

Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe

RAPHAEL S. COHEN, ELINA TREYGER, IRINA A. CHINDEA, CHRISTIAN CURRIDEN, KRISTEN GUNNESS, KHRYSTYNA HOLYNSKA, MARTA KEPE, KURT KLEIN, ASHLEY L. RHOADES, NATHAN VEST

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During the Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden administrations, the United States made countering the rise of China in the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, checking Russian revanchism in Europe core priorities of its national security strategy. Historically, however, great-power competition and conflict have taken place outside the theaters of core concern to the great powers. This report—the summary of a four-volume series—explores where and how the United States, China, and Russia are competing with each other for influence in these secondary theaters (Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America); where and why competition might turn into conflict; what form that conflict might take; and what implications the findings have for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.



APPROACH

The project team employed a multi-method approach. First, it developed a unique data set of 16 variables to measure diplomatic, informational, military, and economic influence-seeking by great powers, which it used to assess the potential for competition in secondary theaters. Second, it combined the assessment of competition potential with measures of conflict potential to identify cases with the greatest theoretical chances for future great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters. Finally, it used qualitative methods—including interviews with subject-matter experts and analysis of primary and secondary source materials—to explore what conflict in those theaters might look like and what the implications might be for the U.S. government, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force. This research was completed in September 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The report has not been subsequently revised.



CONCLUSIONS

This project yielded the following findings about competition and conflict in secondary theaters:

- Competition in secondary theaters is most likely to focus on the historical power centers.
- China's influence and, to a lesser extent, Russia's influence are increasing in secondary theaters, although the United States remains the dominant military actor for the time being.

- Competition may be a necessary but not sufficient condition for conflict.
- Great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters in the new era of competition may be less driven by zero-sum logic than during the Cold War.
- Future secondary-theater conflicts may involve distinct challenges of deconfliction and behind-the-scenes political contests.
- Conflicts in secondary theaters may not be a particularly useful force-sizing construct.
- Latin America offers several plausible scenarios for conflicts in which the United States could become involved on a side opposing Russia or China.



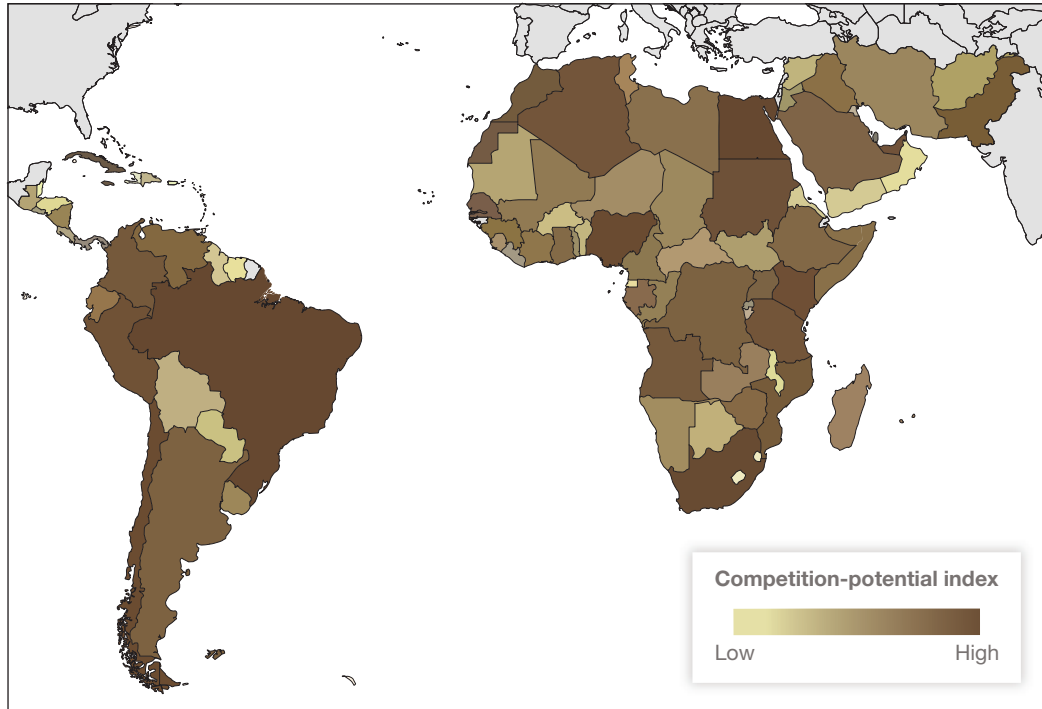
RECOMMENDATIONS

This analysis yields several recommendations for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular. Specifically

- Avoid strategic myopia and secondary-theater blind spots by maintaining a baseline degree of expertise in these theaters.
- Recognize the interconnection between counterterrorism and great-power competition and conflict.
- Strengthen ties to Latin America.
- Work with key allies to economize resources in secondary theaters.
- Maintain access agreements focused on secondary theaters.
- To the extent that the Department of Defense does prepare for conflicts in secondary theaters, invest in mobility and sustainment assets; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and special operations forces.

MAPPING THE POTENTIAL FOR GREAT-POWER COMPETITION IN SECONDARY THEATERS

This figure depicts the potential for competition across countries in each of the three secondary theaters: Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report. Base map: Esri, Garmin International Inc., and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (*The World Factbook*), "World Countries," ArcGIS, map package, last updated 2019. This map was created using ArcGIS software by Esri. ArcGIS and ArcMap are the intellectual property of Esri and are used herein under license. © Esri. All rights reserved. For more information about Esri software, visit www.esri.com.



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