union but will likely fall short of what the United States and even the United Kingdom achieved at the height of their respect eras of primacy. Even so, the PLA's anticipated global reach and expanded capabilities open possibilities for military operations beyond the reach of Soviet commanders.

Patterns in Conflict

In this section we analyze the types of conflict engaged in by leading great powers and how these have unfolded in their respective histories. We group the types of conflict by their characteristics and then explore patterns of association between types of conflict and the phases of ascent, primacy, and decline for the sample countries.

In terms of the types of conflict, international relations scholars have expended considerable effort analyzing major wars between great powers. Scholars have noted, for example, that the ample resources of these states permit them to wage wars of unusually destructive magnitude.[39] These wars are of high interest, in part because their outcomes can have a profound impact on the direction of history. Napoleon Bonaparte's defeat at Waterloo by Britain and its allies decisively closed the chapter on Europe's domination by France. Similarly, the immense destruction of World War II shattered fascist power and opened the way for U.S. international leadership.

But although great powers have faced formidable threats in their peer rivals, they also frequently coped with a broad range of other threats. The militaries of these leading great powers often undertook operations against insurgencies or against other minor powers. In some cases, conflicts may have involved an overlapping array of threats, such as insurgencies

[36] "As Overseas Ambitions Expand, China Plans 400 Percent Increase to Marine Corps," *South China Morning Post*, March 13, 2017.

[37] Kristen Gunness and Oriana Skylar Mastro, "A Global People's Liberation Army," *Asia Policy*, No. 22, July 2016.

[38] Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2271-OSD, 2018a; Kristen Gunness, "The PLA's Expeditionary Force: Current Capabilities and Future Trends," in Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Phillip C. Saunders, Andrew Scobell, and Andrew N. D. Yang, eds., *The PLA Beyond Borders: Chinese Military Operations in Regional and Global Context*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, 2021.

[39] Levy, 1983, p. 3.

or a smaller country's military backed by a rival great power. The leading great power may have supplied arms and equipment to an ally to fight a proxy war against the ally of a rival great power. Or the leading great power may have aided its ally in operations to crush insurgencies and nonstate armed groups that were in turn backed by a rival great power.

For the purposes of our analysis, we will categorize military conflicts in three overarching categories, based on key characteristics. The first, *systemic wars*, consists of wars between rival great powers for the purpose of determining leadership in a global or regional political system. Intensely studied by scholars, these tend to feature conventional war between rival great power militaries. However, as the example of World War II showed, such wars could involve the use of nuclear weapons. The fear of nuclear exchange permeated the Cold War struggle for primacy between the Soviet Union and the United States. The advent of cyberweapons and space-based weapons further raises the specter of devastating strategic attacks in the event of an all-out struggle for supremacy among contenders for global powers. Another characteristic of systemic wars is that they tend to be multilateral affairs, involving large coalitions against one another. In such conflicts, the phenomenon of "war joining," in which countries join one coalition or the other, is common. Countries war join partly in hopes of reaping rewards from supporting the victorious side. The outcome tends to result in a significant realignment of international affairs. Examples include the Napoleonic Wars and World Wars I and II.[40]

A second category is *wars of territorial conquest*. These are wars over issues of territorial control. Scholars who have examined past wars have emphasized the salience of territorial disputes as a key driver of interstate conflict.[41] These tend to be bilateral affairs, and the main outcome is the resolution of a territorial dispute. In most cases, these wars involve conventional forces on both sides, though weaker, less developed adversaries may resort to irregular war to combat imperial invaders. Examples include British wars to acquire colonies in Africa and South Asia, the Mexican-American War, and the Spanish-American War.

The third category is *military interventions*. A catchall category, this captures the myriad small-scale military crises, proxy conflicts, clashes, and confrontations that permeate the histories of great powers and frequently involve client states or those of rival great powers. They use military forces and the threat of violence but are not necessarily fatal events. These operations tend to be smaller than those in the other two categories, though not always, as in the case of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Relevant operations include interventions, raids, and military support to a client's defensive or offensive operations. The main aim of these international incidents, crises, and conflicts is to ensure the security of a client and uphold the credibility of the leading great power as an ally. Examples include the 1898 Fashoda incident in East Africa, where Britain prevailed over French efforts at domination, U.S. military interventions in Latin America, the U.S. war in Vietnam, and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia.

[40] Levy, 1983, p. 4.

[41] Dominic D. P. Johnson and Monica Duffy Toft, "Grounds for War: The Evolution of Territorial Conflict," *International Security*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Winter 2013–2014.

Unlike the outcomes of systemic wars, the outcomes of these wars do not by themselves decisively change the overall structure of international power. And unlike the wars of territorial acquisition, these incidents, crises, and conflicts do not have as a primary objective the annexation of land; accordingly, their conclusion does not generally result in changes to the leading great power's boundaries, although it could result in the loss or gain of territory for client states.

A brief consideration of history shows that each of the great powers engaged in many of these types of operations. The United Kingdom, for example, fought major systemic wars against rivals such as France, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. The Anglo-Dutch wars spanned the 1600s and 1700s and resulted in the United Kingdom gaining mastery of the ocean over its mercantile rivals. France and the United Kingdom clashed repeatedly throughout the 1700s and early 1800s, with conflict spanning the oceans, colonies in the Americas, and on the European continent. The United Kingdom also fought off a major challenge to its leading position in the international system by the Germans in World Wars I and II, though the result was such a weakening of its position that London proved incapable of warding off the United States as its successor. The United Kingdom also fought wars to expand its territorial (colonial) holdings in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and elsewhere. It engaged in many smaller-scale military interventions as well. For example, British troops helped the client state Malaysia suppress communist insurgents in the 1950s. The United Kingdom also became involved in numerous standoffs, militarized crises, and other lesser military incidents with either rival great powers or their allies, as it did in the Suez Crisis in the 1950s.

The United States similarly fought major wars with rival great powers in the Spanish-American War, and in World Wars I and II. Washington's repeated clashes with the United Kingdom in the 1800s underscored the often tense nature of the relationship between a rising and status quo leading power. After 1945, the United States faced the Soviet Union as a great power adversary. Although direct war between the two was avoided, they did fight conflicts against each other's allies in the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Soviet-Afghan War. Both sides also struggled against each other through military interventions and proxy wars in such developing countries as Angola, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. The two also faced each other directly in different militarized crises and standoffs, as happened with the Berlin airlift crisis, the Cuban missile crisis, and other incidents.

As these examples illustrate, leading great powers have traditionally carried out a broad range of military operations, from large-scale conventional war to unconventional war, counterinsurgency, and proxy wars (see Table 3.5). However, scholars have noted that leading great powers have shown a proclivity to engage in certain types of conflict at different points in the relative rise and decline of their powers, a point we examine more closely below.

Using this basic typology of systemic war, war of territorial conquest, and military interventions, we can characterize the types of conflict that leading great powers appear most likely to engage in during their respective phases of ascent, primacy, and decline. Scholars of the power transition, hegemonic stability, and long cycle schools of thought agree that the risk of systemic war to decide international leadership is most likely to happen during periods of transition. Thus, the periods of ascent or decline are likely to feature a higher likelihood of

TABLE 3.5
Varieties and Key Features of Conflicts Involving Leading Great Powers

Conflict	Participants	Main Outcome	Conflict Features
Systemic war	Multilateral: opposing coalitions	Resolution of systemic leadership	Conventional war; nuclear war?
War of territorial conquest	Primarily bilateral	Status of disputed territory	Conventional war
Military interventions	Usually involve client state(s) of one side or other	Various, depending on situation	Conventional or unconventional war, depending on situation

SOURCES: Levy, 1983; Johnson and Toft, 2013.

systemic war.[42] Scholars of conflict over territorial issues also have concluded that the relative age of a state affects the propensity for conflict. Newly independent and younger states generally are more prone to fighting over territory than older, mature states.[43] Among our sample countries, wars of territorial conquest occurred most frequently during the periods of "ascent." The United Kingdom's ascent occurred during an age of European imperialism, and wars were sometimes waged in part to gain valuable colonial possessions. It gained territory in the Americas, for example, when it defeated France in the French and Indian War. The United Kingdom also regarded territory not claimed by a rival Western industrialized state as "unrecognized" and thus occasionally seized territories after it defeated Eastern militaries, as did other European imperialists. For example, the United Kingdom annexed Mysore after fighting several wars in the 1700s. In the mid-1800s and afterward, the United Kingdom added to its territorial holdings, but rarely as a direct result of military conquest.

During periods of primacy and decline, the character of conflict tends to change toward conflicts involving client states and various militarized confrontations. As theorized by hegemonic stability theorists, leading great powers carry out these types of more limited military interventions as part of a sort of "system maintenance" to uphold the current order. Rivalries with other great powers may continue, but do not tend to escalate to the point of major war. During the U.S. period of primacy, for example, the nation fought significant wars in Korea and Vietnam, but these were military interventions with client states that only indirectly involved the Soviet Union. The disappointing outcomes for the United States did not fundamentally alter the trajectory of U.S. primacy during those years.

In periods of decline, military interventions may be carried out to shore up faltering influence and stave off challenges from rising powers. Periods of decline may also feature systemic wars, as happened to the United Kingdom. Although it prevailed against its main challenger, Germany, in World Wars I and II, the strain of war broke British power, leaving London too weak to prevent its eclipse by the United States. The Soviet Union may not have been a global

[42] Levy, 1983; Modelski and Thompson, 1996.

[43] Stephen Kocs, "Territorial Disputes and Interstate War, 1945–1987," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 57, No. 1, February 1995.

leader, but it is worth noting that it undertook one of its largest military interventions—the invasion of Afghanistan—in its last years as a waning power.

This overview of the patterns in conflict experienced by past leading great powers carries some implications for our analysis of China's potential trajectory. If we date the start of China's ascent to 1979, then it has generally refrained from war. The exceptions have been minor skirmishes with Vietnam that resulted in the acquisition of territory in the early 1980s—most notably that of Johnson Reef in 1988. China also faces the same reality regarding the lack of easily accessed unclaimed territory as that confronted by the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States in the post–World War II order. The opprobrium of military conquest has made wars of territorial acquisition as unappealing to China as it may have been to the other leading great powers in recent years. Yet that does not mean China has refrained from the pattern of expanding its territorial holdings as it has ascended in power. It may be the case that China has found a less risky, less politically objectionable approach in turning disputed islands and regions into Chinese-administered and firmly controlled territory, as it has done with the South China Sea. Even if these examples are counted, China has carried out a far lower level of war for territorial gain than the other leading great powers in our sample. Of course, it is possible that the pattern could change and that China could resort to military violence to resolve Taiwan's status or its differences with neighbors over disputed land borders and maritime regions. The U.S. government's highlighting of regional flash points involving China is consistent with the logic of territory-related conflict as most likely during the period of China's ascent. The flash points of the East and South China Seas, the Indian border, and Taiwan similarly all imply that a key political objective for Beijing in these situations is to increase the country's territorial holding at the expense of a rival claimant.

The precedent of systemic war in the ascent phase of past leading great powers suggests this possibility cannot be ruled out either. Currently, most Western experts assess the risk of interstate war as very low, despite the dramatic increase in U.S.-China tensions. Chinese scholars similarly share the view that the U.S.-China competition has a very low probability of escalating to war. However, international relations scholars continue to warn of the risks of a "power transition war" and debate the possibility of a Thucydides Trap in which rising and status quo powers fight to resolve the issue of systemic leadership.[44]

Wars for territorial expansion or to resolve issues of systemic leadership remain unlikely, albeit highly dangerous, scenarios. The review of preceding leading great powers has shown, however, that a far more likely use of Chinese military power in coming years may be those related to military interventions. All the countries in our sample relied extensively on military interventions during their respective periods of primacy and decline. This is especially the case for powerful countries that rely more on informal methods of control in the postwar era. China, like the Soviet Union, also opposes formal methods of control for political reasons and thus likewise has a strong incentive to rely on smaller-scale military operations to exercise influence and leadership (see Table 3.6).

[44] See, for example, Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *Atlantic*, September 24, 2015.

TABLE 3.6
Patterns in Conflict Types for Leading Great Powers

Leading Great Power	Conflict During Ascendance	Conflict During Primacy	Conflict During Decline
United Kingdom	Systemic war; territorial war; military interventions	Territorial war; military interventions	Military interventions; systemic war
United States	Territorial expansion; systemic war; military interventions	Military interventions	Military interventions; systemic war?
Soviet Union	Systemic war; territorial war; military interventions	Military interventions	Military interventions
China	Military interventions? territorial war? systemic war?	Military interventions?	Military interventions? systemic war?

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Kocs, 1995; Levy, 1983; Modelski and Thompson, 1996.

Summary

The patterns of past leading great powers carry several implications for China. First, the analysis suggests that China remains in the period of its ascent as a great power. The nature of potential military conflicts may change and evolve as the country grows more powerful, but for the near term, past precedent suggests that the most plausible Chinese conflict scenarios consist of those related to territorial acquisition. Not surprisingly, most analysts regard war to subjugate Taiwan as among the most likely flash points for U.S.-China conflict for the foreseeable future. But in addition, in 2020, Chinese troops fought a series of bloody brawls on the Indian border, which suggests that the unresolved status of that border remains a potent flash point. Other near-term flash points involve sovereignty and territorial disputes, such as those related to the East and South China Seas. However, the pattern established by the other examples suggests that the risks of systemic war remain real throughout the period of China's ascent. As in the case of the rising powers Germany and Japan in the twentieth century, the pursuit of territorial expansion may become inseparable from broader issues of international systemic leadership. These precedents suggest a high potential for any conflict related to Chinese-claimed territory to escalate into a broader systemic war principally due to the risk that the United States might intervene.

This chapter has underscored the importance of how the method of control exercised by a power influences the range of military operations it might undertake. China's preference for informal and indirect methods of control over formal annexation or colonization provides a strong incentive for Beijing to carry out a broad range of military interventions to bolster clients, control threats, enhance China's influence and status, and possibly downgrade rivals, including the United States. Chinese success in exercising informal control could result in reduced U.S. military access in the Indo-Pacific and other areas of strategic value to Beijing, which, in turn, would further undermine U.S. credibility and ability to respond to Chinese military action (see Table 3.7).

TABLE 3.7

Aspects of Potential Global Primacy: Implications for Possible U.S.-China Conflict

Aspect of Potential Global Leadership	Implications for Possible U.S.-China Conflict
Geographic foundation	China's focus on Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East as the geographic foundation for international leadership raises the possibility of conflict with the United States in those areas.
Methods of control	China's reliance on informal methods to control clients suggests that U.S.-China conflict abroad could involve some form of proxy conflict and/or PLA military interventions.
Military power	China may have the capability for limited power projection beyond Asia, and its naval advantage could grow if more countries become Chinese clients.
Patterns in conflict	Through 2040, military interventions seem more plausible, but wars to secure territory and systemic wars could also be possible.

The geographic foundations of leading great powers merit emphasis as well. More clearly than the Soviet Union ever attempted, China has telegraphed its intention to become the predominant power across a broad swath of the world's geography. We should anticipate that Chinese military forces will concentrate on the same regions that hold the country's most vital economic and political interests—namely, Africa, Asia, parts of Latin America, and the Middle East. These are also likely to be the regions most prone to experiencing Chinese military interventions. To the extent that the United States and its allies and partners operate in the same areas, the risks of conflict in conditions of hostile rivalry could grow.

As in the case of the United States and the Soviet Union, both China and the United States could remain rivals for decades, with the prospect for more limited conflict waxing and waning over time. Should China achieve a position of primacy, the nature of conflicts it could engage in might differ from those related to territory. It might instead follow the examples of the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States in carrying out system-maintaining military interventions to uphold its authority, maintain order, and control threats along BRI routes. To the extent that the United States and its allies and partners oppose Beijing's interests and intent along those routes, the risk grows of some sort of military intervention or proxy conflict involving Chinese and possibly U.S. military forces.

CHAPTER FOUR

Strategic Rivalry: Patterns in Crisis, Escalation, and Great Power Conflict

Despite growing tensions, the overall risk of war between China and the United States remains low. Although commentators routinely suggest that the two countries could enter into conflict, neither China nor the United States has shown much inclination to fight the other. But shifting incentives could lead both countries to reconsider the potential risks and benefits of conflict. Scholars have analyzed some of the potential drivers and factors that could prompt such reconsideration.[1] The infinite variability of possible political events that could result in war makes it impossible to predict a future path to war; analysts obviously cannot access data about developments that have not yet taken place. However, we do have data on past great power rivalries and the events that led to conflict. Drawing from these data, we can identify key factors and developments that collectively elevate the probability of hostilities between China and the United States. Adapted to the U.S.-China rivalry, each of these factors may be modified to serve as a key assumption about how systemic conflict might look on the path to Chinese primacy. Of these factors, the following are especially relevant to our analysis and thus merit a closer look: (1) threat perception; (2) issue spiral; (3) serial crises; (4) alliance building; (5) arms races; and (6) rivalry multilateralization. Each of these factors is explored in more detail in a RAND study on scientific findings regarding key political and strategic structural drivers of great power war.[2]

In the past twenty years scholars have gained new insights on the causes of interstate conflict, owing in part to the availability of more data about past conflicts. Sifting through databases covering hundreds of conflicts, Paul Senese and John Vasquez have pioneered the argument that territorial disputes provided a primary cause of interstate conflict.[3] Since the early 2000s, however, the academic community has advanced beyond this finding to focus on conflict-prone relationships between countries—*rivalries*—as a critical driver of conflict. Brandon Valeriano describes rivalry as "a situation of long-standing, historical animosity between two countries with a high probability of serious conflict or crisis." Rivalry assumes a "zero-sum game" over

[1] Rapkin and Thompson, 2013.

[2] Timothy R. Heath and Matthew Lane, *Science-Based Scenario Design: A Proposed Method to Support Political-Strategic Analysis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2833-OSD, 2019, pp. 2, 23.

[3] Paul D. Senese and John A. Vasquez, "A Unified Explanation of Territorial Conflict: Testing the Impact of Sampling Bias, 1912–1992," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 2, June 2003.

incompatible goals in which one side seeks to ensure its own security at the expense of the other.[4] Vasquez defines rivalry as a "relationship characterized by extreme competition, and usually psychological hostility, in which the issue positions of contenders are governed primarily by their attitude toward each other rather than by the stakes at hand."[5] Gary Goertz and Paul Diehl have noted that rivalries tended to feature repeated sequences of militarized interstate disputes.[6]

Scholars have identified two key types of dispute that lie at the core of rivalries. The first type is over disputes of territory and sovereignty—which we will label *territorial disputes*. Territorial issues remain common, especially among contiguous, minor powers (countries with modest economies and limited ability to project military forces beyond the border). Among major powers (countries with more advanced, wealthier economies and militaries with some capability of deploying beyond the nation's borders), however, the disputes appear quite different. The second type of dispute concerns issues of status, influence, and hierarchy in a given order or system—referred to as *positional disputes*. Rivalries over position and status are exceptionally difficult to resolve, and they end only when one or more rivals are forced to move down a hierarchy in a significant and permanent manner.[7]

A *strategic rivalry* may be understood as a type of interstate hostility that involves primarily positional disputes, but may also involve territorial disputes, including those involving allies. Karen Rasler and William Thompson define a strategic rivalry as that which occurs between two countries that view each other as (1) *competitors*—that is, peers or near peers that compete over unresolved, incompatible goals involving positional and possibly also territorial issues; (2) *threats*—that is, having both the intent and capacity of carrying out military attacks against each other.[8] Several additional features of rivalries allow us to more fully describe the phenomenon.

Characteristics of Rivalries

Threat Perception

The official designation of another country as a top adversary and source of threat provides an inducement to the government to authorize policies against that country. The Cold War serves as an archetype in that both Moscow and Washington, D.C., designated each other

[4] 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.

[5] John A. Vasquez, "Distinguishing Rivals That Go to War from Those That Do Not: A Quantitative Comparative Case Study of the Two Paths to War," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 40, No. 4, December 1996.

[6] Gary Goertz and Paul F. Diehl, "The Empirical Importance of Enduring Rivalries," *International Interactions*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 1992.

[7] William R. Thompson, "Principal Rivalries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 39, No. 2, June 1995.

[8] Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, "Contested Territory, Strategic Rivalries, and Conflict Escalation," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2006.

as a top adversary and threat. This incentivized both countries to engage in confrontational policies and to risk conflict with one another. For our purposes, we will assume that both Beijing and Washington have designated each other as a top adversary and source of threat. This assumption hardly requires a leap of faith given the U.S. government's designation of China as a "strategic competitor" in 2017.[9] In 2021 the Secretary of Defense identified China as one of the department's top three challenges, calling it a "pacing challenge."[10] A change, however, would be the designation by both capitals of each other's country as a *serious threat to the respective nation's security and survival*.

Issue Spiral

Another important factor is the proliferation of intractable dispute issues, which may be of both positional and territorial types. The proliferation in variety, frequency, and volume of disputes typifies the problematic relationships most prone to conflict. The intractability of the disagreements and hostility generated by repeated failures to prevail incentivizes each side to regard the other country as an enemy state that cannot be trusted. This also raises the risk that crises can break out in unexpected situations, owing to the depth of antagonism. This assumption once again merely expands on the reality of an expanding array of intractable disputes over trade, technology, influence operations, human rights, and many other issues in recent years.[11] David Dreyer has called this problem "issue spiral," which he defines as a "dynamic process in which tension increases as multiple issues accumulate." According to Dreyer, issue spirals "increase perceptions of fear and distrust" and can lead to the conclusion that the only way to achieve favorable issue settlement in regard to all disagreements is through "imposing one's will." Moreover, issue accumulation increases the stakes of competition and for this reason may, over time, make war more appealing as a course of action.[12]

Multilateralization of Rivalry

Owing to the nature of competition for influence and leadership, strategic rivalries often involve other countries. Intense competition between great powers could polarize a region, adding pressure on relevant countries to "take sides." The phenomena of multilateralization, in which rivalries between major powers overlap with those involving other countries, is common in strategic rivalries between great powers.[13] Great power rivals often have allies that are engaged in their own disputes with the rival power. In the lead-up to World Wars I and II, for exam-

[9] White House, 2021.

[10] Lloyd J. Austin, "Memorandum for All Department of Defense Employees," Washington, D.C., March 4, 2021.

[11] John Ruwitch and Nishant Dahiya, "Timeline: The Unraveling of U.S.-China Relations," *All Things Considered*, NPR, July 22, 2020.

[12] David R. Dreyer, "One Issue Leads to Another: Issue Spirals and the Sino-Vietnam War," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 6, No. 4, October 2010, p. 302.

[13] Karen A. Rasler and William R. Thompson, 2006.

ple, the overlapping competitions and hostile relationships among world powers eventually coalesced into competing alliances. The Cold War, too, featured numerous overlapping rivalries between the allies of the superpowers. These parallel disputes could in some cases escalate to the point of involving the Soviet Union and the United States in a near war. An example is the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, which nearly escalated into a war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Moreover, each great power may encourage other countries to step up their disputes or to refuse to compromise in order to complicate the strategic situation of the rival, which in turn would further accelerate the multilateralization of disputes.

Arms Races

The official designation of another country as a top threat and adversary provides ample justification for significant increases in defense spending aimed at the other country. Arms races are exceedingly common phenomena in acute rivalries that are prone to conflict. We assume that both capitals are allocating more resources to defense and that a greater share of the expenditures is clearly targeted at the other country. This assumption builds on current developments. Although China and the United States have designated each other as major competitors, they have not treated each other as paramount threats in the way the United States and the Soviet Union did during the Cold War. One difference in our analysis might thus be decisions by both militaries to invest in capabilities that more directly threaten the other country than is the case today. More broadly, studies have also noted strong linkages between arms races, alliance building, rivalries, and war. One study concluded that arms races occur most frequently in the context of enduring strategic rivalries and that arms races are more likely in the middle and later stages of a rivalry.[14]

Alliance Building

Robust alliance-building activities correlate with a heightened risk of conflict, as such activities typically represent an effort by each of two rivals to leverage external resources to prevail against its competitor. In addition to the intense alliance-building efforts typically undertaken by both sides, the formidable resources of each country in themselves provide a strong incentive for third parties to align themselves with one or the other country as clients. The intense alliance-building activities of the Soviet Union and the United States provide an archetype of this type of activity. Although the two superpowers avoided direct war, they did fight proxy conflicts on behalf of their allies.

Serial Crises

Numerous studies have highlighted the rapid increase in the risk of interstate conflict that follows a sequence of militarized disputes. Given the context of an antagonistic, hostile rela-

[14] Toby Rider, Michael Findley, and Paul Diehl, "Just Part of the Game? Arms Races, Rivalry, and War," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2011.

tionship, each militarized crisis exacerbates existing dynamics of threat perception and competition, setting the stage for greater conflict. Michael Colaresi and William Thompson have found arms buildups, alliance building, and repeated crises to be significant predictors of war.[15] Similarly, Vasquez and others have outlined a typical "steps to war" process in which two or more rivals build strength either internally, through arms-race-type military buildups, or externally, through alliance building. Ironically, these steps, while ostensibly designed to improve security, exacerbate the broader problems of distrust and deepen the perceptions of threat, and this raises the sense of insecurity and risk of conflict.[16]

The Cold War at its height in the 1960s may provide an archetype of the "intense" level of rivalry. During that period, both the Soviet Union and the United States cooperated very little, scarcely traded, and competed intensely by building powerful militaries, organizing geostrategic blocs of allies, and mobilizing popular support for costly competitive policies, such as the ambitious U.S. space program aimed in part at surpassing that of the Soviet Union following the latter's launch of the satellite *Sputnik 1*. The two countries depicted each other as existential threats and deployed large militaries on a persistent near-war footing. The two superpowers feuded over a complex array of issues ranging from ideology, influence in different parts of the world, and territorial disputes involving allies and partners. Both countries prioritized defense spending and built competing networks of allies, most notably that of NATO versus the Warsaw Pact. The rivalry also featured a high degree of multilateralization as proxy conflicts and parallel rivalries waxed and waned. Underscoring the connection between rivalry and conflict, the two countries came close to major war during the Cuban Missile Crisis, and their militaries clashed in proxy wars in Afghanistan, Korea, and Vietnam, among other places.[17]

Strategic Rivalry in General

To summarize, the concept of strategic rivalry may provide an analytic tool to help inform a more accurate assessment of the risks of crisis and conflict between two states. In general, the stronger the dynamics of competition and threat perception, the higher the risk of serial militarized crises and conflict. Several observable behaviors can help us assess the relative intensity of a strategic rivalry. These include the level of mobilization of resources against an enemy; whether a government designates a state as an enemy; and the presence of arms races, alliance-building activity, and overlapping rivalries involving other states. Table 4.1 summarizes these features and sorts them according to the relative intensity of the rivalry dynamic, with the high level based on the early Cold War as an archetype.

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[15] Michael Colaresi and William R. Thompson, "Alliances, Arms Buildups and Recurrent Conflict: Testing a Steps to War Model," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 67, No. 2, May 2005.

[16] Paul D. Senese and John Vasquez, *The Steps to War: An Empirical Study*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008, p. 2.

[17] John Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, New York: Penguin, 2016.

TABLE 4.1
Indicators for Assessing the Intensity of Strategic Rivalry

Indicator	Lower Risk of War	Higher Risk of War
Level of resource mobilization	Low level of mobilization of resources against rival	High level of resource mobilization against rival
Threat perception	Government does not identify rival as top threat	Government identifies rival as a top threat
Dispute issues	Few, manageable	Acrimonious array of intractable positional and territorial disputes
Militarized crises	One or fewer	Two or more
Arms races	Defense spending within norm	Elevated levels of defense spending, capabilities clearly target rival's military
Alliance building	Little effort to build coalition aimed at rival	Intense effort to build coalition targeting rival
Multilateralization	Disputants limited to two parties	Multiple parallel, overlapping rivalries

SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Colaresi and Thompson, 2005; Dreyer, 2010; Rasler and Thompson, 2006.

How U.S.-China Rivalry Might Escalate to Conflict

What do these findings tell us about the possible onset of a hostile U.S.-China rivalry? The first important point to make is that war between China and the United States is far from inevitable. Given its economic weaknesses, daunting geopolitical constraints, and other limitations, China's ability to surpass the United States is far from clear. Moreover, although the United States suffers its own economic and political liabilities, it retains formidable advantages.[18] A power transition could be delayed for many more years. It may turn out that Beijing judges that it simply cannot compete with Washington and eventually peacefully concedes the contest. This occurred in the case of the Soviet Union, which gave up the contest and conceded its inability to keep pace with the United States in the late twentieth century.[19]

But even if we assume that China overcomes its weaknesses and mounts a strong challenge, the prospects for rivalry and conflict will depend on several key factors, the most important of which may be the speed and extent of the United States' relative decline and that of China's ascent.[20] The competition between China and the United States could stay peaceful, but it might also turn violent.

Through at least the 2020s and possibly longer, China's position seems likely to remain competitive. For purposes of this analysis, we will assume that the U.S.-China competition

[18] Edelman, 2010.

[19] Karen A. Rasler, William R. Thompson, and Sumit Ganguly, *How Rivalries End*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.

[20] Rapkin and Thompson, 2013, p. 84.

grows increasingly antagonistic as the gap in national power narrows. The hypothetical world we aim to describe differs dramatically from the world today and evokes something similar to the early years of the Cold War. In this situation, U.S.-China relations feature heightened interstate tensions, bitter hostility, and a Chinese leadership motivated and willing to risk some level of violence with the United States to achieve its goals. In this situation we can adapt the general findings of strategic rivalry to paint a picture of a hostile and conflict-prone U.S.-China relationship (see Table 4.2). Because the strategic context will frame the conflict scenarios in subsequent chapters, we will flesh out the picture with a little more detail.

Level of resource mobilization. In this scenario, both China and the United States regard competition with the other country as a top strategic priority. Both governments have prioritized spending to cope with the rivalry, resulting in an increase in resources for defense. Both sides could be expected to compete aggressively for international influence and leadership. Both could also compete aggressively for influence within multilateral groups. In a hostile rivalry, the intensity of the feud provides a strong incentive for both countries to resort to behind-the-scenes tactics, such as intelligence operations, cyber activity, and special forces operations to win friends, undermine allies of the competitor, and surreptitiously damage the interests of the rival country. China has already passed laws for defense mobilization, and in an escalating rivalry Beijing might direct efforts to carry out some degree of resource mobilization. Nevertheless, the two countries cannot disentangle their economies entirely. In the two conflict scenarios outlined in Chapters Six and Seven, the two giant economies will struggle to find substitutes for each other as trade partners.

TABLE 4.2
U.S.-China Hostile Competition Scenario Rivalry Indicators

Indicator	U.S.-China Conflict
Level of resource mobilization	China and the United States have mobilized their respective publics and carried out substantial resource mobilization to support the rivalry, with defense needs prioritized above pressing domestic spending needs.
Threat perception	The governments of China and the United States have publicly identified the other as a primary threat and mobilized their allies and people accordingly.
Dispute issues	China and the United Stated feud over a broad array of dispute issues, usually with little resolution.
Militarized crises	Two or more violent events occur, perhaps in first island chain but possibly elsewhere.
Arms races	Levels of defense spending become elevated; capabilities clearly target rival's military.
Alliance building	An intense effort is underway to build a coalition targeting rival.
Multilateralization	There are multiple, parallel, overlapping rivalries perhaps involving India, Japan, Russia, or others.

Threat perception. In their strategic priorities, both capitals would have labeled the other a top threat. Each would regard the other as a major threat to its way of life. Governments would view diplomatic activity through the lens of the hostile rivalry, with an eye to security vulnerabilities and potential threats from the other country. Military deployments and official statements would reflect the perception of elevated threat. Bilateral relations would be characterized by deep distrust, hostility, and fear of the other's intentions. Persistent U.S.-China flash points such as those related to the East and South China Seas, Taiwan, and cyberspace provide ample opportunity for crises and incidents to erupt and to harden threat perceptions in both capitals. Diplomatic ties between China and the United States will probably have suffered, with possible disruptions to high-level summits and intergovernmental cooperation. To reduce risks of espionage and of the vulnerability of key industries, both sides may have enacted a variety of security restrictions and protective measures. The government leaders in both capitals would routinely describe each other in hostile, adversarial terms.

Dispute issues. A multiplying array of intractable disputes can aggravate threat perceptions and competition. Given relative parity of the United States and China, these would likely span trade, investment, technological, security, and political issues. Indeed, intractable disputes have already proliferated. The key feature of the disputes is that they would become acrimonious and bitterly contested, with little resolution on the most important issues. The lack of progress and pervasive mutual distrust could fuel perceptions of the other side as harboring malign intentions, thus aggravating mutual threat perceptions. This would increase the sense that one side has become a major obstacle to the interests and security of the other side.

Militarized crises. In an atmosphere of intensifying hostility, distrust, and acrimony, the two countries would face a high risk of one or more military crises. These would likely involve the militaries of either China or the United States, or both, and possibly that of one or more allies. The crisis could erupt at sea or on land. Given the escalation of the rivalry from the Asia-Pacific to the global level, it could happen in a broad range of countries, though most likely it would be in those along China's periphery. However, a crisis that erupts in eastern Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, or even the Arctic cannot be ruled out. The crisis might or might not result in fatalities. Whatever the specific details of the crisis, it would likely have several features. First, the initial military crisis would probably not be a planned provocation, and both sides accordingly would have a strong incentive to de-escalate. Second, de-escalation would likely be difficult, due to the high levels of distrust and hostility. Missteps that exacerbate the situation would be possible. Third, the result of the crisis and the difficult de-escalation would likely be an aggravation of the rivalry dynamic, with a hardening of threat perceptions and general hostility. This in turn would elevate the likelihood of a subsequent, more dangerous military crisis. If the pattern continued, the risk of some sort of war could become difficult to avoid.

Arms races. The high level of resource mobilization and acute threat perceptions would provide a strong motive for both capitals to step up spending to build up their militaries and national defenses. The inventories of key munitions could see a significant expansion, espe-

cially in the wake of serious military crises. The challenge of slowing growth and competing spending needs could impose severe constraints on a dramatic expansion of military forces, however. The result could be a shift in resources to lower-cost, higher-impact assets such as those involved in unconventional conflict and cyberactivity. Moreover, overcoming domestic opposition to reallocate resources away from societal to defense needs might require a political mobilization of domestic public opinion. This would entail a heightening of the sense of threat and danger posed by the rival nation, which would probably result in reciprocating denunciations and acrimonious criticisms. This dynamic would merely feed the spiral of hostility, distrust, and perception of threat.

Alliance building. Arms races represent a sort of internal mobilization of resources to strengthen one's military and strategic advantage. But China and the United States could also seek to expand alliances as a way of mobilizing external resources in support of their struggles. The opposing efforts to marshal international support would, of course, involve the deployment of rhetoric that emphasizes the danger and threat posed by the rival country. The result would likely be an intensification of the sense of hostility, threat, and threat perception. Each side could also have the incentive to undermine the alliance-building activities of the other.

Multilateralization. A corollary to the international competition for partner countries and broader influence would likely be the exacerbation of ongoing disputes between third-party countries and either China and the United States or both. The third-party countries would be reacting principally to their own perception of threat as one or the other country stepped up its arms race behavior and menacing rhetoric. However, the aggravation of third-party disputes with one rival would open an opportunity for the other rival to strengthen ties with a potential partner. Examples might include feuds between China and India that aggravate threat perceptions in Japan, which in turn exacerbate Japan's feuds with China. Russia's disputes with the United States could exacerbate tensions between China and the United States as well—if, for example, the United States gained evidence that China had aided Russia in a manner that harmed U.S. interests. The emergence of overlapping rivalries, proliferating dispute issues, and multiple partnerships in support of one cause or the other would help make the situation extremely difficult to resolve, increase the uncertainty of all situations, and expand the number of potential flash points that might involve both the Chinese and U.S. militaries.

Rivalry with Chinese Characteristics

This chapter has sought to lay the context for conflict scenarios by painting in broad strokes the general drivers that could push the two countries closer to war. Past historical great power conflicts have tended to follow a pattern similar to that outlined here. The intensification of a rivalry dynamic, accelerated by deepening threat perceptions, competition, and a proliferating array of intractable dispute issues, would dramatically increase the risk of conflict.

Arms races and alliance-building activities could exacerbate a security dilemma by heightening perceptions of threat and hostile intent in both nations. In such a volatile situation, the sudden onset of one or more military crises could aggravate the rivalry dynamic, drive both nations to regard the situation as unsustainable, and accordingly propel the two sides closer to war.

This historical pattern provides a general template that can help analysts focus on key trends and developments. But the U.S.-China rivalry will have its own distinct dynamics. Should tensions escalate to conflict, there could be aspects of the rivalry dynamic that differ from past norms. In particular, the nature of China's threat perception, its approach to alliance building, the issues in dispute, and the dynamics of multilateralization could manifest in distinct forms.

Regarding threat perceptions, China has since 2002 fairly consistently outlined its most important security concerns in its defense white papers. These take the form of flash points, with the East and South China Seas and Taiwan being the strongest candidates for shock events and crises that could accelerate Chinese threat perceptions. American policies could be modified to bolster the U.S. competitive position, build a U.S. partnership network, undercut China's political and diplomatic influence, or for other reasons. Whatever the motive, clear evidence that Washington has begun to rethink some of its most basic policies, such as the "one China" policy that states that the United States recognizes one country to represent China but also calls for the peaceful resolution of Taiwan's status and identity, or the ownership status of disputed islands in the Senkaku Islands or South China Sea, could dramatically drive Chinese threat perceptions in a hostile direction. Similarly, efforts by the U.S. military to enhance its defense posture by stepping up the deployment of offensive weapon systems in proximity to China—given the context of mutual distrust—could also significantly aggravate Chinese threat perceptions, as could overt efforts by Washington to persuade regional countries to step up military cooperation against China or enact policies that constrain China's regional power.

While in the past great powers have often concluded that alliances are a way to access external resources, Beijing to date has advocated for an end to alliances, calling instead for countries to adopt security relationships based on cooperation with all parties. However, if U.S.-China tensions escalated to the point of hostilities, Beijing would face a strong incentive to leverage external resources against its chief competitor. Military base access and the formation of military coalitions are just some of the vital benefits Beijing could secure from the adoption of alliances. It is possible that China could, under such circumstances, reconsider its opposition to alliances. Some Chinese scholars, such as Yan Xuetong and Shen Dingli, have advocated for just such a change.[21] However, it is also possible that Beijing might conclude security agreements that resemble alliances in form—granting the PLA access to military facilities and permitting the formation of combat-oriented coalitions combined with economic incentives—while continuing to oppose the concept of alliances for political reasons.

[21] Feng Zhang, "China's New Thinking on Alliances," *Global Politics and Strategy*, Vol. 54, No. 5, 2012.

China's focus on cultivating broad political support in the Global South, which generally remains wary of the legacy of Western imperial adventurism and thus alliances with the West, may pave the way to distinct security relationships with its clients there.[22]

The nature of the disputes that drive U.S.-China hostility could differ significantly from past rivalries. For much of history, disagreements over territory between great powers and their allies have featured prominently.[23] In the U.S.-China rivalry, China's claim to Taiwan and large portions of the East and South China Seas remain festering territorial issues consistent with the pattern. But other issues merit attention. In particular, the ruling CCP has made the realization of the country's revitalization as a great power, also called the "China Dream," the centerpiece of its legitimacy. Actions taken by Washington that Beijing regards as potentially imperiling that end state could accordingly be viewed as highly threatening. Already, Chinese officials and press have excoriated the United States for carrying out a "containment" policy aimed at preventing the country's rise. Such arguments cite the measures taken by the United States to bolster its security partnerships with Australia, India, and Japan, a coalition known as "the Quad." Whether such accusations have merit is beside the point. Beijing's perception is what matters for purposes of the threat posed by the United States.

The dynamics of multilateralization could take a distinct form in a U.S.-China rivalry. The formation of mutually antagonistic blocs similar to those that appeared in the Cold War is unlikely to recur in an era of a deeply globalized economy. Instead, most partners of either China or the United States are likely to have some level of trade and diplomatic partnership with the rival country.

Partnerships could accordingly prove more fluid and changeable as countries calibrate how much they are willing to risk in antagonizing one great power or the other. Countries may instead be more loosely aligned. A nation such as India might maintain its own set of disputes, with little overlap with the United States, or it could occasionally side with the United States against China on issues of high concern to New Delhi, such as border disputes with China. European allies of the United States might similarly adopt a selective approach to supporting some actions aimed against China while refraining from supporting others, depending on how much their own disputes overlap with those of the United States.

China, in particular, appears poorly positioned to build a cohesive international coalition in favor of some universal ideal as the Soviet Union or the United States once did. The pragmatic nature of Beijing's international message has tended to emphasize the economic benefits and specific political gains that could be achieved through partnership with China. However, in a situation featuring Chinese near global primacy and a relatively weaker United States, the incentives for countries to align with the United States or China could change significantly from what they are today. A much more successful China would be more attractive as a partner for some countries, especially in the developing world. In this scenario, years of

[22] Rolland, 2020, p. 21.

[23] Kocs, 1995.

Chinese collaboration and involvement in the development of client states along BRI routes may result in a level of dependence that makes it harder for the host nation to refuse Chinese demands for military cooperation. China would also be better positioned to provide an array of benefits for client states. The geographic dispersion and limited military capabilities of the poorer client states—especially in matters of power projection—also raise the question of how broad-based or effective a coalition China could hope to build. China might need to augment any coalition of state-backed militaries with paramilitary and security contractor forces. In a global showdown with a U.S.-led coalition, China could thus find itself leading a disparate group of client states, paramilitary forces, and security contractors that have little in common with one another other beyond Chinese patronage.

Moreover, the polarized international situation featuring a hostile U.S.-China rivalry would incentivize Beijing to more actively seek access and military support from its clients. Even so, China's ability to control most of its client states would probably be weaker than was the case for past great powers such as the Soviet Union. China does not maintain a bloc of states whose militaries and intelligence services are controlled by Beijing in the way Moscow did with its immediate East European neighbors. Limitations in Chinese power projection could also constrain its ability to coerce distant clients in the way Great Britain could at the height of its power. Limited power projection also could provide an incentive for Beijing to rely more heavily on paramilitary and hired groups such as security contractors. U.S. power might be relatively weaker than is the case today, but it would remain substantial. Washington would also be highly motivated to solicit international support, and its offers of benefits could be competitive. The competing offers of benefits in exchange for support could be difficult for many countries—especially those experiencing distress of some kind—to resist.

In short, this chapter has outlined patterns of behavior that could serve as a rough template for a U.S.-China rivalry that escalates to the point of hostilities. However, the current contest, like any other, has its own distinctive features that could affect how these patterns manifest. This chapter has outlined some of these characteristics, but a more detailed analysis could perhaps expand to build a more distinct model that could help analysts monitor key trends to better anticipate the risks of U.S.-China conflict.

CHAPTER FIVE

How the People's Liberation Army Might Prepare for a Systemic U.S.-China War

The previous chapters reviewed key trends that could shape the operational environment in which a hypothetical conflict under conditions of Chinese near global primacy might unfold. They also examined historic patterns to help illuminate how U.S.-China rivalry might escalate to the point of conflict and what general form that conflict could take. We draw from these data for the scenario analysis in this chapter and in Chapters Six and Seven.

In this chapter we explore potential developments in China's military and how it might position itself for a major U.S.-China conflict. To be sure, the PLA has long considered war with the United States in its planning and preparations for contingencies related to Taiwan and other disputed territories. However, Chinese experts have generally bound their analysis to hypothetical clashes involving such flash points as Taiwan. As was noted in Chapter One, PLA experts acknowledge the possibility of a great power war with the United States but have not provided any publicly available in depth analysis of systemic, major war. Above all, the judgment by civil authorities that U.S-China war is improbable constrains military leaders from undertaking large-scale preparations for such a war.

We reserve analysis of how the PLA might fight a systemic U.S.-China war to Chapters Six and Seven. In this chapter we focus on how Chinese leaders and the PLA might prepare for a war with the United States that they have judged to be inevitable. Such a change in political stance and military posture would not happen overnight, of course. A key assumption of this chapter, expanded on in more detail in the subsequent chapters, is that U.S.-China conflict would be preceded by years of worsening tensions and deepening animosity. Given the well-known risks, China's decision to go to war with the United States would be a tremendously significant choice. It is reasonable to expect that Beijing would come to this conclusion after considerable trepidation and only after Chinese leaders had concluded that peaceful ways of resolving intractable differences with the United States had failed. This period of international struggle—which could last many years—could both coalesce Chinese thinking on the inevitability of war and grant the PLA some time to prepare. However, even with years of warning, China would not be able to design a military out of whole cloth. Rather, the PLA would have to prepare with the military it had largely built or planned to build. Assessed trends in the PLA's anticipated future development thus provide a valuable baseline for estimating how China might position itself for a broader war with the United States. The

anticipated state of the PLA would both open and constrain options for waging war. While a full review of how the PLA could posture for war lies beyond the scope of this report, we briefly explore in this chapter how China could modify its plans for power projection capabilities, overseas military access, military doctrine, and other features relevant to better positioning itself for systemic conflict with the United States.

Context: The China Dream as the National Strategic Goal

Before analyzing developments in the military, we briefly review how the national strategy that the PLA serves might change in the lead-up to war. As is well known, China's leadership has outlined a national strategy to achieve a desired end state by 2049, the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The vision of the so-called China Dream entails national revival and the realization of a high living standard for the nation's citizens under CCP rule.[1] Drawing from the analysis in a preceding study, we posit that Beijing seeks to become the preeminent global power. However, we also note that China seeks a form of primacy that would bear little resemblance to the form exercised by such previous global leaders as the United Kingdom and the United States.[2] Exercising a partial global hegemony centered principally on Africa and Eurasia, Chinese international leadership would be characterized by a reliance on finance, diplomatic engagement, and security assistance to exercise influence while maintaining a modest overseas military presence. It would seek to build cooperative, stable ties with rival great powers, such as the European Union, India, and Japan, and to develop relations with Russia as its closest great power partner. In the Indo-Pacific region China would seek to become the undisputed preeminent power. In the developing world, China would focus on becoming the preferred partner and patron for client states through much of Africa, Eurasia, and the Middle East, as well as parts of the Caribbean and Latin America.

In a situation featuring a looming U.S.-China war, Chinese rulers would likely maintain the focus on achieving the China Dream as a key source of legitimacy and retain the ambition for an international end state featuring Chinese global primacy. The most important changes would concern Beijing's willingness to adopt violent means to achieve its ends. This decision would probably not be made lightly and might be preceded by a period of intense interstate coercion that would fall short of overt hostilities. The decision could also be made in response to U.S. actions that closed off paths for Beijing to achieve its goals peacefully. China could step up its use of brinkmanship tactics, violence through gray zone platforms, and secretive special operations to intimidate recalcitrant enemies and weaken U.S. alliances and partnerships. When such tactics proved insufficient, Chinese leaders might gradually accept the idea that war with the United States had become unavoidable.

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[1] Xi, 2017.

[2] 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, RR-A447-1, 2021.

Military Developments: Preparations for a U.S.-China Systemic War

In this section we explore key developments related to the PLA in coming decades that could be modified in anticipation of a broader war with the United States. China's ability to design a military to fight the United States is constrained, of course, by the reality of its past military modernization decisions. Even with years of warning, the PLA faces hard limits in its ability to significantly revamp its military. Thus, we assume that the PLA begins either of the war scenarios that are outlined in Chapters Six and Seven with a force that largely resembles the peacetime projections of future force developments. Accordingly, in this section we briefly review the PLA's current modernization goals, missions, overseas footprint, doctrine, and force structure. We explore how some aspects of the modernization effort could be modified in anticipation of a looming conflict with the United States and analyze the ways in which the current force build could constrain and influence how the PLA operates once war begins.

Modernization Goals

As part of its pursuit of international primacy, the PLA continues to aspire to become a world-class military by the end of 2049.[3] Chinese leaders have not overtly stated what the phrase *world-class military* means to them, but the objectives discussed in official Chinese military documents and PLA literature suggest an ambition to build a PLA that is more operationally capable of prosecuting joint, high-tech wars fought primarily in the maritime and aerospace domains, that operates more efficiently as an institution, and that is more tightly tied to the CCP.[4] While a full accounting of Chinese military capabilities is beyond the scope of this report, it should be noted that the PLA has made improvements in many of these areas, including structural reforms, the fielding of modern indigenous systems, and the strengthening of its ability to conduct joint operations.[5]

PLA awareness of a looming conflict could affect China's modernization ambitions in several ways. First, China might have to curtail some modernization efforts to adequately fund war preparations. For example, goals of building large inventories of prestigious but hugely expensive, technologically advanced ships and aircraft might have to be modified, to pay for dramatically expanded inventories of more mundane but more useful items such as PGMs. Second, Beijing's eagerness to demonstrate its superiority to Washington could paradoxically incentivize it to continue building some high-end, technologically advanced platforms despite the pressure to curb such investments to fund war preparations. The principal reason for fielding such advanced weaponry would be political. Similarly, Beijing's desire

[3] Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. vi.

[4] For example, the 2019 national defense report suggests that by 2050 China will aim to develop a military that is on par with the U.S. military and that can protect China's sovereignty, security, and economic interests in the region and abroad. See State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, July 2019a.

[5] Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 4.

to showcase its world-class military could incentivize it to continue researching and developing advanced weaponry. It could also induce extreme caution in the employment of the highest-profile assets such as stealth fighter aircraft and capital ships. China's history, especially in the late Qing era, provides examples in which Chinese authorities suffered major political humiliation when costly foreign-acquired military platforms failed miserably on the battlefield. Awareness of this legacy, CCP sensitivity to nationalist outcry, and awareness of the PLA's inexperience could provide additional incentives for China to favor low-intensity, indirect, and lower-cost means of waging war against U.S.-backed forces while preserving its most advanced capabilities as political showpieces that take part mainly in lower-risk operations. Similarly, the desire to demonstrate the superiority of China's military could incentivize PLA leaders to prioritize the destruction of politically potent symbols of U.S. military power and prowess, even if such attacks lacked sound military logic. Chinese commanders might prioritize risky efforts, for example, to locate and destroy U.S. aircraft carriers that are marginally involved in some remote clash between Chinese- and U.S.-backed forces.

People's Liberation Army Missions

In this section we examine how the PLA's mission set could change in the years leading up to a potential U.S.-China systemic war. Chapters Six and Seven examine how Chinese leaders might modify the military's missions and priorities once authorities direct the start of war. In the period of transition from peacetime to wartime, a top priority for the PLA would be to deepen its overall combat preparations. It could also seek to expand its overseas access and options for deploying military forces abroad to better protect vital vulnerable interests.

The expansion of China's economic interests has been one of the primary drivers of the development of Chinese expeditionary capabilities, and these remain a major vulnerability.[6] Since the early 2000s the Chinese military has accordingly taken a more active role in operations abroad to protect the nation's interests and shape the international environment, primarily through nonwar missions and especially in BRI regions.[7] Chinese leaders have also called on the military to support the government's efforts to reorganize the international order. A 2019 defense report noted, for example, that the PLA intends to "actively participate in the reform of the global security governance system."[8] PAP and PLA deployments to BRI countries in Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia have helped Beijing's efforts to protect its

[6] Jiang Zemin, "Full Text of Jiang Zemin's Report at the 16th Party Congress," China Internet Information Center, November 17, 2002.

[7] 杨剑 [Yang Jian] and 郑英琴 [Zheng Yingqin], 人类命运共同体思想与新疆域的国际治理 ["The 'Community of Common Destiny' Concept and the New Territories of International Governance"], 国际问题研究 [*International Studies*], No. 4, 2017.

[8] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a.

citizens and assets in those regions and shape a favorable security environment, all of which has generally proven popular with domestic audiences.[9]

In the lead-up to conflict between China and the United States, Beijing could uphold the same mission set but add new points of emphasis. While relying on nonviolent means to weaken U.S. influence, the PLA's role in partnership building could expand. Given the PLA's limited ability to convey combat forces safely, Beijing would have a strong incentive to try to motivate client militaries to step up their own self-defensive preparations—perhaps with generous Chinese support—and provide PLA experts who could help the client militaries use weaponry effectively. In the prewar period, the Chinese military could also see a loosening of restrictions on its use of force to protect overseas citizens and assets. Authorities could allow PLA forces to engage hostile forces judged to be supported by the United States, though they might impose tight controls on attacks against U.S. troops. Another important addition to the military's mission set could concern military action to protect the sovereignty, territory, or political stability of client regimes as a condition for military access or other forms of support. Beijing's assumption of some level of responsibility for the security of client states would likely open new points of contention and friction with the United States and set the stage for a dramatic expansion of potential battlefields once war began.

The People's Liberation Army's Footprint Abroad: Posturing for War

Beijing is today laying the groundwork for an expanded presence beyond its periphery to address threats and challenges to its global interests. China has employed a range of strategies, including increased PLA deployments in peacekeeping and the maritime domain, extensive security assistance and military training programs with countries friendly to China, and military intelligence cooperation.[10] Beijing has also negotiated security frameworks with local governments in countries that house Chinese citizens and investments to improve its capacity to maintain order in case of domestic instability or crisis. In this section we examine the general trajectory of these efforts and consider how the PLA might use this footprint to prepare for combat operations against U.S. forces.

China currently has a small military presence overseas consisting primarily of peacekeeping troops in Africa, border patrol forces in Central and South Asia, one base in Djibouti, and maritime deployments for counterpiracy and other operations. The PLA has steadily increased deployments of these forces through the 2020s, particularly in the maritime domain and in border areas.[11] The central role of naval power in China's military strategy has

[9] A survey found that the younger generation and the elites' views tended to be more hawkish on military operations overseas. Jessica Chen Weiss, "How Hawkish Is the Chinese Public? Another Look at 'Rising Nationalism' and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 28, No. 119, 2019.

[10] Saunders, 2014, p. 308.

[11] Kristen Gunness, "The Dawn of a PLA Expeditionary Force?" in Nadege Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, September 2019.

become increasingly apparent since 2009 and will be a key element in future PLA efforts to support Chinese primacy, a point acknowledged in official defense reports.[12]

China is considering additional bases. The PLA has reportedly discussed establishing logistics facilities in Angola, Indonesia, Kenya, Myanmar, Pakistan, Seychelles, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Tajikistan, Tanzania, Thailand, and United Arab Emirates.[13] Furthermore, the PLA has worked with civilian authorities to establish a global military logistics network, which is critical to an expanded military footprint abroad.

Aside from force deployments, Beijing has worked to align the security interests of BRI countries with China's own interests through the creation of security dialogues and frameworks for security cooperation, which in turn provide a foundation for future military cooperation and expanded PLA presence. Examples include China's efforts to protect BRI projects through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which has focused on counterterrorism efforts and protection of oil and gas pipelines in Central Asia.[14] The Quadrennial Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, established in 2016, includes Afghanistan, China, Pakistan, and Tajikistan and provides a forum for military and security cooperation among its members. It also functions as the primary security dialogue between Afghanistan and China.[15]

A larger overseas PLA presence requires more access to facilities that can support operations and stage forward-deployed forces. Figure 5.1 depicts unconfirmed candidate locations for Chinese facilities that could host visiting military platforms outside China. Drawn from unclassified articles and databases, the map shows military facilities on contested artificial islands in the South China Sea and the single overseas military base in Djibouti. The map illustrates the breadth of China's investments in areas that could potentially support PLA military operations beyond the region, to include Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia (shaded red). The white dots on the map signify largely commercial port structures and facilities that feature a significant amount of Chinese investment.[16] China is unlikely to turn many of the commercial port structures into support facilities for the PLA, but Chinese contractor or government personnel who have gained a degree of control over relevant

[12] State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a.

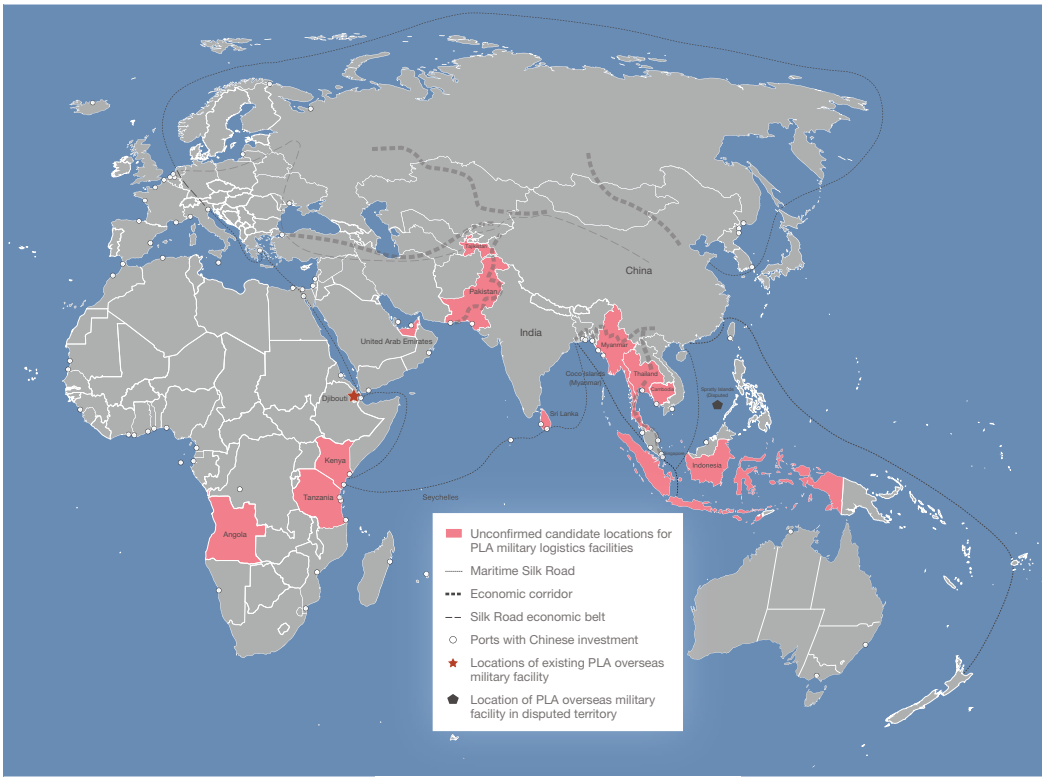
[13] DoD, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China's Expanding Global Access*, 2018. Washington, D.C., 2018.

[14] Jiang Li, "Commentary: 'Belt' of Security and 'Road' to Development for SCO in Challenging Times," Xinhua News Agency, June 13, 2019.

[15] Zhang Tao, "2nd QCCM High-Level Military Leaders' Meeting Kicks Off," China Military Online, August 28, 2017.

[16] Isaac Kardon, "China's Development of Expeditionary Capabilities: 'Bases and Access Points,'" Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, February 20, 2020; Christopher Yung and Ross Rustici, "'Not An Idea We Have to Shun': Chinese Overseas Basing Requirements in the 21st Century," *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 7, Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014.

FIGURE 5.1
Map of Unconfirmed Candidate Locations for People's Liberation Army Logistics Facilities Abroad and Ports with Chinese Investment



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Li et al., 2019; DoD, 2018.

facilities could be directed to carry out logistics support to visiting PLA platforms in some locations.[17]

China's limited success to date in expanding port and logistics access imposes serious constraints on any PLA ambition to plan combat operations against U.S.-backed forces at distant locations. China lacks military bases capable of sustaining major combat operations, and it is far from clear that Beijing will succeed in developing such access. A major selling point of Chinese solicitation for access is precisely its rejection of Western "imperial" methods of military occupation and control. Even if China succeeds in gaining a more robust military base in some locations, such arrangements may remain relatively rare. While this constraint may be tolerable

[17] Kevin X. Li, Zhang Wei, Shu-Ling Shen, and Weiwei Huo, "International Port Investment of Chinese Port-Related Companies," *International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics*, Vol. 11, No. 5, January 2019; DoD, 2018.

in a peacetime competition in which China's principal overseas threats stem from nontraditional sources, it is likely to severely affect the PLA's ability to conduct major combat operations against a peer military such as that of the United States, especially beyond the first island chain.

One way China could mitigate the lack of military bases abroad would be to off-load as much of the defensive needs for military support facilities as possible to client militaries. Arming and equipping host nations with anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) capabilities such as surface-to-air missiles, antiship missiles, and other weapon systems could help to serve the client state's defensive needs and provide some measure of protection for Chinese interests and support facilities. PLA advisers and technicians could serve a critical role in advising on the use of the weapons or even operating them themselves. Clients that balked at exposing themselves to U.S. military attack might demand a greater PLA presence for protection. The degree of alignment between China and particular client states could affect how much military capability the states might be willing to operate on China's behalf.

Another way China might seek to mitigate the vulnerability of military assets abroad could be to disguise shipments and movements as civilian in nature—that is, through the use of defense contractors or civilian transport ships. This fiction could ease the political difficulty of moving and operating combat forces into client states and perhaps help obscure the movement of Chinese military forces. Both of these approaches would lend themselves well to China's leadership, which relies on CCP control of both civilian and military assets in support of each other. They have the drawback, however, of leaving transiting military assets extremely vulnerable, since civilian vessels are largely defenseless. To deter attacks, such ships might also carry vulnerable civilian passengers as a "human shield." A similar tactic would be to collocate military support ports and facilities in densely urban areas.

A third way to improve security for distant Chinese interests and protect transiting forces might be to attack the access points that could enable U.S. forces to threaten Chinese forces in wartime. In the period between peacetime and wartime, the PLA would not be authorized to directly attack U.S. facilities and access. However, China could encourage attacks by proxy forces to either directly threaten U.S. military facilities along the Maritime Silk Road or draw U.S. attention to other parts of the world, such as Europe or Latin America.

Finally, the PLA could be directed in this period to step up preparations for overland transportation routes in recognition of the inevitable vulnerability of maritime routes. Chinese forces might step up SCO cooperation to protect overland pipelines with partner nations. Beijing might increase efforts to secure access agreements for transiting PLA forces through Russia, perhaps through the conclusion of some sort of alliance agreement. While it is difficult to imagine today, Moscow's incentive to side with Beijing could change in a situation featuring a widely anticipated showdown between China and the United States.

Adapting Chinese Warfighting Concepts for a U.S.-China Systemic War

Chinese warfighting concepts have evolved to support military operations against traditional and nontraditional threats, including those outside the region. While some concepts, such as Active Defense, have remained relatively consistent over the years, other plans—such

as information dominance, "intelligentized" warfare, and the Three Warfares concept—illustrate how the PLA is thinking about future conflicts and incorporating trends in military technology and capabilities into its doctrine. This section outlines key Chinese warfighting concepts that are most likely to apply in the scenarios of extensive U.S.-China combat operations analyzed in Chapters Six and Seven.

Active Defense

For decades, authoritative CCP documents and speeches have delineated Active Defense as the country's military strategy.[18] Active Defense has evolved since the 1980s to include a mix of offensive, defensive, and deterrent concepts at the operational and tactical levels. It can apply to China acting externally to defend its interests, encompassing operations farther from China's periphery and operations in outer space and cyberspace.[19] These principles have historically been reinterpreted and given new meaning as China's situation has changed, and this would likely be the case if China approached a position of near primacy.

Facing a looming systemic war with the United States, the PLA could adapt this set of guiding principles to authorize offensive operational concepts that target the militaries of the United States and its allies and partners. China has already shown considerable ambiguity in what it considers self-defense, having stated in defense reports that self-defense applies to distant interests, not just those of the Chinese homeland. In a showdown with the United States, the meaning could be expanded further to include the interests of key client states. The result could be a PLA that is more willing and able to aggressively attack perceived threats to the interests of China and its clients around the world.

China's Military Relationship with Client States

China's relationship with client states would play an important role in its preparations for a showdown with the United States and in the two conflict scenarios outlined in Chapters Six and Seven. But how and why might such a network of client states work? Why would they engage in fighting against the United States? How would such a network differ from the coalitions of countries that supported U.S. power in past wars? A thorough analysis of the forms that a Chinese network of supportive military partnerships could take lies beyond the bounds of this report, but here we offer a few preliminary thoughts.

First, we reiterate that this study focuses on a hypothetical scenario that features a China nearing the point of global primacy. The China described in this study differs considerably from China today, which may be a large economy but is not considered a peer of the United States. A China that enjoyed relatively more wealth and power would become a more attractive patron for countries around the world, especially if—per the assumptions of this

[18] See, for example, James Mulvenon and David Finkelstein, *China's Revolution in Doctrinal Affairs: Emerging Trends in the Operational Art of The Chinese People's Army*, Alexandria, Va.: CNA Corporation, 2005.

[19] Edmund J. Burke, Kristen Gunness, Cortez A. Cooper III, and Mark Cozad, *People's Liberation Army Operational Concepts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A394-1, 2020.

study—the United States experienced a substantial relative decline in its national power. Since the study also assumes that the international situation features considerably more fragmentation, disorder, and breakdown, a large number of countries, especially in the developing world, could experience considerable stress. The stresses could arise domestically, from internal civil conflict, strife, or other competing centers of power. Rival states could step up feuds over territory, resources, or other issues. Various transnational threats might exacerbate the challenges faced by many developing countries. To help cope with these issues and achieve their own national goals, many of these countries could seek patronage and assistance from the two most wealthy and powerful countries, China and the United States.

The polarization of the international order as U.S.-China rivalry deepened would probably result in a greater willingness on the part of Beijing and Washington to provide benefits in exchange for international support. U.S.-China competition for support could extend to rival actors between states or even within a country. In a situation evocative of the Cold War, the result could be a complex overlapping mixture of motivations on the part of different states and nonstate actors that seek to leverage outside help to achieve their own goals. Cooperation with China could be limited to immediate goals of concern for particular client states, such as the elimination of a domestic threat or defeat of a neighboring rival state. China might provide support if any of these threats appeared to be aligned with or backed by the United States. Such a situation would consist of many instances in which China and the United States exploited disorder and existing conflict for their own geopolitical purposes, a phenomenon that has occurred in many previous eras of systemic competition and great power conflict.[20] In some cases, Chinese "coalitions" may consist primarily of China and the small number of countries involved that had the most at stake in the outcome of the relevant local feud, augmented by paramilitary forces or hired security contractors. A Chinese network could consist of small groupings of clients in different geographic regions, which did not interact much at all with one another but instead operated largely autonomously. Their only connection with other countries aligned with China might be Chinese patronage.

In some cases, the client states might be willing to fight U.S. forces directly involved in conflicts of immediate concern but be less inclined to fight U.S. forces outside their own immediate vicinity. This would not be a "coalition" so much as a loose-knit, poorly integrated collection of client states, paramilitary forces, and security contractors that either leveraged Chinese patronage for their own purposes or did so in order to gain Chinese benefits. The military capability of these groupings would vary but probably feature a low level of integration and, assuming these occurred primarily in developing countries, might feature a generally low level of training and operational proficiency. Depending on their respective adversaries, however, Chinese military assistance could be sufficient to empower these actors to prevail against threats of similar or weaker capability and proficiency. To offset some of these weaknesses, highly skilled security contractors or paramilitary forces could play an especially important role.

[20] William R. Thompson and Michael P. Colaresi, "Strategic Rivalries, Protracted Conflict, and Crisis Escalation," *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol. 39, No. 3, May 2002.

Other forms of Chinese military partnerships are possible, however. Following the precedent of past rising great powers, a China enjoying the momentum of climbing closer to the point of global primacy might garner the support of a few countries eager to curry favor by pledging loyalty. If these countries judged that the United States appeared headed toward defeat, they might be willing to risk antagonizing Washington by sending military forces to support Chinese-led coalitions against U.S.-backed forces. This would be more like a traditional coalition of military forces willing to fight outside their immediate border areas in support of a patron military, although perhaps also augmented by paramilitary forces and security contractors. But the limited power projection capabilities of many candidate BRI partner countries for China suggests the pool of such countries would be small. Alternatively, a broader number of supportive clients eager to demonstrate their loyalty to China might commit small numbers of highly specialized capabilities to augment PLA forces. China would probably have to provide much of the logistics capability to move and sustain such forces. In operations, these coalitions would depend heavily on China's military, which would be expected to furnish the bulk of the combat power. The level of interoperability between China and the more capable of its coalition partners could vary considerably, from poorly integrated to some degree of interoperability with more capable and trusted allies. But the challenges of operating with such disparate countries would probably constrain the degree of interoperability to an even more severe degree than is experienced by the United States with its own allies. The willingness of these coalitions to risk clashes with U.S. forces would probably depend on the assessment of client states as to the prospects for Chinese victory and risks of escalation. If they judged the U.S. military to be seriously weakened and likely to be defeated, the motivation to join Chinese operations could be higher.

Information Dominance

This Chinese military concept proposes that the side that dominates the information environment is best positioned to prevail in battle. Chinese strategists have concluded that the surest path to escalation control and prevailing in conflict is through information dominance—with the broadest possible definition of the term *information*.[21] To achieve information dominance, PLA writings emphasize detecting, identifying, and attacking enemy operational system networks. By carrying out kinetic and nonkinetic strikes against leadership, command and control, and information nodes, the Chinese believe they can "information isolate" an adversary and render it unable to function or make decisions.[22] The idea that cyberoperations and information operations can be used in wartime to target civilian infrastructure and shape an adversary's societal thinking has been written in authoritative PLA sources since at least 2009.[23]

[21] Burke et al., 2020.

[22] Jeffrey Engstrom, *Systems Confrontation and Systems Destruction Warfare: How the Chinese People's Liberation Army Seeks to Wage Modern War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1708-OSD, 2018b, p. 15.

[23] Dang and Yu, 2009.

If the time came when Chinese leaders had to weigh the decision to engage in war with the United States, the PLA would probably already be operating aggressively to nonkinetically disrupt U.S. command nodes as part of the peacetime struggle. Military cybersecurity units could carry out operations to access U.S. civilian infrastructure assets to build options for wartime; state and military actors could also direct Chinese commercial companies to turn over data and access they had created with customers in other countries. Intelligence collection, reconnaissance, and surveillance of U.S. networks and combat dispositions could be a priority line of effort. In geographically distant client countries, PLA assets could be expected to prioritize the establishment of ISR to enable A2/AD systems.

Intelligentized Warfare

Chinese writings have recently started referring to "intelligentized" (智能化; *zhinenghua*) warfare, an emerging concept that suggests that future warfare will evolve from "system confrontation" (as discussed in the information dominance concept above) to "algorithm confrontation." In intelligentized warfare, the side with the algorithm advantage dominates war with human-computer hybrid operations, and neural network decisionmaking, technologies and capabilities.[24] The ability to engage in algorithm confrontation depends at least partly on China's ability to master big data analytics, which Chinese researchers posit will better position China to win future military conflict between great powers.[25] As one article notes, the proliferation of big data signals the arrival of a new form of warfare, with data offense and data defense at its core.[26] The PLA's anticipated evolution in the coming years could result in a military more comfortable with employing AI in its combat systems.

How much the PLA might modify its concept of operations and activities to accord with AI-enhanced technologies would depend on how far along the PLA had progressed in its modernization efforts. Since such systems could require considerable technical expertise to manage and operate, it seems plausible that only a small portion of the PLA would be fully capable of fighting in accordance with its most advanced doctrines even decades from now. The rest of the PLA, by contrast, might continue to lag behind, with older doctrines and equipment, by a considerable margin. A two-tiered PLA, with a minority group of well-equipped and skilled units and a far larger group of less skilled and less competent forces, would in many ways reflect a tendency that has been present in the PLA for a long time.

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[24] 袁艺 [Yuan Yi], 人工智能将指挥未来战争? ["Will AI Command Future Wars?"], 中国国防报 [*Defense Daily*], January 12, 2017.

[25] 何友 [He You], 朱扬勇 [Zhu Yangyong], 赵鹏 [Zhao Peng], 柴勇 [Chai Yong], 廖志成 [Liao Zhicheng], 周伟 [Zhou Wei], 周向东 [Zhou Xiangdong], 王海鹏 [Wang Haipeng], 汪卫 [Wang Wei], 熊赟 [Xiong Yun], 许舟军 [Xu Zhoujun], 彭煊 [Peng Xuan], 孟晖 [Meng Hui], and 王生进 [Wang Shengjin], 国防大数据概论 ["Panorama of National Defense Big Data"], 系统工程与电子技术 [*Systems Engineering and Electronics*], Vol. 6, 2016.

[26] 刘林山 [Liu Linshan], 大数据在国防和军队现代化建设中有何作用? ["What Is the Function of Big Data in the Construction of a Modern National Defense and the Military?"], 解放军报 [*Liberation Army Daily*], February 1, 2018.

The PLA took decades of modernization, for example, to build a handful of "informatized" units featuring integrated computer networks of weapons and platforms and digitized sensors. At the same time, much of the PLA continues to struggle with basic mechanization. Similarly, in a hypothetical scenario featuring growing momentum toward war, PLA leaders might maintain a small number of elite forces featuring the highest levels of "intelligentization," but these would probably be based and operated on the mainland and on the wealthy, strategically vital coasts. Major warships and advanced aircraft could have such capabilities as well. However, PLA units deployed farther away and along the western frontiers might feature a far lower level of advanced technologies. This lack of complete integration could incentivize Chinese military leaders to promote a form of war featuring a high level of centralized control and a heavy reliance on unmanned and automated systems. Long-range precision-guided missile strikes, attacks by unmanned platforms, and cyberoperations could be especially appealing to such a leadership.

The Three Warfares

The Chinese concept of the Three Warfares illustrates the importance China places on seizing the information initiative and continuously shaping the narrative in both peacetime and wartime. The Three Warfares comprise public opinion warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare. An overall focus of the Three Warfares is deterring or breaking an adversary's will to fight and degrading decisionmaking, as well as mobilizing support and enthusiasm for the CCP's agenda. The specific objectives of each "pillar" of the Three Warfares are to control public opinion, organize psychological offense and defense, engage in legal struggle, and fight for popular will and public opinion.[27] Chinese scholars emphasize that in wartime, military campaign activities should be synchronized with Three Warfares public opinion, psychological, and legal activities to ensure consistency of the narrative presented to adversaries, partners, and the larger regional and international communities.[28]

In a situation featuring intense and hostile U.S.-China rivalry, the PLA could be expected to invest heavily in activities and operations associated with the Three Warfares. This would be another form of fighting without engaging in kinetic struggle, and it would be especially important for efforts to build military access and military partnerships. The activities would also remain essential to China's efforts to weaken and undermine U.S. alliances and partnerships. The task of building international support for China could become considerably easier in conditions featuring its near global primacy, as China would likely enjoy a higher level of international support and authority than it does today, especially among the BRI countries Beijing cares most about.

[27] Elsa Kania, "The PLA's Latest Thinking on the Three Warfares," *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 13, August 22, 2016.

[28] Peter Mattis, "China's 'Three Warfares' in Perspective," War on the Rocks, January 30, 2018. Mattis makes the point that the Three Warfares are primarily a military tool to expand China's political power, as the PLA is the armed wing of the CCP.

Chinese Warfighting Concepts, in Sum

The four Chinese warfighting concepts discussed herein have evolved to include doctrine that will support Chinese military operations in future conflicts. While these concepts can be applied to regional conflicts, they also carry important implications for a potential U.S.-China war. This chapter has focused primarily on how China might modify and adapt these concepts in anticipation of a looming major U.S.-China conflict; subsequent chapters examine their application in wartime. Table 5.1 summarizes these warfighting concepts.

Potential Near-War Changes to People's Liberation Army War Planning

China's investment in military capabilities has shown impressive gains, and PLA scholars have outlined an ambitious vision for warfare. Yet, whether the Chinese military can realize the full potential of such capabilities remains unclear, especially in a major conflict with the United States. Here we draw on the preceding sections to suggest potential distinctive features of how China might prepare and fight against the United States in a near-peer systemic war to decide global primacy. These features include a heavy reliance on civilian assets and efforts to augment a limited power projection capability; a moralistic and politicized approach to war; an overemphasis on the prestige value of weapons and platforms; a two-tiered military with bifurcated combat capabilities; a preference for proxy, standoff, and indirect war methods; and loosely coordinated war efforts with coalition partner militaries.

TABLE 5.1

Key People's Liberation Army Warfighting Concepts and Their Significance for Preparations for Major War with the United States

Concept	Significance for PLA Preparations for Major War with the United States
Active defense	This guiding principle could be flexibly adapted to permit a broad range of offensive operations against U.S. aligned forces in any geographic region featuring a "Chinese interest"; Active Defense could also be expanded to justify aggressive Chinese military action on behalf of a client state.
Information dominance	The PLA could be expected to considerably ramp up efforts to exploit U.S. information vulnerabilities and prepare options to target a wide range of civilian and military targets; Beijing could direct exploitation of commercial access to foreign information networks, and a forward-deployed PLA could prioritize establishing ISR to enable A2/AD capabilities in client states.
Intelligentized warfare	A small vanguard of PLA forces could be equipped with the most advanced weapons and capabilities, but the majority of the force could operate with legacy equipment and dated concepts; a lack of integration could encourage leaders to favor centralized controlled methods such as long-range strike, unmanned attack, and cyberoperations.
The three warfares	The military implications of the battle for political influence provide a strong incentive for China to prioritize this line of effort; China's progress toward near primacy could make such activities easier.

Heavy reliance on civilian assets. China has long emphasized cooperation between party-controlled civilian and military efforts as a key feature of its military thinking and operations. The PLA under Xi, for example, has highlighted "civil-military fusion" as a key doctrine for raising the technological competence of the military. The approach is facilitated by the reality of CCP penetration and control of civilian government, commercial entities, and military entities. If China were facing a potential systemic war with the United States, this principle would become even more appealing as a means of offsetting the PLA's limited power projection capabilities. Outside China, in particular, the PLA may have little choice but to rely on civilian contractors to provide essential logistics services and support. Armed civilian contractors could carry out combat operations on behalf of, or alongside, uniformed PLA units. Civilian contractors could also be responsible for conveying troops and equipment and could help service ports and airfields that feature deployed or visiting PLA assets. One way to deter adversaries from targeting such vulnerable assets would be to use human shields—that is, to place vulnerable civilians in proximity. China could, for example, ship arms on vessels carrying large numbers of civilian passengers. Beijing would count on the potential outcry about killing civilians to discourage U.S. strikes, a stance that would accord well with its moralistic and highly politicized approach to war.

A moralistic and politicized approach to war. In past wars the Peoples' Republic of China has tended to emphasize the ideological and political dimensions of war in part as a way to offset its disadvantages in materiel. China's power projection capabilities will probably remain modest even if the nation grows closer to becoming a power peer of the United States, and this limitation could motivate Beijing to revive such long-standing practices. Doctrines such as the Three Warfares already indicate that an exaggerated emphasis on moral and political topics will be a likely feature of China's approach to fighting. Moreover, a looming war with the United States to decide the issue of systemic leadership would add other powerful incentives. China could hope to break the United States will to fight in part by delegitimizing the U.S. war effort and by undermining U.S. alliances and international support. It would also need to bolster its own standing among its partner nations and the international community as an aspirant for global leadership. What this might mean in practice is that the PLA relies heavily on coalitions of forces to lend an air of international legitimacy to its operations against U.S.-backed forces. China could also cultivate outrage by deliberately placing civilians in harm's way as any U.S. strikes on such a facility would incur large numbers of civilian casualties. Another way to cultivate moral outrage would be to rely on client militaries to do much of the fighting and bear the brunt of U.S. attacks.

Overemphasis on the prestige value of weapons and platforms. China's political and moralistic approach to war could be bolstered by Beijing's determination to show its superiority over the United States, as demonstrated by the goal to build a "world-class military" by mid-century. In addition to their military value, the development of prestige weapons such as aircraft carriers and stealth fighters provides politically valuable messages that support Beijing's political arguments. Facing a war with the United States, China could fear the political implications of the loss of such expensive prestige weapons. As a result, it could husband and mini-

mize the exposure of such systems to U.S. attack. Thus, the PLA might employ its advanced weapons in lower-risk combat operations that showcase its prowess without sacrificing the platforms. Conversely, the political value placed on prestige weapons could incentivize Beijing to prioritize the targeting and destruction of major platforms such as U.S. aircraft carriers, perhaps even to the detriment of more militarily sound targets.

A two-tiered military with bifurcated combat capabilities. The exaggerated emphasis on demonstrating the PLA's ability to field a superior military has historically led China to build a handful of well-equipped, elite units while much of the rest of the military lags behind with a lower level of modernization. For example, although the PLA has outlined ambitions to operate as a premier military capable of integrated joint operations, its ability to do so remains impaired by inadequate numbers of educated and skilled personnel, inexperience with distributed warfare, and political and cultural preferences for more centralized means of operating military forces.[29] The problems of a bifurcated military are exacerbated by Chinese weaknesses in regulatory enforcement and an inconsistent rule of law.[30] Central leaders have tried on several occasions to overhaul and improve the quality of regulatory enforcement and curb the power of local party bosses.[31] However, progress has remained slow, owing principally to the lack of an independent judiciary and the unchecked power of the ruling CCP. The result has been uneven local compliance with central directives, spotty enforcement of regulations, and extensive corruption.[32]

The two-tiered state of readiness and modernization could continue through the next few decades, with only a small share of forces experiencing the most dramatic gains by adopting AI and other advanced technologies while the rest of the military lags behind. Moreover, the desire to husband and protect the most prestigious forces could mean that the PLA relies on its less advanced forces to carry out combat operations. The result could further incentivize China to rely on proxy forces and precision-guided missile or cyberattack standoffs, all of which could be employed without requiring an integrated joint force. PLA forces abroad might operate on a de facto bifurcated doctrine, with less prepared units operating according to outdated methods, as compared with more elite units based along China's wealthy coastal provinces.

A preference for proxy, standoff, and indirect war methods. The combination of a moralistic emphasis on the war, exaggerated emphasis on the prestige value of platforms, and the reality of a bifurcated military featuring a small elite set of units and uncertainty over the

[29] Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015.

[30] Roderick Lee, "Building the Next Generation of Chinese Military Leaders," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 3, No. 3, August 31, 2020.

[31] Su Lin Han, "Administrative Enforcement in China," New Haven, Conn.: Paul Tsai China Center, Yale Law School, December 2017.

[32] Josh Chin, "China Lags Behind in Rule of Law Ranking," *Wall Street Journal*, October 20, 2016.

combat readiness of lower-tier units provide compelling incentives for China to avoid symmetric direct engagements with U.S. joint forces in favor of asymmetric means. Beijing could favor proxy forces, standoff attacks, and a reliance on host nation militaries to bear the brunt of combat and minimize risks to PLA forces and prestigious high-end weaponry and platforms. The exception could be military operations against inferior opponents close to China's borders, where the full might of the most advanced PLA capabilities could be brought to bear with a lower risk of disastrous losses.

Loosely coordinated war efforts with coalition partners. China's aversion to alliances and lack of compelling security partners raise questions about its ability to build and lead international coalitions in support of Chinese interests. While the PLA has participated in multilateral missions such as United Nations peacekeeping operations, these have tended to avoid combat. A China that hopes to provide greater international leadership will be expected to provide more security goods for client states and will depend on client states to furnish access and, in some cases, military forces to support Chinese security efforts. To date, China has struggled to enlist countries to provide such access and support and has generally shown itself to lack international appeal.[33] This may be due in part to the country's inexperience with international military leadership and a political agenda that seems centered on China's revitalization, with other countries playing at most a secondary role. The fact that many of the countries lack a common agenda with one another outside Chinese patronage suggests that Beijing may not be able to build a robust, integrated coalition. Rather, China may settle for a loosely coordinated bilateral and occasionally multilateral security partnerships, which are more transactional and transitory in nature. Chinese diplomats could lean on one partner and then shift to another to carry out actions to include military attacks, acts of sabotage, or other hostile acts against U.S. interests. The piecemeal and disjointed nature of a pro-China coalition could result in a more unpredictable and poorly coordinated international effort, but it could be the best approach for China and its diverse network of partners, many of which have little motivation to support Chinese wars in other parts of the world.

In conclusion, a PLA confronting the specter of systemic war with the United States has strong incentives to modify aspects of its modernization program and operational methods. However, the reality of sunk costs limits the ability of the PLA to dramatically modify the military it has already planned to build. China's preparations for war would also be informed by key political imperatives. In particular, the CCP's goal of demonstrating China's superiority, the reality of a two-tiered military with inconsistent doctrines and capabilities, and the inability to build a cohesive global alliance could profoundly shape the PLA's preparations for conflict and how it manages combat operations outside China. The result could be a Chinese preference for waging indirect conflict through proxy forces, a focus on arming and backing client militaries, and a generally loose coalition of client states that may have little in common with each other beyond Chinese patronage and a general desire to

[33] Shambaugh, 2013.

redress historical grievances among developing countries. Should war escalate into direct combat involving Chinese and U.S. forces, the PLA could favor standoff and automated weaponry as the preferred means of fighting. Despite Beijing's incessant messaging about the PLA's technological sophistication and superiority, the Chinese defense industries could find demand greatest for long-standing reliable weapons such as long-range missiles and unmanned combat systems.

CHAPTER SIX

A Low-Intensity U.S.-China Conflict Scenario

In this chapter we explore how China and the United States could fight a war to decide the issue of global leadership through extensive low-intensity conflict. A distinctive feature of this scenario is the absence of direct conventional combat between Chinese and U.S. military forces. This emphasis on escalation control means that both sides would also avoid nuclear war and refrain from a mutually ruinous all-out war in cyberspace or outer space. Instead China would seek to seize international primacy through a military strategy that aimed to gradually diminish U.S. warfighting capacity and will to fight. Such a conflict could last many years and feature clashes and various combat operations in many parts of the world. The risk would remain high that such a low-intensity struggle for supremacy could escalate into high-intensity war. Chapter Seven will analyze the prospects of high-intensity war.

In this chapter we first outline several key geopolitical assumptions to provide context for the scenario; this context helps frame key Chinese political and military decisions. We then describe what the national leadership's directives to the PLA might look like in such a situation, paying particular attention to distinctive features of China's approach, to the extent we can plausibly posit them. We then analyze how the military might modify its mission, force development, and guidance on force employment to carry out a low-intensity war. With this material as context, we then sketch out a variety of conflict possibilities across different geographic regions. We emphasize that these conflict possibilities should be viewed as illustrative examples based on the logic and assumptions of the scenario, not as predictions.

Geopolitical Assumptions

The description of a hostile rivalry outlined in Chapter Five provides the starting point for analyzing a scenario of extensive U.S.-China low-intensity conflict. These assumptions do not present the only way that the two countries could arrive at such a scenario, but they do offer a path based on historical patterns of past great power systemic conflict. To maximize the analytic value of the assumptions and minimize the hazard of attempting future prediction, we focus only on the most essential drivers while leaving aside speculation about specific incidents, developments, and other details.

To summarize the findings of Chapter Five, the geopolitical context is one in which both countries have entered a state of hostilities. That is to say, each nation has designated the other as an "enemy" state that it regards as having both the intent and ability to endanger its own basic security. Regardless of whether this entailed a formal declaration of war, both capitals would reorder their national and security strategies to prioritize the conflict. The decision would culminate years of escalating tension in which the two nations regularly feuded over a broad range of economic, political, security, technological, and other issues. Moreover, it would culminate trends in which the U.S.-China rivalry overlapped with rivalries and disputes involving other countries, some of which maintained or stepped up their own feuds with countries aligned with the rival great power. Following past precedent, the involvement of other countries would add to the intractability of escalating U.S.-China tension by providing a significant international constituency for the continuation of the conflict. This could in turn incentivize both capitals to exploit such multilateral feuds for advantage in their own struggles. In such a situation, multilateral organizations featuring both powers would likely have broken down due to gridlock, resulting in international inaction in the face of collective threats. Spreading international disorder could complicate the rivalry by introducing or aggravating multiple threats to international security. It could also elevate the stakes of the contest, since both sides would be incentivized to blame the other and possibly exploit some of the disorder to harm the interests of the other. This in turn would aggravate threat perceptions and encourage both capitals to drive even harder to achieve a decisive advantage over the other.

As conflict begins, Washington and China could be expected to expand their defense buildups and intensify alliance-building activities. China might refrain from naming formal alliances out of political principle, but it would establish partnerships that offer similar security benefits. As in the two World Wars and the Cold War, countries and nonstate actors around the world would exploit the U.S.-China rivalry to achieve their own goals by appealing to one side or the other for patronage. Other countries could choose to support the United States or China due to a desire to gain benefits by demonstrating loyalty to one side or the other, some sympathy or historic relationship with one of the two rivals, or some combination of the above. A series of serious militarized crises could accelerate all these trends. In such a volatile and unstable situation, even a relatively minor incident could be sufficient to tip the strained relationship past the breaking point, kicking off the low-intensity war. However, in this scenario both capitals decide to wage an indirect war. The main driver could be a fear of nuclear exchange, or it could be the fact that despite the intensifying hostilities both sides still depend on each other to a large extent for trade. Whatever the precise reasons, each side chooses to overcome its adversary through a blend of a *systemic war* for global primacy and *interventions* as the primary mode of waging low-intensity war (see Chapter Four).

In many ways, the paradigm for this geopolitical situation would be something akin to the early decades of the Cold War, in which two rival powers carried out political mobilization, oversaw major military buildups, developed alliances, feuded over a broad range of issues

around the world, and competed for influence and partners. The United States and the Soviet Union also fought each other in proxy wars involving their allies and partners in many parts of the world but did not engage in direct conventional combat.

A major difference, however, is the far narrower gap in national power between China and the United States than there was between the Soviet Union and the United States. The geographic scope of conflict could accordingly expand well beyond what it was during the Cold War. But, as in the Cold War case, the onset of hostilities would mark a critical turning point in the struggle for international primacy. Accordingly, the leadership of both countries would have a strong incentive to modify strategic goals and military strategies in light of the dramatic change in situation.

China's National Strategic Goals in a Low-Intensity Systemic War

We assume that, consistent with the CCP's focus over the past several decades, the central leadership would continue to regard China's revitalization as a great power by midcentury, a goal labeled the "China Dream" by Xi Jinping, as the end state of its national strategy. Beijing's adoption of aggressive strategies could be driven by the judgment that peaceful methods of achieving the China Dream had become inadequate. For purposes of this analysis, we will assume that China has made substantial progress toward achieving regional primacy and even toward global leadership, even if it has not fully displaced the United States at either level. On the contrary, we will assume that the United States is strong enough to resist its supersession and that this resistance is a principal reason why China has decided it must resort to violence to impose its will on the United States.

Regional and global primacy would be important to China, as it has been for the United States, for reasons of economic prosperity, security, prestige, and politics. But China does not need to dominate the Indo-Pacific in the manner that the United States has been able to do in the America. China is unlikely to completely subdue powerful states such as Japan and India. Nor has Beijing given any indication that it holds such ambitions. Rather, China seems intent on seeking to build stable, favorable relations with wealthy and powerful Asian countries along the periphery while aiming to establish a more dominant role in the developing countries along BRI routes. Thus, by regional primacy we mean China's leadership role principally in establishing client states in South, Southeast Asia and Central Asia, although it certainly hopes to exert greater influence in East and Northeast Asia as well.

Economically, China as a global and regional leader would be best positioned to arrange and lead economic activity in a manner that privileged its own needs and those of its clients. Security-wise, a China that enjoyed global primacy might face balancing influences from rival states such as the United States, Japan, and others, but it would probably also gain much more support from countries around the world that sought the benefits of Chinese patronage. China would also be better positioned to manage flash points along its periphery with less

fear of U.S. and foreign military intervention. Politically and in terms of prestige, a China that appeared close to eclipsing the United States as the world's most powerful nation could enjoy a considerable boost in domestic and international support.

In accordance with this logic, we assume that Beijing has adjusted its national strategy to require defeat of U.S. power as a necessary condition for achieving the China Dream. Defeat of the United States is an ambitious national objective that needs to be more clearly defined. In this scenario, China has no ambition and no feasible way to contemplate conquest and occupation of the United States. Instead, we assume Beijing's goal centers on the defeat of U.S. efforts to stymie China's realization of its national revitalization goals. Beijing's desired end state accepts the continuation of the United States as a nation, but in a much diminished and weakened condition. In effect, China's end state would envision its ascent to a position of global preeminence and the concomitant downgrading of the status of the United States to that of a regional power in the Americas. The U.S. presence in the rest of the world would largely be on terms that China would regard as acceptable. China could in this situation hope to maintain a trading relationship, despite the indirect conflict, if tensions could be managed.

In sum, we posit that the principal goal guiding the formulation and implementation of a war effort against the United States would be to weaken and diminish U.S. military and political power to such an extent that Washington could no longer seriously impede Beijing's realization of national revitalization. At the same time, Chinese leaders in this scenario would aim to avoid a great power war, whose escalation could prove impossible to control and which would carry intolerably high risks of catastrophic war. If possible, China could also seek to maintain a trading relationship and some level of stable ties or even cooperation on some shared threats with the United States, even as the two sides fought indirectly. Beijing's desired end state would thus be one in which the United States adopts a position of subordination to Chinese power. Somewhat similar to Chinese descriptions of an ideal "new type of major power relationship," the ideal end state for China would be a conclusion of peace on terms of nominal equality but de facto U.S. deference to China as the new global leading power.[1]

The onset of indirect hostilities with the United States could be accompanied by extensive nonmilitary struggle and hostile policies. Given the two nations' economic interdependence and shared involvement in multilateral institutions, as well as China's current preference for waging its international struggles through nonmilitary means, the economic, diplomatic, and informational struggles would perhaps even be foremost.[2] Paradoxically, it is possible that the belligerents could maintain some level of trade and investment, driven

[1] Cheng Li and Lucy Xu, "Chinese Enthusiasm and American Cynicism over the 'New Type of Great Power Relations,'" Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, December 4, 2014.

[2] Michael J. Mazarr, "The Essence of Strategic Competition with China," *PRISM*, Vol. 9, No. 1, October 21, 2020.

perhaps more out of necessity than anything else. However, the onset of hostilities with the United States would profoundly shape almost all domains of Chinese policy. For example, Chinese leaders would probably delay spending on various domestic programs in order to fund a robust military buildup to defeat U.S. power. The country already maintains a vast internal security apparatus, and a reduction in social spending to ameliorate demands for the citizens could mean that Beijing would probably have to further increase repression to ensure political stability.[3] China's foreign policy to support the realization of the China Dream would also likely change dramatically, with a more aggressive focus on demonizing the United States and rallying international supporters in a manner somewhat evocative of the polarizing politics of the Cold War. China could manipulate its long-standing foreign policy prohibitions on unilateral military intervention to justify its reliance on indirect involvement in intrastate wars primarily through military aid and assistance. In ways that recall patterns in the Cold War, the PLA could in some cases find itself drawn more deeply into the conflicts of client states as part of a broader effort to weaken its rival's credibility and prestige.

Given the decision to wage an indirect war and its own power projection limitations, China would have to pay particular attention to motivating client states to fight. Beijing has traditionally relied on a message of anti-imperialism and antimilitary intervention to rally international support against the West, and a similar message could underpin its effort to motivate clients to fight U.S.-backed forces. But clients might be motivated to support Chinese combat operations for other reasons. In the past World Wars and in the Cold War many countries sought to exploit their own local interstate rivalries and/or intrastate conflicts to advance their own goals by appealing to one side or the other for patronage. In World War I, for example, China and Japan joined the Allies in hopes of securing various benefits, including territory for Japan, at the expense of the Central Powers. Alternatively, clients could demonstrate support in hopes of maintaining good relations with a powerful China or in response to intense pressure from Beijing. In the case of World War II, Brazil furnished combat forces and many countries in Latin America sided with the United States against the Axis powers despite any grievance against them. These countries joined in part to maintain good relations with the United States and also partly in response to intense diplomatic pressure from Washington.

But it is also possible that such a disparate collection of states with little ability to project force would not form a cohesive alliance. Rather, China could operate a loose-knit coalition in which countries shared little with one another beyond Chinese patronage and a general desire to redress historic wrongs. Chinese military coordination with its clients could be largely bilateral and transactional, based on Beijing's judgment of how much the particular military aims of its clients supported the broader effort to diminish U.S power and prestige.

[3] Adrian Zenz, "China's Domestic Security Spending: An Analysis of Available Data," *China Brief*, Vol. 18, No. 4, March 12, 2018.

Beijing might also try to build multilateral coalitions modeled on groups such as the SCO, but disunity, lack of consensus, and the limited power projection capabilities of most member states would severely constrain their value beyond propaganda. To compensate for their weaknesses, China might add paramilitary forces and security contractors to such coalitions.

In short, the most likely tool of Chinese overseas indirect combat power could center on bilateral patron-client ties. Current models of Chinese client-patron relations, as seen in Cambodia, suggest a model that could be expanded on in such a low-intensity conflict scenario.[4] In this model China could rely on the provision of arms and benefits to elites in client states to support their conflicts against adversaries that had some form of U.S. backing in exchange for limited access on the part of the PLA. In some cases, Chinese military forces might need to intervene more directly to prop up a client regime, but this option is most plausible for countries along China's periphery. China might also devote resources to supporting proxy conflicts or building influence in states supported by such a key partner state as Russia. In each situation, China would perhaps assess the relative advantage that could be gained through a more active involvement and weigh the feasibility of competing options before deciding on one approach. China would also face the risk that the client state could escalate a situation beyond Beijing's expectations, resulting in a larger commitment that China would find difficult to back out of.

Table 6.1 examines China's potential national goals.

TABLE 6.1
A U.S.-China Low-Intensity War Scenario: China's National Goals

China's National Strategic Goals	Key Sub-Objectives
China Dream realized by 2049	CCP-led government remains in power.
	China Dream domestic end state is achieved.
	China Dream international end state is achieved (China as preeminent global power).
Defeat of United States as rival power	U.S. international credibility and influence are significantly reduced, with U.S. primacy largely reduced to the Americas.
	United States lacks will or ability to meaningfully impede Beijing's realization of China Dream goals.
	Escalation is controlled and great power war is avoided.
	Trade relations and cooperation on shared concerns are maintained, if possible.

[4] Sigit Candra Wiranata Kusuma, "China-Cambodia Relationships: Phnom Penh as Beijing's Permanent Client State," *AEGIS Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2019.

These national strategic goals would in turn frame and inform how Beijing might direct the PLA to carry out its operations against the United States. Several other assumptions are worth noting. First, we assume that the CCP remains in power throughout this time frame, as there is little evidence to suggest the party's rule is in any danger. We assume that the leadership in China seeks to avoid engaging in a devastating great power war that might escalate to nuclear annihilation. Even though we aim to paint a picture of a more antagonistic and conflict-ridden U.S.-China competition, we assume that the Chinese government hopes to avoid escalation to high-intensity war; yet, despite its intentions, the risk of unintended escalation remains high throughout this scenario. The trends noted in Chapter Two also apply or, more likely, have accelerated. In particular, the gap in national power between China and the United States has further narrowed, the world order remains fragmented, problems of resource competition continue to be pervasive, and an increasingly multipolar world features shifting partnerships and alliances. The military trends of new technologies and modes of conflict also apply.

Chinese and Adversary National Interests

While China might adopt an overall posture of hostilities with the United States, the decision to engage in particular clashes and conflicts would likely be driven by careful consideration of the potential benefits to be gained from each individual situation. To represent these sorts of considerations, we specify possible interests of both China and those of its adversaries. The national interests of China also includes those of client countries—that is, nations that depend on Chinese power for protection and benefits, which they receive in exchange for deference to Beijing on a broad range of policy issues. Chinese national policy today does not consider the role of client states, but the incentive to do so would become difficult to avoid in a systemic global conflict with the United States. China's adversaries would principally include the United States but could include others, such as Japan or other U.S. allies and partners. We use China's fairly inclusive typology of "core interests" as a starting point for this analysis. Accordingly, Chinese considerations for the use of force would seek either to defend Chinese interests or to attack the interests of its adversaries, while downgrading the importance of operations that did not aim to achieve either sets of objectives. For Chinese national interests, there are a number of appropriate categories.

Basic national security. This is the essential security of the state and society, damage to which could threaten instability or the survival of the nation. In the present scenario this may also be partially extended to the basic national security of Chinese client states.

CCP rule and the socialist system. The CCP has a natural interest in perpetuating its rule and controlling any threats to it. In the present scenario this may also mean supporting the perpetuation of friendly regimes in client states and the control of threats to those regimes.

Sovereignty and territory. All Chinese claimed territories are involved, including disputed ones in the maritime regions, Taiwan, and land border areas. Chinese sovereignty in cyberspace and protection of relevant space-based assets also fall into this category. In the present scenario, the sovereignty and territory of key client states could be additional considerations.

Developmental interests. This refers primarily to all economic-related assets, resources, markets, and shipping lanes abroad, as these are the vital inputs to the economy. In the present scenario, these interests this may to some extent incorporate the economic interests of key client states, so long as these are congruent with China's.

China's credibility and prestige as a great power. Although not formally listed as one of China's core interests, a China that has neared global primacy would have a strong incentive to uphold its credibility and prestige as a leading power. The desire to maintain its status could motivate China to commit more resources to ensure victory in a distant conflict than might otherwise appear justified.

While the PLA may carry out missions to protect and defend its interests and, to a lesser extent, those of its clients, it would also have the mission to weaken and downgrade the will and capacity of the United States and its allies. China could be expected to direct offensive operations against the interests of the United States and other antagonists of China, which, in such a polarized environment, would very likely seek some level of cooperation with the United States. Since this is a scenario focused on low-intensity warfare, Chinese leaders would support client states to attack the adversary counterpart's interests. In some cases, PLA forces could engage directly against countries backed by the United States (see Table 6.2). The decision to consider the interests of client states as meriting Chinese military aid would mark a striking departure from current practice. The decision might enable China to strengthen its ability to maintain and sustain coalitions abroad, but would also raise risks of entanglement and unwanted escalation of conflict in distant locales involving PLA forces.

TABLE 6.2
Chinese and Adversary Interests for a Low-Intensity War Scenario

Chinese Interest	Adversary Counterpart	Definition
Basic national security	Adversary basic security	Interests vital to the survival of the country
CCP and socialist system; supporting elite rule in client states	Adversary government and social system	Interests vital to the functioning of the state and social cohesiveness
Chinese territory and sovereignty; territorial integrity of client states	Adversary territory and sovereignty	All claimed territory and sovereign assets in cyberspace, outer space, and elsewhere
Chinese developmental interests; congruent client state economic interests	Adversary developmental interests	Overseas inputs to the economy, including resources, markets, shipping lanes, and energy
Chinese credibility and prestige	Adversary credibility and prestige	Rank status of a country among powerful states as perceived by other countries

China's Military Strategy in a Low-Intensity Conflict Scenario

Because our analysis is focused on the possibilities of military conflict, we will examine more closely the PLA's low-intensity strategy to defeat U.S. power. In this section we explore how Chinese leaders might define the nation's principal threats and the military's missions and objectives in light of the conflict. We also explore how leaders might refine guidance on building and operating military force.

Principal Threats

In a situation featuring systemic conflict with the United States, the threat posed by the United States would become a top priority. Owing to the severity of the danger, this would probably result in the downgrading of other threats as lower priorities. However, we assume that Beijing is unlikely to compromise on its core interests. Given the tension between competing objectives, we assume that China would opt to defer resolution of some issues, at least until after it has successfully overcome the U.S. threat. Until China achieved a decisive advantage over the United States, Beijing would continue to prioritize management of key dispute issues over their immediate resolution. This does not mean that China would take a passive posture regarding flash points such as Taiwan. On the contrary, these festering issues could become the new front lines of low-intensity warfare and a useful means for China to stage demonstrations of its strength and U.S. weakness. Occasional kinetic strikes or operations designed to demonstrate the limits of U.S. security assurances are also possible. China and the United States could escalate the frequency and scope of indirect conflicts through cyber, paramilitary, and other forces, a possibility explored further below.

As indirect U.S.-China conflict breaks out between China and the United States, other Asian countries would be motivated to start picking sides to protect their own interests. Longtime rivals of China, such as India and Japan, would probably choose to cooperate with the United States for fear that a victorious China would next seek to subordinate its Asian neighbors. Beijing would thus have to prepare for contingencies on multiple fronts. Following the pattern of multilateralization of conflict noted in Chapter Five, other countries could seek to exploit opportunities arising from the conflict by aligning with the United States or with China. They might carry out limited military actions for their own national purposes, resulting in the eruption of parallel and overlapping conflicts involving a large number of belligerents. In particular, the growing trend of intrastate conflict in past decades could open many opportunities for indirect U.S.-China conflict.[5] China could find itself coping with civil wars involving its client states or exploiting opportunities for mischief in the partner nations of the United States. Alternatively, both the Chinese and U.S. governments might support nonstate actors in countries experiencing intrastate war.

[5] Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2019; Dominic Tierney, "The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War," *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 2021.

China would have to ensure that sufficient forces were available to cope with each of these threats. So would the United States, which in its weakened state might find itself facing newly emerging threats on its periphery. In a reprise of Cold War–era politics, the United States could find itself confronted by hostile rebel groups or states backed by Chinese arms and money in Europe, Latin America, or elsewhere. Longtime antagonists such as Cuba or Venezuela could host Chinese military forces and perhaps support nonstate actors in countries aligned with the United States. Countries in these regions might experience national breakdown, which could in turn exacerbate intrastate conflict—again with potential Chinese involvement. Similarly, Washington could find itself funding and supporting friendly governments besieged by insurgencies and rebel groups backed by Beijing in the Indo-Pacific and elsewhere along BRI routes. The point of China's involvement in low-intensity, indirect war efforts around the world would be to distract the United States and attrit its resources and will to persist through its involvement in numerous conflicts.

U.S. allies in Asia, Europe, or the Middle East might also call for military assistance to deal with threats specific to their situations. China could exploit feuds and conflicts between European countries to drive them farther apart and weaken them further. For example, the fractures and persistent divisions in the Balkan states could also provide opportunities for China to back insurgencies or support clients engaged in their own military conflicts with their neighbors. Again, instances of national breakdown could open opportunities for China to back rebel groups against European- and U.S.-supported rebel groups. As another example, Saudi Arabia and its Sunni allies might similarly demand U.S. military support to cope with a militarily aggressive Iran backed by Chinese funding and arms. To maintain the support of its allies and partners in the broader struggle with Beijing, Washington could find itself under immense pressure to respond to such demands for military involvement around the world.

At the same time, nontraditional threats would likely persist and complicate the situation. Even as they managed low-intensity conflicts against one another, both China and the United States would still need to cope with nonwar threats, such as regional instability, nuclear proliferation, insurgencies, state collapse, terrorism, natural disasters, and other dangers. All these competing threats and drivers could overlap and exacerbate the traditional threat posed by the clashing coalitions. Paradoxically, however, given the strains on the Chinese and U.S. militaries that could threaten to overwhelm their ability to respond, these other threats could add incentives to control escalation.

A China that had moved closer to a position of regional primacy and international leadership would face a strong incentive to counter threats posed to the interests of key partners and to the global economy. To retain the loyalty of client states, China might begin to more highly value threats to key client states along BRI routes. For example, China could list Indian aggression against Pakistan as a threat to China's interests and more directly aid its partner in relevant contingencies, perhaps by more actively supporting rebel groups in India or deploying specialized PLA units to aid Pakistan. To bolster its own international credibility and prestige, China could also seek to expand its international influence—in part by assuming greater responsibility for protecting vital global shipping lanes and tackling other

transnational threats. These multidirectional threats, and the persistent challenge of maintaining a vast domestic internal security apparatus, could further strain the ability of the PLA's resources and add another incentive to maintain a low-intensity approach to war with the United States (see Table 6.3).

Military Missions and Objectives

As noted in Chapter Three, China's leadership has upheld the framework of the "historic mission" to define the PLA's role in national strategy, albeit modified to emphasize the quality of strategic support for each mission.[6] The modification to focus on strategic support emphasizes the current national strategy's focus on achieving goals principally through peaceful methods. For the military, this elevates in importance the responsibilities of deterrence and peacetime-shaping activities.[7]

Modified for an era of low-intensity war with the United States, the missions could carry points of continuity and change. The first mission to support the CCP's rule would likely remain in place. It could, however, carry a corollary directive for the PLA to more aggressively support whole-of-government efforts to undermine enemies of the CCP. This might entail covert operations to encourage social and political division in the United States and its allies. The second mission of protecting sovereignty and territory could probably be modified to direct the PLA to also help protect the sovereignty and territory of key client-allies along BRI routes. China might also direct the PLA to carry out offensive operations that encourage challenges to the authority of U.S. and allied governments in their respective territories and regions. As China's overseas interests grew in importance, the central leadership could direct the military to step up efforts to protect overseas interests, an imperative reflected in the third mission. This might entail defensive operations to protect infrastructure, citizens,

TABLE 6.3
Chinese Threat Prioritization in a Low-Intensity War Scenario

Threat Priority	Security Threat
Primary threat	U.S. political and military power aimed at preventing the realization of the China Dream
	Rival countries that collaborate with the United States against China
Secondary threats	Taiwan separatism, neighbors that dispute territory
	Traditional and nontraditional threats to client states along BRI routes
	Traditional and nontraditional threats to key shipping lanes, digital infrastructure, and other aspects of global economy

[6] "Full Text of the 17th Party Congress Report," Xinhua News Agency, October 24, 2007.

[7] 闫文虎 [Yan Wenhu], 正确理解新时代军队使命任务 ["Correctly Understanding the Military's Missions in the New Era"], 中国军网 [China Military Online], July 26, 2019.

and economic interests in countries located along BRI routes. The interests of client states could rise in importance, motivating Beijing to undertake military operations and activities to support them. Doing so could also entail offensive missions to weaken and damage the interests of the United States and aligned forces positioned to threaten or damage BRI-related infrastructure. An example might be cyberoperations to damage competitor networks. The fourth mission, that of essentially shaping a favorable security environment, could also see a dramatic expansion. China's prestige and credibility could loom larger in considerations of Chinese involvement in various conflict situations, since perceptions of Chinese superiority and success would be more likely to bolster Beijing's efforts to win international support. Related defensive strategies could call on the PLA to backstop client regimes and strengthen a Chinese-led international security order characterized by multilateral organizations that operate principally along BRI routes, such as the SCO. Offensive missions might entail operations to target and imperil U.S. partner countries and governments as part of a broader effort to demonstrate U.S. weakness and undermine the appeal of U.S. international leadership. The PLA might also support attacks by client militaries against high-profile U.S. military platforms such as stealth aircraft or aircraft carriers as part of a broader effort to diminish U.S. prestige (see Table 6.4).

For China, the goal of the low-intensity conflict would be to diminish and discredit the United States as a rival leader and undermine the nation's ability to deny China's ascent as an international leader. At the same, Beijing would be worried about driving Washington to such a desperate point that it escalates the war. Accordingly, China might seek to balance operations and activities that weaken U.S. power with restraint from the most aggressive measures that could provoke a ruinous cyberspace, nuclear, outer space, or conventional war. These cross-cutting incentives could add further motivation for China to favor indirect methods of fighting U.S. power. While China might prefer to have clients do most of the fighting, small numbers of PLA forces could become involved in relevant combat operations.

TABLE 6.4
Chinese Military Missions for a U.S.-China Low-Intensity Conflict Scenario

Defensive Mission	Offensive Mission
Deter and defeat U.S. and allied military operations to undermine CCP governance	Sow political and social division in the United States and among its key allies
Deter and defeat U.S. and allied military operations to overturn Chinese control of its sovereignty and territory	Foment challenges to U.S. and allied control of their respective territories
Deter and defeat U.S. and allied military operations to harm the overseas interests of China and its clients along BRI routes	Damage and discredit U.S. international influence by weakening U.S. client states and damaging alternatives to BRI projects
Deter and defeat threats to the construction of a stable international order based on Chinese leadership, including those arising from the United States and its allies	Damage and discredit U.S. international credibility and prestige by defeating U.S.-backed partners and destroying high-profile U.S. military platforms

Force Development

In terms of force development, years of escalating tensions and the shock of several serious military crises provide a strong incentive for senior leaders in the United States and China to step up a military buildup aimed primarily at the other country. The formal designation of the other country as an enemy state would accelerate this trend. But the preference for indirect conflict could significantly affect funding priorities. A full analysis of how China might revise its military modernization program in the light of a more hostile rivalry with the United States lies outside the bounds of this report, but we do suggest several strategic options that could be most relevant to potential conflict scenarios. In particular, we judge that even in a low-intensity conflict scenario, the PLA would probably still maintain its focus on outmatching the U.S. military in the quality of its weapons and equipment for deterrence purposes and to retain the option of escalating the conflict. Thus, in this scenario we assume that China continues to invest in high-end capabilities, such as hypersonic weapons and medium- and long-range missiles, and enabling capabilities, such as space-based and electronic warfare, to deter and defeat U.S. forces in the Asia-Pacific, especially within the first and second island chains. At the same time, to prevail in low-intensity conflict, China could increase investments in the cyberoperations and special operations domains, as well as gray zone capabilities such as paramilitary maritime forces and air support that could be deployed below the threshold of conflict. Since client states would bear the brunt of most fighting, Beijing might also direct defense industries to significantly expand production of low-cost but capable weapons and platforms to share with client states located along BRI routes, and it might invest in providing cybersecurity capabilities and training to client states. China would also need to improve coordination between the PLA and civilian organizations to support indirect, low-intensity conflict. Below, we briefly review possible changes in the PLA's force development in this low-intensity conflict scenario. Given the cost of military development and expected slower growth for both countries in the coming decades, both could face constraints on their ability to ramp up defense spending. The possibility that some sort of trade relationship might continue despite the indirect conflict could to some extent mitigate the reductions in economic growth, but a world featuring hostilities between the two largest economies would very likely result in considerable disruption to trade and investment.

Missile forces. To deter the United States, we assume that the PLA increases its inventory of long-range strike weapons—in particular, hypersonic glide missiles, intercontinental ballistic missiles, intermediate-range missiles, and medium-range missiles. The PLA Rocket Force could increase its inventory of nuclear warheads to bolster deterrence. China could also be expected to expand its inventory of missile defense capabilities to counter U.S. long-range precision strike systems. As a trade-off, it might slow down production of short-range ballistic missiles due to their ample inventory and the priority of fighting U.S. power around the world over the immediate resolution of the Taiwan dispute and other disputes. The reliance on PGMs could be attractive to China for many reasons, but it would carry its own risks. Use of standoff strike could increase the risk of civilian casualties, for which China could

be blamed. To mitigate this potential blowback, Chinese forces could be expected to step up information operations and propaganda to suppress such reports or deflect blame.

Cybersecurity forces. In this scenario the PLA has a strong incentive to significantly increase cybersecurity units for the purposes of improving the cyber defense of China and key client states. Cybersecurity units come at relatively low cost. The PLA could expand its capabilities to carry out offensive operations that target the networks of the U.S. military and those of key U.S. allies and partners. China could also expand its financing and support for proxy cybersecurity groups in other countries, such as Russia, to carry out cyberattacks on U.S. and allied networks. It has already used some of these tactics through collaboration with the Chinese Ministry of State Security and affiliated advanced persistent threat groups that conduct cyberespionage at the behest of the ministry.

Outer space and C4ISR. With hostile operations potentially expanding around the world, the PLA would have a strong incentive to upgrade and improve its ability to carry out surveillance, communication, and reconnaissance around the world. Space-based and unmanned assets could be key to those missions and might accordingly see expansions in capability. Replicating a method that would likely characterize many Chinese efforts, civilian entities could augment military capabilities. For example, Chinese civilian government ministries could step up their direct support for military missions. China could also capitalize on previous efforts to develop information technology, communications, and outer space infrastructure in its client states and persuade their governments to share C4ISR capabilities and expand access for Chinese military units. Although the PLA might maintain offensive space-based and counterspace capabilities, the low-intensity nature of the war would provide a strong incentive to refrain from escalation to a high-intensity war involving space-based assets.

The PLA Army. The conventional forces of the PLA Army (PLAA) might slow the pace of modernization to help pay for upgrades in the other services and branches. Defense industries that support the PLAA could ramp up production of small arms, armor, artillery, helicopters, and other equipment for use by client military forces. PLAA experts and advisers could play a key role in helping client militaries fight effectively with Chinese equipment. Major combat units facing potential contingencies near the Indian border or Taiwan or facing other potential enemy forces would retain priority for the modernization of weapons and equipment, however.

The PLA Air Force. To support low-intensity war, the PLA Air Force could expand its planned inventory of long-range transports—namely, the Y-20—and supporting special mission aircraft. In order to support overseas combat missions, expanding the ranks of long-distance bombers and refueling tankers could be a top priority. Long-range bombers could provide valuable strike support to distant client militaries engaged with U.S.-backed forces. To continue to deter potential escalation into conventional war, the PLA Air Force could maintain a strong inventory of advanced fighter aircraft, although the pace of constructing high-priced fifth-generation aircraft such as the J-20 and J-35 could slow in order to free up resources for other efforts.

The PLA Navy. By 2049, the PLA Navy will have likely upgraded and modernized its surface ships to augment shipborne air defense systems and increased the size and capability of its submarine fleet. To better protect merchant shipping and deter potential attacks through the South China Sea, from the second island chain, and in the Indian Ocean, the PLA might develop teams of surface action groups consisting of destroyers, submarines, replenishment vessels, and other combat vessels capable of routinely carrying out SLOC protection missions. The PLA Navy's current counterpiracy task force offers a potential template for the type of force it could deploy in a future maritime crisis. The task force comprises a landing vessel, a missile frigate, and a supply ship, with approximately 700 PLA Navy officers manning the vessels. In addition, the task force has deployed the missile frigate *Anyang*, which also has long-range alert and air defense capabilities.[8]

The PLA Navy Marine Corps. The PLA is already on pace to expand the size of its Marine Corps to 100,000 troops. In this scenario, a modest increase in the number and prioritization of newer arms and equipment could enable the PLA Navy Marine Corps to more effectively carry out combat missions abroad, including an expanded capacity for amphibious operations. As with the PLA itself, the PLA Marines could serve in military advisory roles with counterparts in client militaries.

Special forces (all services). Chinese special forces could experience expansions in numbers and receive higher priority for modernization and expansion of weapons and equipment. They could carry out a variety of sabotage, reconnaissance, and other elite light infantry missions to support client military forces around the world. The PLA might seek to improve the ability of special forces to serve in advisory and assistance missions, although this remains a key gap in its present capabilities.

Bases and facilities. Given a higher likelihood of hostilities with U.S.-backed forces beyond the first island chain, the PLA would have a strong incentive to expand access for combat forces abroad. This would include both direct involvement in the form of PLA troops and indirect involvement in the form of Chinese donations of military aid and equipment. We assume that China will have successfully leveraged its economic prowess to gain access in key locations along BRI routes, especially in Southeast Asia. For the purposes of this analysis, we assume that PLA forces have some limited access in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In Central Asia, PAP and PLA special forces could gain access to facilities to support limited combat operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In the Middle East, China could have gained access and built some facilities for visiting troops in Iran. Africa could see the expansion of facilities and access in key energy-producing partner states such as Angola and Sudan. To support military operations in the Atlantic and the Americas, China might also seek a naval base on the eastern coast of Africa. All these regions could also experience greater Chinese indirect involvement in the form of donated military aid and

[8] "China Deploys New Missile Destroyer, Frigate in Its Anti-Piracy Fleet," *Economic Times*, last updated April 4, 2019.

equipment, especially in intrastate conflicts featuring opposing factions backed by Beijing and Washington.

China could also post military advisers and technical experts in client states in eastern Europe or in the Balkan states. The Arctic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea could see regular patrols of major PLA Navy combatants, which could occasionally provide offshore support to Chinese-backed forces fighting inland. China's success in establishing the Djibouti base could lead to its expansion to host larger combat formations, which could be deployed to support clients in Africa and perhaps the Middle East. In the Caribbean and Latin America, China would in this scenario gain expanded military access and some sort of support facilities in such partner states as Argentina, Cuba, or Venezuela, mostly in the form of temporary hosting of visiting military aircraft and ships. But Chinese military advisers and experts could augment donating alarms and equipment throughout Latin America, especially in those countries experiencing intrastate conflict between Chinese- and U.S.-backed factions.

Force Employment

A low-intensity conflict with the United States would likely spur Chinese leaders to rethink many of their long-standing guiding principles regarding the use of force. While we do not know exactly how the guidance might change, we can hypothesize some possible modifications to current PLA guidance to better suit the Chinese war aims and strategic objectives outlined in this scenario.

Chinese leaders in a situation of conflict with the United States would, by definition, permit more aggressive operations, including offensive operations against the interests of the United States and its allies and partners. But the struggle for international leadership and influence could dramatically affect how the PLA contemplates combat operations and its approach to risk and escalation. Sensitivities to the PLA's persistent vulnerabilities, weaknesses, and political imperatives could encourage China to favor distinctive ways of conducting combat operations. In particular, the PLA is likely to remain relatively inexperienced entering a low-intensity war against U.S. forces. Even if we grant that the PLA might have clashed with neighboring countries in a handful of conventional fights, this remains a relatively small base of experience compared with that of the U.S. military. Moreover, we assume that the CCP and the PLA have not fully overcome the problems of weak administrative enforcement, a political preference for centralized control, emphasis on party loyalty, rule by the individual rather than law, and pervasive corruption. The military vulnerabilities of inadequate logistics infrastructure, while perhaps somewhat mitigated by the conclusion of access agreements with client states, could also impose an important constraint on PLA planners. Adding to these concerns are the political considerations that Chinese leaders could retain in their pursuit of global leadership. Since Beijing hopes to build its base of power among developing countries, it would face a strong motivation to limit the appearance of imperial occupation in other countries. However, China's inexperience with leading international coalitions raises a high likelihood that Beijing and PLA forces would poorly understand the conditions

on the ground in distant intrastate conflicts or proxy wars involving Chinese-backed forces. The risk of Chinese miscalculation and misjudgment for such fights could be significant.

All these factors would provide a strong incentive for Chinese leaders to remain cautious about how they employ PLA forces abroad and to push client states to do most of the fighting where possible, perhaps operating at most in a manner of a poorly integrated, loose coalition. In most operations outside Asia the PLA footprint could be relatively modest, featuring a handful of bases. In most partner nations the PLA presence could be limited to military advisers, technical experts to support arms transfers, and small teams of PLA specialists to carry out intelligence and reconnaissance, cybersecurity, and other specialized missions. Unsure of the PLA's ability to fight at long range in a truly integrated, joint fashion, forward-deployed combat forces could rely on single-service-led missions. The CCP's preference for centralized control could also incentivize the PLA to rely heavily on technology, such as PGMs, AI-enabled sensors and weapons, and computer-enabled decisionmaking, which would reduce the need for delegating command authority and also avoid the potential embarrassment of poor battlefield performance by inadequately prepared joint forces.

The PLA would likely continue to adhere to the principles of active defense as guides to the employment of military force. But, consistent with past practice, the meaning of the principles would be adjusted to serve the political needs of the conflict. There are certain key principles that the central leadership could provide to guide military operations, as noted in the following paragraphs.

Ensure that military operations serve political goals. Consistent with past practice, the PLA would, in this scenario, emphasize its allegiance and deference to the party's leadership and political goals for conflict. The diplomatic, information, economic, and technological aspects of the U.S.-China rivalry are the primary means of struggle. Military operations would play a critical but supporting role. Accordingly, the PLA would emphasize that military operations should not derail the nonmilitary efforts. For similar reasons, it would remain imperative that the PLA maintain escalation control and avoid provoking a broader conventional or nuclear war if at all possible. Chinese military writings on "war control" already strongly emphasize the imperative of ensuring political control of all military efforts and that military activities remain subordinate and supportive of political goals.[9] These imperatives and principles would become just as important or more so in a world featuring extensive low-intensity and indirect conflict. A hallmark of this conflict would therefore be the extensive use of propaganda, information operations, "legal warfare," and psychological operations in the leadup to the war to shore up domestic and international support and demoralize and undermine the United States.

Seize and maintain the moral, legal, and political high ground. The PLA has long valued the political dimensions of conflict and would likely do so in any U.S.-China conflict. As part of a broader struggle for political mastery, Chinese military operations involving the United States could pay close attention to the moral, legal, and political aspects of conflict. Chinese leaders might direct the PLA to avoid moves that appear overly aggressive and to pursue

[9] Burke et al., 2020.

options that put the United States on the political defensive. To compensate for the vulnerability of its interests abroad, for example, China might deliberately choose to locate its overseas assets in densely populated areas or rely on civilian transports with passengers to ship some equipment. China would in turn trumpet the civilian casualties that would inevitably arise from strikes against relevant military assets. At the same time, China's government and military could carry out extensive efforts to legitimize and normalize PLA operations in the same area. Chinese military forces could be directed to operate in a manner that advances China's vision of multilateral security based on Chinese political principles and ideals, such as a BRI-related multilateral security organization, even if relevant operations achieve little beyond advancing Chinese propaganda.

Employ asymmetric means where possible. As part of the Maoist principle "You fight your way, I fight my way," the PLA could be directed to seek asymmetric and cost-imposing strategies that minimize risks of escalation or embarrassing battlefield defeats. This principle could reinforce the PLA's apprehension over engaging U.S. joint forces in a symmetrical manner. Instead the PLA could prefer long-range strikes by PGMs, attacks by unmanned systems, and cyberoperations. This could also mean generous Chinese support for simply equipped guerilla forces and other nonstate actors in third-party countries that fought against the United States.

Carefully control military actions and minimize escalation risks. Consistent with a strong emphasis on "war control" and related concepts, PLA forces might be directed to carefully manage the use of military operations and activities to ensure alignment with political goals.[10] In situations featuring conflict with U.S.-backed forces, the PLA could prioritize operations with paramilitary and nonmilitary forces, such as intelligence and law enforcement assets, to advance Chinese interests where possible. Indirect conflict via partner host nation forces, paramilitary forces, and defense contractors would be prioritized over direct PLA engagement. But Beijing would restrict direct combat between PLA and U.S. forces without central leadership approval, though the risk of unintended escalation would be high for many conflict situations. Major conventional combat forces would thus probably remain on high alert and at a high state of readiness in the event of escalation to major war.

Employ systems-of-systems doctrines in combat. Consistent with current PLA warfighting concepts, troops in this scenario might also prepare for battle guided by doctrines such as intelligentized warfare and systems-of-systems warfare, which seek rapid dominance in all domains to prevail on the battlefield by attacking and degrading enemy systems. Yet it is possible that only a minority of elite PLA units would be fully trained and prepared to execute such missions, and these might be located principally on the mainland in a defensive posture. PLA forces that engage with U.S.-backed proxy forces might operate with less advanced forces and accordingly favor the methods of long-range attacks. However, difficulties in integrating client militaries that fight in simpler ways could also result in the PLA focusing on support functions such as ISR and long-range fire support.

[10] Timothy R. Heath, "Dispute Control: China Recalibrates Use of Military Force to Support Security Policy's Expanding Focus," *Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies*, Vol. 43, Nos. 1–2, 2018b.

These admittedly speculative guiding principles provide a sense of how central leaders might seek to manage and control the role of military forces in a comprehensive, whole-of-government struggle for supremacy against the United States. To achieve political goals, the PLA would be directed to focus on a wide spectrum of military operations and activities, of which combat would be only one part. Combat operations would be strictly controlled and carried out in a manner that reflects the central leadership's sensitivity to the political, legal, and moral features of any confrontation involving U.S.-backed forces. While Beijing might practice restraint in any situation involving U.S. military forces, it would keep the possibility of expansion to higher-end conflict open both to deter the United States and to maintain flexible options for any contingency. When considering options, PLA leaders might consider a graduated approach, starting with the least lethal and nonmilitary forces. Where possible, Chinese leaders might prefer to empower and assist partner host nations to carry out any combat operations in their own country, with PLA forces playing at most an indirect, supporting role. Sensitivity to the political optics of Chinese military operations abroad might also incentivize Beijing to organize coalitions, including some key client states for operations against any U.S.-backed forces. For example, PLA military advisers could help facilitate intelligence collection and support for host nation military forces that target nonstate actors possibly backed by the United States. Chinese civilian technicians could at the same time help host nation military units operate unmanned platforms to carry out strikes or reconnaissance. Chinese government officials and contractors could also oversee the transfer of arms and training to employ the weapons effectively. Security for Chinese personnel and key assets could be provided by host nation units augmented by armed, nonuniformed defense contractors from China.

Implications

In summary, we assess a U.S.-China low-intensity war to be a long-term effort featuring proxy conflict and possibly direct interventions across much of the world. Fought primarily by the militaries of client states or favored rebel groups, as well as paramilitary and defense contractors, these conflicts could be waged as part of intrastate or interstate conflicts. PLA involvement would consist primarily of support to these combat forces and take the form of ISR and long-range fire support. The conflicts would most likely occur along the BRI routes that China has prioritized as the geographic basis of its international power. Relevant Chinese and U.S. military units could also engage each other in cyberspace and in the information domains. Conventional military forces would continue their buildup and preparations for major combat operations, though they would operate primarily as deterrent forces. Some conventional military interventions on the part of the PLA along China's periphery, to fight U.S.-backed regimes or insurgencies, could be possible. War waged primarily through indirect means would open the possibility of cooperation and stabilization of bilateral relations, in a manner somewhat evocative of how Soviet-U.S. relations stabilized despite the two nations waging indirect conflict against each other through proxy struggles around the world in the later decades of the Cold War. If the combatants successfully avoided escalation and maintained the conflict at a low level, trade and investment might flourish, resulting

in a long-lasting, chronic state of semistable, bilateral ties and indirect war. But the risk of unintended escalation would remain substantial, since either side could tire of the indecisive stalemate and risk more aggressive actions to seize a major advantage.

The low-intensity nature of such conflicts also raises the possibility that different conflicts could emerge simultaneously in different parts of the world. Beijing and Washington could find themselves simultaneously managing a diverse set of intrastate and interstate conflicts that flare up now and then in different parts of the world. Moreover, the intensification of hostilities could overlap with those of rival countries in different regions, as well as with security challenges associated with shortages of water and food or nontraditional threats such as natural disasters and terrorist groups. Given the fragmentation, disorder, and pervasiveness of transnational threats assumed in this scenario, there could be many opportunities for China to exploit state weakness to harm U.S.-aligned governments and groups. In such an environment, embattled states and groups could solicit Chinese or U.S. support for their own purposes. Both China and the United States could be challenged to balance their war efforts against each other, with security demands raised by their respective partner nations and/or various transnational threats. Much of the conflict could take the form of opportunistic operations to exploit the difficulties of partner states aligned with one side or the other through the provision of low cost weaponry and equipment to supportive groups or governments.

Beyond the force development and employment possibilities discussed herein, the method by which the PLA would fight in a low-intensity conflict would also depend on the geographic location, the specific Chinese threat perception or interests involved, and the capabilities that the United States and its client states bring to bear. Some of these considerations would likely be as follows:

- Along China's periphery (Central, East, and Southeast Asia), Beijing could consider a range of conventional combat interventions against U.S.-backed governments or rebel groups. The most elite PLA units could take part in conventional assaults against neighboring states with hostile regimes or menacing insurgencies backed by the United States. China could also seek greater access for ships and aircraft in client states such as Cambodia and possibly press Bangladesh, Myanmar, Thailand, and others for similar access and to deny the United States military access. Beijing might similarly lean on Manila to permit small detachments of Chinese ground troops to assist with domestic security missions, establish surveillance and intelligence collection networks, and ensure denial of U.S. access. Regarding Taiwan and maritime disputes, China could intensify gray zone operations against the militaries of nations with either an explicit or implied security partnership with the United States, to include more aggressive tactics such as arrests, seizures, ramming, and armed clashes at sea. Chinese forces could also launch punitive missile strikes and other smaller-scale offensive operations to demonstrate the weaknesses of Taiwan's defense and the limits of U.S. security assistance. Although Beijing might seek to avoid escalating such a situation into a broader conflict, such volatile situations could carry a high risk of miscalculation and unintended escalation.

- Outside China's immediate periphery, in areas such as the Indian Ocean, South Asia, and West Africa, the most likely form of low-intensity conflict could consist of opportunistic operations that exploited state fragmentation and disorder to harm the interests of U.S.-aligned governments and groups and bolster supporters of Chinese power. In occasional cases, China could organize small coalitions of forces to carry out various military operations. Chinese military officials could oversee the transfer of arms and equipment and provide training, technical expertise, and limited specialized military support in the form of reconnaissance and cyberoperations. Host nation militaries and rebel groups carrying Chinese weapons and equipment that fought neighbors or groups backed by the United States could be expected to bear the brunt of fighting. China could deploy smaller combat formations, including modest combined air and ground forces, to intervene directly in support of a client state or to attack U.S.-backed forces. Escalation of Chinese-Indian tensions could result in clashes at sea involving advanced naval warships or skirmishing on the borders.
- In more distant locations such as Africa and the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, and the polar regions, China's options for waging low-intensity conflict would be more constrained by its limited access and power projection capability. The primary means of fighting in these areas would probably consist of operations that exploited the interstate and intrastate conflicts that already existed to advance Chinese goals and harm the interests of the United States. China could provide military assistance and support to client nations or nonstate actors that fought for their own goals against neighbors and nonstate actors that happened to have some form of U.S. backing. Chinese specialized troops could provide ISR and possibly fire support with manned or unmanned systems.
- In these overseas locations China would likely prioritize missions based on the importance of national interests involved. For example, the importance of the transit lane along the Indian Ocean for Chinese energy supplies and merchant shipping provides a strong incentive for the PLA to step up its ability to protect passing ships and deter possible attacks. It could expand access for PLA Navy ships in Iran and for surface warships and submarines in Pakistan and Sri Lanka. Augmenting the gray hulls, China could send troops and equipment on civilian vessels carrying passengers or rely on armed civilian contractors to convey materiel to PLA bases or client militaries. The net result could be a more continuous and larger Chinese military and paramilitary presence along the Indian Ocean and in the Persian Gulf. Chinese naval and armed merchant ships could step up their presence in the Arctic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea to defend shipping traffic. In a scenario of low-intensity war, China might also be willing to become a more active supporter of Russia in confrontations with NATO countries and the United States.
- In any location China could use information operations and outer space and cyberspace capabilities to gather intelligence, harvest data, incite domestic instability and political opposition to the United States, and garner support for Chinese leadership. The information domain could see the most aggressive activity due to the lower risk

of escalation. Chinese operatives could promote disinformation aimed at fomenting U.S. political division and unrest, but they would also be expected to defend against similar attacks from the United States within China. In cyberspace, Chinese cybersecurity units could escalate their espionage and reconnaissance activities to include modest attacks on U.S. networks, most likely by working through proxies in other countries to provide plausible deniability. Chinese forces would favor long-range strikes for direct attacks on U.S.-backed forces, either in support of client militaries or in PLA-led attacks against hostile forces along China's periphery. Fear of unrestrained escalation and the concomitant collateral damage to infrastructure, finance, and the economy could deter China from pursuing more destructive cyberattacks on the United States in a scenario of low-intensity conflict.

While indirect war offers the advantage to Beijing of fighting a conflict at low cost, the downside is that the damage against U.S. power might also be fairly modest. The result could be a long-lasting, chronic state of indirect hostilities. The war could last even longer if accompanied by relatively stable U.S.-China ties and the continuation of trade relations, which would enable both sides to replenish resources lost through indirect conflict. Breaking U.S. power in a manner that avoids catastrophic major war could be essential to Beijing's goals in this scenario, but achieving that outcome could prove elusive or illusory. After years of inconclusive fighting, China could scale back some of its war aims so as to focus merely on gaining positional advantage in a few priority countries—most likely in the vital shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean and into Africa and the Middle East.

To decide systemic leadership, Chinese leaders could prefer to wage a low-intensity war over a high-intensity war for several reasons. Most obviously, the level of destruction would probably be much lower, as would the overall risk of nuclear annihilation or catastrophic devastation. Moreover, a low-intensity war would make China's vulnerabilities in power projection less of a liability, since China would have less reason to fear U.S. military attacks on its distantly deployed ships. The pressure to demonstrate Chinese prowess on the battlefield in symmetrical fights with U.S. joint forces would also be lower. The PLA could instead aim to demonstrate its superiority by destroying high-profile U.S. weapon systems and platforms, primarily through sabotage or attacks launched by client militaries while the PLA husbanded its own advanced weapon systems. If the conflict could be managed, China might also be able to maintain a semblance of trade and investment with many of its BRI partners and continue to implement many aspects of its peacetime efforts to consolidate its leadership.

The ability to replenish losses could prove critical to either side's effort to prevail in a long-term low-intensity war. The fundamental strategic logic on both sides could center on attrition of the adversary to the point that it yields owing to exhaustion. Finding ways to impose costs that stress the adversary's overburdened military resources, in addition to economic strategies aimed at constraining the other side, could prove key to prevailing. Of course, the losing side might also become desperate and opt for escalation to high-intensity war (discussed in Chapter Seven) as a high-risk way to avoid defeat.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A High-Intensity U.S.-China Systemic Conflict Scenario

In this chapter we explore a scenario of high-intensity systemic conflict between China and the United States. This scenario builds on the developments outlined in Chapter Six, as we judge that the most likely path to high-intensity war would be an escalation from low-intensity war. The principal difference in this scenario, of course, is that both sides have directed their militaries to directly engage each other. Leaders on both sides would struggle to contain the war from escalating to the point of devastating nuclear exchanges or cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure but would also face strong incentives to escalate the war in hopes of achieving a decisive victory. The risk of escalation would accordingly be extremely high. The conflict could extend to many parts of the world and include highly destructive attacks in outer space and cyberspace, and it could involve some level of nuclear weapon use.

First, we flesh out key geopolitical assumptions to provide context for the national strategic and military directives in this scenario. We then describe what the national leadership's directives to the military might look like in such a situation, paying particular attention to distinctive features of China's approach to the extent that we can confidently project them. We then explain how the military might modify its mission, force development, and guidance on force employment to carry out a high-intensity war. With this material as context, we then sketch out a variety of conflict operation possibilities. These should be viewed as illustrative examples based on the logic and assumptions of the scenario, not predictions.

Geopolitical Assumptions

The geopolitical context shares much in common with that described in Chapter Six. Both countries have entered a state of hostility after having designated each other as an "enemy" state. The onset of open hostilities would follow months or years of indirect, low-intensity conflict around the world in which each of the two nations regularly battled forces aligned with the other. Over time, self-imposed restraints to control escalation could loosen, leading to more violent and shocking clashes and incidents that serve to harden opinion in both capitals.

The established trend of U.S.-China rivalry overlapping with rivalry involving other countries would probably continue or intensify. Countries eager to secure the benefits of patron-

age from one great power could provoke their own clashes with enemies aligned with the rival great power. Moreover, efforts on the part of China and the United States to mobilize international support against each other could aggravate dynamics of regional and global polarization, which could in turn raise the stakes of the conflict. The involvement of growing numbers of countries would disincentivize compromise in militarized crises, raising the likelihood of bloody outcomes and miscalculation. In such a volatile and unpredictable international situation, the temptation to escalate to conventional attacks could prove difficult to resist. Moreover, the spreading economic dislocation and persistence of chaotic and unaddressed security problems around the world would further strain the military resources of both countries. Decisionmakers in Beijing and Washington could lose patience with an indirect war of attrition and demand more aggressive measures to more rapidly bring the war to a conclusion.

One major difference between the scenario outlined here and that in Chapter Six thus lies in the heightened sense of threat and urgency. Whereas in the low-intensity scenario both countries might have tried to balance the struggle to prevail with a desire to reap the benefits of maintaining trade and some level of cooperation, in this scenario the relations are uniformly hostile and bitterly acrimonious. There is also a greater sense of urgency to the war effort, perhaps owing to the severe damage to the global economy and the disintegration of global order. In this scenario, each country accordingly regards the other as an enemy committed to its destruction. This elevated threat perception justifies the willingness to engage in extensive conventional combat and to risk escalation in order to prevail. While both China and the United States may hope to avoid use of nuclear weapons, the imperative to prevail in a struggle for supremacy results in a fraying and uncertain ability to control escalation. Moreover, the urgent desire to bring the war to a conclusion could lead decisionmakers in Beijing and Washington to authorize highly escalatory attacks in hopes of achieving decisive victory.

China's Wartime National Strategic Goals

The onset of high-intensity war with the United States could drive China to dramatically reorder its national strategic goals. While still seeking in the long term to achieve the China Dream end state, Beijing would likely prioritize more pressing goals. This reprioritization would likely stem directly from the inconclusive results of low-intensity systemic war. For example, the decision to wage high-intensity war could arise from the desperate realization that China's prosecution of a low-intensity war had failed. Alternatively, Chinese leaders could escalate the violence due to their belief that they have gained the upper hand and that conventional conflict could bring victory over the United States and end the chronic state of inconclusive low-intensity conflict. We will refrain from speculating on the precise path or specific drivers that shift the low-intensity war to a high-intensity one and simply instead suggest that the leadership has shifted to a high-intensity war after dissatisfaction with the progress of the low-intensity war.

In shifting to a high-intensity war, Beijing will likely have adjusted its national strategy to prioritize national survival and defeat of the United States as a rival power (Table 7.1). With

TABLE 7.1
A U.S.-China High-Intensity War Scenario: China's National Goals

China's National Strategic Goals	Key Sub-Objectives
National survival	CCP-led government remains in power.
	Chinese nation persists and avoids annihilation or collapse.
	Damage to the nation's military and economic strength is minimized.
	Escalation is controlled, and all-out nuclear exchange is avoided.
Defeat of United States as rival power	U.S. international credibility is damaged, and its influence dramatically reduced.
	United States acknowledges its subordination to Chinese power.
	U.S. military and economic strength degraded to the point that Washington lacks the ability to meaningfully impair Beijing's realization of China Dream goals for decades.

an elevated perception of threat and willingness to embrace extremely high risks, we assume Beijing will have increased its demands for victory. In part to justify the turn to potentially catastrophic major war, Beijing could refine its war aims to seek a severe downgrading in U.S. power. The end state would accept the continuation of the United States as a nation, but in so weakened a condition that it could not plausibly pose a threat to China's ambitions for years or even decades. China could be willing to tolerate a far higher level of destruction and show a higher willingness to inflict violence in pursuit of such a desired end state. This might mean that it would seek a substantial degradation of U.S. warfighting capability and economic strength. At the same time, China would hope to limit the degree of damage and destruction to its own military and economic strength in hopes of reconstituting its national power after the war. In short, we suggest that the principal goal guiding the formulation and implementation of a high-intensity war would be to rapidly and decisively cripple U.S. power to such an extent that the United States would have little choice but to accept a position of subordination in a new Chinese-led order. Put more concisely, China would regard the war as a way to decisively resolve the issue of global leadership. Beijing might not start with that demand, and it might in fact begin a conventional war with more limited aims, but the structural drivers underpinning U.S.-China rivalry would make it difficult to avoid eventually arriving at this conclusion.

The onset of hostilities with the United States would by definition primarily be a large-scale military conflict, though the struggle for supremacy in economics, diplomacy, and other domains could escalate as well. With the onset of a high-stakes power transition "war of decision," the impact on both the Chinese and U.S. economies and political situations could be profound. In China, for example, severe damage to the economy could incentivize

Beijing to incur massive debt to pay for the war, ramp up repression of a discontented populace, and adopt a more radicalized ideology to mobilize popular support and justify the war's potentially staggering costs in lives and resources. China's foreign policy to support the realization of its goal of national revival would likely change dramatically as well, with an aggressive focus on demonizing the United States, punishing U.S. supporters, and rallying international supporters in a manner similar to how major belligerents behaved in World War II. Its aims for remaking the international order might also become more expansive or radicalized, though we will set aside speculation on the details of the various possible political goals of a U.S.-China conflict as beyond the scope of this report.

These national strategic goals in turn frame and inform how Beijing might direct the PLA to carry out its operations against the United States. Some of the assumptions from Chapter Six still hold. We assume that the CCP remains in power throughout this time frame, and we assume that the leadership seeks to avoid engaging in a devastating war of nuclear annihilation, though it may be open to the limited use of nuclear weapons. Chinese leaders may also be willing to entertain extensive cyberspace and outer space attacks to cripple U.S. power. Many of the developments outlined in Chapter Six can be assumed to have occurred as a sort of "road to war." In other words, China and the United States have escalated tensions to the point of indirect conflict spanning much of the world. The global economy will likely have become more chaotic and experience significant disruption.

China's Wartime Military Strategy

In this section we explore how Chinese leaders might define the nation's principal threats and the military's missions and objectives in light of the onset of high-intensity war. We will also explore how leaders might refine guidance on building and operating military force.

Principal Threats

In a situation featuring high-intensity war, the threat posed by the United States and its allies and partners would become the obvious, most pressing priority. Beijing would, however, be focused on defeating the United States. Knocking the United States out of the war could, after all, severely undermine the motivation and ability of other countries to continue the fight. War with the United States would probably entail war with key U.S. allies in Asia. This is because Chinese leaders would probably direct the military to destroy major U.S. military assets such as advanced warships and aircraft based close to China and capable of threatening the nation's vulnerable seaboard. Owing to the severity of the danger posed by the United States and its allies, this would mean a severe downgrading in priority of all other threats. However, we assume that Beijing is unlikely to compromise on its core interests. Given the tension between competing objectives, we assume that China opts to defer resolution of key issues or only takes them on if relevant military operations can help China achieve its goals against the United States. For example, Chinese leaders may view Taiwan through the lens

of how an attack might lure in U.S. forces that could in turn be destroyed by awaiting PLA forces.

As direct combat escalated, Beijing would also likely have to prepare for contingencies on multiple fronts, dealing with U.S. allies and other countries that opt to align with Washington. Few countries, especially in the Indo-Pacific, would probably remain neutral in a major war between China and the United States, since each country would have a strong incentive to align itself with the anticipated victor in hopes of reaping the rewards of loyalty. The coalitions could span much of the world but lack the cohesiveness of those in the wars of the Industrial Age. With limited power projection capability and a higher degree of interdependent relations with both China and the United States, countries in either coalition might operate with a higher degree of autonomy and coordinate in a looser fashion than might have been the case in past wars. PLA forces could find themselves engaged in fighting on multiple fronts, although major combat would be most likely along China's periphery, where the PLA could deploy more easily. Nontraditional hazards would likely drop in priority as the PLA grappled with more pressing threats (see Table 7.2).

Military Missions and Objectives

In a high-intensity war the Chinese leadership would issue a new wartime set of missions. Compared with the peacetime "historic missions" or even the missions outlined in the low-intensity war, the high-intensity war effort would direct the PLA to prioritize a decisive defeat of U.S. military power and preservation of the nation's hopes of achieving the China Dream. The PLA would be directed to also prevent nuclear annihilation or national collapse. Ensuring the CCP's rule would likely also remain a priority. Other missions could be demoted in priority. The PLA would be expected to defend the nation's sovereignty and territory, of course, but operations to compel Taiwan's unification could be delayed or reconceived in terms of operations to cripple U.S. forces. Similarly, the mission to defend overseas interests, while important, might become second in priority, owing in part to the difficulty of fielding forces so far away in a contested environment (see Table 7.3).

TABLE 7.2
Chinese Threat Prioritization in a High-Intensity War Scenario

Threat Priority	Security Threat
Principal threat	U.S. political, economic, and military power
	U.S. coalition allies and partners that militarily engage PLA forces
Lower-priority threats	Taiwan separatism, neighbors that dispute Chinese territory
	Rival Asian powers that support the United States but avoid combat
	Traditional and nontraditional threats to client states along BRI routes
	Nontraditional threats to Chinese and client interests abroad

TABLE 7.3
Military Missions for a U.S.-China High-Intensity Conflict Scenario

Mission Priority	Mission
Top priority	Defeat U.S.-led coalition's efforts to prevent China's rise
	Ensure the basic security and survival of the nation
	Ensure CCP's rule
	Preserve conditions for achieving the China Dream
Second priority	Secure China's unification with Taiwan
	Secure China's territorial integrity in disputed areas
	Protect China's overseas interests
	Protect the interests of Chinese client states

High-End Systemic War: Force Development

The onset of high-intensity war provides a compelling incentive for senior leaders in China to direct a general mobilization and maximize the war effort. A full analysis of how China might revise its military modernization program in light of a major war with the United States lies outside the bounds of this report, but we do suggest several strategic options that could be most relevant to potential conflict scenarios. In contrast to the low-intensity scenario, in which the political imperative to demonstrate Chinese superiority and maintain prestige incentivized the preservation of costly, high-end platforms, a China engaged in high-intensity war could be more open to risk-taking in hopes of achieving decisive victory. The PLA's most elite forces would perhaps seek to engage U.S. forces, but on favorable terms in which the PLA could hope for a reasonable chance of success. Baiting U.S. forces to fight within China's counterintervention envelope would serve such an imperative best. An example might be a Chinese attack against a U.S. ally or partner within the first island chain; the attack would be designed to lure U.S. forces in for a devastating Chinese counterattack.

High on the list of acquisitions would probably be long-range missiles, bombers, submarines, and unmanned systems. As in Chapter Six, these capabilities offer the potential to severely damage U.S. military forces without requiring intricate joint maneuvers. Other priorities could include air defense weapons to deter strikes on the mainland. Beijing might also direct defense industries to produce low-cost but capable weapons and platforms to arm and equip client states around the world to fight U.S.-backed forces.

The paragraphs that follow review possible changes in the PLA's force development. Given the cost of military development and the likely disruption to the global economy that would accompany U.S.-China hostilities, both countries would face hard constraints on their ability to ramp up defense spending. Given the urgency of prevailing in high-intensity war, Beijing might be willing to tolerate a massive increase in defense spending for a brief period of time in hopes that such a major buildup could enable rapid victory.

Missile forces. As an assumed favored weapon system that accommodates China's preference for centralized control and reduced risk for prestige platforms, we assume that the PLA increases its inventory of long-range and precision strike cruise and ballistic missiles, including hypersonic glide missiles and intercontinental ballistic missiles. The PLA Rocket Force would likely increase its inventory of nuclear warheads as part of the effort to increase deterrence and harden nuclear facilities to defend against potential attack. China could develop new ground-based delivery vehicles to launch missiles more easily and cheaply for its client militaries. China could also be expected to expand its inventory of missile defense capabilities to counter U.S. long-range precision strike systems.

Cybersecurity forces. As in the low-intensity scenario, the PLA has a strong incentive to significantly increase cybersecurity units for purposes of improving the cyber defense of China and key client states. Cybersecurity units come at relatively low cost. The PLA could target the networks of the U.S. military and those of key U.S. allies and partners. China could also expand its financing and support for proxy cybersecurity groups in other countries such as Russia to carry out cyberattacks on U.S. and allied networks.

Unmanned combat systems. China could employ unmanned combat aircraft and naval ships to attack U.S. forces in a manner that supports a centralized command system and minimizes the need for complex joint operations. It could also proliferate various unmanned strike aircraft to client militaries to support their own war efforts against U.S.-backed forces.

Outer space and C4ISR. With combat operations expanding around the world, the PLA would have a strong incentive to upgrade and improve its ability to carry out surveillance, communication, and reconnaissance around the world. Space-based and unmanned assets could be key to those missions and might accordingly see expansions in capability. China might expand its inventory of weapons to target U.S. space-based assets and improve security for Chinese space-based systems and ISR. Replicating a method that would likely characterize many Chinese efforts, civilian entities could augment military capabilities. China could also lean on the governments in client states to share their C4ISR capabilities and to expand access for Chinese military units, which could become even more important given the risks of an outer space war.

The PLA Army. The PLAA might see a significant expansion of funding to build capable joint expeditionary units capable of carrying a range of combat operations along the periphery and to support limited power projection missions as far as Africa and the Middle East. China could be willing to risk its more elite, integrated joint units for combat operations against pro-U.S. neighbors such as Taiwan or other countries.

The PLA Air Force. The PLA Air Force would probably prioritize the expansion of its inventory of Y-20 long-distance transport aircraft and supporting mission aircraft to support expeditionary combat missions abroad. Expanding the ranks of long-distance bombers such as the H-20 and refueling tankers could also be a top priority, as these could be used to provide support to PLA combat operations at distant locations and to the war efforts of important client militaries. The PLA Air Force would also aim to expand its inventory of advanced fighter aircraft, such as the J-20 and J-35, though to curb war expenses Beijing

might try to rely on air defense missiles and unmanned systems to protect the country's airspace.

The PLA Navy. In a high-intensity conflict scenario, China would rely on the PLA Navy to deter potential attacks along China's periphery and the Indian Ocean. Submarines, in particular, could be valuable for menacing adversary navies along the Indian Ocean. Surface ships are extremely vulnerable, of course, so Beijing may opt not to replace major combatants destroyed in the war. Instead it might rely on civilian contractors to move troops and equipment in disguised ships. Alternatively, China might rely on overland transportation networks through its partnership with Russia to field forces to Africa and the Middle East.

The PLA Navy Marine Corps. In a high-intensity war scenario, the PLA might rely on an expanded PLA Navy Marine Corps to augment expeditionary ground forces for limited power projection missions through the South China Sea and into the Indian Ocean. However, ensuring the survivability of large assault ships loaded with troops in an era of global precision strike would raise the risk and cost of amphibious operations and sea-based deployments of major combat forces. Instead China might rely on the deployment of modest-size combat formations by air or only attempt such amphibious assaults if such ships could be escorted by robust protective naval forces.

Special forces (all services). China could expand the number of special forces for all services. These troops would play an important role in both direct and indirect combat with U.S. forces. In direct combat operations, special forces could carry out elite light infantry duties including sabotage, reconnaissance, support to air strikes, and support to combat operations. In indirect conflicts, the special forces could help train and guide the efforts of client military forces.

Bases and facilities. In a state of Chinese near global primacy, we assume that China would have successfully leveraged its economic prowess to gain access in key locations along BRI routes, especially in Central and Southeast Asia. As part of its preparations for high-intensity war, Beijing would lean hard on its partner nations to provide full military access. Thus, for purposes of this analysis, we assume that PLA forces are able to deploy the full range of forces in such Southeast Asian countries such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand. In Central Asia, PAP and PLA special forces could have access to facilities to support limited combat operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We assume that in a showdown between China and the United States, Russia would opt to support China. Accordingly, Russia could agree to arrangements resembling an alliance and allow Chinese troops to transit overland to locations in the Middle East. We assume that the China-Iran relationship could become closer to an alliance as well, though as a result China could find itself enmeshed to some extent in Iran's wars with its Sunni rivals. In Africa, PLA forces could seek to set up long-range antiair and anti-ship missile launchers in client states located on both the eastern and western African coasts. The Djibouti base could experience upgrading to accommodate forward-deployed joint combat forces, which might carry out operations in support of client states in the Levant, North Africa, or perhaps even the Balkans. China might also seek to expand military access and some sort of support facilities in partner states in the

Caribbean and Latin America, such as Cuba or Venezuela, where it could stage missiles to threaten U.S. military aircraft, ships, or even territory. All of these facilities would be vulnerable to attack by U.S.-backed forces, however, and China's limited ability to project power would constrain its ability to ensure the survival of its more distant assets.

Force Employment

To prevail in a high-intensity war, Chinese leaders could direct aggressive offensive operations aimed at dismantling the U.S. ability to continue the fight. But the struggle for international leadership and influence could dramatically affect how the PLA contemplates combat operations and its approach to risk and escalation. With heightened stakes and a more total form of combat, China's tolerance of risk could increase significantly. Eagerness to prevail in battle and avoid decisive defeat could drive China's military to risk its most elite units and platforms in dramatic attacks on U.S. forces. However, PLA commanders would probably still hope to reduce the risks by fighting the U.S. military on favorable terrain, such as within the first island chain, where the PLA's counter intervention forces could inflict punishing losses.

A high-intensity conflict with the United States would likely provide a compelling incentive for Chinese military leaders to adopt more aggressive guiding principles on the use of force while still emphasizing the importance of "war control." While we do not know exactly how the guidance might change, we can project some possibilities based on existing precepts. These precepts provide a starting point for analyzing how PLA forces might operate in the opening days of high-intensity conflict. Past wars demonstrate, however, that new technologies and operational concepts would likely arise over the course of the war, which suggests that many of these precepts could become outdated soon after the war began. At the start of the conflict, the PLA might adhere to many of the guiding principles outlined in Chapter Six. The biggest change would involve those related to the actual conduct of combat operations.

Employ "intelligentized" systems-of-systems doctrines in combat. In its combat operations with U.S. troops, elite PLA units could be deployed and trained to use the most advanced technologies, such as AI-enabled weaponry, sensors, and platforms. Consistent with current PLA theory, troops in this scenario might also prepare for battle guided by the most advanced warfighting doctrines, such as that of "intelligentized war" and systems-of-systems warfare. China's concept of "integrated joint operations" envisions a flexible combination of information systems and networks that enables Chinese military planners to fuse the "operational strengths" from each of the PLA's services. The notion of integrated joint operations is closely linked to the concept of "informatization" and "systems confrontation" or systems-of-systems warfare. Informatization forms the core of these joint operations and consists of information networks to integrate and systematize operations to achieve information superiority.[1] The systems-of-systems warfare concept is based on linking command automation,

[1] 战玉 [Zhan Yu], 一体化联合作战理论探要 ["A Study of the Theory of Integrated Joint Operations"], 中国军事科学 [*China Military Science*], No. 6, 2007.

ISR, precision strike, and rapid mobility to quickly strike an enemy's system of vital nodes. According to the 2015 defense white paper, its main features may be distilled as "information dominance, precision strikes, and integrated joint forces."[2] These units are most likely to be employed in combat along China's periphery, where the full range of technological capabilities could be brought to bear and the risk of devastating losses minimized. Outside the immediate periphery, Chinese combat forces could consist of simpler formations with a lower level of joint capability. PLA forces could instead rely on unmanned systems, cyberoperations, and long-range strike options to reduce the need for complex joint operations and decentralized command authority. To enable this type of war, forward-deployed PLA assets would require robust ISR capabilities. Thus, PLA forces fighting outside the first island chain could consist primarily of ISR specialists and various missile and unmanned strike platforms accompanied by small ground units to defend them.

Seize information superiority first. PLA writings consistently emphasize the importance of seizing information superiority in the opening moments of combat. PLA forces may first seek to seize the information advantage by disrupting or destroying the adversary's flow of information and establishing superior ISR. Combat forces could then target key nodes via precision munitions with an aim to establishing comprehensive dominance. The goal would be to render the enemy incapable of resisting, not the total destruction of all forces.[3] The focus on seizing information superiority could incentivize the PLA to prioritize the deployment of ISR assets to distant bases and facilities, followed by appropriate combat forces. Chinese combat assets could also prioritize destruction of U.S. ISR assets in the opening moments of any engagement.

Destroy key enemy nodes. Consistent with the doctrines of systems-of-systems warfare, PLA forces could prioritize strikes and operations that target command and control and other key nodes vital to the war system of the adversary. The goal of systems confrontation is "comprehensive dominance" in all domains, including land, sea, air, outer space, cyberspace, the electromagnetic domain, and even the psychological domain. Chinese writings espouse a method that seeks to paralyze and even destroy critical functions of an enemy's operational system. According to the PLA, the enemy will "lose the will and ability to resist" once its operational system cannot function. The PLA may employ kinetic and nonkinetic attacks to achieve this goal.[4] PLA writings identify four target types to paralyze the enemy's operational system: the first consists of strikes to degrade or disrupt the enemy's information flow; the second attacks essential factors, such as C4ISR and firepower capabilities; the third consists of strikes against the physical nodes of the C4ISR and firepower operational systems; and the fourth targets the time sequence and/or tempo of the enemy's operational architec-

[2] State Council Information Office, "China's Military Strategy," May 26, 2015.

[3] Mark Cozad, *PLA Joint Training and Implications for Future Expeditionary Capabilities*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-451, 2016, pp. 10–11.

[4] Jeffrey Engstrom, "China Has Big Plans to Win the Next War It Fights," *National Interest*, February, 9, 2018a.

ture.[5] In a high-intensity war with the United States, the PLA could rely on an expanded inventory of missiles to target such nodes. While military writings emphasize destroying the enemy's will to resist, it may not be enough for purposes of the broader war with the United States. Instead, destruction of key nodes could be a first step toward destroying hard-to-replace high-intensity U.S. military platforms. The purpose of such large-scale devastation of U.S. military platforms and weaponry would be to inflict such crippling losses that the United States could not easily regenerate forces for many years.

These admittedly speculative guiding principles provide a sense of how central leaders might seek to manage and control the role of military forces in a comprehensive, whole-of-government struggle for supremacy against the United States, at least in the opening phases of high-intensity war. The PLA would aim to wipe out large parts of the U.S. military by luring it into battles within the first island chain, where the full weight of advanced PLA capabilities could be brought to bear. China would also aim to forward-deploy ISR, missile, unmanned, and other limited combat capabilities in client states throughout the world in the lead-up to the decision to initiate high-intensity war. These far-flung forces might not be able to operate according to the most advanced doctrines, but their purpose would be simpler: to target and destroy passing U.S. military aircraft and ships or other targets of opportunity.

How War Might Unfold

The examples of the most recent great power wars—those of World Wars I and II—suggest that a U.S.-China high-intensity, systemic war could prove to be long lasting and highly destructive. The examples also suggest that in the course of such a war, new technologies and methods of warfare could emerge that are unimaginable today. Of course, a high-intensity war could also turn out differently, with a possibly shorter duration or lesser degree of destruction. We have no way of estimating how the war might progress and will refrain from attempts to do so. Instead, in this section we will explore how some of the opening battles and fights might unfold.

In our analysis, the primary theaters of war could center on traditional hot spots along China's first island chain. But U.S.-China conventional conflict could also erupt in more distant locations along BRI routes. Moreover, the onset of high-intensity war would not necessarily end the low-intensity war. Indirect, low-intensity war across the globe could continue or intensify as China and the United States fought each other directly, owing to the relative low cost of maintaining many of those commitments. Moreover, the escalation of war could coincide with a continuation or worsening of many of the transnational threats and multilateral fighting between partners of either belligerent. Chinese and U.S. military resources could be severely stressed by nearly overwhelming demands from traditional and nontraditional sources. Combat operations between the two nations would probably also coincide with a broader informational, diplomatic, and economic struggle for dominance.

[5] Engstrom, 2018b.

The result could be a long-lasting war with periodic, destructive battles involving conventional forces followed by longer periods of intermittent, smaller scale skirmishes that would provide opportunities to reconstitute forces. Alongside the occasional high-intensity battles, China and the United States could maintain a near consistent low-intensity war in many parts of the world, exploiting disorder and stress to drain the rival's resources. Cyber, information operations, and other economic warfare could continue as well. The war would probably inflict severe damage on the world's economy and possibly lead to a global economic depression. The populations of both major belligerents and in many parts of the world could experience considerable unrest and instability owing to the stresses of war. A desire to bring the war to a close and restore economic growth and social stability could lead to the experimental use of even more destructive escalatory options, including tactical nuclear weapons, cyberattacks on civilian infrastructure, and attacks on space infrastructure. Failure to control escalation could result in truly nightmare scenarios of annihilation and breakdown. The duration of the war could depend on the ability of the belligerents to endure the pain of economic disruption and political instability as well as manage the effects of escalation. But even if the worst outcomes were avoided, the outlook for high-intensity war of any variety appears unavoidably grim.

What follows are some possible conflict situations involving Chinese and U.S. forces. These are meant to be illustrative of how high-intensity war under conditions of Chinese near global primacy could unfold. They are not predictions of what might actually happen. We will review the possibilities through a geographic outward progression, starting with China:

- The most likely triggers for high-intensity war would be the persistent flash points that have antagonized China for years, but new ones could emerge over time. Chinese leaders could design an operation to attack Taiwan, with a primary objective of seeking to destroy U.S. military forces in the theater. China could also provoke a clash with U.S. allies and partners in Southeast Asia, such as the Philippines, Singapore, or other partners, with similar goals in mind. In either case, China's war aims would regard as top priority the destruction of U.S. combat power throughout the theater. If China's feuds with Japan continued to escalate in the lead-up to war, China might also consider a massive strike against Japanese forces to cripple one of America's most capable allies in the theater. The result could be a widespread war that begins with devastating preemptive strikes against U.S. and allied forces and facilities throughout the region.
- In countries close to China's borders, the PLA could carry out direct interventions to bolster the efforts of rebel groups and governments engaged with U.S.-backed forces. PLA ground forces augmented by strike aircraft and missile forces could spearhead attacks against U.S.-backed governments or could, alternatively, augment governments friendly to China in their efforts to battle U.S.-backed insurgents. U.S. military forces operating in those regions could find themselves engaging directly with PLA forces. The most plausible areas for some form of U.S.-China combat would be Thailand, Vietnam,

and other countries in Southeast Asia owing to the strategic and economic importance of that region to both China and the United States.

- In Central Asian countries such as Afghanistan or Kazakhstan, China might send intervening forces against pro–United States governments or to help Chinese partner nations attack nonstate actors backed by U.S. power. In South Asia, Chinese military forces might fight alongside Pakistani forces against Indian troops. If the United States had built a security partnership with India, then U.S. forces could be involved as well. Chinese defensive conventional combat operations along its border regions could include the defense of Chinese territory against incursions, control of cross-border raids, and cyber defense activities. Offensive operations could include cross-border interventions to aid an embattled client state, incursions to pressure and threaten an adversary neighbor, cross-border raids, and targeted cyber strikes and missile strikes for punitive or operational purposes.
- Along the Indian Ocean, Chinese surface and subsurface naval forces could engage the naval forces of the United States and its partners, possibly including India. Outside these maritime spaces, China's eagerness to secure the Indian Ocean route could lead it to deploy major joint combat formations to seize vital choke points near the Strait of Malacca.
- In the Middle East, Chinese joint expeditionary forces augmented by client military forces could attempt to seize and control vital choke points to threaten U.S. and allied access to energy, shipping, and other vital resources. With a de facto alliance with Russia, China could also rely more on overland routes to move larger combat forces, which could in turn motivate China to seek greater security in Central and South Asia. PLA forces could accordingly step up combat support to client states in those areas to counter nonstate threats or any groups aligned with the United States. The Persian Gulf and other vital choke points in the Middle East could prove to be the scenes of the most significant U.S.-China ground combat outside Southeast Asia.
- For Europe and the Mediterranean Sea, a China that had more closely approached a point of international primacy could have more options for combat operations than it does today. For example, Chinese military assets based on the Mediterranean coast in North Africa could support insurgents or client states in the Balkans against NATO- or U.S.-backed insurgents or governments. PLA forces on the coast of East Africa could engage passing U.S. naval and air assets. If U.S. missiles struck Chinese territory, Chinese strategic bombers could deploy from bases in West Africa to launch retaliatory strikes against the continental United States. Chinese naval ships that escorted merchant ships through the Arctic could engage U.S. naval ships in that area as well. If China and Russia became de facto allies, the PLA could more safely transport air and ground forces across Russian territory to support combat operations in eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. Combined Chinese and Russian forces might operate together to intimidate NATO countries, fight U.S.-backed forces in the Middle East, or aim to control key choke points connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Indian Ocean.

- In a climate of major war featuring contested environments, the PLA would struggle to safely transport large volumes of military equipment to more distant locations. PLA bases, assets, and personnel in Africa, eastern Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East could come under attack by U.S.-backed forces, and the PLA would probably struggle to defend them. To support its clients in these areas, China might be able to provide occasional shipments of lightweight assets such as air defense missiles, unmanned strike aircraft, and other portable weapons and equipment. Small numbers of PLA troops could also travel to help advise and direct the efforts of client militaries. But Beijing's expectation would probably be that client states would bear the brunt of the fighting in these regions.

Implications

The shift to direct, large-scale conventional war would mark a major escalation that would probably change—and in dramatic fashion—the dynamics of U.S.-China conflict. A surge in casualties inflicted by the armed forces of the rival military would probably drive threat perceptions to extreme levels, incentivizing both sides to carry out a more extensive mobilization of the populace. Defense spending would likely receive top priority, and efforts to counter other threats would be accordingly downgraded in priority. Leaders might become receptive to increasingly risky measures in hopes of achieving a decisive victory. How the war might evolve beyond the opening clashes is impossible to predict.

The enormous economic dislocation and potential destruction caused by major war would provide a strong incentive for both sides to seek a rapid and decisive victory, but achieving such a victory could prove as illusory to the combatants as it frequently has in past wars of power transition. War could persist until major exogenous shocks or developments finally exhausted the resources and will of one side or the other.[6] Given their nuclear arsenals and vulnerability to crippling strikes to vital economic and strategic assets in cyberspace and outer space, as well as to long-range conventional strikes, projecting the potential escalation of major U.S.-China war seems hazardous at best. At the very least, escalation to include destructive strikes in one, some, or all these domains cannot be ruled out. As in past conflicts, third parties could see opportunities in the war and seek out alliances with one side or the other as well. In short, the war would very likely be a multilateral one featuring opposing coalitions of countries from multiple continents. The war could prove long lasting and highly destructive. The ability of both capitals to avoid escalation to the highest levels of devastation remains far from clear.

[6] Rasler, Thompson, and Ganguly, 2013.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Conclusion

The prospect of China overtaking the United States to attain a position of international primacy may be remote. It appears unlikely, but it is not impossible. Whether it happens or not will depend on an interplay of geopolitics, economics, demographics, and many other factors, the outcome of which lies beyond the scope of this report. Other RAND studies have suggested that China may experience mediocre growth and never muster the strength to overturn the U.S. position.[1] This may well be the case. But if China should surprise the world and move closer to a position of global primacy, the implications for U.S. security could be tremendous. The United States has been the world's premier power for so long that it is difficult to imagine a world in which it no longer maintains that position.

This report has sought to tentatively explore what a situation of potential power transition featuring an adversarial China that has achieved a position of near global primacy might mean for U.S. security. To be sure, it is possible to imagine, as others have done, scenarios of peaceful power transition.[2] However, we have focused on the grim possibilities that such a transition would be contested and bitterly fought. Data on a hypothetical situation may be scarce, but they are not completely absent. We have sought to present facts and data that could help illuminate how such a situation might unfold.

Report Summary

Trends in global politics and economics provide the most basic reason for the possibility of some sort of power transition. The gap in comprehensive national power between China and the United States is expected to narrow in the coming years, and the size of China's economy could well surpass that of the United States in nominal terms, though it will continue to lag behind the United States in per capita terms. The rise of the non-West and the decline of the West raises the prospect of an unsettled international order that will likely bear little resemblance to that of the past two centuries, which were dominated by Western powers. An increasingly multipolar world could result in shifting partnerships and alliances, which, combined with the rise of the developing world, might open new opportunities for China to

[1] Scobell et al., 2020.

[2] Rapkin and Thompson, 2013, p. 2.

expand its base of international power. The evolution of the global economy in a direction that could feature Asia and China in a central role could further expand opportunities for China. The role of BRI countries in particular could shift the scene of major political and military confrontations to those countries.

Military trends provide another source of insight into the potential evolution of a systemic U.S.-China conflict. Analysts have outlined reasons to expect war to grow more protracted, to involve society, and to overlap with transnational threats and nontraditional conflict. Advanced militaries continue to innovate and develop new technologies and capabilities that raise the possibility of future conflict featuring a higher degree of AI, unmanned systems, and long-range precision strike capabilities. These features could characterize conflict scenarios involving both China and the United States.

How might China initiate and manage conflict under conditions of international primacy, especially regarding its chief rival? Patterns in warfare and geopolitical control by previous great powers provide some data that we can draw from for insight. The Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, and the United States all established a geopolitical base of power, which China seems poised to do in its focus on BRI regions. Past great powers also varied in their efforts to control other countries, with more recent trends favoring a reliance on informal methods of control, an approach consistent with recent Chinese practices. Patterns in conflict between past powers also suggest that China may be inclined to favor direct and indirect interventions on behalf of client states over direct aggression, imperial conquest, and formal incorporation of territory.

The onset of U.S.-China hostilities could also follow observed patterns of preceding rival great powers. The multiplication of intractable disputes, polarization of views, deepening of threat perceptions, and multilateralization of rivalries could all mutually aggravate hostile sentiments and incentivize leaders in both nations to declare the other a top threat. Such a move would likely be accompanied by accelerating arms buildups and an intensified effort to cultivate alliances and partnerships. In an atmosphere of intense hostility and fear, the risk of escalation in any military crisis could surge dramatically.

Chapter Five featured a shift toward scenario analysis. We examined how the PLA might modify elements of its modernization program to prepare for a potential major war with the United States. We projected that the PLA might favor the buildup of long-range munitions and low-cost weaponry for use by client militaries in its preparations. Chinese leaders could direct broader efforts to distribute arms to client states ahead of time and might rely on civilian contractors to augment PLA capacities to transport troops and equipment around the world.

In Chapter Six we synthesized the findings from the preceding chapters to create a scenario of systemic U.S.-China low-intensity conflict. The decision to initiate hostilities, even in an indirect form, would represent a dramatic escalation in tensions between the two countries. As we have proposed, China's war aims in such a situation could be the gradual attrition of U.S. power to the point where the latter could no longer pose a credible threat to China's efforts to realize its goals of national revitalization. Military operations could take

the form of operations to damage and weaken the power of the United States and its allies indirectly while advocating for cooperation on shared threats and the continuation of trade. While the PLA might favor support to host nation forces as a means of minimizing the risks of escalation, the PLA could get involved in combat operations alongside client armies. The prospect of conflict involving PLA forces would be highest along China's periphery, where the projection of forces would be easiest given the PLA's limited expeditionary capability. However, low-intensity conflict could encompass a broad range of operations, including technical and advisory support to host nation militaries. An environment in which Chinese and U.S. forces did not engage each other directly could free China to deploy fairly substantial military forces in client states as far away as the Americas, although China would probably favor indirect support in the form of arms sales and the furnishing of military and technical advice to such distant clients. In between China's periphery and the most distant regions, PLA forces could project power in a limited fashion to support combat operations undertaken by client militaries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and southern Europe. Civil war and interstate war could result in Chinese and U.S. assistance to their clients as well. The possibility of occasional direct engagements by Chinese and U.S. platforms cannot be discounted given the close proximity in which the forces might be operating. Conflict could extend to the homelands of each country, primarily in the form of cyberspace and information domain struggles. However, fear of uncontrolled escalation in cyberspace and outer space provides a strong incentive for both sides to limit attacks in those areas. The relatively modest resource commitments of a low-intensity war raise the prospect of chronic warfare lasting many years, especially if the two adversaries found ways to stabilize relations, occasionally collaborate on shared threats, and maintain global commerce even as they waged indirect conflict.

In Chapter Seven, we explored a scenario of high-intensity systemic conflict. Policymakers who have tired of the chronic, indecisive fighting of a low-intensity war could be lured by the promise of a rapid and decisive victory to escalate the conflict through high-intensity warfare. The principal goal of such a war would be to rapidly destroy the warfighting capacity of the adversary and thereby render its chances of victory extremely unlikely. The advent of conventional major combat operations would in many ways represent the escalation of a war of power transition to a decisive stage. Given the stakes and the polarized political atmosphere exacerbated by mounting casualties and destruction inflicted by the adversary power, further escalation of the conflict could prove difficult to resist. High-intensity war would probably overlap with a continuation or exacerbation of low-intensity conflict around the world and feature multiple feuds and rivalries. A destabilized global economy could aggravate transnational problems and add to the complex and unsettled security environment in which the war would be waged. Chinese military forces would prefer to fight a conventional war with U.S. forces close to the country's shores, perhaps near Taiwan or other flash points in the first island chain, where the PLA's arsenal could be largely brought to bear. But direct combat engagements could also break out along the vulnerable sea lanes passing through the Malacca Strait and the Indian Ocean as Chinese military forces fought

to protect vulnerable merchant traffic and defeat potential U.S. threats long those routes. While such battles would be waged largely by air and maritime forces, Chinese ground forces could collaborate with air and naval forces to seize and control vital choke points in East Africa and the Middle East.

Implications for the Department of Defense

This report carries several implications for U.S. decisionmakers, analysts, and planners. First, planners may need to consider a broader range of contingencies for both low-intensity and high-intensity war. Second, planners may need to view the possibility of serial conflicts when contemplating combat contingencies involving China. Third, the United States should consider bolstering its ability to wage indirect war. Fourth, the analysis of high-intensity war has underscored the importance of ensuring that the United States has the ability to defend and secure vital choke points in the Middle East and along the Indian Ocean. Fifth, U.S. planners contemplating potential scenarios of chronic U.S.-China conflict may want to focus on the possibility of Chinese-manned A2/AD systems in client militaries and irregular combat.

Department of Defense (DoD) planners should contemplate a broader range of possible conflict scenarios involving China beyond traditional hot spots such as Taiwan. While most of the conflict scenarios discussed in this report consist of indirect, low-intensity combat, we have also examined clashes between Chinese and U.S. forces in the Indian Ocean and in the Middle East. These are, of course, merely illustrative examples, not predictions. But China's determination to establish its base of power along BRI routes raises the possibility of clashes occurring throughout a much broader geographic region than traditional analysis tends to consider.

DoD planners may need to consider the possibility that any conflict scenario with China will entail a series of clashes spread over a broad area and over a long period of time, perhaps lasting years. The systemic nature of U.S.-China conflict as outlined herein provides a strong incentive for both sides to engage in low-intensity war in many parts of the world even if they also engage in high-intensity war near Taiwan or other conventional flash points. Conventional clashes near Taiwan could also coincide with high-intensity wars along the Indian Ocean or even extend to vital choke points in East Africa and the Middle East. War is also likely to extend to cyberspace and possibly outer space, even as challenges from nontraditional threats could continue to stress the military capacity of the warring parties. A situation featuring systemic low-intensity conflict could also last many years, following the precedent set by the Cold War.

DoD planners and decisionmakers may want to focus more effort on indirect conflict. The relatively modest cost and more limited disruption posed by low-intensity war make this form of conflict more plausible, at least in the near term. Yet analysis of how the United States could conduct such operations remains nascent. More study of possibilities for building partnerships and helping partners defend themselves against state-backed threats in countries

along BRI routes could expand opportunities to defend China's own interests and limit its ability to assert its primacy along vital economic corridors in Eurasia.

DoD planners should consider integrating analysis of operations to secure vital choke points in the Middle East with analysis of potential U.S.-China combat operations. Because of the importance of these choke points for China's ability to secure its Indian Ocean shipping route, Beijing could be motivated to direct major combat formations to seize control of vital canals and maritime routes. The possibilities of conventional combat over these features raises the imperative to include analysis of these regions in planning for major U.S.-China conflict contingencies.

Finally, U.S.-China conventional conflict scenarios outside the first island chain could consist mainly of engagements between ISR sensors and modest-size units of long-range strike systems, as well as potential clashes involving irregular and proxy forces. Planners who seek to anticipate such scenarios may want to focus on weapons and platforms that help gain the information advantage, and attacking from a long range could be the most helpful. Alliance building to develop counterinsurgency and to counter such forces could also be useful for such scenarios.

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NATIONAL SECURITY RESEARCH DIVISION

Through a careful synthesis of current and historical data on relevant factors, anticipated trends, and research-grounded speculation, the authors analyze several scenarios of systemic U.S.-China conflict under hypothetical conditions in which China has neared the point of global primacy. Drawing on academic and research findings regarding the potential trajectory of international security and warfare in coming years, China's approach to future warfare, relevant experiences of preceding great powers, and patterns in interstate wars, the authors explore the possibility of a U.S.-China war of power transition. The authors develop two scenarios of systemic U.S.-China conflict. The first scenario features a low-intensity conflict that unfolds across much of the world, across many domains, and over many years. The second features a high-intensity war that evolves out of the low-intensity war. The high-intensity war scenario envisions aggressive actions by both countries to destroy the warfighting capability of the adversary and carries an extremely high risk of escalation to the most destructive levels. Both scenarios occur within the context of a deeply fragmented international situation in which the U.S. and Chinese militaries experience immense strain from sustaining the war effort while grappling with an array of nontraditional threats and responding to demands for aid from embattled partners. Although their analysis concerns a hypothetical conflict situation in which China has neared global primacy, the authors' findings could inform defense planning for potential contingencies even today.

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