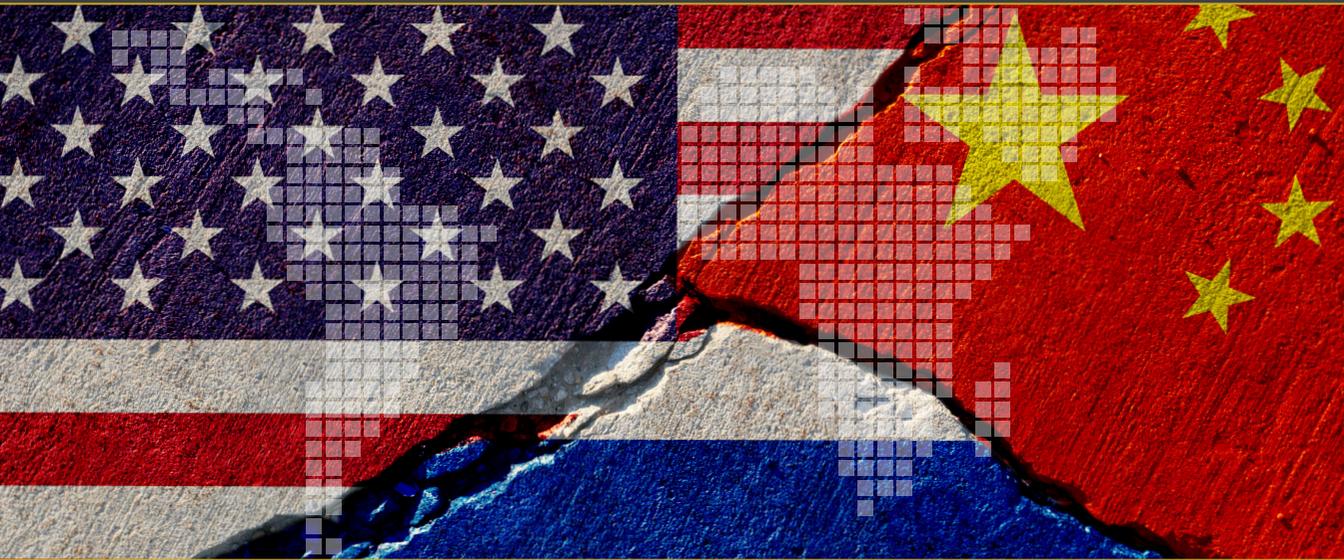


GREAT-POWER COMPETITION AND CONFLICT IN THE 21ST CENTURY OUTSIDE THE INDO-PACIFIC AND EUROPE



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About This Report

Although much of the U.S. Department of Defense’s attention is focused on two primary theaters of concern—the Indo-Pacific and, to a lesser extent, Europe—China and Russia are global powers, and the challenges they pose to international security are therefore global as well. This report summarizes a series of reports and looks at the U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia competition outside those two primary theaters of concern. The other reports in this series are as follows:

- Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming
- Ashley L. Rhoades, Elina Treyger, Nathan Vest, Christian Curriden, Brad A. Bemish, Irina A. Chindea, Raphael S. Cohen, Jessica Giffin, and Kurt Klein, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-3, 2023
- Irina A. Chindea, Elina Treyger, Raphael S. Cohen, Christian Curriden, Kurt Klein, Carlos Sanchez, Holly Gramkow, and Khrystyna Holynska, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-4, 2023.

Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables.

The authors of this report examine where and how the United States, China, and Russia are likely to be competing for influence; where and why competition might turn into conflict; what form conflict might take; and what this might mean for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular. This research was completed in September 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The report has not been subsequently revised.

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Summary

Issue

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.¹

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.

Key Findings

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.

¹ Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables.

- 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.

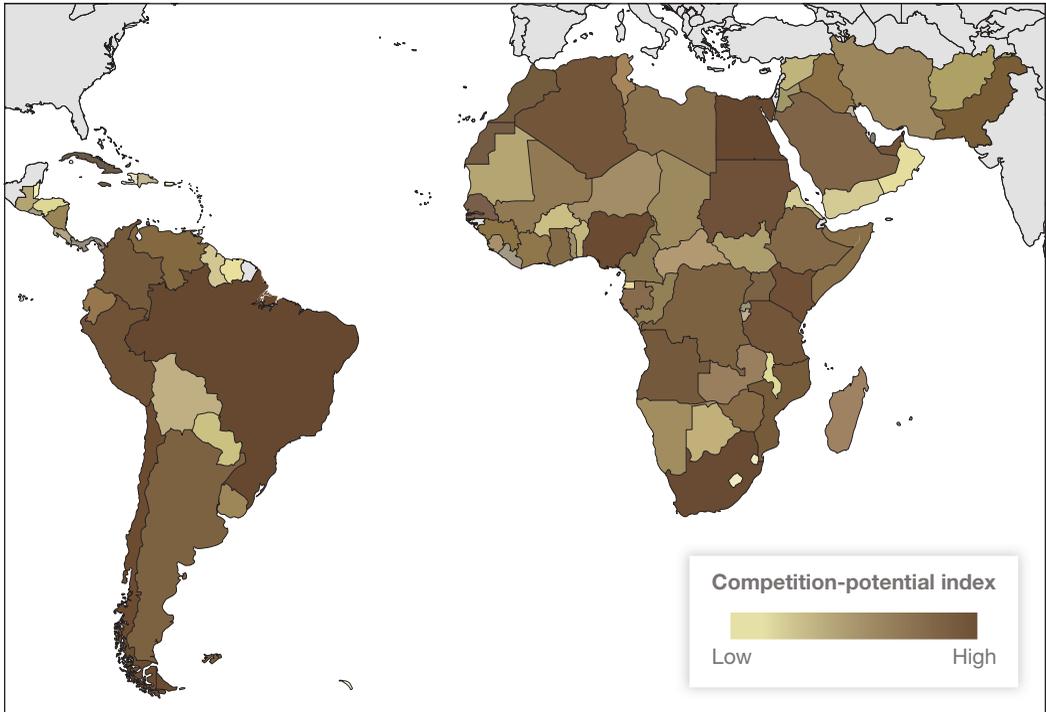
Recommendations

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.

Figure S.1 depicts the potential for competition across countries in each of the three secondary theaters: Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America.

FIGURE S.1
Mapping the Potential for Great-Power Competition in Secondary Theaters



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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Competition and Conflict in Secondary Theaters

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.¹ The Obama administration famously called for a “rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”² The Trump administration emphasized the Indo-Pacific and Europe as the regions where the United States needed to focus its efforts.³ And the Biden administration’s Interim National Security Strategic Guidance similarly contends that the U.S. “presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe.”⁴ This prioritization makes intuitive sense. After all, in both regions, the United States has many friction points with China and Russia—including Taiwan, the South China Sea, Ukraine, and the Baltics, to name a few.

Historically, however, great-power competition and conflict have often played out in areas outside those of core concern to the great powers themselves. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the European powers competed for territory and fought wars in the Americas, Africa, and South Asia, as well as in Europe. During the 20th century, the United States and the Soviet Union waged a Cold War that included entanglement in conflicts across South America, Africa, and Asia, even though both the United States and the Soviet Union focused much of their attention on Europe. Fighting in secondary theaters, especially through indirect proxy conflicts, offered fewer escalation risks than fighting in Europe did and presented a safer option for great-power conflict. Thus, it is very plausible that this new era of 21st-century great-power competition will also take place partly outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe. After all, China and Russia are both global powers with worldwide interests and the

¹ This research was completed in September 2021, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. The report has not been subsequently revised.

² U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, D.C., January 2012, p. 2.

³ DoD, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018a, p. 4.

⁴ Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance*, Washington, D.C.: White House, March 2021, p. 15.

capability to project power well outside their respective regions. There is, therefore, the possibility that the United States will need to at least deconflict—and potentially engage with—Chinese and Russian forces in regions well outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Thus, in a series of RAND Corporation reports, we analyze the potential for competition and conflict among the United States, China, and Russia in secondary theaters (sometimes referred to as *regions* in this report), and we draw out the implications for the joint force at large and the Department of the Air Force (DAF) in particular.⁵ This first volume summarizes the series of reports. In this introductory chapter, we start by situating our discussion in a historical context and then review the definitions and methodology employed in the series. We conclude the chapter by providing an overview of this report.

New Era, New Wars?

As mentioned, competition among powerful states historically has played out in conflicts in regions distant from the center of competitors' concerns. Although not a novelty of the Cold War, the U.S. and Soviet support for their respective clients in armed power struggles all over the world provides the most-vivid examples of this phenomenon in recent history. Across the developing world, the two rival superpowers have supported coups, helped client governments put down rebellions, and backed opposing claimants to political power in violent struggles.⁶ The United States' escalating support to the government of South Vietnam against the Communist North from the 1950s to the 1970s was part of Washington's all-encompassing struggle against international communism, while the Soviet Union and China supported the North.⁷ The Soviet decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan in 1979 was a bid to maintain a friendly socialist government close to Soviet borders, likewise driven by the Soviet view of the clash between socialism and capitalism—and fears that Afghanistan would reorient toward the United States.⁸ U.S. support to the *mujahedeen* (Islamic guerrilla fighters)

⁵ Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables. The other reports in the series are Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming; Ashley L. Rhoades, Elina Treyger, Nathan Vest, Christian Curriden, Brad A. Bemish, Irina A. Chindea, Raphael S. Cohen, Jessica Giffin, and Kurt Klein, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-3, 2023; and Irina A. Chindea, Elina Treyger, Raphael S. Cohen, Christian Curriden, Kurt Klein, Carlos Sanchez, Holly Gramkow, and Khrystyna Holynska, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-4, 2023.

⁶ See, for example, Roger E. Kanet, "The Superpower Quest for Empire: The Cold War and Soviet Support for 'Wars of National Liberation,'" *Cold War History*, Vol. 6, No. 3, 2006.

⁷ See, for example, Pat Proctor, *Containment and Credibility: The Ideology and Deception That Plunged America into the Vietnam War*, New York: Carrel Books, 2016, pp. 221–305.

⁸ The Soviet military intervention was motivated in no small part by the suspicion that the Afghan leader, Hafizullah Amin (who was previously receiving Soviet support), was reorienting to the West and that not

on the other side of the conflict was seen as a needed countermeasure to Soviet aggression and intended to exploit the conflict to impose costs on the U.S. rival.⁹

In both Vietnam and Afghanistan, fighting rivals indirectly on a third state's territory proved disastrous for each of the Cold War competitors in turn—in the latter case, ultimately contributing to the downfall of the Soviet state.¹⁰ Although less dangerous than a direct military confrontation between the two nuclear powers in Europe, the displacement of Cold War competition to faraway conflicts had imposed costs and increased risks. Even when involvement did not escalate to the extent of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam or Soviet operations in Afghanistan, external support to parties in foreign conflicts has tended to prolong internal conflicts and increase their costs—to the conflict-torn countries and to the intervening powers.¹¹ Although many conflicts where the United States and the Soviet Union (as well as China) supported opposite sides did not escalate into direct military interventions, some did, as indirect support to clients proved insufficient to achieve the great powers' goals.¹² Moreover, at times, support for parties in one conflict spread to involvement in nearby countries: U.S. support for South Vietnam, for example, contributed to U.S. involvement in the wars in Laos and Cambodia. And involvement in third-party conflicts by competing powers often has contributed to destabilizing consequences in the future: In Afghanistan, for example, the long-lasting effects of the Soviet invasion and the U.S. support to the mujahedeen laid the groundwork for the rise of the Taliban and al-Qaeda.¹³

intervening would hand political control of the country to the Americans. See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 316–326.

⁹ See, for example, George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*, New York: Grove Press, 2007.

¹⁰ Kanet, 2006, p. 339.

¹¹ See, for example, Aysegul Aydin and Patrick M. Regan, “Networks of Third-Party Interveners and Civil War Duration,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2011; Noel Anderson, “Competitive Intervention, Protracted Conflict, and the Global Prevalence of Civil War,” *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 63, No. 3, September 2019; and Matthew Moore, “Selling to Both Sides: The Effects of Major Conventional Weapons Transfers on Civil War Severity and Duration,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 38, No. 3, 2012.

¹² In many conflicts, such as most of those on the African continent, the support of the two powers remained indirect, even as their partners and allies participated directly. For an overview, see, for example, Atomic Heritage Foundation, *Proxy Wars During the Cold War: Africa*, Washington, D.C., August 24, 2018. However, in other conflicts, the insufficiency of indirect assistance prompted the United States to deploy troops; for example, following a Central Intelligence Agency-supported assassination of the Dominican Republic leader Rafael Trujillo and resulting political instability, President Lyndon Johnson sent 20,000 U.S. troops to the country in 1965. In Afghanistan, Soviet leadership believed that providing aid would be insufficient to keep Afghanistan firmly in the Soviet camp, and this perception led the Soviets to intervene militarily. See Westad, 2005, pp. 316–326.

¹³ Pavel K. Baev, “Russia and America's Overlapping Legacies in Afghanistan,” Brookings Institution, August 18, 2021.

Great-power involvement in foreign conflicts in the Cold War era had a central distinguishing feature. As political scientist Karl Deutsch explained,

international conflict between two foreign powers . . . [was] fought out in the soil of a third country[,] disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country's manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies.¹⁴

U.S. and Soviet involvement in third countries was largely driven by the imperative to prevail in the all-encompassing geopolitical and ideological struggle, as the two rivals sought to balance each other's influence across much of the world.¹⁵ In Vietnam, for example, a victory by North Vietnam was not seen by U.S. leaders as merely a victory of one party over another in a faraway civil conflict. As Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara argued in 1964, such a victory would let China have control over Vietnam, and, “[i]n communist hands, this area would pose a most serious threat to the security of the United States and to the family of free-world nations.”¹⁶ Because of the global and zero-sum nature of this struggle—that is, a communist government anywhere was viewed as a loss to the United States, just as a capitalist nation was viewed as a loss to the Soviets—great-power entanglement in conflicts all over the world was rather frequent.¹⁷ As a result, the political fates of countries and regions that should have been secondary to the great powers' core national security concerns acquired greater importance.

The United States, China, and Russia have also supported actors in foreign conflicts in a variety of ways in the more recent, post-Cold War past. As detailed in the appendixes to this report, these powers have supported such actors in secondary theaters when it suited their strategic, economic, or political interests in the recent past—and they may choose to do so again in the future. Indeed, a prominent strand of international relations strategy suggests that rival states should be balancing against U.S. power—and facilitating friendly

¹⁴ Karl W. Deutsch, “External Involvement in Internal Wars,” in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964, p. 102.

¹⁵ The causes and drivers of the U.S. and Soviet involvement in the multitude of conflicts globally between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War remain subject to debate among historians; however, there is little doubt that ideological and geopolitical aspects of the Cold War rivalries and the contest over newly independent countries were paramount. For a seminal historical treatment of the U.S. and Soviet interventions of the late Cold War, see Westad, 2005.

¹⁶ Proctor, 2016, pp. 221–305.

¹⁷ We are indebted to our colleagues for tabulating the incidence of proxy wars over time; see Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-1, 2023.

regimes in third countries is one form of balancing.¹⁸ As importantly, all three competitors now have a robust set of capabilities—from economic support, military advisers, and weapon sales to conventional power projection abilities on the higher end—to render the full range of such support.

With the dawn of this new era of great-power competition, should the United States anticipate the return of the same types of conflicts that characterized the Cold War? Or should it be prepared for competing powers to become embroiled in conflicts that are considerably different in nature—and, thus, in the challenges they present—from those of the Cold War?

To explore these questions, we begin by defining the relevant conflicts. The Cold War-era conflicts noted earlier are often described as *proxy wars*, and what makes external powers' involvement in a foreign conflict a proxy war is a matter of some debate.¹⁹ For instance, some definitions of proxy wars limit them to cases in which external powers support non-state actors but not states.²⁰ However, most discussions of proxy wars distinguish this form of involvement from direct military interventions: In proxy warfare, the external power intervenes through only indirect support—such as with arms and other resources—and delegates the fighting to a local actor.²¹

In practice, the line between indirect and direct or military support may not be a firm one, as indirect support to proxies can subtly escalate to military action. Moreover, one power may intervene in a conflict solely through indirect support of a proxy actor, whereas its rival power might intervene more directly. For example, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviet intervention entailed a substantial deployment of Soviet troops, whereas the U.S. involvement was largely confined to supporting the mujahedeen.²² Then too, the risks that attend the spillover of competition into foreign conflicts—risks of escalation into direct conflict and mounting costs of involvement—may exist whether rival powers become involved directly or indirectly. Thus, in this series of reports, we investigate the prospects for great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters, whatever form this involvement takes.

More specifically, we consider *whether and under what conditions the United States could expect to become involved in a secondary-theater conflict in which at least one of its two main competitors is also involved*. Great-power involvement in conflicts might take the shape of proxy warfare—that is, support for a state or non-state actor by means short of direct mili-

¹⁸ Indeed, prominent international relations scholars have explored the question of why balancing against U.S. dominance was not seen in the 1990s and early 2000s, and some have predicted the return of balancing (G. John Ikenberry, ed., *America Unrivaled: The Future of the Balance of Power*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002).

¹⁹ See, for example, Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 1.

²⁰ See, for example, Dominic Tierney, “The Future of Sino-U.S. Proxy War,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 2021; and Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

²¹ See, for example, Tierney, 2021; Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

²² See, for example, Mumford, 2013, p. 14.

tary intervention. This might include covert or overt action. In particular, it might include purely indirect aid, such as training, equipping, advising, selling arms, and providing financial assistance, but it might also involve combat or military action—so long as that action is carried out by non-state groups, such as private military and security companies (PMSCs), affiliated with and operating on behalf of the external power.²³ Great-power involvement in conflicts might also take the shape of direct military interventions—although we deemphasize the prospects of major military interventions.

Importantly, we do not limit our investigation to the potential involvement in third-party conflicts for “foreign goals,” as per Deutsch’s description of Cold War proxy wars noted earlier. In the future, great powers may become embroiled in conflicts in pursuit of a variety of goals, and we do not want to exclude any possibilities from consideration. Similarly, emphasizing the degree to which the proxy, or local actor, must be an agent that wholly does the external principal’s bidding, rather than pursuing its own agenda, would unduly narrow the scope on the basis of factors that are difficult to parse even in historical cases—and much more so in hypothetical future conflicts.²⁴

The prospect for the United States to become involved in foreign wars with China or Russia is indeed more than hypothetical, as all three countries already support proxies in such conflicts. Both China and Russia are already competing with the United States and its allies and partners in the *gray zone* (the spectrum of competition below the threshold of armed conflict) in Europe and Asia.²⁵ Perhaps the most notable clash between the great powers that resulted from their involvement in a conflict in a third state has been between the United States and Russia in Europe. Since 2014, the United States and Russia have been involved in a bloody war in Ukraine; Russia was sending aid and troops to fight alongside pro-Russian separatists in the country, and the United States had sent more than \$1.6 billion in military aid to Ukraine.²⁶ As of September 2021, the conflict had taken more than 14,000 lives by Ukrainian government estimates.²⁷

The three great powers have also become embroiled in wars outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe. Most notably, the United States and Russia have found themselves backing different

²³ Some definitions of *proxy warfare* treat PMSCs and similar actors as the proxies who are being supported by the external powers, on par with local actors (see, for example, Mumford, 2013). We think that this lens is not helpful for the present context and consider such actors as Russia’s PMSCs to be a potential instrument of support to local actors rather than a party to the conflict in their own right.

²⁴ For an example of such an emphasis, see Douglas A. Ollivant and Erica Gaston, “The Problem with the Narrative of ‘Proxy War’ in Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, May 31, 2019.

²⁵ See Lyle J. Morris, Michael J. Mazarr, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Stephanie Pezard, Anika Binnendijk, and Marta Kepe, *Gaining Competitive Advantage in the Gray Zone: Response Options for Coercive Aggression Below the Threshold of Major War*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2942-OSD, 2019.

²⁶ Cory Welt, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45008, last updated April 29, 2020.

²⁷ Pavel Polityuk, “Ukrainian President Says War with Russia a Worst-Case Possibility,” Reuters, September 10, 2021.

parties in conflicts in Syria and Libya. Of the two, Syria is perhaps the more serious. After the country descended into civil war following strongman Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown on protests during the Arab Spring in 2011, the United States—along with its allies—backed what it considered “moderate” opposition forces.²⁸ Russia, on the other hand, backed the Assad government, and its support escalated into a direct military intervention in 2015. Ten years in, the conflict had left 387,000 dead and some 205,000 missing.²⁹

The Libyan civil war follows a similar trajectory. Like Syria, the conflict grew out of unrest from the Arab Spring in 2011. In this case, although assistance from the United States and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies led to the death of longtime Libyan ruler Muammar al-Qaddafi, the end of Qaddafi's rule did not stabilize the country. To the contrary, Libya descended into a bloody civil war; the United States, along with Turkey, backed the Government of National Accord, and Russia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and others backed the Libyan National Army under General Khalifa Haftar.³⁰ A decade later, the conflict had produced a death toll in the thousands and displaced well over a quarter million people.³¹

In some contrast with the Cold War-era conflicts noted earlier, the U.S. and Russian involvement in these later conflicts is not driven by an overriding zero-sum logic of competition. For the United States, although limiting Russian influence over these conflict-torn nations and their neighborhoods may be a goal, it is by no means the dominant goal driving involvement. Russia was indeed motivated by preventing what it viewed as another U.S.-sponsored regime change in Syria and by keeping in power a Russia-friendly regime. But Moscow also had other reasons for involvement, and its effort to fortify influence was intended as much to compel the United States and its allies to retrench from their post-2014 diplomatic isolation of Russia as it was to prevent the United States from having any influence over Syria.³² In Libya, the logic of strategic competition as a driver of the U.S. and Russian role is arguably even more attenuated. U.S. involvement has been minimal overall; although U.S. policy has consistently called for the withdrawal of foreign forces, Russia's mercenaries included, it is driven largely by regional counterterrorism and stability concerns.³³ And Russia's motivations for involvement do include gaining influence in a country strategically located on NATO's southern flank, but they also include helping the economy,

²⁸ “Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?” BBC News, last updated March 12, 2021.

²⁹ “Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?” 2021.

³⁰ Frederic Wehrey, “‘Our Hearts Are Dead.’ After 9 Years of Civil War, Libyans Are Tired of Being Pawns in a Geopolitical Game of Chess,” *Time*, February 12, 2020.

³¹ Council on Foreign Relations, “Global Conflict Tracker: Civil War in Libya,” webpage, last updated April 13, 2022.

³² Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia's Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019.

³³ Christopher M. Blanchard, “Libya and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, IF11556, September 2, 2021.

as Russia seeks to recoup losses caused by the United Nations (UN)-authorized removal of the Qaddafi regime in 2011, as well as boosting Russia's regional standing and ability to operate in Africa generally.³⁴

A notable aspect of both conflicts is that the United States and Russia have generally been cautious with regard to each other's presence. Apart from a handful of incidents—such as the attack by Russian Wagner mercenaries on U.S. special operations forces in Deir al-Zour in Syria, which provoked a decisive response of U.S. firepower—there have been few direct clashes between the two sides.³⁵ There have been a handful of well-publicized incidents in which U.S. and Russian forces have accused each other of trying to run the other off the road, including one incident that injured four U.S. soldiers.³⁶ However, neither side has viewed the conflict as primarily a way to impose costs on its competitor. Indeed, although some U.S. officials have suggested that the United States seeks to make Syria a “quagmire” for Russia, the United States has not taken every opportunity to do so, choosing instead to pursue deconfliction efforts aimed at minimizing mutual harms, with mixed success.³⁷ Russia, though certainly interested in undermining U.S. influence, has not demonstrated much desire to impose direct costs on the United States—and evidence suggests that its decision to intervene militarily in Syria in the first place was based on a belief that a clash with the United States there would be unlikely.³⁸ In other words, the shared goal of defeating the Islamic State largely eclipsed the competition over influence.³⁹

Moreover, although the United States was more active early on in both conflicts, its participation has since been half-hearted at best. The United States tacitly retrenched from its goal of ousting the Assad regime and focused on destroying the Islamic State. Rather than doubling down on the conflict to try to undercut Russia's hold on Syria, the United States ended its train-and-equip mission to vetted Syrian opposition and tried—though later reversed the decision—to withdraw its troops from Syria entirely in 2019; however, its future commitment

³⁴ Jalel Harchaoui, “The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya,” *War on the Rocks*, January 7, 2021.

³⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

³⁶ Lolita C. Baldor and Robert Burns, “Vehicle Collision with Russians Injures 4 US Troops in Syria,” *Military Times*, August 26, 2020.

³⁷ David Brennan, “U.S. Syria Representative Says His Job Is to Make the War a ‘Quagmire’ for Russia,” *Newsweek*, May 13, 2020. On the history of U.S.–Russia deconfliction efforts, see Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019.

³⁸ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

³⁹ For U.S. priorities, see Carla E. Humud and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33487, July 27, 2020.

is uncertain.⁴⁰ In Libya, the United States noted Russia's expanded deployment of Wagner mercenaries to Libya and explicitly called for their withdrawal, but the United States has not chosen to increase its involvement to bring about that outcome.⁴¹

The Syrian and Libyan civil wars demonstrate that, just as in the past, conflicts that draw in great-power competitors can often erupt outside the primary theaters of competition. Yet the nature of great-power involvement in Syria and Libya raises questions about how future conflicts of this kind will unfold. Will they resemble the proxy wars and military interventions of the Cold War, when rival powers supported parties on opposite sides of conflicts, driven predominantly by geopolitical and ideological goals rooted in competition? Or will future conflicts more closely resemble Syria and Libya, where rival great powers may be backing different parties, but not primarily for reasons related to competition or intended to impose costs on their competitors? Although involvement in conflicts outside the central theaters of concern to rival powers is certainly not new, future competition and conflict may well have important features that distinguish them from the proxy wars and interventions of the Cold War era.

Definitions of Key Concepts

Before delving further into the subject matter of this analysis, we want to define two concepts that are key to this research. In the previous section, we explained our conception of great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters, and here we specify how we view competition and how we identified secondary theaters.

Competition

Competition is perhaps one of the most often used and least understood words in modern U.S. strategy. For the purposes of this study, rather than wade into debates about definitions, we adopt the definition proposed by Michael Mazarr and colleagues in a 2018 RAND study:

Competition in the international realm involves the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status.⁴²

⁴⁰ Louisa Loveluck, "As U.S. Completes Afghan Withdrawal, American Allies in Syria Watch Warily," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2021.

⁴¹ U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs, "Russia, Wagner Group Continue Military Involvement in Libya," press release, July 24, 2020c; and Blanchard, 2021.

⁴² Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018, p. 5.

This definition captures two key aspects of competition. First, competition is a relative game. This means that, for the purposes of this study, U.S., Chinese, and Russian influence, power, and status should be assessed relatively rather than independently. Second, competition is not firmly bounded and takes place across multiple domains. States compete for different types of contested goods and therefore employ an appropriately varied set of tools—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic—to seek competitive advantage. Consequently, a study of competition in secondary theaters needs to take account of competition across different dimensions.

Secondary Theaters

Although the distinction between theaters that are of core concern and those that are secondary is important, there is no uncontested definition of the latter. In particular, great powers' so-called spheres of influence are sometimes unclear. These areas are commonly noted among analysts but elude boundaries that one can point to on a map: The United States maintains relationships of varying degrees of closeness with many of China's and Russia's neighbors, just as China and Russia do with the United States' neighbors. History provides only a partial answer for defining such areas. The 1823 Monroe Doctrine, in which the United States claimed to be the sole great power in the Western Hemisphere, does not necessarily provide a modern definition of a U.S. area of interest, and neither do common claims that Russia's sphere of influence extends throughout the post-Soviet space.

With this study, we do not resolve such questions comprehensively but instead seek to identify some theaters where the United States, China, and Russia do *not* have vital national interests at stake. Consequently, we take a conservative definition of secondary theaters. We start by ruling out the two core theaters that are central in U.S. national security documents: the Indo-Pacific and Europe. This also rules out much of Russia's self-proclaimed "near abroad."⁴³ At the same time, by ruling out the Indo-Pacific, we exclude many of the more sensitive parts of the world for China.⁴⁴ We then add North America (because it presumably would be of vital interest to the United States) and the Arctic (because it likely would be of core concern to Russia) to this list of exclusions.⁴⁵

⁴³ Russia's *near abroad* refers to the former Soviet republics (minus the Baltic states), which Russia views as its rightful sphere of influence. For one articulation of the different levels of strategic importance accorded to different regions in Europe, Asia, and beyond, see Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017.

⁴⁴ For example, China scholars Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell argue that Beijing views the world in a series of four rings—starting with China proper, then its adjacent countries, then the rest of the Indo-Pacific, and then everywhere else—with each successive ring being somewhat less sensitive to Chinese security. Our definition of *secondary* excludes most of the first three rings and focuses the analysis on the last ring (Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, "How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2012).

⁴⁵ See Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Kristin Van Abel, and Scott Stephenson, *Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia: Planning for Regional Change in the Far North*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1731-RC, 2017.

This leaves us with three main secondary theaters—Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East—which we define mostly along geographic combatant command boundaries rather than political convention. Our main departure from that approach is the Middle East, which we define more narrowly than the current U.S. Central Command area of responsibility; specifically, we consider the former Soviet Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) to be part of Russia’s near abroad, and we therefore exclude them from this secondary Middle East theater. In addition, for Africa, we exclude all island countries except for Madagascar (the largest one).

Methodology

To study great-power competition and potential conflict in secondary theaters, we devised a three-stage methodology. The first two stages represent a data-driven approach to identify *competition flashpoints*—that is, places where more than one of the three powers (the United States, China, or Russia) would most plausibly become embroiled in a proxy war or limited conflict.

First, we sought to measure the relative *potential for competition* among the United States, China, and Russia, across multiple domains, for all the countries in the three secondary theaters.

Second, we assessed the *potential for internal conflict* erupting in each of the countries (relative to the rest of the theater), based on measures of state weakness or other sources of vulnerability to turmoil. We then relied on both sets of measures to identify countries with both a relatively high risk of conflict and a relatively high likelihood of acute competition, which served as the basis for analyzing scenarios for great-power involvement in conflicts. Support for proxies and limited military interventions require both motive (gauged by multiple countries’ interests or involvement in a given state) and opportunity (conflict outbreak). Without the former, the great powers would have little reason to back any parties to foreign conflicts. Without the latter, the competition might play out in largely peaceful fashion.

Finally, we selected a small number of countries likely to present both motive and opportunity and examined what scenarios for great-power involvement in conflicts in those countries might look like: What are the objectives of the three great powers in each country, what are their relative abilities to project power into a given location, and how might each choose to become involved under the more likely paths to conflict?

Measuring the Potential for Competition

Because great-power competition takes place across multiple domains, measuring the potential for competition is a data-intensive task. Moreover, measuring competition itself is a difficult proposition; whether one state is in competition with another is as much a function of perceptions of a zero-sum game as it is of concrete, measurable factors. Our approach was therefore to rely on data that enabled us to measure the degree of great-power involvement

in each state, relative to other states in that region. That is, we identified states in the region in which the United States, China, and Russia have been most involved, using each of the four main tools of national power—diplomacy, information, military, and economics (often known by the acronym DIME). States that attract the greatest degree of involvement from all three powers are thus the sites of potentially acute great-power competition. Potential, of course, need not mean actual; it is possible that the objectives that underlie each great power’s involvement do not clash. However, there is more opportunity for competition where great powers are most extensively involved.

Moreover, measuring involvement captures *influence-seeking* rather than influence itself. Although we measured how much time and resources the United States, China, and Russia have been investing in a location, we did not measure to what extent these investments are paying off in terms of each state gaining influence on the ground.⁴⁶

Table 1.1 summarizes the data used to measure each of the three great powers’ involvement or influence-seeking in each country, which we then combined to quantitatively assess the potential for competition across countries in each region.

To measure diplomatic involvement, we relied on some traditional indicators, such as the amount of foreign aid each great power directed toward countries in the region.⁴⁷ We also captured whether states had an embassy in each country and reciprocal visa-free travel, on the assumption that the presence of such agreements indicates more people-to-people ties.⁴⁸ In addition, we captured the number of high-level diplomatic visits by heads of state, top for-

⁴⁶ For one approach to connecting influence-seeking to influence, see Michael J. Mazarr, Bryan Frederick, John J. Drennan, Emily Ellinger, Kelly Eusebi, Bryan Rooney, Andrew Stravers, and Emily Yoder, *Understanding Influence in the Strategic Competition with China*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A290-1, 2021.

⁴⁷ Data for the United States are for 2019, as reported in U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), “U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2019,” webpage, February 24, 2021a. Data for China are Official Development Assistance for the latest year between 2000 and 2014 available for each country, as calculated by AidData, a research lab at the College of William & Mary; these data are available at AidData, “China’s Global Development Footprint,” webpage, undated. Data for Russia are Official Development Assistance (total net) for the latest year available between 2012 and 2019, as reported in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, “Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions [DAC2a],” webpage, undated. Although we sought data for the most recent year available, the most recent data for China dated to 2014 at the latest. This means that our measures of China’s diplomatic influence-seeking may be somewhat distorted if the relative prioritization of its foreign aid recipients in the region shifted considerably.

⁴⁸ We verified these data for each country and great-power pair individually using official state information from U.S. Department of State, “Websites of U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions,” webpage, undated-d; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Chinese Embassies,” webpage, undated-a; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Russia in International Relations,” webpage, undated.

TABLE 1.1
Measuring Influence-Seeking and Potential for Competition: Summary of Variables

Variable	Description
Diplomacy	
Foreign aid and assistance	Total aid or assistance reported to the country for the most recent year available (\$)
High-level diplomatic visits	Total visits by heads of state, top foreign policy officials, and top military officials (for the U.S.) between 2000 and 2020 (aggregated number of visits)
Presence of embassy	Existence of an embassy in the country (binary)
Visa-free travel	Visa-free travel from each great power to and from the country (two binary variables)
Information	
State-sponsored media	Presence of each great power's state-sponsored media (binary)
Military	
Involvement in post-Cold War conflicts	Participation in intra- or inter-state conflicts in the country between 1991 and 2021 (binary)
Arms exports	Volume of exports to the country based on Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI)'s trend-indicator value of exports ^a
Presence of military forces and bases	Each great power's force presence in the country between 2014 and 2020 (number of person-years)
Military agreements	Presence of active military or defense cooperation agreements (binary)
Military exercises	Total number of exercises performed with the country between 2014 and 2020
PMSCs	Presence of PMSCs in the country (binary)
Military access	Access to the country (standing agreement or access granted in practice) (binary)
Economics	
Trade volume	Trade volume (\$)
Investment	Foreign direct investment position (U.S. and Russia), foreign investments (China) (\$)
Critical infrastructure	Presence of major Russian companies in critical infrastructure sectors (binary)

NOTE: For more information on how we defined these variables, see the appendixes to the three companion reports in this series: Kepe et al., forthcoming; Rhoades et al., 2023; Chindea et al., 2023.

^a Available at SIPRI, Arms Transfers Database, web tool, undated-a.

oreign policy officials, and (for the United States) top military officials between 2000 and 2020, because one of the most valuable diplomatic commodities is senior leader time.⁴⁹

Of the four main tools of state power, informational activities proved most challenging for us to measure. For Russia, we determined whether a state-sponsored media outlet (RT, Sputnik, or TASS) had a cooperation agreement with local media.⁵⁰ For China, we determined whether the China Global Television Network, China Radio International, or Xinhua was present in the country.⁵¹ And for the United States, we identified countries where Voice of America had a bureau, had transmitters, owned FM frequencies, or had contracts with local radio or television affiliates that retranslate.⁵² Although this measure of information does not capture many channels of informational influence and narrative dissemination—notably, we were unable to find systematic measures of social-media information efforts—it does provide a rough approximation of where great powers have chosen to devote their informational resources.

We collected multiple indicators for the potential for military competition. Given the military focus of this work and the aim of exploring the possibilities for conflict in the three secondary theaters, we relied on a larger number of metrics than for other domains of national power. Most of the indicators bear a direct relationship to the state of military-to-military

⁴⁹ Visits were aggregated over the period between 2006 and 2020 for Africa and between 2000 and 2020 for the Middle East and Latin America. For the United States, we counted visits by the President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense, as reported in Office of the Historian, “Travels Abroad of the Secretary of State,” webpage, undated-c; and DoD, “Releases,” webpage, undated. For China, we searched for records of visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs to each country in the region during the 2000–2020 period in Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Top Stories,” webpage, undated-b; we supplemented that search by searching Chinese and regional news sources. For Russia, we searched for records of visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs to each country in each region in two official portals: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated; and President of Russia, “Events,” webpage, undated.

⁵⁰ Specifically, we identified cooperation agreements signed by state-controlled media (RT, Sputnik, or TASS) with local media outlets and news agencies, based on George Barros, “Russia’s Cooperation Agreements with Local Media Outlets,” map, Institute for the Study of War, 2020; we supplemented that source with news sources.

⁵¹ Specifically, we identified the presence of the China Global Television Network (i.e., China Central Television [CCTV]’s international division), China Radio International, or Xinhua bureaus. For Africa, see Herman Wasserman and Dani Madrid-Morales, “How Influential Are Chinese Media in Africa? An Audience Analysis in Kenya and South Africa,” *International Journal of Communication*, Vol. 12, May 14, 2018; and Michael Leslie, “The Dragon Shapes Its Image: A Study of Chinese Media Influence Strategies in Africa,” *African Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 3–4, December 2016; we supplemented those sources with media reports. For the Middle East, see China Global Television Network [نوي زفلة ةك بشل ةي ب رعل ا ةان قل ا], “Who We Are” [“نحن نم”], webpage, undated; CCTV, “List of Overseas Bureaus,” webpage, undated; and China Culture, “Xinhua News Agency,” webpage, undated. For Latin America, see China Radio International Español, homepage, undated; Peilei Ye and Luis A. Albornoz, “Chinese Media ‘Going Out’ in Spanish Speaking Countries: The Case of CGTN-Español,” *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, Vol. 13, No. 1, 2018; China Culture, undated; and CCTV, “Chinese, Latin American Media Join Hands to Overcome Global Crisis,” August 29, 2020.

⁵² Voice of America, “Programs,” webpage, undated; and U.S. Agency for Global Media, “Middle East Broadcasting Networks,” webpage, undated.

ties; notable examples include military agreements,⁵³ arms exports,⁵⁴ military access,⁵⁵ military exercises,⁵⁶ and basing.⁵⁷ We also included a variable for prior or ongoing great-power involvement in a conflict in each country after the Cold War.⁵⁸ Lastly, given the importance of gray-zone tactics, we included the reported presence of U.S., Chinese, and Russian PMSCs.⁵⁹

⁵³ These were based on the following sources: Brandon J. Kinne, “The Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2020, covering bilateral defense cooperation agreements from 1980 to 2010; Office of Treaty Affairs, “Treaties in Force: A List of Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States in Force on January 1, 2020,” U.S. Department of State, 2021; Government of the Russian Federation, “Mezhdunordniye Dogovori Roisiiskoi Federacii” [“International Agreements of the Russian Federation”], database, undated; various articles and sources in *Janes Defence Weekly*, *Defence Industry*, *Intelligence Weekly*, and *Country Risk Daily Report* publications; and searches of Chinese-language news sources.

⁵⁴ Arms sales were measured using SIPRI, undated-a, total trend-indicator value of exports from 2014 to the latest year available (2018 or 2019). For details on the methodology, see SIPRI, “Sources and Methods,” webpage, undated-b.

⁵⁵ We captured the existence or ability to secure military access in practice. For China, we tracked port visits by the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy, based on DoD, *Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access*, Washington, D.C., December 2018b; and Katherine Koleski and Alec Blivas, *China’s Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, October 17, 2018. For Russia, we identified naval port calls, access to ports, or access to airfields through searches of the English- and Russian-language press, as well as in R. Evan Ellis, *The New Russian Engagement with Latin America: Strategic Position, Commerce, and Dreams of the Past*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015. For the United States, we identified the presence of publicly known U.S. *lily pads* (cooperative security locations), relying on the following sources: Stephen J. Townsend, general, U.S. Army, “A Secure and Stable Africa Is an Enduring American Interest,” statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., January 30, 2020; Peter E. Teil, “United States Africa Command Posture and Requirements and IPL Overview,” U.S. Africa Command, 2018; Madelene Lindström, “The United States—From Counter-Terrorism to Great Power Competition in Africa?” Swedish Defence Research Institute, FOI Memo 6817, August 2019; Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNERney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-201-OSD, 2013; and John Lindsay-Poland, “U.S. Military Bases in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, Vol. 9, No. 3, August 2004. We supplemented all these U.S. sources with media reports.

⁵⁶ See International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, London, Vols. 114–120, 2014–2020. We supplemented those data by searching news sources in English, Mandarin, and Russian.

⁵⁷ International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014–2020.

⁵⁸ This variable is based on data on actors in conflicts between 1991 and 2021, as reported by the following sources: Uppsala Conflict Data Program, web tool, Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, undated; the Uppsala Conflict Data Program External Support Dataset, via Stina Högbladh, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, “External Support in Armed Conflict 1975–2009, Presenting New Data,” paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, March 16–19, 2011; Nina von Uexkull and Therese Pettersson, “Issues and Actors in African Nonstate Conflicts: A New Data Set,” *International Interactions*, Vol. 44, No. 5, 2018; and data on non-state armed groups, as of December 14, 2021, from Dangerous Companions Project, homepage, undated.

⁵⁹ To identify the presence of PMSCs, we used a variety of sources, including press and other investigative reports and the websites of major PMSCs. U.S. PMSCs included Allied Universal, Caliburn International,

Finally, on economic measures, we relied on bilateral merchandise trade volume and direct investment.⁶⁰ Although direct investment position data were available for the United States,⁶¹ and partly available for Russia,⁶² this was not the case for China; thus, for China, we relied on the most comprehensive independent effort to catalog China's global investments, compiled by the American Enterprise Institute and the Heritage Foundation.⁶³ Because Russia's direct investment position data are particularly patchy and likely do not adequately represent countries in which Russian entities have an economic stake, we supplemented the investment measure with another variable that captured an important aspect of economic involvement: the presence of Russian companies in critical infrastructure sectors of each country.⁶⁴ For the United States and China, these investments generally are included in their respective investment data.

A few caveats about these data and our approach are in order. First, given the extensive geographic scope and differences between what data the United States, China, and Russia make public, not every variable was available for each of the three great powers, and not all the data were of equal quality or completeness.⁶⁵ Second, even when the data were available and complete, many of the variables are not directly comparable across the competing powers. Unlike the trade volume metric, for example, the presence of PMSCs does not repre-

Constellis, Continuity Global Solutions, DynCorp, ISC Security, K2 Solutions, MPRI, and Reed International. (By the time this report was published, several of these companies had been rebranded, had combined with other companies, or were otherwise no longer in business as the same entity.) For detail on sources used for Russian and Chinese PMSCs, see the appendixes to the companion reports of this series (Kepe et al., forthcoming; Rhoades et al., 2023; Chindea et al., 2023).

⁶⁰ World Integrated Trade Solution, web tool, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in each region, 2000–2019.

⁶¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “U.S. Direct Investment Position Abroad on a Historical-Cost Basis,” 2019.

⁶² International Monetary Fund, “Coordinated Direct Investment Survey,” webpage, undated; we used data for the most recent year available for Russia (2018 or 2019).

⁶³ American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, “China Global Investment Tracker,” webpage, undated.

⁶⁴ As analysis from a Russian expert shows, Russia's direct investment data are distorted by the magnitude of capital kept offshore, which inflates the significance of such places as Cyprus; this analysis also indicates that foreign investments by Russia's largest companies (such as Gazprom, Lukoil, and Rosneft) are underestimated, sometimes vastly (Alexey V. Kuznetsov, “Перспективы диверсификации российских прямых инвестиций за рубежом” [“Perspectives for Diversifying Russian Direct Investment Abroad”], *Проблемы прогнозирования* [Problems in Forecasting], No. 1, 2017). For each country in each region, we sought to identify the presence of key Russian companies operating in the relevant sectors (energy, raw materials, transport, financial services, communications). We reviewed news and research reports on Russian companies in each region and supplemented those reports by reviewing the websites of key Russian companies—notably, Rosatom, Lukoil, Gazprom, Transneft, Alrosa, Rusal, Norilsk Nickel, Severstal, Nordgold, Ferrum Mining, and Uralkali.

⁶⁵ For example, both the United States and Russia decline to publicly report foreign investments for certain countries because of confidentiality concerns.

sent the same kind of influence-seeking for each great power; whereas the United States and Russia might both have PMSCs in a given country, the former's may be performing a relatively benign task, such as embassy security, while the latter's may be doing something more offensive, such as training local military factions or participating in combat.⁶⁶ Third, not all variables proved of equal utility by region. For example, if the United States has an embassy in every country of a particular region, the variable does not help identify where the United States focuses its efforts in that region.

Despite these limitations, these variables offer a reasonable approximation of where each power is focusing its efforts. To synthesize this broad set of variables, we constructed metrics, or indices, measuring great-power influence-seeking in each of four domains (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) and overall, and those indices capture where in the region each power focuses its activities. The *influence-seeking indices* (i.e., scores) for each of the three powers across the four domains provide a numeric indication of how involved a given great power is in a particular country relative to other countries in that region. The influence-seeking metrics for all three competing powers are then combined to produce *indices for competition potential* in each domain and overall for a given country.⁶⁷

In constructing the influence-seeking and competition-potential indices, we accorded each variable equal weight. Military access, for example, counts as much as the presence of PMSCs in the military influence-seeking index and the military competition-potential index, and direct investment counts as much as arms exports in the overall competition-potential index.⁶⁸ To be sure, how much each activity should matter in determining a country's impor-

⁶⁶ For detail on the activities of Russian PMSCs in conflicts in secondary theaters, see Appendix C.

⁶⁷ Each variable was standardized—that is, converted into z-scores for each country and great-power pair in the region for any given variable—as follows:

$$Z_{ij} = \frac{x_{ij} - \mu}{\sigma}$$

That is, for each country and great-power pair ij , a z-score for a given variable x measures standard deviations (σ) above or below a mean value (μ) of x across all countries i in the region for that great power j . For example, the z-scores for trade between Iraq and China indicate how much trade there is between those countries relative to China's trade with all other countries in the Middle East. We then converted the z-scores into percentiles, for easier interpretation.

Although our selection of data sources and variables was driven in part by the need to minimize missing data, some missingness is inevitable. Missing data were handled as follows: In the few cases when it was highly likely, based on other sources, that the value should be zero—for example, because we located no references to China or Russia sending foreign aid to a particular country—the missing value was treated as zero. In all other cases, missing values remained missing, and the observation was excluded from generating the z-score for observations on that variable.

⁶⁸ We chose to weight *each variable* equally—rather than *each of the four domains* equally—for the following reasons: Overall, we do not have strong theoretical reasons to prejudge that any single variable matters more than any other in creating the potential for competition. That is, we want to avoid assumptions that, for example, the volume of trade matters more or less than the volume of diplomatic visits or military exercises in shaping the intensity of strategic competition in the future. Thus, we do not weight the diplomacy, information, military, and economics categories equally, as this would, in effect, suggest that each mili-

tance to competing powers is an open question. The resulting indices are just one way, and certainly not the only way, of capturing influence-seeking and potential competition. Thus, our approach does not pursue a nuanced weighting of different activities. However, it does provide a useful single numeric indicator of where a particular country falls, in terms of effort by a given great power, relative to other countries in that region.

With the help of these aggregate indices, we can identify the most likely competition flashpoints: In particular, countries where the United States and one or both of its competitors concentrate their activities, relative to other countries in that theater, are more likely to become focal points for great-power competition.

Measuring the Potential for Conflict

A high potential for competition among two or more great powers in a given country does not necessarily make that country a very likely location for a proxy war or military intervention. Great-power support for local actors in power struggles in secondary theaters requires both motive *and* opportunity.

Opportunity, in this case, would stem from a high risk of conflict. External powers' support for proxies or more-direct interventions are predicated on an underlying internal conflict or civil war, or at least conditions where such a conflict might be plausibly catalyzed by external powers.⁶⁹ External powers, then, can exploit these dynamics to their advantage; they might choose to back a party whose victory might confer benefits on the external power or a party that is in a position to inflict costs on a rival great power.⁷⁰ For example, during the Cold War, the United States backed the anti-Communist South Vietnamese government, while the Soviet Union supported the pro-Communist rebel Viet Cong and the North Vietnam-

tary variable is less informative about great-power interests than the single variable in the informational domain is. Therefore, our overall index is most influenced by military variables (of which we had seven) and least influenced by informational variables (of which we had only one). The emphasis on military or security forms of influence-seeking is partly a function of data availability, reflecting the fact that we were able to gather more-quantifiable information about the military domain than about the informational domain. However, given that the focus of this study is ultimately on the potential for involvement in conflicts, an index that is more influenced by military factors also appears justifiable. The analysis of each of the four domains separately helps ensure that we do not simply neglect countries where the potential for economic or informational competition, for example, is relatively high but military competition is low. There are a couple of exceptions: For example, Russia's direct investment position and critical infrastructure investments were weighted together as a single variable; we did this because both U.S. and Chinese direct investment data include critical infrastructure, so treating these as two separate factors for Russia would cause Russia's influence-seeking index to be more influenced by economic variables than the indices of the other two powers.

⁶⁹ In theory, an inter-state war can also have elements of a proxy war; here, however, we focus largely on internal conflicts, although we do consider inter-state or cross-border dynamics in some of the scenarios examined.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Fall 2011.

ese government.⁷¹ Years later, the United States backed the rebel mujahedeen in Afghanistan, while the Soviet Union backed the pro-Communist central government.⁷² Importantly, the United States' intervention in Vietnam and the Soviet Union's intervention in Afghanistan were not limited to indirect assistance and instead involved substantial troop deployments. In both cases, the rival great powers became involved in the conflicts because both had the motivation—but also the opportunity—to do so: Both Vietnam and Afghanistan were weak states with homegrown rebel movements. Of course, local parties to the conflict are not devoid of agency; they have exploited and will in the future exploit great-power interests to secure support as well.⁷³ Indeed, some scholars have contested the description of local actors in ongoing conflicts as proxies for the competing external powers because of the local actors' degree of influence over those powers.⁷⁴ In sum, whatever form external power involvement takes and the relative degrees of agency of local actors, a high risk of internal conflict is a prerequisite.

To capture the potential for conflict, we relied on preexisting data sets. To assess the potential for conflict across Africa, we used the University of Uppsala's Violence Early-Warning System (ViEWS), a well-regarded tool for forecasting the probability of internal conflict on the basis of a large set of variables found to be correlated with conflict.⁷⁵ ViEWS assesses the prospective risk of conflict over three years and “provides early warnings for three forms of political violence: armed conflict involving states and rebel groups, armed conflict between non-state actors, and violence against civilians.”⁷⁶

Because no similar forecasting tools were available for the Middle East and Latin America, we relied on two alternative sources to estimate the risk of conflict in these regions. The first is the Janes qualitative, intelligence-driven *internal conflict risk* measure, which is an assessment of the “likelihood . . . of intra-state military conflict (in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict or full-blown civil war where rebels/insurgents are attempting

⁷¹ Seyom Brown, “Purposes and Pitfalls of War by Proxy: A Systemic Analysis,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 27, No. 2, 2016.

⁷² See George Crile, *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of the Largest Covert Operation in History*, New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2003.

⁷³ See, generally, Westad, 2005.

⁷⁴ See, for example, Ollivant and Gaston, 2019.

⁷⁵ ViEWS: The Violence Early-Warning System, web tool, Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, undated. For more-detailed discussion, see a companion report in this series, Kepe et al., forthcoming.

⁷⁶ Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, “About ViEWS,” webpage, last modified April 25, 2022. The project incorporates a “variety of variables to specify the models that are then used to predict the risk of armed conflict. Such variables contain data on a range of aspects that might influence the risk of conflict occurrence in a particular grid-cell or country” (Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, “Independent Variables,” webpage, undated). We used a country-level predicted probability that at least one of the three conflict outcomes (armed conflict involving states and rebel groups, armed conflict between non-state actors, and violence against civilians) would occur in a country-month for the forthcoming 36 months (starting with April 2021).

to overthrow the government, achieve regional independence or at least heavily influence major government policies).⁷⁷ The advantages of the Janes assessment are that it (1) takes into account expert judgment and qualitative factors that are difficult to quantify and (2) provides an up-to-date assessment of each country in each region. Real-time expert rankings, however, depend on subjective judgment and may be unduly influenced by events that may turn out to be fleeting.

To balance these potential biases, we combined the Janes rankings with ratings from the State Fragility Index, an older measure produced by the Center for Systemic Peace.⁷⁸ This index does not produce real-time estimates of conflict risk but instead assesses state fragility based on durable factors that have been demonstrably related to conflict and do not change easily—such as history of prior conflict, discrimination against particular ethnic groups, and the Human Development Index.⁷⁹ Because we are most interested in identifying which countries are at *relatively greater risk* of conflict than others—rather than by *how much* one country's risk is greater than another's—we converted the numeric ratings into ordinal rankings and combined the two (the Janes internal conflict risk ranking and the state fragility ratings) for a single ranking of countries from most to least potential for conflict.⁸⁰

Choosing and Analyzing Countries and Conflict Scenarios

Using the results from our analysis of the potential for competition and the potential for conflict, we selected two or three countries per theater to present some of the more plausible conflict scenarios, where great powers might become involved. To do so, we first limited the potential set to the one-third of countries in each theater with the highest conflict potential. This helped ensure that the conflict scenarios we examined were sufficiently foreseeable and based on existing dynamics, so that we could identify the most likely causes of conflict; in other words, this subset of states is most likely to present actual, rather than merely speculative, opportunities for great powers to become involved in conflicts in the foreseeable future.

We then ranked this set of most-conflict-prone states in the region by competition potential, from highest to lowest. This enabled us to also identify which states have been the sites of the most extensive great-power influence-seeking and are therefore theoretically more likely to attract great-power attention if conflict occurs. A high potential for competition

⁷⁷ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, “Global Country Risk Ratings,” IHS Markit, April 6, 2020.

⁷⁸ Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, “State Fragility Index and Matrix 2018,” Center for Systemic Peace, webpage, undated.

⁷⁹ For full details, see Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, *Global Report 2017: Conflict, Governance, and State Fragility*, Vienna, Va.: Center for Systemic Peace, August 27, 2017.

⁸⁰ The combination of rankings was straightforward; we added the two rankings and re-ranked on the basis of the sum. For more-detailed discussion, see two of the companion reports in this series: Rhoades et al., 2023; Chindea et al., 2023.

does not *ensure* that any of the three powers has sufficient motivation to become involved, but it should make it more likely on average.⁸¹

Rather than simply picking the two or three states with the greatest competition potential among the most-conflict-prone states, we adopted a somewhat more qualitative approach. We consulted with regional subject-matter experts and our analyses of China's and Russia's approaches to supporting proxy actors (see Appendixes B and C) to select countries (1) where the likelihood of significant conflict, especially with some transborder or broader regional implications, is indeed present and (2) that present at least theoretically plausible contexts for great-power involvement in conflicts, in view of what we know about how great powers have approached faraway conflicts in recent times. From among countries that met those general criteria, we further sought to select cases that were sufficiently different from each other to stress the DAF in different ways.

After selecting the countries for analysis of potential great-power involvement in internal conflicts, we drew on a variety of sources to develop plausible scenarios for what these conflicts might look like. First, we explored local political dynamics and identified which local actors have ties to which great power, if any. We relied on expert analyses of each country's political dynamics and assessments of conflict risks. Our conflict scenarios are based on causes of conflict identified as salient or most likely in such analyses.⁸² Sparks that start armed conflicts are not always predictable; for example, the outbreak of a series of uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 was largely unexpected to most analysts, including intelligence analysts.⁸³ Thus, we do not claim to predict precisely how conflicts will unfold or to cover the full spectrum of possible scenarios that might come to pass. Instead, we focus on the dynamics of discord that are evident at present and identified by regional experts as the most-plausible sources of substantial violent conflict in the foreseeable future.

Second, we assessed each great power's overarching interests in the country, which help inform what objectives, if any, each might have in a hypothetical conflict. We then explored what type of posture and access each great power might have and what types of capabilities it might be able to bring to bear on the given scenario. Next, we explored how such a conflict might unfold and what factors might affect its ultimate outcome. To focus analysis here, we accorded more attention to scenarios that we assessed were more likely to draw in the United States and at least one of its two key competitors. That is, even where multiple, equally plausible conflict scenarios existed, we focused on the scenario where the great powers were

⁸¹ To be sure, in an atmosphere of acute rivalry resembling periods of the Cold War, it is possible that a great power would support local actors purely for competitive reasons in countries where it lacks any other interests. Where this might occur, however, is essentially unpredictable; thus, we focus on identifying the more plausible cases based on factors (i.e., influence-seeking) that we can observe.

⁸² In this, we drew on our interviews with regional experts, scholarly and policy research on each country, and the research that produced the assessments of political risk on which we relied to rank countries in each region.

⁸³ Jeff Goodwin, "Why We Were Surprised (Again) by the Arab Spring," *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2011.

more likely to have sufficient motivation for involvement. To empirically ground these assessments, we drew on a variety of sources to better understand how China and Russia—as well as the United States—have approached conflicts in secondary theaters in the past. These analyses, contained in the appendixes to this report, included research into how Chinese and Russian experts—as well as Western ones—write about the subject today.

Finally, we assessed the implications of each conflict scenario for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the DAF and explored what the scenarios might mean for future military posture, capabilities, and capacity.

Limitations of the Approach

As with all methodological choices, there are limitations to the approaches taken in this series. First, as we explained earlier, the data used for measuring competition potential are limited and uneven in quantity and quality. Second, the last component of the project—analyzing scenarios for potential conflicts in secondary theaters—is an inherently speculative task. Although we based our analysis on factual trends, historical precedent, and previous scholarship, the United States’ ability to predict future conflict is notoriously poor.⁸⁴ Consequently, although these scenarios are useful heuristics for thinking through what might be demanded of the joint force in conflicts in secondary theaters, they are not predictions of what *will* happen and should not be interpreted as such. Finally, we were unable to conduct field research in each of the countries selected for the scenarios to get a more nuanced sense of local dynamics and great-power influence. This was made impossible by the ongoing coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. The research team substituted telephone interviews and other research materials, but this is an imperfect solution.

Overview of Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. Chapter Two provides an overview of the state of competition in secondary theaters. We argue that, for the most part, the potential for great-power competition is greatest in traditional power centers in each region; that is, the United States, China, and Russia concentrate their influence-seeking efforts in larger, wealthier, and more-powerful countries. These states, however, often are not the ones most prone to conflict, which creates a potential mismatch between where the United States might focus its competitive efforts and where it might end up engaged in a proxy war or limited conflict.

Chapter Three provides a summary of the analysis conducted in the three accompanying reports of this series, exploring some of the most-plausible scenarios in which the United States might become involved in a conflict in a secondary theater with at least one of its two

⁸⁴ See Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chandler, Shira Efron, Bryan Frederick, Eugeniu Han, Kurt Klein, Forrest E. Morgan, Ashley L. Rhoades, 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, pp. 5–8.

main competitors. We analyze countries that we determined are among those most likely to present both motive and opportunities for potential great-power involvement in conflicts, and we present how such conflicts would most plausibly unfold. Overall, we find that the risk of direct conflict among the United States, China, and Russia in Africa or the Middle East may be relatively low because the external powers would either support the same side or, in the case of divergent interests, have few compelling reasons to commit considerable resources. In the Latin American scenarios, the great powers may be more likely to back opposing sides, and the United States' vested interests in the region, given its proximity to the U.S. homeland, may make Washington more likely to commit resources.

Chapter Four details the findings and implications of this work for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the DAF. We recommend that the DAF avoid strategic myopia when it comes to secondary theaters; continue to pursue access and alliances, particularly in Latin America; and continue to invest in capabilities that will most likely be high demand—namely, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, as well as mobility and special operations assets.

Finally, Appendixes A, B, and C provide overviews of the United States', China's, and Russia's approaches, respectively, to conflicts in secondary theaters, whether these take the shape of proxy warfare or limited military interventions. These appendixes provide the intellectual and empirical foundation to the conflict scenario analysis described in Chapter Three. They describe the reasons why and identify how and where the three great powers might support local actors in foreign conflicts, as well as what kinds of capabilities they might be able to bring to bear in a future conflict.

The overarching argument of this work is that, although the United States, China, and Russia likely will compete for influence in secondary theaters and may even end up becoming involved in conflicts in these areas, these conflicts are unlikely to closely resemble those of the Cold War. Absent a return to a zero-sum mentality, where any gain in influence in a secondary theater by a rival great power is seen as directly threatening to the other's national security, competition alone is unlikely to be a dominant driver of great-power involvement in foreign conflicts. As a result, the three powers might have little reason and relatively few occasions to back opposing parties in secondary-theater conflicts and thus a relatively low risk of head-to-head engagement. Instead, crises in secondary theaters, insofar as they draw in competing great powers, may pose predominantly deconfliction challenges—similar to what the United States encountered in Syria, where Russian and U.S. forces operated in close proximity to one another. The most-plausible exceptions to this general conclusion that emerge from our analyses are in Latin America, where the United States and its competitors are more likely to back opposite sides in some potential conflicts. Even if most future conflicts in secondary theaters are not very likely to resemble the proxy wars and military interventions of the Cold War era, the United States still needs to invest in access and alliances in secondary theaters, if only as a strategic hedge, while it focuses on more likely hot spots in other parts of the world.

Competition in Secondary Theaters

For the Trump and Biden administrations, great-power competition has been at the heart of national security strategy. The Trump administration’s 2018 National Defense Strategy proclaimed that “inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”¹ The Biden administration similarly made competition a cornerstone of its Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, pledging that its “agenda will strengthen our enduring advantages, and allow us to prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation.”² Great-power competition, however, is an expansive and ill-defined mandate.³ The United States, China, and Russia compete for diplomatic, informational, military, and economic influence globally. Although U.S. attention is focused on the Indo-Pacific and Europe, the competition extends to other regions as well.

In this chapter, we evaluate the potential for competition in Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America on a macro level; our analysis yields four general findings.⁴ First, across all three theaters (or regions), the United States, China, and Russia tend to focus their influence-seeking efforts on the larger countries in each region, although each great power may be drawn to these countries for somewhat different reasons. Second, at times, the character of U.S.-China competition in secondary theaters is very different from the character of U.S.-Russia competition. In general, the former tends to involve China pushing for economic influence while the United States dominates the security area; by contrast, in U.S.-Russia competition, both powers are more likely to focus on some of the same military influence measures. Third, China and Russia are increasing their involvement across multiple domains and regions, whereas U.S. involvement is often stagnating or even decreasing. Although the United States remains a dominant military actor across all three regions, China and Russia are increasing their engagement. China, in particular, has the capacity to expand its influence-

¹ DoD, 2018a, p. 1.

² Biden, 2021, p. 20.

³ For a further critique of competition in U.S. strategy, see Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Scott W. Harold, Michelle Gris , Marta Kepe, Soo Kim, Ashley L. Rhoades, Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, *Vanishing Trade Space: Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in an Era of Competition—A Project Overview*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A597-1, 2023.

⁴ For the full findings, see Kepe et al., forthcoming; Rhoades et al., 2023; Chindea et al., 2023.

seeking efforts in the future. Finally, competition is sometimes cast as the prelude to conflict, but this may not hold true in secondary theaters. Across all three regions, competition by and large is focused in more-stable countries, whereas countries that are more prone to instability tend to be less of a priority in the competition arena.

Mapping Competition in Secondary Theaters

Strategic competition between the United States and the two rival powers is theoretically boundless geographically. Yet the potential for such competition is not equal across countries in the theaters we have identified as secondary. To identify where the potential for competition is most acute, we sought to depict competitors' influence-seeking activities in each country in diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains, relying on the best publicly available data for the selected variables to create scores capturing in which countries the three great powers are focusing their influence-seeking efforts, relative to other countries in the same region.⁵ Although data differences prevented us from comparing the great powers' competition scores (hereafter, *indices*) directly, we are able to compare their relative prioritization of countries in a given theater.⁶ In other words, although we generally could not directly compare the United States' relationship with South Africa and China's relationship with South Africa, we could compare how much emphasis the United States places on its relationship with South Africa relative to its relationships with other African countries. Doing the same for China, we could see whether the United States and China are focusing on the same or different countries in the region.

The maps in this chapter are a visual depiction of these efforts. Countries with darker shading reflect more-intense focus by the great powers. Mapping the potential for competition in this way obscures some relevant aspects of competition. Notably, the maps show a snapshot in time and give no indication of trends. To partly remedy this shortcoming, our analysis also contains information about trends for the variables on influence-seeking for which data were available over time. Second, although we generally cannot draw comparisons about which competitor has been more active on some aspects of influence-seeking than others have, some variables—such as trade volume—are more comparable across powers than other variables are; thus, wherever possible, we include comparisons among the competing powers.

⁵ See Table 1.1 in Chapter One and subsequent text for a summary of the data.

⁶ The World Bank employed a similar method when aggregating governance indicators. See Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, "Governance Matters VIII: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators, 1996–2008," World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4978, June 29, 2009, pp. 7–19.

Africa

All three great powers have somewhat different interests and objectives in Africa, although all three see economic opportunities in the continent's abundant natural resources and burgeoning population. Over the years, the United States has maintained the same broad goals—support democracy, governance, and human rights; promote peace, security, and stability; maintain trade and commerce interests, particularly in the energy field; and support Africa's development.⁷ China places great importance on Africa as a strategic long-term bet.⁸ Over the next few decades, Beijing expects the continent to become one of the most economically dynamic places on earth and hopes to both facilitate and benefit from this rise.⁹ Finally, Russia's leaders view Africa as an area of active economic growth, second to the Asia-Pacific region.¹⁰ Moscow's interests are partly rooted in economics, as it seeks to secure access for Russia's companies to key economic sectors (e.g., energy, mineral resources, critical infrastructure, space) and to expand to new markets, especially in the wake of the sanctions against Russia since the 2014 invasion of Crimea. Russia also views Africa as an opportunity to boost its international status as a power of consequence, even as its role in the region remains less significant than that of the United States or China.

Given this common interest in expanding economic opportunities, the three great powers, perhaps unsurprisingly, have all tended to focus their influence-seeking efforts on larger, wealthier, and energy-rich countries in Africa.

U.S.-China Competition

China has been seeking to expand its influence in Africa, especially in the diplomatic and economic domains. Of the three powers, it devotes the most attention to maintaining a regular schedule of high-level meetings with African countries and nurturing long-term relations between elites.¹¹ Although the United States has the largest embassy network across the continent, China has been catching up since the early 2000s and has managed to establish

⁷ Bureau of African Affairs, "Our Mission," U.S. Department of State, webpage, undated.

⁸ Zhao Chenguang [赵晨光], "America's 'New Africa Policy': Changes and Holdovers" ["美国 '新非洲战略': 变与不变"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], November 7, 2019.

⁹ Ma Hanzhi [马汉智], "Africa Continental Free Trade Agreement Is Worth Looking Forward To" ["非洲自贸区故事值得期待"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], December 29, 2020b; Wan Lingying [万玲英], "Changes and Prospects of Africa's International Position" ["非洲国际地位的变化及前景"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], June 4, 2013; and Ruan Zongze [阮宗泽], "Winning the Next 10 Years: China's Multi-Strongpoint Diplomacy" ["赢得下一个十年: 中国塑造多支点外交"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], July 23, 2013.

¹⁰ Anna Sysoeva and Ilya Kabanov, "Как России и ЕАЭС обеспечить свои интересы в Африке одним кликом" ["How Russia and the EAEU Secure Their Interests in Africa with One Click"], Russian International Affairs Council, August 29, 2019.

¹¹ Former U.S. Department of State official, interview with the authors, July 2021.

embassies in all the countries that we reviewed except for Eswatini, which continues to maintain diplomatic relations with Taiwan.¹² The diplomatic push comes in tandem with expanding Chinese economic involvement. Between 2010 and 2019, China's trade volume with the continent doubled.¹³ In 2019, 16 percent of African exports to non-African countries and 19 percent of African imports from non-African countries were from China.¹⁴ Overall, of the three powers, China is the largest economic partner for the continent, with large investments accompanying robust trade. By contrast, U.S. diplomatic efforts, at least as evidenced by high-level visit trends, have declined since 2012.¹⁵ The U.S. economic involvement has also flagged; in particular, trade volume declined between 2008 and 2018.¹⁶ Foreign aid is the one exception to stagnating or downward trends in U.S. involvement, which generally increased between 2000 and 2019.¹⁷

The potential for U.S.-China competition is the highest in Nigeria, South Africa, and Kenya, and competition-potential indices are also relatively high in other countries, including Tanzania and Senegal. This list largely reflects these countries' economic importance to both competitors: Nigeria and South Africa are among Africa's largest economies, and Nigeria is a major energy producer. As a member of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) group, South Africa maintains a volume of trade that by far exceeds other African countries' trade with China.¹⁸ Similarly, U.S. economic involvement is significant in South Africa and Nigeria relative to the rest of the continent: South Africa is the United States' largest trading partner in Africa, and the United States is the largest foreign investor in Nigeria (in terms of foreign direct investment).¹⁹ Figure 2.1 depicts results from our analysis of the potential for competition between the United States and China in Africa; darker shades represent a higher potential for competition.

¹² J. D. Moyer, D. K. Bohl, and S. Turner, "Diplometrics Diplomatic Representation," data set, Frederick S. Pardee Center for International Futures, 2016; and Thiam Niaga and Tim Cocks, "China Opens Embassy After Burkina Faso Severs Ties with Taiwan," Reuters, July 12, 2018.

¹³ Johns Hopkins China-Africa Research Initiative, "Data: China-Africa Trade," webpage, undated.

¹⁴ African Union, *Statistiques Du Commerce International Africain [African Trade Statistics]*, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, August 2020.

¹⁵ This is according to our analysis of this measure using the sources described in Chapter One. Throughout this chapter, we describe findings from our analyses of the measures that constitute the competition-potential index; see Chapter One for data sources.

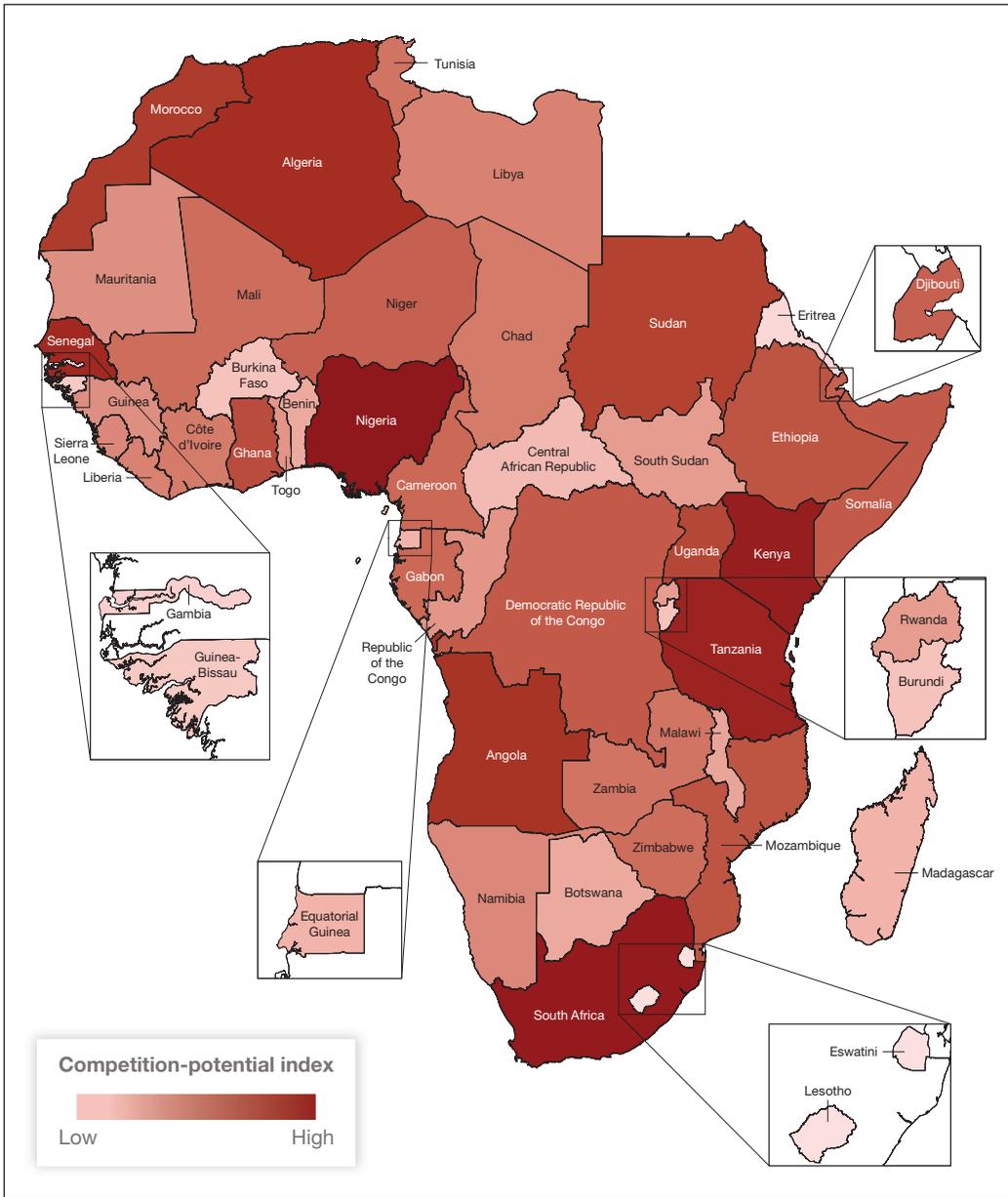
¹⁶ U.S. Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with Africa," webpage, last updated 2021.

¹⁷ USAID, 2021a.

¹⁸ In 2018, China's trade with South Africa was approximately 1.5 times larger than with China's second-largest trading partner in Africa, Angola (World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a).

¹⁹ Bureau of African Affairs, "U.S. Relations with South Africa: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated January 14, 2020a; and Bureau of African Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Nigeria: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated April 29, 2021a.

FIGURE 2.1
U.S.-China Competition Potential in Africa



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin International Inc., and U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (*The World Factbook*) (Esri, Garmin, and CIA), "World Countries," ArcGIS, map package, last updated 2019. Maps throughout this report were 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.

For the United States, there is also a strategic dimension to the focal points of influence-seeking. Kenya, for example, was a strategic location in the fight against communism during the Cold War, and the United States has had close ties with the country ever since.²⁰ Today, Kenya is a U.S. strategic ally in the global war on terrorism and ranks among the top countries for U.S.-African high-level visits and among the top U.S. foreign aid recipients. Kenya, South Africa, Tunisia, and Morocco are also key destinations for U.S. arms transfers, and all of these countries are viewed as key partners for counterterrorism.²¹

A historical and strategic focus is also at play with China's priority countries, so Kenya, as a large and relatively stable country in East Africa, is also a strategic partner for China. Kenya is among the largest recipients of China's aid and one of the top countries for high-level meetings. Kenya hosted the first-ever foreign-based broadcasting hub of CCTV following the establishment of CCTV Africa in 2012, and the leading English-language state newspaper, *China Daily*, is published there.²² In addition, there are strategic aspects to some of the other countries in which China focuses attention in Africa: Senegal is a key hub in West Africa, while Tanzania has historic and military ties with China.²³

Almost as importantly as what is driving influence-seeking on the continent, however, is what is *not* prominently driving it—namely, military involvement. China's reliance on military instruments of influence remains more limited relative to the other two powers. Although it has established its first military base in Djibouti, China remains a relatively modest arms supplier, and its military presence is limited to UN peacekeeping.²⁴ By and large, Chinese and U.S. influence-seeking activities in the military domain have different features and have not led the powers to focus on the same countries. For example, while the United States has focused on selling offensive weapons to a limited number of important security partners, Chinese weapons have gone to a large variety of recipients rather indiscriminately.²⁵ And

²⁰ Linnet Hamasi, "Kenya-US Relations Under Joe Biden's Presidency: Prospects and Challenges," *Kujenga Amani*, February 10, 2021; and Bureau of African Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Kenya: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated August 21, 2020b.

²¹ These countries have received such products as anti-tank missiles, air-to-air missiles, combat helicopters, fighter aircraft, M1A1 Abrams tanks, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs). Between 2014 and 2020, Nigeria, Kenya, and Algeria were the largest recipients of U.S. weapons in terms of volume (SIPRI, undated-a). Importantly, because we are looking at a composite metric for influence-seeking, some import locations for military operations (e.g., Somalia) are not at the top of the list, because they do not rank highly across diplomatic, informational, and economic metrics.

²² Leslie, 2016.

²³ David H. Shinn, "China in Africa," testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Washington, D.C., May 8, 2020.

²⁴ Nan Tian, "China's Arms Trade: A Rival for Global Influence?" *The Interpreter*, September 17, 2018; and Joshua Eisenman and Eric Heginbotham, eds., *China Steps Out: Beijing's Major Power Engagement with the Developing World*, New York: Routledge, 2018.

²⁵ Colum Lynch, "China's Arms Exports Flooding Sub-Saharan Africa," *Washington Post*, August 25, 2012; see also Appendix B.

although the United States and China both have several thousand troops on the continent (5,828 and 2,318, respectively, in 2020), those troops tend to be located in places with greater security deficits (e.g., Niger and Somalia for the United States; South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of the Congo [DRC] for China) than in places where there are higher overall competition indices.²⁶

In other words, although the United States and China are seeking influence in Africa on a host of diplomatic, informational, and economic fronts, it is less clear how much potential there is for military competition between the two powers in Africa, at least for the moment.

U.S.-Russia Competition

Like the potential for U.S.-China competition in Africa, the potential for U.S.-Russia competition is driven partly by economic factors and partly by strategic factors. Russia's economic activities have focused on geological exploration, nuclear energy, oil and gas, hydroelectric power, and extractive industries and mining (including diamonds, gold, and uranium). Importantly, these are not necessarily adversarial activities, and at times, Russian companies have cooperated with U.S. and other Western companies in these mining or energy ventures.²⁷

Russia's focus on Africa also has strategic underpinnings. Especially since Russia's relations with the West soured over the Ukraine conflict, Africa has provided Russia with a means to escape future isolation in international relations. Russia seeks to portray itself in Africa as a pragmatic, fair, and responsible strategic partner and power broker, in contrast with the United States and the rest of the West, which are—in Russia's view—inequitable or morally corrupt.²⁸ Africa—and particularly North Africa—provides Russia with some leverage against NATO by threatening its southern flank.²⁹ These reasons, combined with economic interests, have incentivized Russia to increase diplomatic engagement with the continent, and high-level visits by Russians have increased since 2010 and especially since 2017.

²⁶ International Institute for Strategic Studies, Military Balance Plus, online database, undated.

²⁷ For example, in Botswana, a subsidiary of Alrosa (Russian) and Botswana Diamonds Plc (British) was created in 2013 to explore promising deposits; in Ghana, Lukoil entered an offshore exploration project operated by a Norwegian company; and in Nigeria, Lukoil co-funded a deepwater oil project with U.S.-based Chevron (*Kommersant*, “Крупнейшие российские проекты в Африке” [“The Largest Russian Projects in Africa”], October 23, 2019; Lukoil, “Ghana,” webpage, undated-a; Lukoil, “Nigeria,” webpage, undated-b; and Etienne Kolly and Justin Michael Cochrane, “To Deal or Not to Deal, That Is the Question . . .,” IHS Markit, July 9, 2002).

²⁸ Joseph Siegle, “Russia's Strategic Goals in Africa,” Africa Center for Strategic Studies, May 6, 2021; and Ksenija Brishpolets, “Strategicheskiye Interesi Rosii V Afrike” [“Russian Strategic Interests in Africa”], *Mezhdunarodnaya Analitika [International Analytics]*, No. 1-2, 2019.

²⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation,” Moscow, December 1, 2016.

In comparison with China's activities, Russia's involvement privileges the military domain. Although Russia's overall trade with the region is still modest, its arms exports dominate the African market, providing both important security and economic ties to the region. In keeping with Russia's strategic focus on North Africa, by far the largest recipient of Russian arms is Algeria, and other significant buyers include Angola, Nigeria, Sudan, and South Sudan.³⁰ Russia's official military presence has been on the decline, in contrast to that of the United States and China, but the activities of a more flexible and deniable force—Russia's PMSCs—have been on the rise and have been employed by Russia to support parties to multiple African conflicts, as Appendix C documents.³¹ Russia has also aggressively pursued military agreements, signing agreements with at least 20 countries between 2015 and 2018, bringing the total to 33 as of 2020.³² Moscow has thereby been establishing access to maritime locations and air bases in such countries as Madagascar, Mozambique, Sudan, and Guinea, expanding Russia's ability to operate in the Indian Ocean, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Aden, and the Gulf of Guinea. Moreover, Russia has more African (and non-African) combat-related experience than China does. This includes, notably, the conflict in Libya, where Russia's Wagner Group has fought alongside the forces of Russia-backed General Khalifa Haftar in the ongoing civil war.³³

Of the top three focal points for potential U.S.-Russia competition, two—South Africa and Nigeria—are also focal points for U.S.-China competition; Morocco is the third (Figure 2.2). In general, U.S. competition with Russia is more intense in North Africa, owing to Russia's focus on the region's proximity to Europe and strategic focus on ensuring access to the Mediterranean, and has more of a military element than the U.S.-China competition does.³⁴

³⁰ Russia's sales to Africa between 2010 and 2019 have included submarines, anti-tank missiles, combat helicopters, guided bombs for Uganda's combat aircraft, T-90 main battle tanks to Uganda and Algeria, tank destroyers Khrizantema-S to Libya, and numerous sales of transport helicopters. China's sales over the same period have included air search radars, anti-ship missiles, beyond visual range missiles, combat helicopters, fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missile systems, self-propelled guns and mortars, an multiple rocket launchers, and short-range air-to-air missiles. See SIPRI, undated-a, *Transfers of Major Weapons: Deals with Deliveries or Orders Made for 1990 to 2019*.

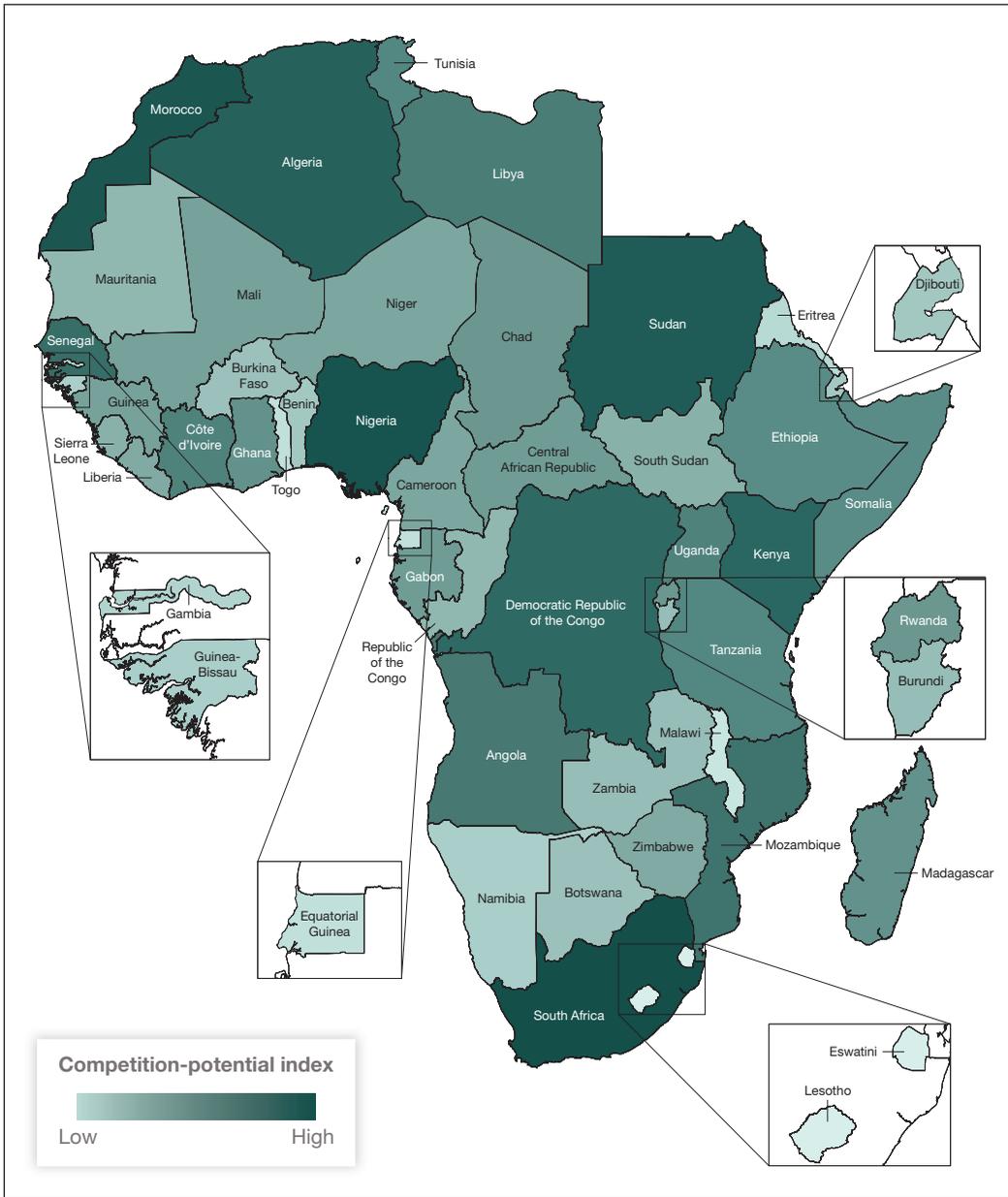
³¹ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated; and R. Kim Cragin and Lachlan MacKenzie, "Russia's Escalating Use of Private Military Companies in Africa," Institute for National Strategic Studies, November 24, 2020.

³² Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation in Africa," Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018; and Kinne, 2020.

³³ Hedenskog, 2018; Alexey Muraviev, "Russia's Red Star in the Red Sea," *The Interpreter*, November 30, 2020b; and 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.

³⁴ See Appendix C for more in-depth analysis on how the importance that Russia places on strategic access is shaping its approach to competition.

FIGURE 2.2
U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in Africa



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

Overall Competition Flashpoints in Africa

When we look at the results holistically, we can begin to identify competition *flashpoints*—that is, countries that receive the most attention across all three great powers and therefore present the highest potential for acute competition (see Figure 2.3 and Table 2.1). In general, all three powers' key interactions are with Africa's largest economies (Nigeria, South Africa, and Morocco), the countries with which the powers have historic ties, and the countries that are among the largest energy producers (e.g., Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa).³⁵ Unsurprisingly, the three powers also focus on countries that border strategically important locations, particularly maritime trade routes. Sudan is significant for its access to the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden; North African countries implicate access to the Mediterranean Sea; and Tanzania and Kenya are significant for access to the Indian Ocean.

And yet, these focal points should be viewed in proper perspective. Figure 2.3 and Table 2.1 identify where, in aggregate, the United States, China, and Russia are concentrating their efforts, but the three powers' individual priorities vary. Moreover, even when the powers are seeking influence in the same country, they may not be pursuing the same objective. For the United States, the goal might be counterterrorism; for China, economic resources; and for Russia, arms sales. And even when all three powers are pursuing similar objectives, this does not necessarily foreclose some level of cooperation or translate into acute competition. In many cases, influence-seeking by China or Russia does not directly undermine U.S. interests; for example, as noted earlier, U.S. and Russian companies have been known to jointly develop energy resources. In other words, identifying the potential for competition, as measured by the extent to which influence-seeking activities by the three powers overlap, does not necessarily help identify the countries where future conflicts involving great powers might erupt.

³⁵ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Total Energy Production 2019," webpage, 2019.

TABLE 2.1
The 15 African Countries with the Highest Competition Potential Overall and Their Rankings for Bilateral Competition Potential

Country	Competition-Potential Ranking		
	Overall	U.S.-China	U.S.-Russia
South Africa	1	2	1
Nigeria	2	1	2
Sudan	3	9	4
Kenya	4	3	6
Algeria	5	6	5
Tanzania	6	4	15
Angola	7	7	10
Morocco	8	8	3
Senegal	9	5	8
Mozambique	10	12	9
DRC	11	15	7
Uganda	12	10	12
Ethiopia	13	13	16
Ghana	14	11	18
Zimbabwe	15	20	28

NOTE: The rankings were calculated by adding the standardized indices capturing the involvement in each African country across all four domains (diplomacy, information, military, economics) for the relevant combination of great powers specified in each column and ranking them from highest total (top ranking) to lowest.

Middle East

Although the United States has tended to view the Middle East principally as central to the counterterrorism fight in recent years, the Middle East has historically been a theater for great-power competition. The region's location at the crossroads of Asia, Africa, and Europe all but ensures that multiple great powers have a stake in the region's alignment. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, multiple colonial powers vied for control of the region. During much of the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union played central roles in the region's security dynamics. And today, the region is once again becoming a flashpoint for great-power competition.

U.S.-China Competition

The United States and China are, in many ways, pursuing different sets of interests in the Middle East, and their respective influence-seeking activities reflect those differences. In general, the United States has been more focused on the military and security arenas, while China privileges economic interests.

Since the Camp David Accords in the late 1970s and particularly since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States has been the region's primary great-power security provider. Even with the U.S. drawdowns in the region, the United States had by far the largest force presence of the three competitors from 2014 to 2020, as troop totals ranged between 40,000 and 60,000.³⁶ By contrast, China had only a peacekeeping presence (between 218 and 419 peacekeepers) in Lebanon during the same period.³⁷ The United States is also the region's primary arms provider, selling \$71.5 billion in equipment over 2014–2020, compared with China's \$10.2 billion over the same period.³⁸ Additionally, the United States and Pakistan have 13 military agreements, whereas China and Pakistan have only one.³⁹

Although China's influence-seeking is dominated by economic activities, Beijing has been involved in the security sphere—just in a geographically limited way. China hopes that Islamabad will keep the areas bordering China's restive Xinjiang province from becoming a breeding ground for extremism, that trade routes through Pakistani territory will bring economic prosperity to China's western provinces while bypassing the Strait of Malacca, and that Pakistan can provide a counterweight to China's regional rival India.⁴⁰ China and Pakistan already have budding military ties. In addition to their military agreement, Pakistan was one of the first countries to purchase the Chinese BeiDou satellite system in 2013, which now is being used by the Pakistani military.⁴¹ China has reportedly eyed Pakistan as the potential site for a future military base as well.⁴² Outside Pakistan, though, by almost any statistic, the United States' influence-seeking activities dwarf China's in the region on the military front.

Chinese influence-seeking elsewhere is dominated by economic activities—and at a scale that greatly exceeds U.S. engagement. For instance, China has become the largest trad-

³⁶ For numbers of U.S. troops in specific countries as of 2020, see Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini, Nathan Vest, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A958-1, 2021, Table 5.2, p. 107.

³⁷ United Nations Peacekeeping, "UNIFIL Fact Sheet," webpage, undated.

³⁸ SIPRI, undated-a, trend-indicator values of U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to the Middle East, 2014–2020.

³⁹ U.S. Department of State, "2019 Treaties and Agreements," webpage, undated-a; and Kinne, 2020.

⁴⁰ Maria Abi-Habib, "China's 'Belt and Road' Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn," *New York Times*, December 19, 2018.

⁴¹ "Pakistan Military to Use Chinese Navigation System BeiDou to Improve Interoperability," *Economic Times*, August 21, 2020.

⁴² Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "A New China Military Base in Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2018.

ing partner of every country in the region except Afghanistan and Bahrain. Chinese trade in the Middle East steadily gained market share from the United States beginning in 2000, and China overtook the United States as the region's primary trading partner in 2009. By 2019, Chinese trade flows were almost triple those of the United States—some \$278 billion to \$103 billion.⁴³ China's top trading partners—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Iraq, Oman, and Pakistan—reflect not only its interests in trading with some of the largest economies of the region but also China's demands for energy. In contrast to the United States' situation, China's dependence on Middle Eastern oil is likely to increase in the coming years; the International Energy Agency has predicted that Chinese imports from the region will double by 2035.⁴⁴ Indeed, in 2021, China and Iran inked a 25-year deal valued at some \$400 billion, signifying China's growing need for energy and increasing economic commitment to the region.⁴⁵

China and the United States have both been active in the diplomatic and informational domains. Judging by the data on high-level visits, China's diplomatic engagement has been trending upward, while U.S. diplomatic engagement appears to be trending downward—although, in absolute terms, the United States may still be more active than China.⁴⁶ And although the United States made an extensive push on the informational front as part of its counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East, China has also set up CCTV and Xinhua bureaus throughout the region, as well as radio presence in Egypt and Qatar. Somewhat unsurprisingly, U.S. diplomatic attention has focused on Iraq since 2003, and this is also a common destination for Chinese officials.⁴⁷ Both Washington and Beijing have signed high-level dip-

⁴³ In Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq—some of the region's largest economies—Chinese trade was 2.7, 1.9, and 3.9 times greater than U.S. trade, respectively. Furthermore, since 2008, U.S. trade in the Middle East has remained steady—albeit with slight declines—averaging \$118.7 billion per year. Conversely, China's trade in the Middle East has continued to generally trend upward, climbing from \$114.9 billion in 2009 to \$278 billion in 2019 (World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2000–2019).

⁴⁴ China Power Team, "How Is China's Energy Footprint Changing?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 15, 2016.

⁴⁵ Farnaz Fassih and Steven Lee Myers, "China, with \$400 Billion Iran Deal, Could Deepen Influence in Mideast," *New York Times*, March 27, 2021.

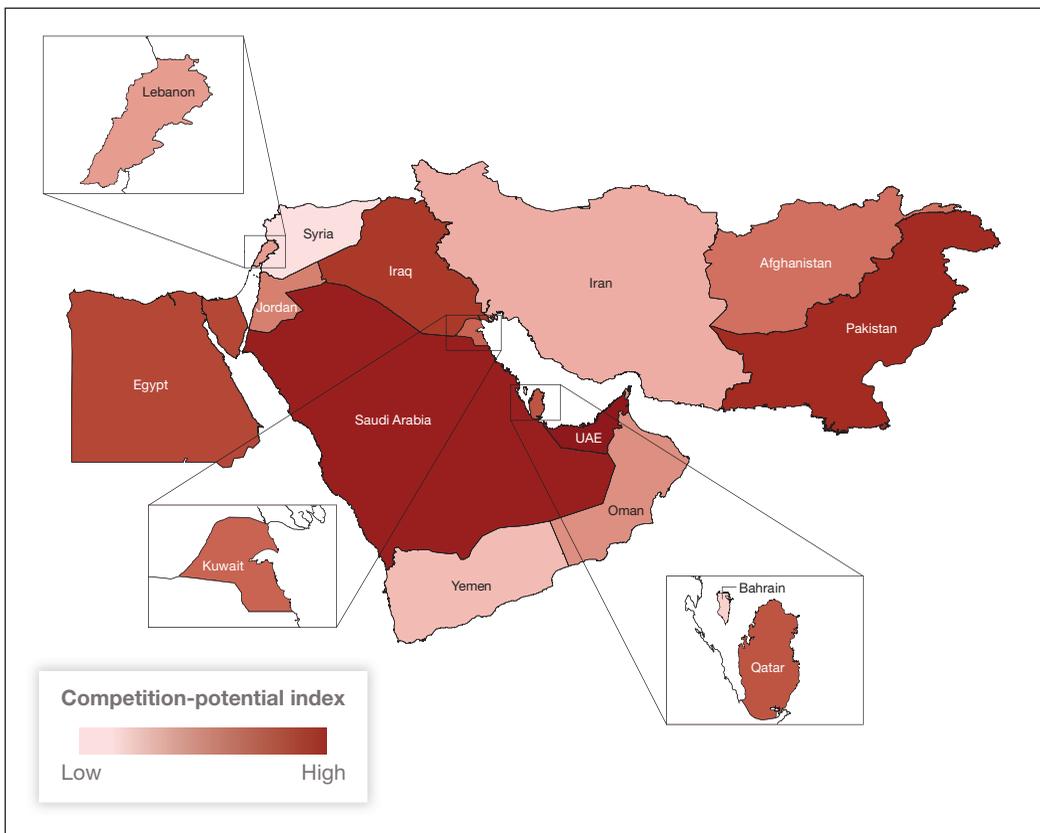
⁴⁶ Between 2000 and 2009, the United States far outpaced China in number of high-level visits, averaging 31 visits per year compared with China's four. However, between 2010 and 2019, high-level U.S. visits averaged 27 per year compared with China's nine. Furthermore, in 2018 and 2019 combined, both countries conducted 35 high-level visits—an all-time two-year low for the United States but an all-time high for China.

⁴⁷ High-ranking U.S. officials visited Iraq 87 times over 2000–2020, compared with 115 and 101 trips to Jordan and Egypt, respectively. We recorded 15 visits to Iraq by high-ranking Chinese officials over that period. By this metric, U.S. engagement in Iraq dwarfs that of China's and Russia's engagement there. However, we were able to account for U.S. visits to the region with a greater level of fidelity due to a higher quality of U.S.-specific data.

lomatic agreements with Baghdad—the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation and a strategic partnership agreement, respectively.⁴⁸

Overall, as depicted in Figure 2.4, the competitors’ influence-seeking efforts converge in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iraq, though driven by somewhat different interests and activities. The United States has been interested in Pakistan and Iraq for counterterrorism reasons and in Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE for broader regional security considerations. By contrast, China’s interests in most of these countries are largely economic, with the notable exception of Pakistan.

FIGURE 2.4
U.S.-China Competition Potential in the Middle East



SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

⁴⁸ U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Iraq, “Our Relationship,” webpage, undated; and Jonathan Fulton, *China’s Changing Role in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, June 2019.

U.S.-Russia Competition

In contrast with China's focus on economic activities in the Middle East, Russia's focus on military and security involvement has the potential to bring Russia into more-direct competition with the United States. Especially during the course of its intervention in the Syrian civil war, Russia has built a visible military presence in the region—although not yet surpassing the U.S. presence. Even at its height of approximately 4,000–6,000 troops, Russian military presence in Syria remained an order of magnitude less than the U.S. presence (but an order of magnitude more than China's).⁴⁹ Russia's ten military agreements with Middle Eastern countries are still fewer than the United States' 13, but not dramatically so.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Russia has been a major supplier of arms to the region, and the Middle East has been the fastest-growing buyer of Russian arms since 2014.⁵¹ Still, although they exceed China's \$10.2 billion of arms exports to the region between 2014 and 2020, Russia's \$39.5 billion of arms exports are still well short of the United States' \$71.5 billion.⁵²

Russia's involvement in the military sphere goes further. Aside from its military bases in Syria, Russia had use of an air base in Iran until 2016, and Iranian missiles supposedly relied on the Russian Globalnaya Navigazionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema (GLONASS) satellite navigation system to target U.S. military bases in Iraq during Operation Martyr Soleimani in January 2020.⁵³ Russia has also used Iraqi airspace for flights and conducted port calls in Oman.⁵⁴ Additionally, Russia has participated in joint naval exercises with Iran and China in the Indian Ocean, possibly portending aspirations toward projecting naval power in the region.⁵⁵

Russia has tried to leverage its military and historical ties to the region into diplomatic and geopolitical influence, with mixed success. It has cast itself as an alternative power broker to the United States and other Western countries in several of the region's ongoing conflicts, such as the Iranian nuclear standoff, the Syrian civil war, and the Palestine-Israel conflict.⁵⁶

⁴⁹ Troop total compiled from International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014–2020.

⁵⁰ U.S. Department of State, undated-a; Kinne, 2020; Hedenskog, 2018.

⁵¹ Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019*, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, p. 4.

⁵² SIPRI, undated-a, trend-indicator values of U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to the Middle East, 2014–2020.

⁵³ Alexey Muraviev, "Russia Makes Its Presence Known in Iran Crisis," *The Interpreter*, January 24, 2020a.

⁵⁴ Matt Bradley, Gordon Lubold, and Nathan Hodge, "Deepening Russian Involvement in Iraq Complicates U.S. Airstrikes on Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2015; and Dorian Archus, "Russian Navy's Stereguschy-Class Corvette Visits Oman," *Naval Post*, March 15, 2021.

⁵⁵ Alexander Marrow, "Russia, China, and Iran to Hold Joint Naval Drills in Indian Ocean Soon—RIA," Reuters, February 8, 2021a.

⁵⁶ Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2019.

Apart from the Syrian civil war, in which Russia's intervention proved decisive in keeping the Assad regime in power, many of Moscow's initiatives have struggled to gain traction.

Like the United States and China, Russia has an active information effort underway in the Middle East. For instance, two of Russia's primary international media platforms—RT and Sputnik—have TV or radio broadcast agreements with major players in the region, such as Egypt, Iraq, and Iran, as well as in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. And although our data do not include other aspects of informational efforts, Russia-affiliated actors reportedly also have employed social media-based disinformation techniques in the region.⁵⁷

Although Russia does have an economic stake in the Middle East, the extent of its economic involvement lags far behind that of China and the United States. Total Russian trade flows amounted to \$15.2 billion in 2019, one-seventh of U.S. trade and one-eighteenth of Chinese trade for the same year.⁵⁸ Although the non-uniformity of investment data does not support direct or precise comparisons, Russia's investments in the region fall far short of U.S. and Chinese investments. Russia's comparatively limited economic activity is partly due to the nature of Russia's economic interests. Russia is a major oil and gas producer and is focused on cooperation with competing energy producers, such as Saudi Arabia, in order to affect world oil prices. This gives Russia an incentive to seek influence, but not by means of measurable economic indicators. Notably, Russia has fewer opportunities to increase trade with the region's economic powerhouses. Russia does trade in consumer goods, raw materials, and foodstuffs with countries in the region and provides services in the energy, nuclear, and transportation sectors, among others.⁵⁹ However, Chinese and U.S. industry and service sector outputs tend to dwarf Russia's, partly contributing to Russia's limited share of Middle Eastern markets.

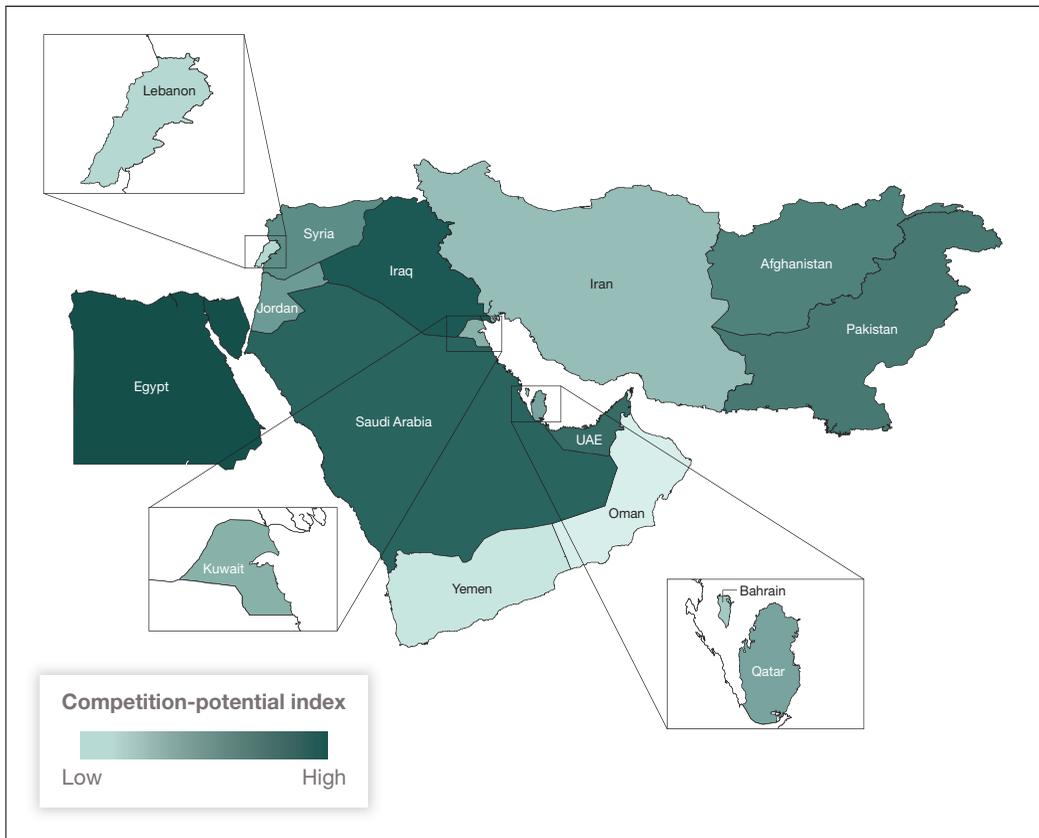
As a result of these differences, the countries where there is potential for U.S.-Russia competition overlap with the countries where there is potential for U.S.-China competition, but they are ranked somewhat differently. Egypt, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE top the list for the U.S. competition with Russia. For both powers, involvement in Egypt is based on historical bonds—the Soviet Union was a major supporter of Egypt during the Cold War—and strategic significance. By contrast, Pakistan—which holds some strategic importance for Russia as a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization but not nearly as much as it does for neighboring China—is somewhat lower on the priority scale (see Figure 2.5).

⁵⁷ Donald N. Jensen, "Russia in the Middle East: A New Front in the Information War?" Jamestown Foundation, December 20, 2017; and Sputnik International, "Sputnik Arabic News Service," webpage, undated.

⁵⁸ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2018.

⁵⁹ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2018.

FIGURE 2.5
U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in the Middle East

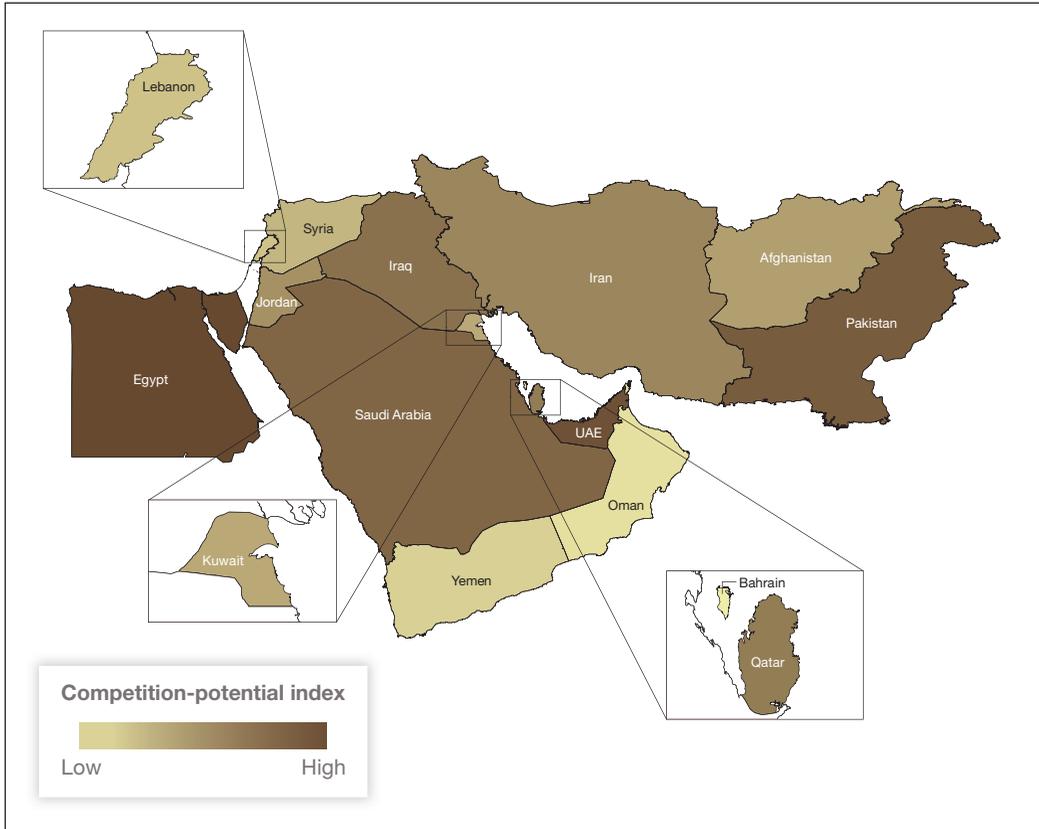


SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

Overall Competition Flashpoints in the Middle East

Figure 2.6 depicts the landscape of competition potential across the Middle East among all three great powers. Countries where there is low competition potential are those that are prioritized by just one great power or relatively neglected by all three. For example, even though both Kuwait and Jordan are cornerstones of U.S. posture and strategy in the Middle East, they have less overall potential for competition than some other countries do—but that is because both China and Russia are less involved there than in much of the rest of the region. Conversely, some other countries—notably, Iran and Syria—maintain close relationships with Russia and, to a degree, China but are ostracized by the United States. And other countries attract influence-seeking by multiple sides. Egypt's place at the top of the overall ranking likely stems from the historical relationships it has with both the United States and Russia. China also has a long-established relationship with Egypt, and although China-Egypt

FIGURE 2.6
Overall Competition Potential in the Middle East



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

ties historically are not as deep as Egypt's ties with the United States or Russia, China has been increasing its involvement there in recent years. Saudi Arabia and the UAE are both wealthy, regional power brokers, and all three powers have an economic and strategic interest in maintaining good relations with these two countries. Finally, the United States, China, and Russia are drawn to both Iraq and Pakistan, albeit for somewhat differing reasons: For the United States, both countries are fronts in the global war on terrorism; for China, these countries provide economic opportunities, and Pakistan, in particular, provides the prospect of strategic access; and for Russia, Iraq and Pakistan are destinations for arms sales, and Iraq especially is a site for building regional influence.

Overall, there is considerable consistency in the potential for U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia competition for influence. While the exact order differs, the countries in the top, middle, and bottom thirds of the competitiveness scale remain largely consistent. As shown in Table 2.2, the top third is some combination of Egypt, the UAE, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq,

TABLE 2.2
The 15 Middle Eastern Countries Ranked by Highest
Competition Potential Overall and by Bilateral Competition
Potential

Country	Competition-Potential Ranking		
	Overall	U.S.-China	U.S.-Russia
Egypt	1	5	1
UAE	2	1	4
Pakistan	3	3	5
Saudi Arabia	4	2	3
Iraq	5	4	2
Qatar	6	6	9
Iran	7	12	11
Jordan	8	9	8
Afghanistan	9	8	6
Kuwait	10	7	10
Syria	11	15	7
Lebanon	12	11	13
Yemen	13	13	14
Oman	14	10	15
Bahrain	15	14	12

NOTE: The rankings were calculated by adding the standardized indices capturing the involvement in each Middle Eastern country across all four domains (diplomacy, information, military, economics) for the relevant combination of great powers specified in each column and ranking them from highest total (top ranking) to lowest.

reflecting some of the largest or wealthiest countries or the biggest oil producers (or all three) in the region. By contrast, the countries with the lowest potential for competition—Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Oman, and Bahrain—tend to be smaller and often conflict-torn.

As was true with the results for Africa, although this list reflects where great-power influence-seeking might be most intense, it does not necessarily indicate what form competition will take. Importantly for a region roiled in conflict, many of the places where competition is most intense are also comparatively more stable (e.g., the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt).

Latin America

In his address to Congress on December 2, 1823, U.S. President James Monroe expressed, “as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.”⁶⁰ Monroe’s principle—that the Western Hemisphere be free of meddling by the European or, more generally, other powers—became known as the Monroe Doctrine and has been implicit in U.S. strategic discourse ever since. The doctrine, however, was always aspirational. The United States was never able to prevent Spain, France, and Great Britain from meddling in the hemisphere in the 19th century or the Soviet Union from interfering in Latin America during the 20th century. Now, in the 21st century, Latin America is once again emerging as a forum for great-power competition.

U.S.-China Competition

Despite being half a world away from Latin America, China has become very involved there. In 2018, China officially expanded its Belt and Road Initiative to Latin America, one of the last regions of the world to be included in President Xi Jinping’s economic cooperation framework.⁶¹ Yet China had been an important economic player in the region even before 2018. Chinese trade with Latin America and the Caribbean grew 26-fold, from \$12 billion in 2000 to \$315 billion in 2020, making China the second-largest trading partner for the region overall and the largest for some countries, including Brazil, Chile, and Peru.⁶² By some estimates, China’s trade volume with the region is expected to surpass \$700 billion by 2035.⁶³ In 2000, China accounted for less than 2 percent of the region’s trade; by 2035, it is expected to make up 25 percent, and for some countries, that number could top 40 percent.⁶⁴ Behind these numbers is China’s need for raw materials—fuels, iron, steel, copper, wood, and meat—and Latin America’s need for electric and electronic equipment, as well as nuclear materials.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ James Monroe, “Monroe Doctrine (1823),” National Archives, December 2, 1823.

⁶¹ Thomas Lum, “China’s Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean,” Congressional Research Service, IF10982, last updated July 1, 2021; Jorge Malena, “The Extension of the Digital Silk Road to Latin America: Advantages and Potential Risks,” Council on Foreign Relations, January 19, 2021; and Pepe Zhang, “Belt and Road in Latin America: A Regional Game Changer?” Atlantic Council, October 8, 2019.

⁶² Lum, 2021.

⁶³ Pepe Zhang and Tatiana Lacerda Prazeres, “China’s Trade with Latin America Is Bound to Keep Growing. Here’s Why That Matters,” World Economic Forum, June 21, 2021. Of note, these statistics include trade with Mexico, which is excluded from our definition of Latin America here (see Chapter One).

⁶⁴ Zhang and Prazeres, 2021.

⁶⁵ R. Evan Ellis, *China in Latin America: The Whats and Wherefores*, Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2009.

By contrast, economic influence-seeking by the United States has been on the decline—at least as a percentage of the region’s overall trade—gradually but steadily since the turn of the millennium. In 2000, the United States accounted for well over half of Latin America’s trade, with a total trade volume of approximately \$379 billion; in 2019, that volume was slightly over 30 percent, at \$761 billion).⁶⁶ And the overarching statistics in some ways obscure the full story. Although Central American and Caribbean countries still disproportionately trade with the United States, South American countries are expected to trade more with China.⁶⁷

China’s economic rise in the region has been accompanied by a diplomatic push. If one of the rarest commodities in diplomacy is senior leaders’ time, then China is dwarfing the United States in its level of investment (Table 2.3). Between 2010 and 2020, compared with

TABLE 2.3
Number of U.S., Chinese, and Russian High-Level Diplomatic Visits to Latin America, 2000–2020

	United States		China		Russia	
	2000–2020	2010–2020	2000–2020	2010–2020	2000–2020	2010–2020
Overall number of visits to Latin America	286	116	334	229	215	164
Breakdown by country, for the ten countries with the highest number of visits						
Argentina	25	11	27	21	19	15
Brazil	26	12	63	45	34	20
Chile	24	10	36	22	8	5
Colombia	44	17	17	11	10	7
Cuba	3	3	28	15	29	23
Ecuador	7	2	20	16	10	7
Nicaragua	5	0	0	0	11	7
Peru	34	21	35	18	12	7
Venezuela	0	0	31	20	21	18
Subtotal	168	75	257	168	154	109

SOURCE: Authors’ analysis based on the high-level visit measure developed for this report; for data sources, see Chapter One.

NOTE: The overall numbers include high-level visits across 23 Latin American countries included in the U.S. Southern Command area of responsibility. The numbers for the United States include any visit by the President, Secretary of State, or Secretary of Defense. The numbers for China and Russia include any visit by the President, Prime Minister, or Foreign Minister.

⁶⁶ The data are for the entire region of Latin America, including Mexico (World Integrated Trade Solution, “Latin America & Caribbean Trade Summary 2019,” webpage, undated-c; see also Zhang and Prazeres, 2021).

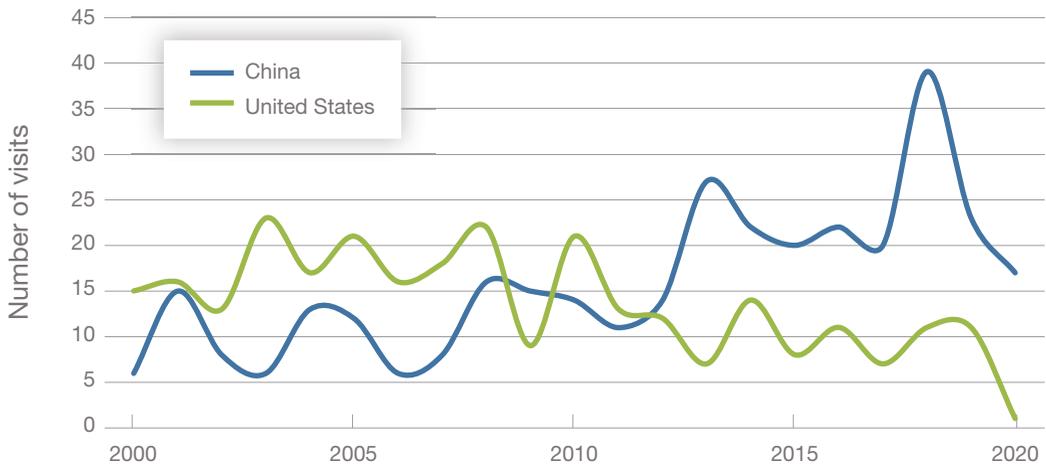
⁶⁷ Zhang and Prazeres, 2021.

the United States, China engaged in almost double the number of high-level visits overall to the region, four times the number of visits to Brazil, and double the number of visits to Chile and Argentina.⁶⁸

These trends are more obvious in Figure 2.7, which shows the year-to-year evolution in the number of high-level visits from the United States and China to Latin American countries between 2000 and 2020. The frequency of U.S. high-level diplomatic visits has remained relatively steady across the two decades for which we captured data, but China has increased the frequency of its high-level visits.⁶⁹

China’s influence in the region may be less impressive in the informational domain, at least judging by the indicators we gathered. Argentina and Brazil are the only two Latin American countries where CCTV, China Radio International, and Xinhua bureaus are all present. CCTV and Xinhua bureaus are also present in Cuba and Venezuela.⁷⁰ By contrast, Voice

FIGURE 2.7
Trends in U.S. and Chinese High-Level Diplomatic Visits to Latin America, 2000–2020



SOURCE: Authors’ analysis of high-level diplomatic visits; for data sources, see Chapter One.

⁶⁸ Although the top three officials whose visits were counted are not the same across the two powers (e.g., the United States does not have a Prime Minister) and thus this is not a precise comparison, it is still evident that China has been considerably more active in its in-person diplomacy.

⁶⁹ Chinese diplomatic visits increased from six per year in 2000 to 11 in 2011 and 23 in 2019. By comparison, the number of U.S. high-level exchanges with Latin American countries has remained relatively stable, showing only a slight downward trend, from 15 visits per year in 2000 to 11 in 2019 and averaging 14.25 visits per year. (Because of COVID-19 travel restrictions, data for 2020 are skewed, and all three competitors show a significant decrease in the number of high-level visits. Hence, we consider 2019 to be the last comparable year available to us for this metric.)

⁷⁰ Ye and Albornoz, 2018; China Culture, undated.

of America has affiliates in 17 of the 23 Latin American countries in our data set.⁷¹ Likely more important than the Voice of America outlet is the reach of private U.S. media organizations into the region. CNN Español, for example, reaches an estimated 40 million households throughout Latin America, while CNN en Español Radio has some 780 affiliates throughout the Americas.⁷²

Finally, in the military domain, the United States remains the undisputed primary great-power actor in the region. For instance, the United States leads in the number of military exercises conducted with countries in the region. Between 2014 and 2020, it conducted 211 exercises with 21 Latin American countries; by comparison, over a longer period (2003 to 2020), China conducted 17 exercises with five Latin American countries: Brazil, Colombia, Chile, Peru, and Venezuela.⁷³ The United States is also the primary weapon supplier to the region, selling \$757 million of equipment across 15 Latin American countries,⁷⁴ compared with China's \$288 million, between 2014 and 2020.⁷⁵ Moreover, whereas China sold its hardware to smaller and ostracized nations, such as Bolivia and Venezuela (Peru being the exception), the United States marketed to the region's most powerful countries—Brazil, Colombia, Chile, and Argentina.⁷⁶

And yet, even in the military realm, China is beginning to make some inroads into the region. In 2015, China signed a defense cooperation agreement with Argentina. In it, Argentina agreed to purchase weaponry from and engage in military-to-military exchanges with China. In turn, China built a space-tracking facility managed by the China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General, which reports to the PLA's Strategic Support Force in Patagonia (in southern Argentina), and agreed to share the satellite imagery with Argentina.⁷⁷ There is little to no oversight of the station from the Argentine government, and the Chinese military-run space station is often described as a "black box."⁷⁸ For these reasons, there

⁷¹ Voice of America, undated.

⁷² CNN Press Room, "CNN Worldwide Fact Sheet," last updated April 2021.

⁷³ International Institute for Strategic Studies, undated, database of military exercises available as of August 30, 2021. For this analysis, we also included military exercises not captured in Military Balance Plus and available in the following sources: Kenneth Allen, Phillip C. Saunders, and John Chen, "Chinese Military Diplomacy, 2003–2016: Trends and Implications," *China Strategic Perspectives*, No. 11, July 2017; Yao Chun YanMeng, ed., "PLAN's Taskforce Conducts Maritime Joint Exercise with Chilean Navy," *People's Daily Online*, October 14, 2013; and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *The Diversified Employment of China's Armed Forces*, Beijing, April 2013.

⁷⁴ SIPRI, undated-a, trend-indicator values of arms exports from the United States, 2014–2020.

⁷⁵ SIPRI, undated-a, trend-indicator values of arms exports from China, 2014–2020.

⁷⁶ SIPRI, undated-a, trend-indicator values of arms exports from the United States and China, 2014–2020.

⁷⁷ Jordan Wilson, *China's Military Agreements with Argentina: A Potential New Phase in China–Latin America Defense Relations*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 5, 2015, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Cassandra Garrison, "China's Military-Run Space Station in Argentina Is a 'Black Box,'" Reuters, January 31, 2019.

are concerns that the space station is, in essence, a military base that also carries out intelligence collection activities.⁷⁹ ADM Craig Faller, commander of U.S. Southern Command, issued a warning in his February 2019 congressional testimony regarding the dangers of China expanding its reach “in key infrastructure such as a deep-space tracking facility in Argentina.”⁸⁰

In sum, the ingredients for great-power competition between the United States and China—particularly in the economic and diplomatic spheres—are very much present in Latin America, and China has been making subtle but steady inroads into the military realm. As depicted in Figure 2.8, the potential for competition is most intense in South America, particularly in Chile, Brazil, and Peru, reflecting these countries’ relative economic weight. More importantly, if current trends hold, the competition in these countries will likely intensify in the years to come.

U.S.-Russia Competition

Russia lacks the economic heft that China commands in Latin America. Although Russia primarily trades with some of the same regional partners as the other great powers do, including Brazil, Chile, and Argentina, and despite an increase in absolute value in trade with the region since 2000,⁸¹ Russia’s total trade with Latin America was estimated to be only \$15 billion in 2018, paling in comparison with the United States’ \$897 billion and China’s \$305 billion for the same year.⁸² And unlike China’s, Russia’s trade to the region will likely not expand dramatically, in either absolute or relative terms.

Russia has pursued growing influence in the diplomatic and informational domains, although the magnitude of its efforts is not as large as China’s. As shown in Table 2.3, Russia has maintained ties with its former Soviet satellites—Cuba and Nicaragua—and countries with an anti-U.S. inclination, such as Venezuela. And similar to what we discussed with the U.S.-China competition, although the frequency of U.S. diplomatic visits has remained relatively steady from 2000 to 2019, the frequency of Russia’s high-level diplomatic visits has increased during that span, especially taking off in 2008.⁸³

⁷⁹ Ernesto Londoño, “From a Space Station in Argentina, China Expands Its Reach in Latin America,” *New York Times*, July 28, 2018.

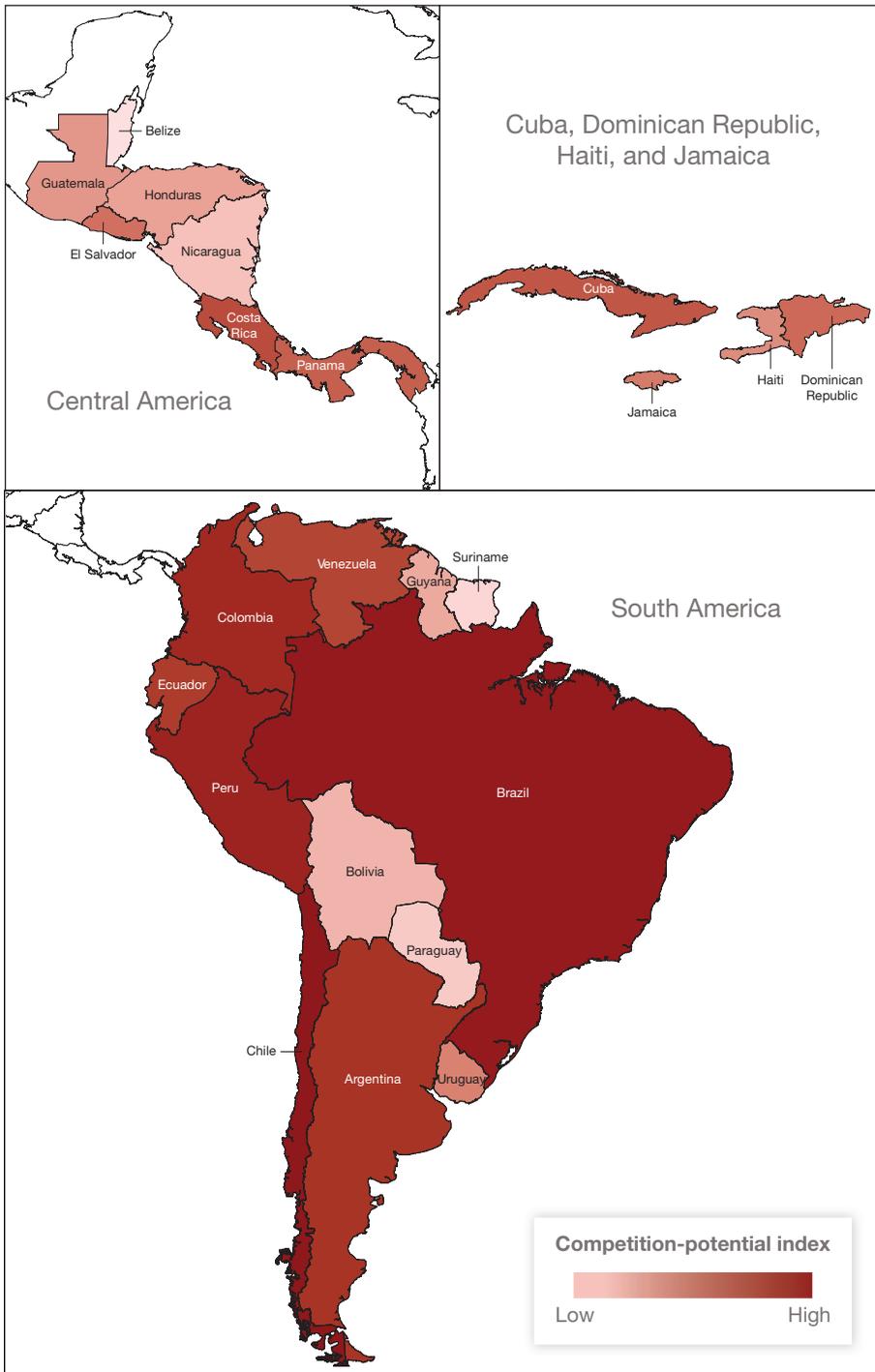
⁸⁰ Lara Seligman, “U.S. Military Warns of Threat from Chinese-Run Space Station in Argentina,” *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2019.

⁸¹ Russia’s trade with Latin America was estimated at \$3 billion in 2000, representing 0.4 percent of total Latin American trade (imports and exports) (Mira Milosevich-Juaristi, “Rusia en América Latina: repercusiones para España” [“Russia in Latin America: Repercussions for Spain”], Madrid, Spain: Elcano Royal Institute, Working Paper 02/2019, March 2019, p. 14).

⁸² These numbers are based on our analysis of 2018 statistics from Trading Economics, homepage, undated, last accessed on August 30, 2021. We used 2018 data because that was the latest year available for all three competitors for the Latin American countries in our data set.

⁸³ Russian high-level visits increased from one visit in 2000 to 13 visits in 2008 and 17 visits in 2019.

FIGURE 2.8
U.S.-China Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

On the informational front, Russia concluded broadcasting agreements with Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, Panama, Paraguay, and Uruguay between 2016 and 2019.⁸⁴ RT en Español also is available for free in Argentina and part of cable subscription packages throughout Latin America. And RT Spanish-language broadcasts can be accessed for free online.⁸⁵

Russia also maintains a small but visible military footprint in Latin America concentrated in Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. Russia sent two Tu-160 nuclear bombers to Venezuela in 2008, November 2013, and December 2018, presumably in response to U.S. activities in Eastern Europe.⁸⁶ From 2008 to 2019, Russian naval vessels have also repeatedly visited ports in all three countries; the most well-documented visits took place in 2008, 2013, 2018, and 2019.⁸⁷ In February 2014, in the middle of the crisis in Crimea, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu announced Russia's intentions to open or reopen military bases in Cuba, Venezuela, and Nicaragua.⁸⁸ No permanent bases have been established in any of the three countries, but Russia did send several hundred soldiers to Venezuela in response to unrest there.⁸⁹ Moreover, multiple Latin American countries—including Brazil in 2013, Cuba in 2014, Nicaragua in 2015, and Argentina in 2020—signed up to host Russian GLONASS ground stations.⁹⁰

Importantly, Russia's military access to Latin America is neither unlimited nor without controversy. Cuba still harbors some degree of resentment toward Russia since its abrupt

⁸⁴ Barros, 2020.

⁸⁵ Vladimir Rouvinski, "Understanding Russian Priorities in Latin America," Wilson Center, Kennan Cable No. 20, February 2017; Julia Gurganus, "Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 3, 2018; and RT en Español, homepage, undated.

⁸⁶ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Sends 2 Nuclear-Capable Bombers to Venezuela," *Military Times*, December 10, 2018.

⁸⁷ Ellis, 2015, pp. 26–27, 32, 40; Dmitry Gorenburg, *Russian Naval Deployments: A Return to Global Power Projection or a Temporary Blip?* Washington, D.C.: PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo No. 57, May 2009; Norman Polmar, "The Soviet Navy's Caribbean Outpost," *USNI News*, February 5, 2013; "Guided-Missile Cruiser Moskva Arrives in Nicaragua on Friendly Visit," TASS, August 12, 2013; Michael Weissenstein, Andrea Rodriguez, and Vladimir Isachenkov, "What's an Advanced Russian Warship Doing in Havana Harbor?" Associated Press, June 24, 2019; Associated Press, "Russian Warplanes, Navy Ships to Visit Venezuela," *Seattle Times*, December 6, 2018; and Zachary Keck, "Amid Snowden Fallout, Russian Navy Makes Port Call in Cuba," *The Diplomat*, August 5, 2013.

⁸⁸ "Russia with Plans for Military Bases in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela," *MercoPress*, February 27, 2014; and Ellis, 2015, p. 41.

⁸⁹ Andrew Roth, "Russia Acknowledges Presence of Troops in Venezuela," *The Guardian*, March 28, 2019; "Russian Army Helping Venezuela amid US 'Threats': Moscow's Ambassador," *France 24*, May 24, 2019; and Alison Brown, "An Enduring Relationship—From Russia, with Love," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 24, 2020.

⁹⁰ For Brazil, see "First GLONASS Station Outside Russia Opens in Brazil," *GPS World*, February 20, 2013. For Cuba, see Ellis, 2015, p. 42; and Matthew Bodner, "Cuba Agrees to Host Russian GLONASS Navigation Stations," *Moscow Times*, June 18, 2014. For Nicaragua, see "Nicaraguan Legislature Approves Russian Satellite Bases," *Tico Times*, April 29, 2015. For Argentina, see "Russia Ratifies Deal on Space Cooperation with Argentina," *TeleSUR*, December 8, 2020.

withdrawal from the region in 1989 just prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁹¹ Consequently, although it allows Russian port calls, Cuba did not host the Russian bombers deployed in the area in 2008 or participate in the 2008 naval exercise that Russia conducted with Venezuela.⁹² Similarly, Russia's military access agreements with Nicaragua were only temporary; one ran for six months until June 2014, and another expired in June 2015.⁹³ Finally, Moscow signed its military access agreement with Venezuela in 2019, but the Venezuelan parliament—then controlled by opponents of the Nicolás Maduro regime—voided the treaty.⁹⁴

In the end, Russia likely will never be a dominant player in Latin America, but it does wield significant, although not unlimited, influence over a handful of its longtime allies—Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela. More importantly, as depicted in Figure 2.9, it potentially has enough of a regional footprint to play the spoiler elsewhere in the region.

Overall Competition Flashpoints in Latin America

Overall, the potential for great-power competition in Latin America shares some of the features of the potential for competition in other regions. Like in Africa and the Middle East, the countries that attract the most influence-seeking by all three powers in Latin America are the wealthier and most-populous ones, such as Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Colombia (see Figure 2.10). Conversely, some of the poorer and least-stable countries in the region rate comparatively low on the competition scale. Like in the other regions, there is more competition on the economic and diplomatic fronts than within the military domain. And finally, but perhaps most importantly, China's and (to a lesser extent) Russia's influence in Latin America is on the upswing, as it is in the other regions. China's economic and diplomatic efforts have grown dramatically since the turn of the millennium and likely will continue to grow over the coming decade. Russia's diplomatic efforts and military involvement have grown as well.

Competition in Latin America, however, also has at least two features that make it distinct from the other regions. First, some of the most militarily relevant places for competition are former Soviet satellites Cuba and Nicaragua, as well as anti-U.S. Venezuela. Nicaragua does not rank particularly high for U.S.-China competition (see Table 2.4), perhaps unsurprisingly because it is economically distressed. And yet, given the fact that Russian forces have been granted access by Nicaragua and Venezuela in the past, these economically distressed coun-

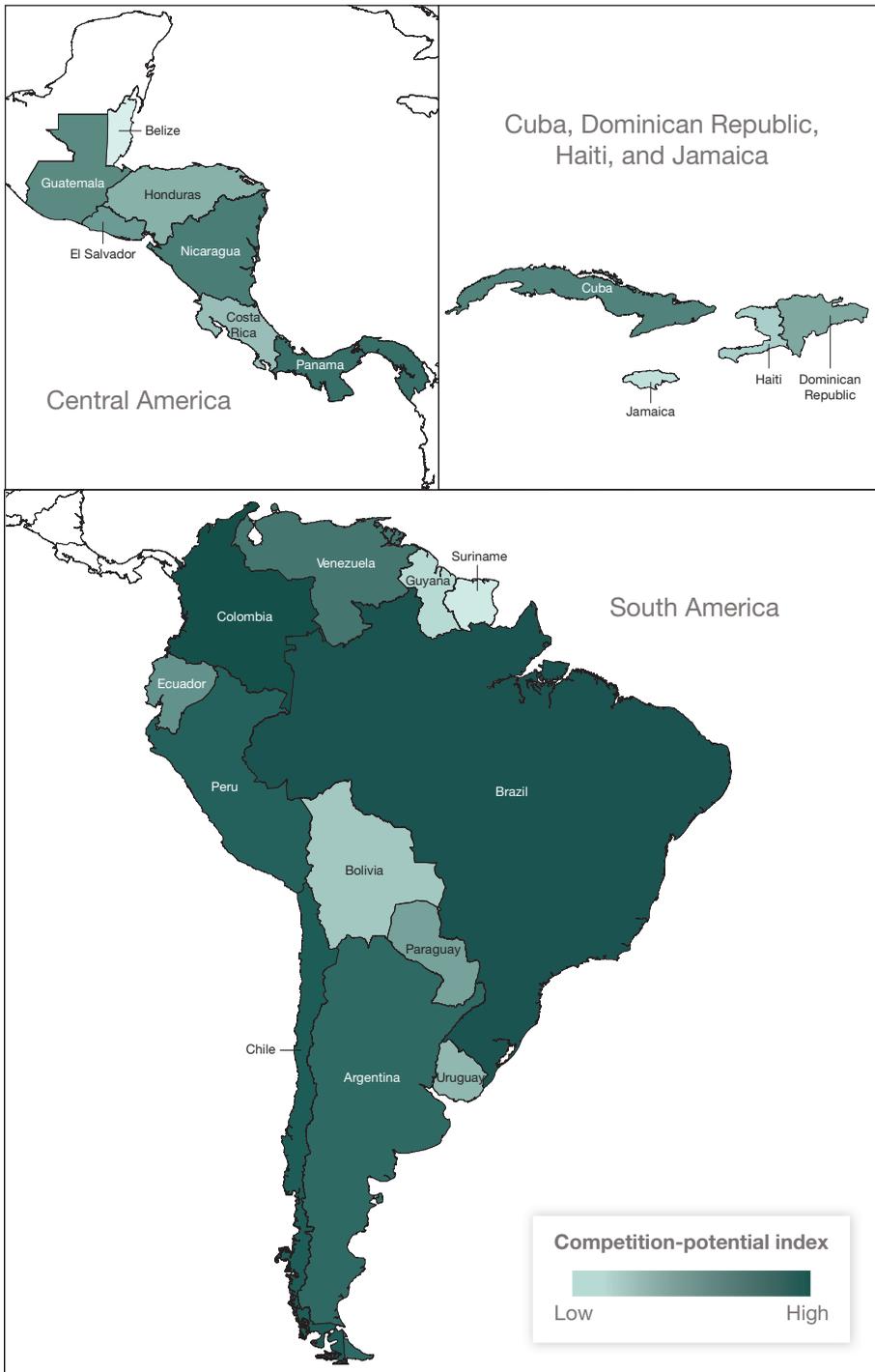
⁹¹ Milosevich-Juaristi, 2019, p. 1; Ellis, 2015, p. 39.

⁹² Ellis, 2015, p. 40.

⁹³ Brenda Fiegel, "Growing Military Relations Between Nicaragua and Russia," *Small Wars Journal*, December 5, 2014.

⁹⁴ "Rusia Y Venezuela Firman Acuerdos Para Intensificar Cooperación Militar" ["Russia and Venezuela Sign Agreements to Intensify Military Cooperation"], *Voice of America*, August 15, 2019; "Rusia Y Venezuela Suscriben Acuerdo De Cooperación Militar" ["Russia and Venezuela Subscribe Military Cooperation Agreement"], *teleSUR*, August 15, 2019; and "Venezuelan Parliament Says New Military Agreement with Russia 'Unconstitutional,'" TASS, August 26, 2019.

FIGURE 2.9
U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

FIGURE 2.10
Overall Competition Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

TABLE 2.4
The 15 Latin American Countries with the Highest Competition Potential Overall and Their Rankings for Bilateral Competition Potential

Country	Competition-Potential Ranking		
	Overall	U.S.-China	U.S.-Russia
Brazil	1	2	2
Chile	2	1	3
Peru	3	3	4
Colombia	4	4	1
Argentina	5	5	5
Venezuela	6	7	7
Cuba	7	9	9
Ecuador	8	6	11
Panama	9	10	6
Nicaragua	10	20	8
Uruguay	11	14	16
El Salvador	12	12	12
Costa Rica	13	8	17
Guatemala	14	16	10
Jamaica	15	13	21

NOTE: The rankings were calculated by adding the standardized indices capturing the involvement across all four domains (diplomacy, information, military, economics) for the relevant combination of great powers specified in each column and ranking them from highest total (top ranking) to lowest.

tries present the more likely places where Russia could project power in the future, making them potentially more likely areas for clashes.

Second, the United States' relationship with this region is somewhat different from its relationship with Africa or the Middle East. The United States traditionally has not had much of a military presence in Africa and has wanted to withdraw from the Middle East for decades now. By contrast, the United States historically has viewed Latin America as strategically essential, and geography alone dictates that the United States needs to remain engaged in this region. Consequently, going forward, competition in this part of the world may involve higher stakes for the United States than elsewhere.

Implications from the Competition Analysis

Competition among the United States, China, and Russia takes different shapes across the world, yet our analysis yields a few cross-cutting trends.

First, the potential for great-power competition is highest in large, regional power centers. Across all three regions, the three great powers have tended to focus their efforts on the wealthiest and most-powerful countries in each region. As a result, South Africa and Nigeria top the overall rankings for competition potential in Africa; Egypt and Saudi Arabia are near the top in the Middle East; and Brazil, Peru, and Colombia are at the forefront of competition in Latin America. The big-country bias is, in many ways, understandable and expected. After all, if competition is about influence, power, and profit-seeking, then larger, wealthier countries might often offer more opportunities to achieve those objectives than smaller countries do.⁹⁵

Second, at times, U.S.-China competition in secondary theaters takes on a more economic and diplomatic character than U.S.-Russia competition, which has a more military flavor. China, at least thus far, has not played a major role in the military space in secondary theaters. Although it has become more willing to act in the security sphere—it has deployed peacekeepers, it has established a military base in Djibouti and satellite ground stations in Latin America, and PLA Navy ships have been increasingly active in their port calls—these military tools of influence are secondary to China’s primary means of wielding influence. Its dominant manner of involvement remains economic, often accompanied by diplomacy.

U.S.-Russia competition, by contrast, has a more pronounced military or security character. Russia has been more aggressive about sending troops and PMSCs to secondary theaters, be it to Syria, Libya, Mozambique, or Venezuela; however, by any comparable metrics, its activities still pale in comparison with the United States’ military presence. Russia also competes more directly with the United States for arms sales markets. In this respect, U.S.-Russia competition often appears to be more symmetrical, with both sides employing military levers of influence, whereas the U.S.-China competition appears to involve two players engaged in entirely different games.

Third, China and Russia are increasing their involvement across multiple domains and regions, whereas U.S. involvement is often stagnating or even decreasing. Across all three regions, as noted earlier, China’s economic influence-seeking has grown significantly. China’s trade volumes have increased over the past decade or two, and China has become the largest or the second-largest trading partner with all three regions. As the Chinese economy continues to grow, China’s economic importance to these regions may continue growing. The same trends are evident in China’s diplomatic and informational activity. As for Russia, although its resource constraints limit its possibilities, it has also made inroads into sec-

⁹⁵ Importantly, some of this bias may be built into how we measured influence as well, because we weighted the indicators (e.g., trade, foreign aid) on absolute terms rather than a per capita basis. Had we opted for the latter approach, less-populated countries likely would have had the advantage.

ondary theaters, drawing on historic ties from Soviet times and leveraging its strengths—in energy and arms sales—to expand its influence. Russia’s diplomacy has increased across all three regions, and its informational presence has spread more broadly. Russia’s efforts in the military domain, though more difficult to measure quantitatively, have intensified and include increasing military presence, PMSC activities, military agreements, and even arms exports.⁹⁶ At the same time, U.S. economic and diplomatic influence-seeking efforts have stagnated or declined in at least two of the three regions. We do not suggest that this is a zero-sum game, but these trends do indicate that both competitors are gaining ground on the United States.

From a DAF and DoD perspective, the concern has to be that, if the United States’ diplomatic and economic influence begins to wane, so too will its military influence, eventually. For example, just because specific countries grant the United States some form of military access today does not mean they will continue to do so in the future, especially if they become more closely economically intertwined with China. And as we suggest in Chapter Three, positional advantage—gaining and maintaining military access—might remain a crucial element to responding to conflicts in secondary theaters.

Finally, competition is sometimes cast as the prelude to conflict, but this may not hold true in secondary theaters. This is so for at least two reasons. First, even when great-power influence-seeking converges on the same country, the objectives of the three powers may not be averse to each other. If the United States is driven by counterterrorism concerns, it is not necessarily thwarted by China’s interest in extractive resources, for example. Second, even where the three powers are directly competing for scarce goods or pursuing mutually incompatible aims, the risks of competition transforming into armed conflict may remain low. In some domains of competition (such as economics), there may be means to sort out the competition that are short of full-on conflict. In fact, as we explore in detail in the next chapter, conflict in secondary theaters may be less common than one might presume.

⁹⁶ While Russia’s overall arms exports declined between 2016 and 2020, exports to the Middle East and Africa increased (SIPRI, undated-a).

Conflict Potential in Secondary Theaters

Although the United States may face an increasingly intense battle for influence with China and Russia in secondary theaters, this does not necessarily mean that the United States will be drawn into armed conflicts in the potential competition hot spots. As mentioned in Chapter One, more than just interests are needed for great-power competition to lead to great-power conflict; a conflict would have to erupt that presents opportunities for external involvement. Consequently, we analyze the potential for both competition and conflict in order to select a few countries in each region where a conflict between the United States and China, Russia, or both is *more plausible* than elsewhere in the region, even if it is still not—in objective terms—likely.¹

In this chapter, we give an overview of this analysis. We start by explaining our approach to selecting countries for scenario analysis and to evaluating potential conflict scenarios. We then discuss our findings for each country, by region. We conclude by drawing out some of the broader implications of this work. Ultimately, we find that many of the more plausible conflict scenarios in Africa and the Middle East would place the United States, China, and Russia at least notionally on the same side and working toward similar goals. By contrast, in the context of the Latin American conflict scenarios we considered, the three powers lack the same common interests; moreover, unlike in the other regions, the United States arguably has less latitude to simply walk away from conflicts. Thus, potential conflicts in Latin America could be among the more consequential for the United States in the future.

Selecting Countries for Scenario Analysis

As described in Chapter One, to identify the countries where opportunity and motive would most likely coincide, we first limited the potential set of countries to the one-third of countries with the highest conflict potential, and then we ranked these more-conflict-prone states in each region by competition potential, from highest to lowest.² Tables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 show

¹ War, in general, is a rare event. Consequently, although we can identify countries where armed conflict may be more likely than elsewhere, the chances that such a conflict in fact erupts in any one location within any time frame may still be less likely than not.

² The companion reports in this series present the full conflict-potential rankings across each theater; see Kepe et al., forthcoming; Rhoades et al., 2023; Chindea et al., 2023.

the resulting pool of eligible countries—that is, the one-third of each region’s countries with the highest conflict potential, ranked by competition potential. We then selected two or three countries at the top of these rankings for each region, and our selections incorporated subject-matter expertise to ensure that they indeed present a likelihood of significant conflict and are at least theoretically plausible contexts for great-power involvement in view of what we know about how great powers have approached faraway conflicts in recent times (see the appendixes). We also sought to select cases that were sufficiently different from each other to stress the DAF in different ways.

For Africa (Table 3.1), this process led us to select Nigeria, where there is significant conflict potential and an extent and nature of great-power interest that makes some kind of external involvement theoretically plausible. We also opted for Mozambique because of the conflict potential, the character of great-power involvement, and the potential it offers for

TABLE 3.1
Africa Case Selection

Country	Overall Conflict-Potential Ranking	Overall Competition-Potential Ranking
Nigeria ^a	1	2
Sudan	9	3
Kenya	15	4
Mozambique ^a	8	10
DRC	2	11
Ethiopia	10	13
Libya	12	17
Somalia	3	18
Cameroon	5	21
Mali	4	22
Chad	14	28
Niger	13	29
CAR	11	33
South Sudan	7	34
Burundi	16	40
Burkina Faso	6	44

SOURCE: Conflict-potential ranking is based on VIEWS: The Violence Early-Warning System, undated (data from 2021). We are grateful to the VIEWS team for providing the underlying data. Competition-potential ranking is based on authors’ analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One.

NOTE: We ranked 48 countries in Africa by conflict potential (1 = highest) and competition potential (1 = highest). CAR = Central African Republic.

^a We selected this country for scenario analysis.

insights into the military-related challenges associated with operating in that part of the continent. We did not select higher-ranking Kenya, because its conflict potential was anomalously low for a state at the top of the rankings, which would make identifying plausible conflict scenarios a more speculative enterprise compared with doing so for the other top four countries. And although both Sudan and Mozambique presented qualitatively strong cases, we chose the latter partly for the operational considerations just noted, which appeared more dissimilar to those for Nigeria.³

For the Middle East (Table 3.2), qualitative evidence supported the countries that indeed rose to the top of the rankings, although we combined the Afghanistan and Pakistan cases because of the high degree of interconnections between them.⁴ Lastly, for Latin America (Table 3.3), we selected a joint Venezuela-Colombia scenario, based on the countries' geographic proximity and cross-border dynamics. And we opted for Nicaragua, rather than Ecuador, for geographic diversity and because Russian activity in the country suggests that it would be a plausible candidate for involvement in a conflict.

TABLE 3.2
Middle East Case Selection

Country	Overall Conflict-Potential Ranking	Overall Competition-Potential Ranking
Pakistan ^a	5	3
Iraq ^a	2	5
Afghanistan ^a	2	9
Syria	4	11
Yemen	1	13

SOURCE: Conflict-potential ranking is based on Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated. Competition-potential ranking is based on authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One.

NOTE: We ranked 15 countries in the Middle East (as defined in this report) by conflict potential (1 = highest) and competition potential (1 = highest).

^a We selected this country for scenario analysis. We combined Afghanistan and Pakistan in one scenario.

³ We did not select Libya for our scenario analysis for a few reasons. For instance, it is already host to an ongoing proxy conflict, and there is less to be gained from examining scenarios of its future course than from considering scenarios that have probably attracted less attention from U.S. decisionmakers and policy elites. Moreover, Libya's proximity to the Mediterranean Sea and to Europe means that it poses fewer operational challenges than some of the other countries higher on the list of candidate countries. For more detail on cases selected, see the companion report in this series, Kepe et al., forthcoming.

⁴ We chose not to focus on Syria, a site of ongoing war with the involvement of external powers, for similar reasons that we did not select Libya in Africa; that is, there is less value added by an examination of Syria's future course than from considering scenarios that have probably attracted less attention from U.S. decisionmakers and policy elites.

TABLE 3.3
Latin America Case Selection

Country	Overall Conflict-Potential Ranking	Overall Competition-Potential Ranking
Colombia ^a	1	4
Venezuela ^a	3	6
Ecuador	7	8
Nicaragua ^a	6	10
Bolivia	4	16
Guyana	5	19
Haiti	2	21

SOURCE: Conflict-potential ranking is based on Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated. Competition-potential ranking is based on authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One.

NOTE: We ranked 22 countries in Latin America by conflict potential (1 = highest) and competition potential (1 = highest). The data sets used for the conflict-potential analysis excluded Belize because data were not available.

^a We selected this country for scenario analysis. We combined Venezuela and Colombia in one scenario.

Evaluating Conflict Scenarios in Secondary Theaters

Predicting how future conflicts might break out, much less how they might unfold at some point in the future, is an inherently speculative and error-prone endeavor. History is littered with bad predictions about the future of conflict, and U.S. policymakers have routinely failed to predict where conflicts will occur—let alone how they will proceed—even a few years out.⁵ In our exploration of potential conflicts in secondary theaters, we claim to be no more precise—and aim more to identify the more plausible shapes that conflicts with great-power involvement might take rather than to predict where and how any particular conflict will take place.

We adopted a three-phased approach to understanding the potential for great-power involvement in conflicts in each of our selected scenarios. First, we examined under what circumstances conflicts are most likely to break out. As described in Chapter One, we drew on a variety of expert analyses and research to identify the salient causes of conflict present in each country at the time of analysis. Because we chose our countries partly based on their history of instability, we inevitably project existing conflict potential into the future. Although this likely neglects less-expected scenarios for how conflict arises, we hewed close to the current dynamics in order to avoid excessive speculation about the character of future conflicts.

⁵ See Cohen et al., 2020, pp. 5–10.

Second, we conducted an analysis of each great power's interests and objectives in each country studied, which helped us identify why any of the three powers might become involved in a conflict there or whether they would choose to become involved at all. Specifically, we looked at all three actors' strategic and geopolitical interests, security concerns, and economic interests in the country, as well as potential humanitarian and ideological motivations.⁶ We further assessed which local actors the United States, China, and Russia might support in each conflict scenario, were they to intervene, based on overall objectives in the country, existing relationships, and our analysis of how each power has approached support for actors in conflicts in secondary theaters in the recent past.⁷

Finally, we assessed how the conflict might plausibly unfold. In this regard, we emphasize that we adopted a broad definition of great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters, as discussed in Chapter One. This means that we did not limit our examination to great powers exploiting third-party actors primarily to hurt their great-power rivals, and we assumed that each power might employ a range of options—including sending aid, PMSCs, or even limited numbers of its own forces—to achieve its ends. We assessed which of these options the United States, China, and Russia most likely would choose, based partly on what they have done in the past (as summarized in the next section and in detail in the appendixes to this report) and partly on the stakes involved for each.

Importantly, in this analysis too (as in the competition analysis), we are not offering a prediction that such a conflict *will* occur and *will* involve these great powers. States can behave in unpredictable ways. Leaders can miscalculate the risks, misjudge stakes involved, and view a rival's actions as more threatening than they actually are. Moreover, although much of our analysis focuses on the United States, China, and Russia, local actors in a country where there is conflict also can shape how each great power behaves during a conflict. Consequently, if a particular war did occur, it could take unforeseen turns. So, we cannot claim to forecast these future conflicts with certainty. Rather, we are simply outlining—in generic terms—the plausible shape that such a conflict would take *if it did occur*.

Notably absent from this approach is any operational-level analysis or in-depth modeling. Consequently, although we can describe in the abstract what the DAF and the joint force might be required to do in a given scenario, we cannot say with any precision how many forces would be needed, what mixture of forces (between conventional and unconventional forces or between air and ground) might be required, or where they might be based. All these

⁶ In general, ideological interests and motivations for involvement in foreign affairs at present appear weaker than they were during the Cold War and more challenging to identify or describe precisely. While the United States remains committed to democratic and human rights values, China and Russia eschew ideological or normative interests in their foreign relations and have demonstrated that they are willing to work with a variety of regimes and non-state actors, provided that they support the power's interests. Even in the case of the United States, the extent that it is willing to fight wars for democracy promotion—particularly after the lackluster results in Afghanistan and Iraq—is at best uncertain.

⁷ Appendixes B and C to this report contain our analysis of what is likely to motivate China's and Russia's involvement in foreign conflicts and what kinds of actors each is likely to support.

are questions for a follow-on analysis. For the moment, we restrict ourselves to the political- and strategic-level analysis of the conflicts and draw implications from there.

Potential Conflicts in Africa

Historically, Africa has been a focal point for great-power conflicts. During the 18th and 19th centuries, European colonial powers battled each other for influence and colonial possessions on the continent. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union were engaged in proxy wars on the continent in such places as Algeria, Angola, Chad, and Western Sahara. Whether Africa once again becomes a battleground for future conflicts during this new round of great-power competition, however, remains an open question. And as explored in the previous chapter, Africa is an increasingly important front in the greater competition among the United States, China, and Russia. As we explain throughout our analysis, great-power competition in and of itself may not suggest that great-power conflict in Africa is likely.

As discussed in Chapter One, conflicts that draw in competing great powers require more than mutual interest in a country; they require a spark—often in the form of instability—to set conflict in motion. Figure 3.1 depicts Uppsala University’s ViEWS assessments of conflict potential in Africa; darker shades represent a higher potential of conflict.⁸ Unsurprisingly, many of the countries with civil wars at the time of this analysis—Mali, the DRC, and Somalia—rated the highest. Importantly, in some cases, relatively high competition potential and conflict potential overlap (as in Nigeria), but in some cases they do not. For example, South Africa ranks high on the competition-potential indices (see Chapter Two) but is also relatively stable.

As explained earlier, we selected Nigeria and Mozambique as two countries that present some of the more plausible conflict scenarios, where great powers might become involved, because both countries have high potential for both competition and internal conflict. Our analyses of the likely dynamics of those scenarios suggest that the United States, China, and Russia may be more likely to find themselves—at least notionally—on the same side of these potential conflicts than in opposition to one another.

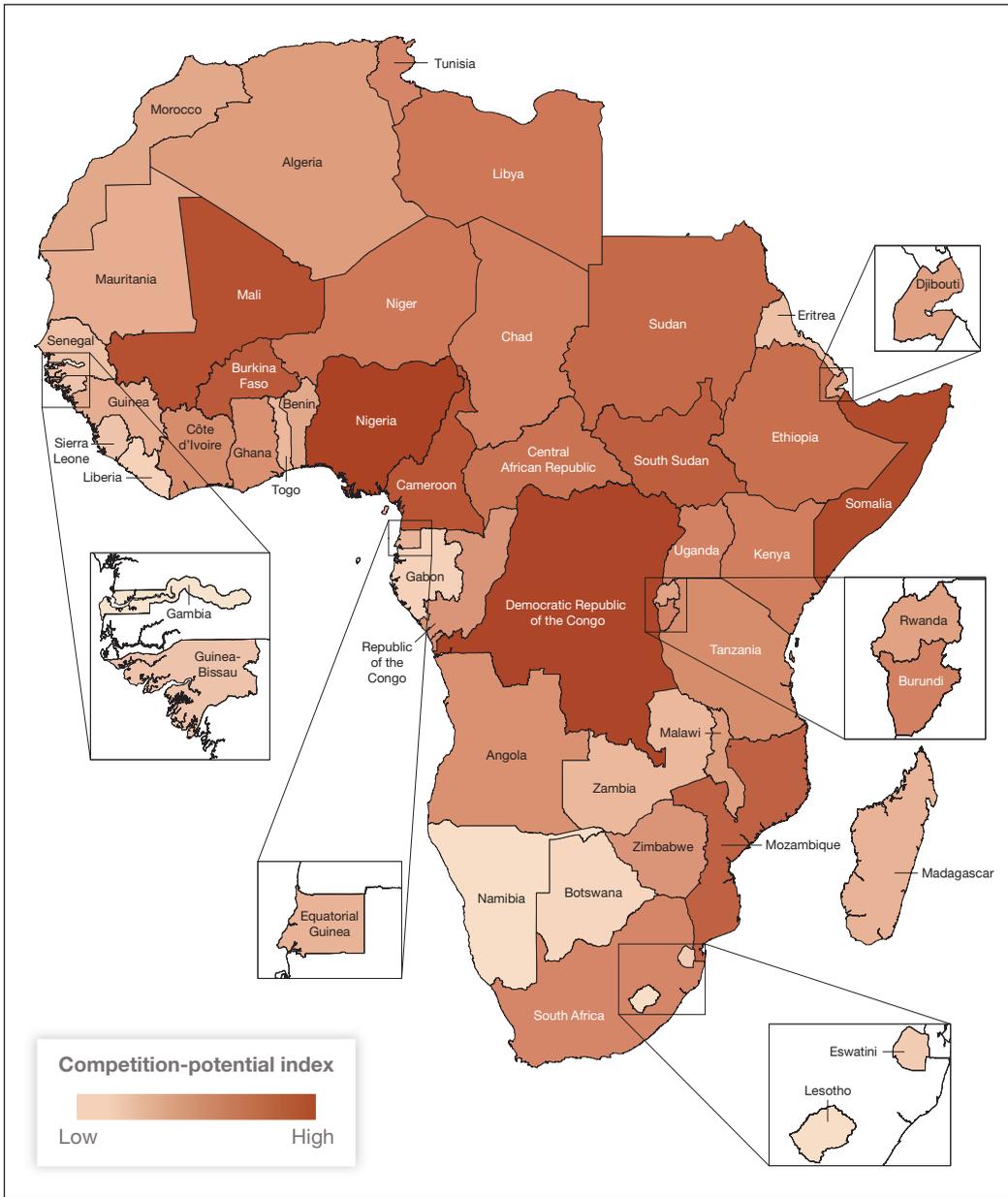
Nigeria

By most metrics, Nigeria is already one of the most prominent states in Africa. In 2021, it was the most populous country in Africa and the sixth most populous country in the world.⁹ Nigeria is projected to become the third most populous country in the world by 2050, with

⁸ ViEWS: The Violence Early-Warning System, undated. The ViEWS project, introduced in Chapter Two, “generates monthly probabilistic assessments of the likelihood that fatal political violence will occur in each country . . . throughout Africa—during each of the next 36 months.”

⁹ Tomás F. Husted and Lauren Ploch Blanchard, *Nigeria: Current Issues and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33964, September 18, 2020, p. 1.

FIGURE 3.1
Conflict Potential in Africa



SOURCE: VIEWS: The Violence Early-Warning System, undated (data from 2021). Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

more than 400 million people, replacing the position currently held by the United States. It is also one of the largest economies in Africa, largely because of its position as the continent's leading oil producer. And yet, despite (or perhaps because of) its substantial human capital and its abundance of natural resources, Nigeria is also a deeply troubled country, experiencing persistent ethno-religious tensions, criminal activity, violent extremism, and insurgency.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

We identified two scenarios that capture salient sources of conflict in Nigeria that the United States, China, Russia, or any combination thereof might be drawn into in some fashion. First, since 2009, Nigerian security forces have been engaged in a protracted fight with terrorist organizations Boko Haram and the Islamic State – West Africa Province (ISWAP) in the northeast of the country, resulting in 350,000 people killed as of the end of 2020, by some UN estimates.¹⁰ Both threats have remained localized thus far, but there is a distinct possibility that these groups could transform to pose a broader regional or international terrorism threat. ISWAP maintains links to other Islamic State affiliates in Africa and the Islamic State core in the Middle East.¹¹ All three great powers are concerned about and have previously expended considerable resources to combat terrorism abroad that threatens cross-national spillover.

Second, in a set of scenarios that are relatively less likely to draw great-power involvement, the United States, China, and Russia might have occasion to intervene in the event of conflicts stemming from other sources of instability—such as ethno-sectarian or resource-based strife. Nigeria's five major ethnic groups—the Hausa, Fulani, Igbo, Yoruba, and Ijaw—have fought each other in the past. Between 1967 and 1970, the Christian Igbo backed a secessionist movement in Biafra against the Nigerian government, which ended only after hundreds of thousands of Igbo died from starvation.¹² Currently, cities in Nigeria remain largely segregated along ethno-religious lines. All major ethnic groups have formed militias to protect their own interests, given the Nigerian government's inability to adequately handle the situation.¹³ Particularly as drought and floods have displaced local populations, ethno-sectarian conflicts over resources have become increasingly common.¹⁴ From January to March 2018 alone, an estimated 1,079 people died as a result of conflict over water sources.¹⁵ Some of

¹⁰ Paul Carsten and Felix Onuah, "Northeast Nigeria Insurgency Has Killed Almost 350,000—UN," Reuters, June 24, 2021. Prior estimates are much lower; see, for example, Human Rights Watch, "Nigeria," in *World Report 2020: Events of 2019*, New York, 2020b.

¹¹ Vincent Foucher, "The Islamic State Franchises in Africa: Lessons from Lake Chad," International Crisis Group, October 29, 2020.

¹² "Ethnicity in Nigeria," PBS NewsHour, April 5, 2007.

¹³ "Ethnicity in Nigeria," 2007.

¹⁴ Marcus DuBois King, "Water Stress: A Triple Threat in Nigeria," Pacific Council on International Policy, February 15, 2019.

¹⁵ King, 2019.

these small-scale clashes have occurred in the Niger Delta, Nigeria's most important oil-producing region and a major flashpoint among the local populations, criminal gangs, international corporations, and the Nigerian government.¹⁶ Were a large-scale civil war to erupt, the United States, China, and Russia might see a reason to intervene in some fashion, whether to provide humanitarian assistance or to secure their own interests in the country.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

If Nigeria did become a base for international Islamic terrorism or experienced a significant escalation of internal conflict on other grounds, would the United States, China, and Russia choose to intervene and, if so, to what ends?

Were the United States to intervene in Nigeria, current U.S. policy objectives suggest that it would probably be to stabilize the country, counter international terrorism, or address humanitarian concerns. U.S. security cooperation with Nigeria to date largely has focused on countering terrorism, including the 2021 sale of 12 A-29 Super Tucano aircraft to support Nigerian military operations against Boko Haram and ISWAP.¹⁷ A transformation of these terrorist organizations into ones with transnational ambitions and reach would elevate U.S. interests in neutralizing these threats.¹⁸ The United States has made substantial investments on the development side as well. The United States has supported Nigeria's democratic transition and promoted democratic institution-building in the country after military rule ended in 1999.¹⁹ In 2020, USAID and the State Department allocated more than \$450 million in foreign assistance to Nigeria to support "programs focused on health, good governance, agricultural development, law enforcement, and justice sector cooperation," making Nigeria one of the top annual recipients of U.S. foreign aid globally.²⁰

The United States also has economic interests in Nigeria, but these may be less compelling as significant drivers of involvement in any conflict scenario.²¹ As the largest African economy and top oil producer in Africa, Nigeria has become the United States' second-largest trading partner in Africa and the third-largest destination for U.S. foreign direct

¹⁶ PIND Foundation, "Niger Delta Annual Conflict Report: January–December 2020," February 9, 2021.

¹⁷ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Nigeria: Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated March 19, 2021.

¹⁸ See, for example, comments by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who called for the U.S.-led global coalition to defeat the Islamic State to "expand on Coalition plans for effective[ly] dealing with the threat in Africa" (Antony J. Blinken, "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Opening Remarks at D-ISIS Meeting Opening Session," remarks in Rome, U.S. Department of State, June 28, 2021).

¹⁹ Bureau of African Affairs, 2021a.

²⁰ Chris Olaoluwa Ogunmodede, "Biden's 'Low Bar' for Improving Ties with Nigeria," *World Politics Review*, January 26, 2021; and Husted and Blanchard, 2020, p. 1.

²¹ The two countries have been party to a bilateral Trade and Investment Framework Agreement since 2000 (Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Nigeria," webpage, undated-b).

investment in the region.²² At the same time, the instability and government corruption in Nigeria have discouraged some U.S. business ventures, while other U.S. businesses have been accused of contributing to Nigeria's problems.²³ And U.S. energy companies are in fact drawing down their presence in the country.²⁴ Still, the economic potential and regional weight that Nigeria commands suggest that the United States might view maintaining influence over the country as geopolitically important when Chinese and Russian inroads on the continent are deepening.

By contrast, economics lie at the heart of China's objectives in Nigeria, which is a major exporter of oil, and China is the world's largest importer.²⁵ Although China does not import a particularly large portion of its oil from Nigeria, it is trying to diversify its suppliers away from the Persian Gulf, so Nigeria's significance is greater than present import volumes would indicate.²⁶ Nigeria is also a key source of other natural resources, including about one-third of China's imports of certain rare metals essential for defense applications.²⁷ And, as the largest economy in Africa, Nigeria is an attractive market for Chinese exporters.²⁸ From 2015 to 2020, China invested \$22.5 billion in Nigeria, making it Beijing's top destination for investment in sub-Saharan Africa and among the largest recipients of Chinese financing in the world.²⁹

From Beijing's standpoint, it would be a top concern to stabilize Nigeria in the event of a conflict, if only to secure China's investments and protect Chinese nationals in the country. Nigeria's precarious security situation already poses a threat to Sino-Nigerian cooperation,

²² Husted and Blanchard, 2020.

²³ "Twitter's Decision to Base in Ghana Raises Questions About Nigeria's Role as West Africa's Tech Hub," *14 North*, April 26, 2021; and Sam Thielman, "ExxonMobil Under Investigation over Lucrative Nigerian Oil Deal," *The Guardian*, June 23, 2016.

²⁴ Former U.S. Department of State official, interview with the authors, July 2021; think-tank expert on non-state actors, interview with the authors, July 2021.

²⁵ Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Nigeria," webpage, undated-d.

²⁶ Matthew T. Page, *The Intersection of China's Commercial Interests and Nigeria's Conflict Landscape*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, September 1, 2018, p. 56.

²⁷ Notably, niobium, tantalum, and vanadium ores (Observatory of Economic Complexity, "China," webpage, undated-a; and Office of the Secretary of the Interior, "Final List of Critical Minerals 2018," *Federal Register*, Vol. 83, No. 97, May 18, 2018).

²⁸ In 2019, Chinese exports to Nigeria reached \$15.5 billion, up from \$13.6 billion in 2018 and \$12.2 billion in 2017 (Deloitte, *So, Nigeria Is the Largest Economy in Africa. Now What?* Johannesburg, South Africa, 2014).

²⁹ Much of this investment was in transportation and power-generating infrastructure. Chinese companies have either built or financed (or both) the \$2.8 billion Ajaokuta-Kaduna-Kano gas pipeline, the \$200 million Nnamdi Azikiwe International Airport, the Lekki Port's new deepwater harbor, and the Mambilla Dam. By 2018, China had financed as much as \$20 billion in rail projects around the country. To put this in perspective, China invested \$7.93 billion in Japan, \$25.61 billion in Pakistan, \$30.61 billion in Brazil, and \$64.97 in the United Kingdom between 2015 and 2020. See American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated; Page, 2018, p. 7.

both scaring off potential investors and interfering with Nigerian petroleum exports.³⁰ Chinese businesses in Nigeria face recurring armed attacks.³¹ Chinese authorities already fear not only that the Islamic State or other similar groups could destabilize other African states in the region but also that their extremist ideology or actions could spread to regions closer to China's borders, or even to Muslim minorities within China.³² If the threat from Boko Haram were to increase or Nigeria's internal security situation were to deteriorate further, China's fears about protecting its investments and people would likely only increase.³³

Finally, Russia's objectives in Nigeria stem from a combination of strategic, economic, and security interests. Like China and the United States, Russia has considerable economic interests in the country: Nigeria is Russia's fifth-largest trading partner in Africa and its largest trading partner in West Africa.³⁴ Since 2007, Russian state-owned enterprises have sought to acquire alternative energy sources in order to compensate for the high energy extraction costs in Russia, so they have tried to make inroads into the Nigerian energy extraction sector and develop Nigeria's nuclear energy sector.³⁵

In its efforts to strengthen relations with Nigeria, Russia also has sought to boost its status in the region and mitigate its international isolation since 2014. Russia's officials emphasize that Russia's relationship with Nigeria is based on mutual respect and not contingent on Nigeria's adoption of any set of values.³⁶ As a result, Russia has explored the opportunity of developing this relationship left by the United States' reluctance to sell arms to Nigeria because of human rights abuses.³⁷ As Matthew Page of Chatham House notes, "Russia and the African

³⁰ Wang Hongyi [王洪一], "The Influence of New Security Challenges in Africa on Sino-African Cooperation" ["非洲安全新挑战及其对中非合作的影响"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], July 25, 2018; and Page, 2018, pp. 2–3.

³¹ Wang, 2018.

³² Dong Manyuan [董漫远], "The Influence and Outlook for ISIS's Rise" ["'伊斯兰国'崛起的影响及前景"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], October 14, 2014.

³³ Some Chinese experts affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have argued that any threats to these people or interests could justify China violating its long-standing policy of non-interference (He Dan [何丹], "China Shows Greater Care in Protecting Overseas Interests" ["中国海外利益保护更加温暖人心"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], May 19, 2021; and Page, 2018, p. 6).

³⁴ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated-a.

³⁵ Although Lukoil has identified Nigeria as one of the most desirable prospective sites for the expansion of Lukoil business, Russia may not be well positioned to compete in the Nigerian extractive sector because of the size of competition with other actors (Oil Capital, "Западная Африка—наиболее перспективный район для инвестиций ЛУКОЙЛа" ["West Africa—The Most Promising Region for LUKOIL Investments"], October 18, 2019; and Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Inroads into Central Africa (Part Two)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 59, April 29, 2020c.

³⁶ Aidoghie Paulinus, "Atomic Partnership with Russia'll Propel Nigeria's Economy—Shebarshin Russian Envoy," *The Sun*, March 14, 2021; and Sunday Omotuyi, "Russo/Nigerian Relations in the Context of Counterinsurgency Operation in Nigeria," *Jadavpur Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 23, No. 1, 2019.

³⁷ Paulinus, 2021; Omotuyi, 2019.

countries are natural business partners because the Russians sell more economically priced military equipment”—with no or little demands for political accountability, the rule of law, or requirements for democratic values.³⁸

In sum, our assessment of the potential for great-power involvement in a Nigerian conflict produces two key insights. First, although all three powers have interests in Nigeria’s long-term political and economic success, it is not obvious whether any one of the three powers would view these as sufficient reasons to commit military forces to a conflict there. Although China and, to a lesser extent, Russia have demonstrated growing interests in Nigeria and Africa more broadly, neither has sufficiently compelling national interests at stake to take on direct military action in a conflict in Nigeria.

Second, even if the United States, China, and Russia did intervene—likely through means short of military action—they may not support opposite parties to any conflict. The three powers’ other interests, including competition-related ones, may well prevent cooperation, yet all three have a common interest in curbing Islamic terrorism and maintaining stability in the country. In practical terms, all three powers likely would end up backing the government, particularly if the government were fighting against a more robust Boko Haram or ISWAP. Which group each power would support in a Nigerian conflict stemming from any other source of instability is uncertain and contingent on factors that are difficult to predict; however, because all three powers are seeking to maintain relations with the Nigerian government, it is unlikely that any overt or substantial support would be offered to other actors (at least not without government consent).

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

We do not attempt to predict definitively how a hypothetical conflict might unfold, but there are good reasons to believe that China, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, the United States are more likely to intervene indirectly (through economic aid, military equipment sales, and potentially military contractors) rather than directly, with their own militaries (e.g., sending air or ground forces abroad). First, as noted in Appendix B, China has, to date, generally avoided direct military action abroad, limiting its participation to peacekeeping and noncombatant evacuation operations. And, as detailed in Appendix C, although Russia has been more willing to engage in overt military interventions, its threshold for such a relatively costly action is high—in terms of both interests at stake and enabling conditions on the ground that limit the risks and costs. Moreover, the United States, China, and Russia have a willing partner in the Nigerian government. So long as the government remains in relative control, there are few reasons for the three powers to send their own forces, risking blood, treasure, and potential political backlash in the process.

And there are practical reasons why China and Russia might prefer indirect support rather than direct intervention. Nigeria is far away from both powers and not an easy location for

³⁸ Will McBain, “Scepticism Follows Russia-Nigeria Deal Announcements,” *African Business*, December 9, 2019.

power projection. It has not granted the PLA access to its territory for anything other than occasional training exercises or port visits.³⁹ As of 2020, there had not been any significant local rumors of an impending Chinese military facility there (as there have been in many other possible basing locations), and the Office of the Secretary of Defense did not list Nigeria as a possible base location in its 2020 report on China's military power.⁴⁰ China's nearest base to Nigeria is its logistics facility in Djibouti, which would be within air transport range of some airfields in Nigeria, but only if the Chinese expanded the airstrip.⁴¹ So, a substantial Chinese military intervention in the future—though not impossible—is not likely.

Russia has an only somewhat better position. Russia does not have official military presence in Nigeria, but its reported plans to develop a military base in CAR, and its existing military presence in that country, could potentially support military presence in Nigeria.⁴² Nonetheless, it would be less costly, more practical, and in keeping with Russia's general approach to Africa to largely rely on PMSCs to support whatever contingency it confronted in Nigeria.⁴³ The presence of Russian PMSCs there may be traced back to at least 2010, when Russian sources suggest that the Moran Security Group conducted training of Nigerian military personnel.⁴⁴ More recently, open-source reports show a sharp increase in the presence of Russian PMSCs in Nigeria since 2015.⁴⁵ And Russian PMSCs, such as the RusCorp, Moran, and RSB Group, have been engaged in anti-piracy activities on behalf of Russian state-owned oil companies, as well as in counterinsurgency operations in support of the Nigerian government.⁴⁶ Russia would also likely provide other indirect support, especially arms sales.

³⁹ Page, 2018, p. 7.

⁴⁰ Chad Peltier, Tate Nurkin, and Sean O'Connor, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, Coulsdon, United Kingdom: Janes, 2020; and 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., 2020.

⁴¹ Janes, "XAC Y-20 Kunpeng," *All the World's Aircraft: Development and Production*, December 16, 2021.

⁴² Aleksandr Gostev, "Дикие гуси' или 'Псы войны'? Российские наемники в Африке: кто, где, почему" ["'Wild Geese' or the 'Dogs of War'? Russian Mercenaries in Africa: Who, Where, How Much"], Radio Liberty Russia, January 11, 2019a; and Evgeniy Pudovkin, "ЦАР перед выборами оказалась на грани политического коллапса" ["Before the Elections CAR Found Itself on the Verge of Political Collapse"], RBK, December 23, 2020.

⁴³ See Appendix C for a discussion of Russia's "concessions for protection" approach.

⁴⁴ Tor Bukkvoll and Åse G. Østensen, "The Emergence of Russian Private Military Companies: A New Tool of Clandestine Warfare," *Special Operations Journal*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 2020; and Vladimir Neyelov, "Частные военные компании в России: опыт и перспективы использования" ["Private Military Companies in Russia: Experience and Prospects of Use"], 2013.

⁴⁵ Alessandro Arduino, *The Footprint of Chinese Private Security Companies in Africa*, Washington, D.C.: Johns Hopkins University, Working Paper No. 35, 2020.

⁴⁶ Asymmetric Warfare Group and U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, *Russian Private Military Companies: Their Use and How to Consider Them in Operations, Competition, and Conflict*, Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory, April 2020.

A limited overt direct military intervention is most likely to come from the United States, if only because the United States has conducted military counterterrorism operations in Nigeria in the past. Under the Obama administration, for example, the United States deployed an interagency team, 80 U.S. troops, and a UAV to support search efforts in the aftermath of Boko Haram's kidnapping of 276 schoolgirls from Chibok, Nigeria, in 2014.⁴⁷ In March 2021, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers established a permanent presence in Abuja, Nigeria, to manage U.S. Africa Command projects, including "the construction of new facilities for the A-29 Super Tucano wing at Kainji Airbase" in Nigeria.⁴⁸ The United States also established an air base in the Agadez region of neighboring Niger in 2019, which is used to support counterterrorism operations.⁴⁹ In all of these cases, overt U.S. military presence was fairly limited; small numbers of forces assisted in training, advising, and intelligence collection rather than large-scale operations. U.S. military support to the Nigerian government might thus take the form of a small deployment of special operations forces, aircraft to conduct ISR missions, or air strikes on key Boko Haram or ISWAP targets. Short of such measures, the United States might engage in indirect support consisting of training, advising, and equipment support.⁵⁰

Overall, our analysis suggests that, for the most likely sources of conflict, a future great-power intervention in Nigeria may look very different from the conflicts of the Cold War era. Considerations stemming from competition are not absent, but they are unlikely to be the driving factors behind involvement for any of the competing powers in the more plausible conflict scenarios. Conflict is more likely to consist of battles for power behind the scenes, as great powers seek to leverage their support to Nigerian actors to compete for influence. Although there is a possibility that Russia's PMSCs would run up against limited U.S. special operations presence, there likely would not be much occasion for direct military engagement in the country (see Table 3.4). In this and similar tables in this chapter, by *external* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of the country in question (in this case, Nigeria); by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within the country.

⁴⁷ Husted and Blanchard, 2020.

⁴⁸ Alfredo Barraza, "USACE Establishes Permanent Presence in Africa to Support Key Missions," U.S. Army, March 2, 2021.

⁴⁹ DoD Inspector General, *Evaluation of Niger Air Base 201 Military Construction*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, DODIG-2020-077, March 31, 2020; and Oriana Pawlyk, "US Begins Drone Operations out of New Niger Air Base," *Military.com*, November 1, 2019.

⁵⁰ The United States is constrained by law from providing certain kinds of weapons to Nigeria because of concerns about human rights abuses (Robbie Gramer, "U.S. Lawmakers Hold Up Major Proposed Arms Sale to Nigeria," *Foreign Policy*, July 27, 2021).

TABLE 3.4
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Nigeria

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent competitors from becoming security partners of choice 	Strategic and geopolitical (limited): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek political support for China's policies 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Seek political support for Russia's policies Undermine U.S. influence Build status in the region
Internal reasons	Security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat violent extremism Ensure regional stability 	Economic and security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect or secure access to extractive industries, critical infrastructure investments, and trade Protect Chinese nationals Counter international terrorism 	Economic and security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversify trade and pursue markets Counter international terrorism
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt support Limited military support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect covert and overt support
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training and advising Military equipment (limited) ISR Special operations forces Airlift Air strikes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Military equipment ISR Special operations forces Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training and advising Military equipment Special operations forces

Mozambique

Across the continent from Nigeria, Mozambique presents a similar story in terms of prospects for great-power involvement in conflict. It may appear to be a good candidate for such a future scenario, in view of its immense natural resources and a history of conflict. The country is endowed with large, untapped potential of minerals and hydrocarbons, including natural gas, coal, and heavy sands, as well as various metals (including precious metals) and precious and semi-precious gems and stones.⁵¹ Mozambique also enjoys a strategic location, with

⁵¹ Jane Korinek and Isabelle Ramdoo, "Local Content Policies in Mineral-Exporting Countries," OECD Trade Policy Working Papers No. 209, December 15, 2017.

a 2,700-km-long coastline on the Indian Ocean and overland transit routes to neighboring inland countries Malawi and Zimbabwe. And like Nigeria, Mozambique suffers from instability. The Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO, or the Mozambique Liberation Front) and the Resistência Nacional Moçambicana (RENAMO, or the Mozambican National Resistance) fought a bloody civil war from 1976 to 1992, and although both organizations are now political parties, tensions have reemerged since 2012.⁵² The country is also home to the violent, largely homegrown Islamic militia group Ansar al-Sunna Wa Jamma (ASWJ)—also known as Ansar al-Sunna, Mozambican al-Shabaab, and the Islamic State – Mozambique—which has killed and displaced thousands of people since October 2017.⁵³ As we did in our Nigeria scenario analysis, we find that the United States, China, and Russia are more likely to find themselves on the same side of a future conflict in Mozambique—albeit with potential for political contests behind the scenes—than to support opposing sides or risk escalation to direct clashes with each other.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

When we consider the most likely sources of internal conflict, Mozambique offers at least two plausible scenarios that could prompt international intervention. The first revolves around combating Islamic terrorism—specifically, ASWJ. A source of significant violence since 2017, the group not only has attacked local inhabitants but also has targeted foreign workers and energy-processing installations in Cabo Delgado, home to Mozambique’s natural gas deposits.⁵⁴ Although the extent of the groups’ foreign ties is not clear, in 2019, ASWJ declared allegiance to the Islamic State.⁵⁵ The Mozambican government has struggled to curb ASWJ’s violent attacks, mostly because the Mozambican Army lacks the necessary capabilities and training; in 2020, Mozambique spent only an estimated 1.1 percent of its gross domestic product on military expenditures.⁵⁶ Although the Mozambican government historically has been opposed to foreign involvement in its internal security, the scale of the problem has led to Maputo reaching out for assistance.⁵⁷ In November 2020, President Filipe Nyusi said that Mozambique was open to any form of support in the struggle against terrorism, albeit with

⁵² Natália Bueno, “Reconciliation in Mozambique: Was It Ever Achieved?” *Conflict, Security and Development*, Vol. 19, No. 5, 2019.

⁵³ ASWJ is a branch of the Islamic State – Central Africa Province (Tim Lister, “The March 2021 Palma Attack and the Evolving Jihadi Terror Threat to Mozambique,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 4, April 2021).

⁵⁴ Lister, 2021. Mozambique reportedly holds 100 trillion cubic feet of proved natural gas reserves, making it the third-largest owner of natural gas reserves in Africa after Nigeria and Algeria (U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Mozambique,” webpage, July 2020).

⁵⁵ David G. Lewis, “U.S. Counterterrorism Chief Says Mozambique Militants Are Islamic State Affiliate,” Reuters, December 9, 2020b.

⁵⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Mozambique: Military and Security,” *The World Factbook*, last updated June 29, 2021.

⁵⁷ John Campbell, “Foreign Involvement Growing in Mozambique Insurgency,” blog post, Council on Foreign Relations, April 6, 2021.

caveats. “Those who arrive from abroad will not replace us, they will support us. This is . . . about sovereignty,” Nyusi said in April 2021.⁵⁸ In summer 2021, the Southern African Development Community and the European Union began providing assistance to Mozambique.⁵⁹ Given this backdrop and ties to Mozambique’s energy sector (discussed in the next section), the United States, China, and Russia might find their interests under attack.

A second cause of conflict could be a reignition of the tensions between Mozambique’s dominating party and the formerly Communist-Leninist FRELIMO on one side and the notionally democratic RENAMO on the other; as mentioned earlier, the two sides fought a long civil war during the last years of the Cold War. Since then, both adversaries have transformed into political parties, and clashes have surfaced in recent years.⁶⁰ If Mozambique descended into civil war again, the international community might seek to stabilize the situation, although why and how external powers would likely become involved is an open question.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

The prospect of multiple great powers choosing to get involved in Mozambique is not materially different from that in the Nigeria scenario. Moreover, were they to become involved, it would most likely be at least notionally on the same side—backing Mozambique’s current government.

The United States’ interests in Mozambique are fairly limited. Although some U.S. companies, such as Anadarko Petroleum, Mozambique Leaf Tobacco Limitada, and ExxonMobil, have invested in Mozambique, many of the U.S. government’s objectives focus on counterterrorism and humanitarian concerns.⁶¹ The United States has expressed concern over ASWJ’s violence in the Cabo Delgado province, which could destabilize southern Africa and adversely affect U.S. interests across the continent.⁶² Consequently, the United States seeks to

⁵⁸ “UPDATE 1-Mozambique Seeks Targeted Foreign Support to Help Tackle Insurgency—President,” Reuters, April 7, 2021; see also Bill Corcoran, “Mozambique’s Jihadists Gain Ground as Government Declines Help,” *Irish Times*, December 31, 2020.

⁵⁹ Helmoed-Römer Heitman and Jeremy Binnie, “SADC Mission in Mozambique Launched,” Janes, August 12, 2021; and “Southern Africa: Mozambique Will Coordinate SADC Standby Force,” *All Africa*, July 24, 2021.

⁶⁰ Manuel Mucari, “Renamo’s Appeal to Have Election Result Annulled Dismissed: Mozambique’s Top Court,” Reuters, November 15, 2019; and John C. K. Daly, “Mozambique’s RENAMO Conducts Low-Level Insurgency While Running for Election,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 12, No. 13, June 26, 2014.

⁶¹ U.S. economic efforts in Mozambique are regulated by a U.S.-Mozambican Bilateral Investment Treaty and a Trade and Investment Framework Agreement, both of which have been in effect since 2005 (Bureau of African Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Mozambique: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, last updated July 6, 2021b).

⁶² Anita Powell, “US Offers Resources to Help ‘Contain, Degrade, and Defeat’ Mozambique Insurgency,” *Voice of America*, December 8, 2020.

be Mozambique's "security partner of choice" and is committed to supporting Mozambique's holistic approach to countering terrorism.⁶³ The United States is Mozambique's largest donor of humanitarian aid, providing an average of \$452 million in aid per year between fiscal years 2016 and 2018.⁶⁴ Much of this aid focuses on fostering economic development, improving quality of life for the Mozambican people, and promoting good governance.⁶⁵

China's primary interests in Mozambique, as elsewhere in Africa, are economic. Mozambique provides China with a large share of forestry products,⁶⁶ and in 2019, it provided China with 20 percent of its titanium ore and almost 9 percent of its graphite imports.⁶⁷ China National Petroleum Corporation also has a stake in the Rovuma LNG project, where it partners with U.S.-based ExxonMobil and Italy-based Eni.⁶⁸ In 2019, China funded 37 percent of the bilateral foreign debt, and in 2020, Mozambique's debt to China represented 20 percent of the country's total external debt.⁶⁹ Beijing hopes to make money from its investments, although Mozambique's struggling economy raises questions about whether China will be able to do so.⁷⁰ As impressive as these numbers may seem at first glance, Beijing's investments in Pakistan, Angola, and other countries associated with its Belt and Road Initiative still dwarf those in Mozambique.⁷¹

China also has some geopolitical interests at play in Mozambique, although they are less important than its economic interests. China hopes that Mozambique and other African

⁶³ Lewis, 2020b; and John Vandiver, "U.S. Special Operations Forces Train Mozambique Troops to Counter ISIS Threat," *Stars and Stripes*, March 16, 2021.

⁶⁴ USAID, "U.S. Delivers Humanitarian Relief Supplies in Response to Insecurity in Mozambique," press release, May 6, 2021b.

⁶⁵ Bureau of African Affairs, 2021b.

⁶⁶ Chinese loggers have been reported to be involved in timber smuggling (Will Ross, "Mozambique's Debt Problem," BBC News, November 10, 2018).

⁶⁷ The 20 percent of China's titanium ore that Mozambique provided in 2019 was a drop from 41.4 percent in 2018 (Observatory of Economic Complexity, undated-a; and Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Mozambique," webpage, undated-c).

⁶⁸ "Debt Woe Continues for Mozambique," MacaHub, May 24, 2019; China Petroleum Enterprise [中国石油企业], "Petro China and Mozambique Sign Cooperation Framework Agreement" ["中国石油与莫桑比克签署合作框架协议"], May 2016; Africa Oil Week, "Understanding Chinese Investment in African Oil and Gas," October 7, 2019; and China-Lusophone Brief, "China's CNPC Natural Gas Project in Mozambique Delayed," April 8, 2020.

⁶⁹ Kim Harnack and Celeste Banze e Leila Constantino, "Dividas Contraídas Com A China Afectam Disponibilidade De Recursos No Orçamento Para Enfrentar a COVID-19" ["Debts Contracted with China Affect Availability of Resources in the Budget to Face COVID-19"], CIP Eleições, October 2020.

⁷⁰ Dong Feng, "China-Mozambique Financing Cooperation Is About Development," *Global Times*, November 9, 2020; and Alex Vines, "China's Southern Africa Debt Deals Reveal a Wider Plan," Chatham House, December 10, 2020.

⁷¹ Vines, 2020; and Club of Mozambique, "Mozambique: No 'Indications' That China May Seize Assets Due to Debt—Government," November 19, 2020.

states, a sizable voting bloc in the UN, will provide it with political support on the international stage.⁷² China may also be interested in countering India's attempts to strengthen ties with Mozambique and use those ties to regularize its military presence in the southern Indian Ocean.⁷³ India has secured port use agreements in Maputo and a defense agreement with Mozambique, has built a coastal radar system in Madagascar, and has increased the frequency of its air and naval patrols near the Mozambique Channel.⁷⁴ Finally, China has an interest in protecting its citizens and their "legitimate interests" in Mozambique, as elsewhere.⁷⁵ Chinese analysts have expressed particular alarm at the spread of terrorism throughout Africa and have noted that the problem has become much more severe in northern Mozambique in recent years.⁷⁶ All these interests, however, rank fairly low among China's overarching priorities in Africa.⁷⁷

Like China, Russia is invested in its relationship with Mozambique—perhaps more so, with both strategic and economic interests in the country. Mozambique used to be a close partner to the Soviet Union, which had ties to FRELIMO; and in the post-Cold War era, Mozambique has often supported Russian foreign policy interests in the UN or other international arenas.⁷⁸ As Russia seeks to boost its status in Africa and grow its footprint and influence in strategic locations, historic ties and location make Mozambique a convenient choice.⁷⁹ Russia already enjoys significant access to Mozambique's infrastructure and ports, and some experts point to Moscow's interest in a naval military base in the country.⁸⁰ Moreover, Russia

⁷² Zhang Ying [张颖], "China's Africa Diplomacy: Concepts and Practice" ["中国对非洲外交: 理念与实践"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], January 22, 2018.

⁷³ Shi Hongyuan [时宏远], "The Modi Government's Indian Ocean Policy" ["莫迪政府的印度洋政策"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], January 22, 2018; Lan Jianxue [蓝建学], "India's 'Link West' Policy: Origins, Progress, and Prospects" ["印度'西联'战略: 缘起、进展与前景"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], May 31, 2019; and Sui Xinmin [随新民], "India's Strategic Culture and Patterns of Foreign Policy" ["印度的战略文化与国际行为模式"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], January 20, 2014.

⁷⁴ Sui, 2014; Lan, 2019.

⁷⁵ He, 2021.

⁷⁶ Ma Hanzhi [马汉智], "Africa's Serious Regional Security Problems Are Worthy of Note" ["非洲局部地区严峻安全形势值得关注"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], August 27, 2020a.

⁷⁷ Notably, on his first trip abroad, Xi Jinping visited Mozambique's northern and southern neighbors (Tanzania and South Africa) but not Mozambique (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Arrives in Dar es Salaam, Kicking Off His State Visit to Tanzania," March 25, 2013).

⁷⁸ Sergey Sukhankin, "Russia Prepares a Foothold in Mozambique: Risks and Opportunities," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 142, October 15, 2019b.

⁷⁹ See Appendix C for more discussion about how strategic access shapes Russia's actions.

⁸⁰ Sukhankin, 2019b; and Steve Balestrieri, "Putin Is Reportedly Looking to Expand Russia's Presence in Africa with New Bases in 6 Countries," *Business Insider*, August 11, 2020.

has already demonstrated that its interests in the country are sufficient to allow the Wagner Group to support the Mozambican government troops in the campaigns against ASWJ.

Russia's economic interests are to diversify its imports and exports to mitigate the impact of Western economic sanctions and to gain presence in Mozambique's energy sector in order to compensate for the increasing costs of Russian natural resources by accessing cheaper African alternatives. Although Russia's economic relationship with Mozambique today is—according to Mozambique's Deputy Minister of Energy Augusto Fernando—in an “embryonic” stage, Moscow is intent on fostering it.⁸¹ In 2013, three years after the discovery of Mozambique's gas reserves, Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov visited the country to improve economic cooperation, and there have been regular high-level visits from ministers and parliamentarians since then.⁸² Still, Russia has struggled to make much headway: Its energy companies came to Mozambique's market later than some of the others, and international sanctions on Russia have made it difficult for Russian companies to operate there.⁸³

In sum, our analysis of the Mozambique scenario suggests conclusions similar to those in the Nigeria case. First, given the limited interests of all three powers, it is not very likely that any of the three would choose to get substantially involved in a conflict in Mozambique. Combating ASWJ in Cabo Delgado province is the most likely of the two potential justifications for getting involved in a conflict, given that all three powers have a mutual interest in counterterrorism for strategic and economic reasons. In that case, however, all three powers would intervene on the same side—supporting the Mozambican government against ASWJ.

A return of the civil war between FRELIMO and RENAMO has more potential to split the three powers. This, however, remains highly unlikely; rather than taking a side in such an internal conflict, the United States recently has tried to establish itself as an honest broker between the two parties. Along with several European allies and partners, Botswana, and

⁸¹ Club of Mozambique, “Mozambique Eyeing Russian Investment in Hydrocarbons, Mining,” October 23, 2019.

⁸² Russia is also particularly interested in the country's hydrocarbon resources, chemical fertilizer production, and electricity. During the visit, Lavrov discussed the possibility of increasing trade turnover and investments in geological survey, ferrous industry, petro-chemistry, agriculture, energy, and infrastructure projects, and he suggested cooperation in fishery, education, and personnel training (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Speech of and Answers to Questions of Mass Media by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov During Joint Press Conference Summarizing the Results of Negotiations with Mozambique Foreign Minister Oldemiro Balói, Maputo, 12 February 2013,” February 13, 2013; and Rússia em Moçambique [@EmbRusMov], “#Putin: #Moçambique é o nosso parceiro tradicional no Continente Africano. Há interesse comum na ulterior intensificação . . .,” Twitter post, May 18, 2021).

⁸³ Russian oil company Rosneft has sought cooperation opportunities with other actors in Mozambique. For example, in 2018, Rosneft and ExxonMobil signed a contract with Mozambique for the exploration and extraction of hydrocarbons (Stanislav Ivanov, “Dzihad Po Mozambiski” [“Jihad Mozambican Style”], *Voyenno-Promishlennii Kuryer* [*Military Industrial Courier*], May 4, 2020, p. 4).

China, the United States is a member of the ad hoc international contact group that helps mediate peace between the two competing groups in Mozambique.⁸⁴

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

As noted earlier in this analysis, any great-power involvement is far more likely in the first scenario, involving a potentially transnational terrorist threat. If the three powers chose to get involved, they likely would prefer more-indirect measures (e.g., economic aid, military equipment sales, PMSCs, and training and advising efforts) rather than deployment of their own military forces involved in direct combat action, for many of the same reasons as noted in the Nigeria scenario. The stakes for each of the three powers are, if anything, lower than in Nigeria, and the reasons to avoid the political and economic costs that come with the large-scale deployments of sovereign forces are, if anything, magnified. However, the future development of the large natural resource reserves in Mozambique may alter these interests.

Neither the United States nor China has shown much interest thus far in developing the ability to project conventional power in Mozambique. Mozambique has many excellent natural harbors, but China has looked to other countries as candidates for future PLA bases in the Indian Ocean.⁸⁵ Russia might have a greater interest in this regard. Mozambique's infrastructure and ports may serve as pit stops for Russian forces in West Africa in the future; as noted earlier, according to some assessments, Moscow is seeking a base in the country.⁸⁶ To date, Russia has preferred to employ PMSCs rather than Russian troops in Mozambique (although some sources also reported presence of military personnel).⁸⁷ In 2019, Russian Wagner mercenaries were reported to provide training and combat support to Mozambican government troops in the campaign against ASWJ in Cabo Delgado, although they left in March 2020 after several Wagner operatives were killed and others clashed with the local Mozambican population.⁸⁸ Despite this failure, Russia may well consider resorting to PMSCs again in the

⁸⁴ Nicolas Cook, *Mozambique: Politics, Economy, and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45817, September 12, 2019.

⁸⁵ Neither DoD's 2020 report on China's military developments (Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020) nor the Janes report on possible PLA basing locations (Peltier, Nurkin, and O'Connor, 2020) mentions Mozambique as a likely basing site. It is impossible to say for certain whether the PLA has any intention of building a future base in Mozambique, but the lack of any major intimation that this could be the case (as opposed to the frequent rumors about possible bases in many other countries in the Indian Ocean basin) suggests that, if the PLA has any such intentions, it is somehow hiding its interest there far better than elsewhere.

⁸⁶ Sukhankin, 2019b; "De como os mercenários russos da Wagner perderam a guerra contra os terroristas no norte de Moçambique" ["How Wagner's Russian Mercenaries Lost the War Against Terrorists in Northern Mozambique"], *Carta de Moçambique*, April 20, 2020.

⁸⁷ Sukhankin, 2019b; Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020; and Ilya Polonskiy, "Вернутся ли российские военные в Мозамбик?" ["Will the Russian Military Return to Mozambique?"], *Военное обозрение* [*Military Review*], October 3, 2019.

⁸⁸ Dzvinka Kachur, "Russia's Resurgence in Africa: Zimbabwe and Mozambique," South African Institute of International Affairs, November 27, 2020. Media outlets also reported that the group included 200 sol-

future, supplemented by military advisers and potentially some smaller units, as well as supporting the government through arms sales.

The United States has thus far shied away from committing substantial numbers of U.S. forces in Mozambique, although it has shown interest in helping Mozambique “contain, degrade, and defeat” ASWJ.⁸⁹ The country is more than 2,000 miles away from the only permanent U.S. base in Africa, located in Djibouti at Camp Lemonnier.⁹⁰ Mozambique is not a member of the National Guard’s State Partnership Program, although neighboring South Africa and Botswana are.⁹¹ In May 2021, U.S. and Mozambican military members engaged in a Joint Combined Exchange Training exercise, the first of its kind in 20 years. The two-month-long exercise involved U.S. special operations forces (specifically, Army Green Berets) and Mozambican marines and focused on the development of “tactical skills, combat casualty care, marksmanship, and executing a mission while avoiding damage to civilians and property.”⁹² A follow-on exercise was scheduled for July 2021, but other trainings will be smaller in scope.

If the three great powers did choose to take a more direct role in intervening for whatever reason, Mozambique’s geography—with its long coastline—would make this scenario more likely to feature naval power more prominently than some of the other scenarios. Indeed, great-power military involvement in Mozambique has more of a naval tone. For example, PLA Navy warships have made goodwill and replenishment visits to Maputo, and PLA medical teams have been allowed into Mozambique to provide aid.⁹³ In addition, in March 2017 and October 2018, the Russian Northern Fleet’s anti-submarine destroyer *Severomorsk* called at the Port of Maputo during its tour of African countries.⁹⁴ According to Russian sources, after leaving Mozambique’s territorial waters, the destroyer’s “crew trained to search, detect location and attack an enemy submarine.”⁹⁵ Russian Ambassador to Mozambique Alexander

diers, three attack helicopters, and crew (Sukhankin, 2019b; Kachur, 2020; think-tank expert on Africa and special operations, interview with the authors, July 2021).

⁸⁹ Powell, 2020.

⁹⁰ Commander, Navy Region Europe, Africa, Central, “Welcome to Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti,” webpage, undated.

⁹¹ South Africa and Botswana are members through the New York and North Carolina National Guards, respectively.

⁹² U.S. Embassy in Mozambique, “U.S. Embassy and Ministry of Defense Commemorate Security Cooperation at Closing Ceremony of JCET Training Exercise,” press release, May 5, 2021.

⁹³ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, “China’s Blue Soft Power,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2015, p. 76; and CCTV, “After Completing Their Mission, China’s First Group of Military Doctors Sent to Aid Mozambique Return Home” [“中国首批援助莫桑比克军事医疗专家组圆满结束任务回国”], January 15, 2018.

⁹⁴ Kachur, 2020.

⁹⁵ TASS, “Russia’s Large Anti-Submarine Ship Ends Visit to Mozambique,” Club of Mozambique, October 17, 2018.

Surikov has denied allegations that, during the ship's port call at Pemba in 2018, it was used in anti-terrorist activities.⁹⁶ And in November 2020, U.S. Naval Forces Africa conducted Exercise Cutlass Express in conjunction with U.S. Central Command's International Maritime Exercise, which together became the second-largest maritime exercise in the world.⁹⁷

A second important feature of a potential conflict in Mozambique is that the United States could be operating in support of other allies and partners. Given that Mozambique was a former Portuguese colony, Portugal has advocated that the European Union provide military assistance to Mozambique and reportedly has sent troops to train Mozambican soldiers and provide intelligence support to Mozambique's counterinsurgency efforts.⁹⁸ France, similarly, has an interest in Mozambique given the African country's proximity to the French territories in the Southwest Indian Ocean (Réunion Island and Mayotte), France's exclusive economic zone in the Mozambique Channel around the Scattered Islands, and the substantial interests of the French energy giant Total in the country.⁹⁹ And, as already mentioned, India has an interest in Mozambique as part of its larger efforts in the Indian Ocean. Consequently, in most plausible scenarios, the United States would not be acting alone.

Still, as we summarize in Table 3.5, the chances that the United States would be drawn into a conflict against either China or Russia in Mozambique are relatively slim. The three powers would be notionally on the same side in a conflict against ASWJ, and any substantial involvement in a Mozambican civil war does not seem plausible. The challenges that would arise if multiple great powers were to become involved are likely to consist of harassment by PMSCs (which could, for example, complicate U.S. access to airport infrastructure for delivering aid) or other problematic conduct, such as human rights violations. As in the Nigeria scenario, there is still the potential—and perhaps even the likelihood—of competition for influence and resources in Mozambique, but it is very likely to stay short of armed conflict.

⁹⁶ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Interview of the Ambassador of Russia in Mozambique to the Portuguese News Agency," April 7, 2021.

⁹⁷ Townsend, 2020, p. 11.

⁹⁸ Benjamin Fox, "EU Must Step Up Military Assistance to Mozambique, Says Portuguese Presidency," *EURACTIV*, February 1, 2021; and Catarina Demony and Emma Rumney, "Portugal to Send Another 60 Troops to Mozambique on Training Mission," Reuters, May 10, 2021.

⁹⁹ The Scattered Islands are part of the French Southern and Antarctic Lands.

TABLE 3.5
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Mozambique

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons		Strategic and geopolitical (limited): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counterbalance the influence of other powers (including India) 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue influence Maintain or secure strategic access Build status in the region
Internal reasons	Security and humanitarian: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter violent extremism (ASWJ) Prevent and respond to humanitarian disasters 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to hydrocarbons, timber, and critical infrastructure investments 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure access to hydrocarbons
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt support (e.g., training and working with partners and allies, such as Portugal, France, and the European Union) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt and covert support to the government, with a very low likelihood of limited overt military intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt and covert support, with a low likelihood of limited overt military intervention
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training and advising ISR Airlift Naval forces, potentially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Military equipment Special operations forces Financial support Peacekeeping operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training and advising Military equipment ISR Special operations forces Naval ships, if there is an overt military intervention

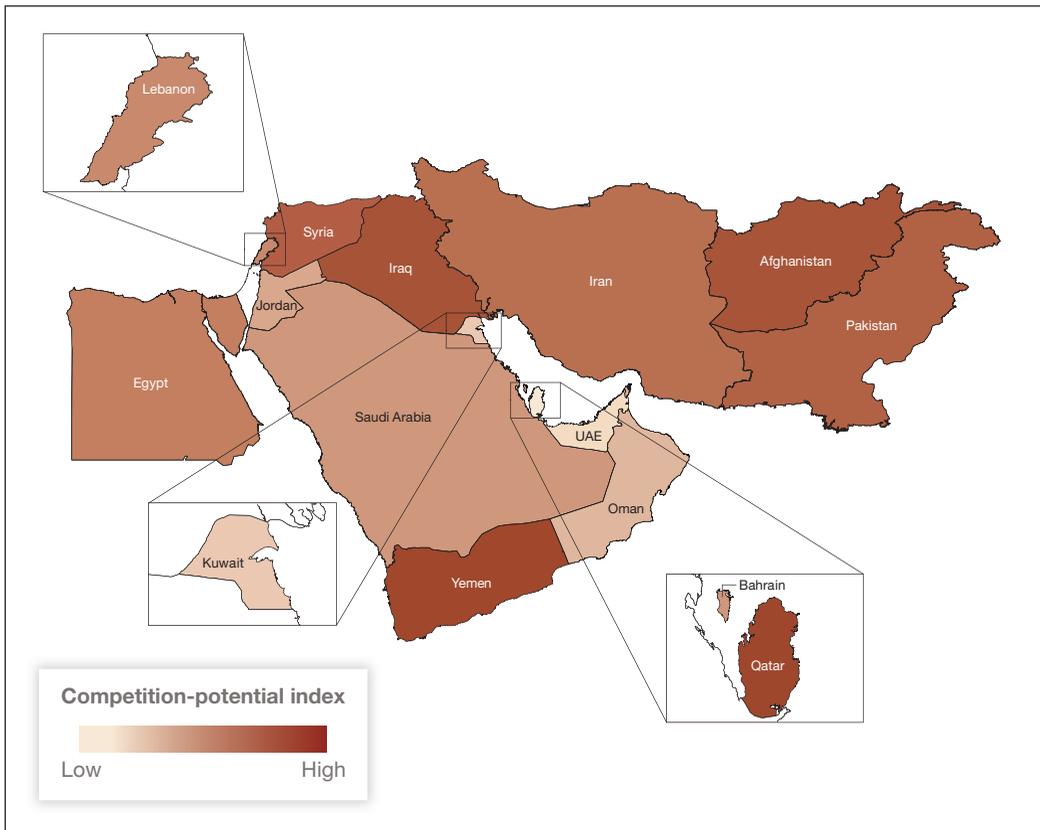
Potential Conflicts in the Middle East

Although the countries that we selected for analysis in the broader Middle East have unique dynamics, there are parallels between the prospects for great-power involvement in conflicts in this region and the prospects in Africa. As in Africa, the Middle East was historically a prime location for proxy wars and military interventions by competing powers throughout the Cold War—for example, when the Soviet Union and the United States backed opposing sides of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And, as we observed in Chapter One, Afghanistan is one of the most salient examples of zero-sum Cold War competition playing out in conflicts in secondary theaters. The future of great-power involvement in the Middle East, however, may not resemble these Cold War precedents very closely.

First, the potential for competition (see Figure 2.6 in Chapter Two) and the potential for conflict (Figure 3.2) do not necessarily overlap. Some of the most fragile states in the Middle East are not those where the United States, China, and Russia are most actively seeking influence but rather those in the midst of internal conflicts—for example, Yemen and Syria.

Second, even among the countries where competition and conflict potential do overlap more significantly—such as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan—Cold War–style conflicts are unlikely. As in Africa, the Middle East has significant natural resources (notably, energy resources), but it is not clear that any one power would risk an all-out war with a powerful competitor to control these resources.¹⁰⁰ Also as in Africa, many of the most likely plausible

FIGURE 3.2
Conflict Potential in the Middle East



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of the influence-seeking measures described in this report; for data sources, see Chapter One. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ In 2020, the United States was a net petroleum exporter. Moreover, over the past several decades, the United States has imported less of its energy from the Middle East and relied on supplies closer to home—most notably from Canada (U.S. Energy Information Administration, “Oil and Petroleum Products Explained,” webpage, July 26, 2021).

reasons for intervention revolve around international terrorism, which would—at least on the surface level—put the United States on the same side as China and Russia. And projecting power into parts of the Middle East would be difficult without at least some sort of tacit cooperation among the three powers. Indeed, we see these dynamics play out in two of the more likely cases for future proxy wars in the region—the combined Afghanistan and Pakistan scenario and the Iraq scenario.

Afghanistan and Pakistan

Afghanistan and Pakistan have long been battlegrounds for great-power competition and conflict, dating back to the 19th century Great Game between the British and Russian empires for influence in the region. Although Afghanistan has earned a reputation as the “graveyard of empires,” its location at the crossroads of the Middle East and Asia all but ensures continued interest from multiple great powers—including China, Russia, and India.¹⁰¹ As emphasized earlier, after the Soviet military intervention in Afghanistan, the United States backed the Afghan mujahedeen to counter its rival in the 1980s.¹⁰² More recently, Pakistan—and, to some extent, Iran and Russia—backed the Taliban in a proxy war against the United States and its Western allies in Afghanistan. Iran was reported to have provided the Taliban with arms, training, and assistance with recruitment; Russia very likely provided arms and equipment; and, most significantly, Pakistan provided the same kind of aid, as well as safe haven for fighters and leadership.¹⁰³ Both Afghanistan and Pakistan are also highly unstable; Afghanistan has endured a decades-long civil war, and Pakistan is the site of multiple military coups d’état. Given the region’s troubled history, one might expect Afghanistan and Pakistan to top the list of secondary locations for potential future conflicts among the great powers. This, however, may be less likely than the sheer potential for competition and conflict suggests.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Seth G. Jones, *In the Graveyard of Empires: America’s War in Afghanistan*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2010.

¹⁰² Crile, 2007.

¹⁰³ Jonathan Schroden, “Afghanistan’s Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment,” *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January 2021, p. 22. Since 2017, U.S. military officials, Afghan leaders, and members of the Taliban themselves have claimed, with some evidence, that Russia has been supplying the Taliban with weapons (see, for example, Theo Farrell, “Unbeatable: Social Resources, Military Adaptation, and the Afghan Taliban,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3, May 2018; Justin Rowlatt, “Russia ‘Arming the Afghan Taliban,’ Says US,” BBC News, March 23, 2018; and Nick Paton Walsh and Masoud Popalzai, “Videos Suggest Russian Government May Be Arming Taliban,” CNN, July 26, 2017). U.S. intelligence sources found evidence that Russian military intelligence may have been paying the Taliban bounties to kill U.S. soldiers; however, this evidence was not conclusive (Ken Dilanian and Mike Memoli, “Still No Proof That Russia Paid Taliban Bounties for Dead Americans,” NBC News, April 15, 2021).

¹⁰⁴ We note that the research for this project was largely completed prior to the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, which makes the prospects for a U.S. return to the country, for one, even less likely.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

We identified two distinct scenarios in which the United States, China, and Russia could once again become militarily involved in a conflict in Southwest Asia. The first, and more likely, scenario is that Afghanistan again becomes a home for international Islamic terrorism. After all, in the run-up to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Afghanistan—then run by the Taliban, a Sunni Islamist organization—provided refuge for al-Qaeda. While the Taliban has vowed that Afghanistan will not become a hub of international terrorism in the future, its takeover of the country in August 2021 and the subsequent attacks by the Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) suggest that a resurgence of terrorism is rather likely for four reasons.¹⁰⁵ First, there is an open question of whether the Taliban’s promises are made in good faith. Second, even if Taliban leaders were acting in good faith, it is unclear what all their fighters—who, for the past two decades, have known nothing but continuous war—do now that Kabul has fallen. As of early 2021, the Taliban fielded approximately 60,000 core frontline fighters, and upward of 90,000 Taliban-aligned militia members served as local security forces.¹⁰⁶ Third, in the aftermath of the United States’ seeming defeat at the hands of the Islamist organization, Afghanistan may become a beacon for other would-be jihadis, left homeless after the collapse of the Islamic State’s self-proclaimed caliphate. Finally, even if the Taliban remains domestically focused, there are other actors in Afghanistan that still maintain links to international terrorism. The semi-autonomous, extremist Haqqani Network reportedly maintains close ties with al-Qaeda.¹⁰⁷ The ISKP had an estimated strength of more than 1,000 fighters in 2019, and despite fighting both the Afghan security forces and the Taliban, ISKP maintained a steady drumbeat of low-level attacks in 2021, even prior to the deadly attack on the Kabul airport in August 2021.¹⁰⁸

A second potential conflict scenario would center on instability in Pakistan, which could be exacerbated by spillover from Afghanistan. Pakistan has flirted with democratic governance since its founding in 1947, but military-backed regimes repeatedly stalled and reversed its process of democratization. Since Pervez Musharraf—a retired four-star general who came to power amid a bloodless coup in 1999—resigned from the presidency in 2008 to avoid impeachment, Pakistan has maintained a nominally inclusive parliamentary democracy. How-

¹⁰⁵ Eltaf Najafizada, “Taliban Vow No Haven for Terrorists, Breaking with Own Past,” Bloomberg, August 17, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Schroden, 2021, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰⁷ Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team, *Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan*, New York: United Nations Security Council, S/2020/415, May 27, 2020, p. 3.

¹⁰⁸ Lead Inspector General, *Operation Freedom’s Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2021—March 31, 2021*, Washington, D.C.: Office of the U.S. Department of Defense Inspector General, U.S. Department of State Inspector General, and U.S. Agency for International Development Inspector General, 2021, p. 22.

ever, civil-military relations remain tense, and Pakistan struggles with Islamist insurgents and ethnic separatists—primarily Baluch separatists and the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan, which has fought the Pakistani government since 2007. The Pakistani military has degraded the group over the years, but the organization continues to field between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters and may be resurgent, having conducted increasingly sophisticated attacks and at an increased tempo in 2021.¹⁰⁹ The Taliban’s takeover of Kabul might further galvanize the Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan insurgency and provide the organization with an external base from which it can operate against Pakistani security forces. Should the security situation deteriorate, the Pakistani military might decide to once again seize control of the country via a coup d’état.

The destabilization of Pakistan because of an insurgency or a coup attempt could cause a host of international security problems, with implications for the interests of the United States, China, Russia, or all three. Pakistan is a nuclear power, and some estimates put its arsenal at 220–250 nuclear warheads by 2025.¹¹⁰ It borders China and India, a strategic U.S. partner and also a nuclear state. Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan has ties to al-Qaeda; has targeted Chinese nationals and Chinese interests in Pakistan in the past; and has maintained close ties to the ethnic Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a group that Beijing considers a major security threat.¹¹¹ And from a normative perspective, a military coup that overthrows a democratically elected Pakistani government would challenge the United States’ commitment to democracy. In short, for a host of reasons, the United States, China, and Russia might consider some degree of involvement in response to potential instability in Pakistan.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

In Afghanistan, the dominant U.S. strategic objective has more or less remained consistent since 2001—arguably even after the full U.S. withdrawal from the country in August 2021. In the 2021 U.S. Central Command Posture Statement, Gen Kenneth McKenzie, Jr., stated, “The U.S. strategic objective in Afghanistan . . . is to ensure Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the U.S. and our allies and partners.”¹¹²

Whether the United States would take military action in Afghanistan, and what form that action would assume, depends on the magnitude and nature of the terrorism threat emanating from the country. However, future U.S. military action in Afghanistan would almost certainly face strong headwinds. First, U.S. policymakers may be more reticent to deploy U.S.

¹⁰⁹ Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 301; and Amira Jadoon, *The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, No. 494, May 2021.

¹¹⁰ Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation, “Fact Sheet: Pakistan’s Nuclear Inventory,” March 2021.

¹¹¹ Frud Bezhan and Daud Khattak, “The Rise of the New Pakistani Taliban,” Gandhara, May 18, 2021.

¹¹² Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Commander, United States Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” U.S. Central Command, April 22, 2021.

military troops to the country, given that the most recent deployment resulted in a 20-year commitment and concluded in an unfavorable way. Second, even if U.S. policymakers were willing, the United States' NATO and other allies—which had been similarly invested in Afghanistan—may also be reticent to join another operation. Finally, projecting power into landlocked Afghanistan is now more difficult and requires Pakistan, Iran, or other countries neighboring Afghanistan to grant overflight rights or potentially ground access.¹¹³

Even if the United States did choose to get involved in Afghanistan again and could mitigate the operational challenges, whom the United States would back in the future is not certain. Most likely, the United States would view the Taliban-controlled government as a supporter of terrorism and would back its opponents. This result, though, is not guaranteed. Although the United States may not recognize the Taliban-controlled government in the near term, it left open the possibility of more-tactical coordination on items of mutual interest, including countering the Islamic State. During the evacuation of U.S. troops and other Americans from Afghanistan, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said that the Taliban leaders “have shown flexibility, and they have been businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort.”¹¹⁴ Similarly, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Mark Milley said it is “possible” that the United States would coordinate with the Taliban on counterterrorism efforts against the Islamic State in the future.¹¹⁵

The Pakistan scenario is somewhat less foreseeable than the Afghanistan scenario. A destabilization of Pakistan could threaten long-standing U.S. objectives of preventing nuclear proliferation to state or non-state actors in the region or a high-intensity conflict between Pakistan and India that could become an escalatory spiral.¹¹⁶ In the past, the United States has been willing to subordinate its other political goals, such as democracy promotion, to stability. The United States may be compelled to do so in this scenario and accept any actors with the ability to control the country and its nuclear arsenal, even if that means accepting a military coup. Theoretically, there are conditions that might change U.S. decisionmaking—for instance, if the military government that were to seize power threatened war with India, became even more aligned with Beijing such that it threatened the sea lines of communication in the Indian Ocean (by giving the PLA Navy access to bases), became so repressive that the United States simply could not look the other way, or lost its will or ability to control the country's nuclear arsenal. In other words, the conditions for Washington to intervene in a substantial way in Pakistan would have to be rather extreme.

¹¹³ Given its long-standing support for the Taliban, Pakistan is unlikely to grant U.S. forces overflight privileges. Furthermore, Russia is likely to oppose U.S. use of territory in former Soviet Central Asia, unless the security threat from Afghanistan to Russian territory and the Central Asian states becomes more acute.

¹¹⁴ Agence France-Presse, “US Says Taliban ‘Businesslike and Professional’ in Afghan Evacuation,” France 24, September 9, 2021b.

¹¹⁵ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “Milley: US Coordination with Taliban on Strikes ‘Possible,’” Associated Press, September 1, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Think-tank expert on South Asia, telephone interview with the authors, July 26, 2021.

China, by contrast, has more at stake in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Because China is the only one of the three powers that borders both countries in this scenario, conflict there can directly affect China's security. In particular, Afghanistan and Pakistan are key in China's fight against the "three evils" of extremism, terrorism, and separatism.¹¹⁷ Since the 2010s, the Xinjiang area has seen an increase in inter-ethnic violence, which Chinese officials blame on cross-border terror organizations and foreign extremist ideologies.¹¹⁸ Beijing recognizes both Pakistan and Afghanistan as current or potential sources of this instability. China also has limited economic interests in Afghanistan, which sits over deposits of copper and other minerals in high demand by China's manufacturing industry.¹¹⁹ China has much more at stake economically in Pakistan, including \$62 billion in planned investments in the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor that some have described as a Belt and Road Initiative "flagship" project.¹²⁰ Finally, China has strategic interests in Pakistan more broadly—both as a counterweight to India and for strategic access, as China seeks to bypass its reliance on the Strait of Malacca for its commerce and plans for a potential naval base in Gwadar.¹²¹

Although China would prefer to avoid military confrontation in this region, its significant stakes in Afghanistan and Pakistan likely ensure that it will need to remain engaged under these scenarios. It likely would support whichever group would help protect China's interests. In Afghanistan, this likely would mean working through the Taliban—as long as the Taliban prevented spillover of instability into western China.¹²² And in Pakistan, China would back any government—including a military one—provided it promised to secure Chi-

¹¹⁷ Siegfried O. Wolf, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020, p. 68; and Bai Lianlei, "The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands Its Membership: New Opportunities and Challenges" ["上海合作组织扩员: 新发展机遇与挑战"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], November 24, 2017.

¹¹⁸ Blaming unrest on foreign interference instead of domestic policy failures may be a cynical excuse by Beijing, and violence in Xinjiang may have as much to do with China's heavy-handed assimilationist or migratory policies as with any international extremist group. That being said, the Chinese have repeatedly blamed inter-ethnic violence on international extremists, and their actions show that they take this so-called threat seriously (Aysha Khan, "Uighurs Reflect on 2009 Violence That Set Off Chinese Crackdown," *Washington Post*, July 10, 2020; and Wolf, 2020, p. 70).

¹¹⁹ Azeta Hatef and Luwei Rose Luqiu, "Where Does Afghanistan Fit in China's Grand Project? A Content Analysis of Afghan and Chinese News Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative," *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 80, No. 6, 2018, p. 554.

¹²⁰ Kriti M. Shah, "CPEC: Building a Path for Pakistan's Financial Ruin," in Harsh V. Pant and Premesha Saha, eds., *Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative: Reach, Implications, Consequences*, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, February 2021, pp. 9–10; Lin Wang, "Opportunities and Challenges of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Implications for U.S. Policy and Pakistan," *Asia Pacific Bulletin*, No. 395, September 6, 2017; and China Power Team, "Does China Dominate Global Investment?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 28, 2021a.

¹²¹ Stephen Blank and Younkyoo Kim, "Making Sense of Russia's Policy in Afghanistan," *Russie.Nei.Reports*, No. 24, September 2018, p. 9.

¹²² Taliban diplomacy appears to be aimed at reassuring Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran that it will no longer pose a threat to their interests (Yuriy Lyamin, "Война и мирный процесс в Афганистане на фоне вывода

na's economic and strategic interests. China so far has been reticent about deploying forces outside of its borders. Yet, under new counterterrorism laws, Xi Jinping is legally authorized to declare war on terror, and PLA units are legally authorized to operate outside of China's borders in counterterrorism missions.¹²³ China might also be more likely to use force directly in Afghanistan or Pakistan than in most other scenarios addressed here.

Russia's interests in Afghanistan, and less so in Pakistan, also create a possibility for more-active military involvement. Russia's 2021 National Security Strategy explicitly calls out Afghanistan as a potential threat to Russia's defense.¹²⁴ Afghanistan's proximity to Russia and to former Soviet Central Asia, including three allies from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, ensures an enduring concern about the threat of terrorism with international reach and conflict spillover.¹²⁵ At the same time, since 2014, Russia has been increasingly motivated by ambitions to limit U.S. influence and prevent U.S. military presence in former Soviet Central Asia.¹²⁶ Yet Russia's own calamitous history of military intervention in Afghanistan would likely dissuade it from intervening directly. Russia has also shown a willingness to reconcile itself to the Taliban, largely because of the Taliban's reassurances that it will combat ISKP and harbors no designs to destabilize Central Asia.¹²⁷ As long as the Taliban's assurances hold, Russia is likely to continue at least tacit support for the Taliban, notwithstanding its continuing designation as a terrorist group under Russian law. However, the question of how Russia would act if a Collective Security Treaty Organization ally—notably, Tajikistan—were to request its aid is an open one.¹²⁸

In Pakistan, Russia's involvement has historically been limited, but the two countries' relationship has strengthened markedly since about 2010.¹²⁹ Russia's interests arise from Pakistan's significance to the balance of power in the region and the future of Afghanistan, as well as a more pragmatic interest in growing another arms market and growing economic

иностранных войск” [“The War and the Peace Process in Afghanistan Amidst the Withdrawal of the Foreign Troops”], *Экспорт вооружений* [*Arms Export*], Vol. 157, 2021, p. 54).

¹²³ Wolf, 2020, p. 65.

¹²⁴ President of Russia, “Стратегия национальной безопасности Российской Федерации” [“National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation”], July 2, 2021, point 37.

¹²⁵ See, for example, RIA Novosti, “Замир Кабулов: не стоит преувеличивать возможности РФ по влиянию на талибов” [“Zamir Kabulov: We Should Not Exaggerate the Ability of the Russian Federation to Influence the Taliban”], December 23, 2017; and Lyamin, 2021, p. 53.

¹²⁶ See, for example, Arkady Dubnov, “What Game Is Russia Playing in Afghanistan?” Al Jazeera, November 14, 2018.

¹²⁷ RIA Novosti, “Лавров назвал представителей талибов ‘вменяемыми людьми’” [“Lavrov Called the Representatives of the Taliban ‘The Sane People’”], July 23, 2021.

¹²⁸ Farangis Najibullah, “Tajikistan Concerned About Taliban Plots to Infiltrate from Afghanistan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 25, 2021.

¹²⁹ Feroz Hassan Khan, “Russia–Pakistan Strategic Relations: An Emerging Entente Cordiale,” *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, January 15, 2021.

interests. The cooling of U.S.-Pakistan relations created an opening for Russia to build influence in South Asia, and the warming of the U.S. relationship with India, a long-time Russian ally, created additional incentive for Russia to seek a rapprochement with Pakistan. The importance of strengthening ties with Pakistan magnified also with Pakistan's inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Russia views as an important multilateral mechanism to determine the future of the region. Whether any of these motives are sufficient cause for Russia to ever become militarily—as opposed to simply diplomatically—involved in Pakistan, however, remains uncertain.

In sum, in a conflict scenario in Afghanistan and Pakistan, were the United States to get involved, it would not necessarily end up opposing China- or Russia-supported proxies. China and Russia likely would continue to begrudgingly accept a Taliban government in Kabul, while the United States may be willing to cooperate with Kabul on counterterrorism, specifically against the Islamic State.¹³⁰ And in Islamabad, even a military coup would likely be at least tacitly accepted by all three powers, unless (1) the new military regime was so hostile to other U.S. interests that the United States would be willing to risk Pakistan losing control of its nuclear arsenal by backing an opposing, if democratic, faction or (2) the new military regime presented a high risk of escalating a conflict with India or of proliferating nuclear weapons. For proxy conflict to pit great powers against each other in Afghanistan or Pakistan, either conditions or U.S. views of China's and Russia's involvement in the region likely would have to shift in the direction of a zero-sum view of competition.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

In Afghanistan, China's and Russia's (1) security and (2) strategic and geopolitical interests are in tension. Both powers are apprehensive about Islamic extremism and Taliban rule, but neither China nor Russia is particularly interested in having a U.S. military presence back in this region. Indeed, when the Taliban went on the offensive as the United States withdrew its forces during July 2021, Russia offered mixed messages about whether it would welcome renewed U.S. presence in Central Asia. Russia publicly warned the United States against deploying troops in the former Soviet Central Asian states, yet only days later, the press reported that Russia offered the United States access to its bases for information-sharing on Afghanistan.¹³¹ For Russia, a military intervention in Afghanistan would be feasible because of Russia's bases in Central Asia and the likelihood of gaining access in neighboring areas.¹³²

¹³⁰ Of course, if the United States were worried about terrorism from a group that the Taliban supported—or at least was not hostile to—then the chances that the United States would support an Afghan opposition group would increase. If the same threat of terrorism were more concerning to the United States than it were to Russia or China, then the chances that the United States would end up on the side opposing China and Russia would increase.

¹³¹ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Against US Troops in Central Asia Near Afghanistan," Associated Press, July 13, 2021; and Alexander Marrow, "Russia Offered U.S. Use of Central Asia Bases for Afghan Intel—Paper," Reuters, July 17, 2021b.

¹³² Barnett Rubin, "Afghanistan and Considerations of Supply," *War on the Rocks*, July 11, 2017.

China also has the option to intervene in Afghanistan if it chose to do so. Aside from its bordering the country directly, China is rumored to want to expand its military presence there, and news reports suggest that it was interested in taking over the Bagram Air Base when U.S. forces left.¹³³ Still, other reports have China financing a Tajik police special forces outpost just over the border in Tajikistan, although China denied that any of its own forces would be stationed at the facility.¹³⁴

However, mixed interests, combined with the historical shadow of previous engagements in Afghanistan, likely mean that all three powers prefer a covert, or at most a limited, military response supplemented with indirect support. Such a response might entail drones (by the United States or China) and a handful of special operations and intelligence operators to handle renewed terrorism threats, with potential PMSC activity, especially from the Russian side. Such a response would more readily allow the sides to engage with unsavory parties (such as the Taliban), as well as with each other. And all three sides would likely seek to avoid being sucked into another protracted and potentially resource-intensive military campaign.

How a conflict in Pakistan would unfold and draw in any of the three powers is a more difficult question. China certainly has the ability to intervene overtly if it chose to do so. As noted earlier, China is rumored to be eyeing a naval base in Gwadar, Pakistan, to help secure Belt and Road Initiative investments.¹³⁵ Even without a formal base in the country, however, the PLA maintains several large combat formations in its Western Theater Command that could intervene in any conflict in Afghanistan or Pakistan without seriously weakening border protection units.¹³⁶ The PLA Air Force also operates several large air bases in the region.¹³⁷ PLA units also engage in relatively frequent, large-scale training operations in the region with Russian and other Central Asian forces as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.¹³⁸ Russia's options are more limited, but it still has significant presence in Central Asia. It is thus possible that both China and Russia have the posture and capabilities to provide overt military assistance to Pakistan in the event of a crisis, should they choose to do so. The United States arguably has the weakest hand to play from a posture angle (although, presumably, it could support its efforts from its bases in the Middle East), and, for reasons mentioned in the previous section, it has significant political and strategic reasons for avoid-

¹³³ Paul D. Shinkman, "China Weighing Occupation of Former U.S. Air Base at Bagram: Sources," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 7, 2021.

¹³⁴ Nazarali Pirnazarov and Olzhas Auyezov, "China to Build Outpost for Tajikistan Special Forces Near Afghan Border," Reuters, October 28, 2021.

¹³⁵ H. I. Sutton, "China's New High-Security Compound in Pakistan May Indicate Naval Plans," *Forbes*, June 2, 2020.

¹³⁶ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 43.

¹³⁷ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 43.

¹³⁸ Matthew Southerland, Will Green, and Sierra Janik, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 12, 2020, p. 13.

ing direct involvement. Consequently, if it wanted to support a pro-U.S. (or at least an anti-China) faction, it may choose to do so covertly.

Ultimately, in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, there is a low but non-zero possibility that the United States, China, and Russia end up backing opposing sides. It is more likely, however, that they face deconfliction challenges as they work to achieve similar aims—albeit with very different approaches (Table 3.6). In Afghanistan, the three powers share a mutual interest in countering terrorism, although they differ in how best to do it, and they may evolve to be concerned about different aspects of the threat. In Pakistan, China has more at stake than the United States does, and that could be a source of leverage, but it is not clear that the United States would use it—especially if it could mean instability in Pakistan and loose nuclear weapons.

Iraq

Like Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iraq has endowments and politics that make it one of the more plausible sites for a future conflict among great powers in a secondary theater. With the fifth-largest proven oil reserves, amounting to more than 8 percent of the world's total, and situated near the center of the Middle East, Iraq is both a strategically and economically important country.¹³⁹ Starting with the 1991 Gulf War and particularly after the 2003 Iraq War, the country has faced ongoing instability, as Islamic jihadist terrorism and ethnorifts between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups have boiled over into civil war. And the great powers have shown a willingness to intervene in the region. The United States has militarily engaged in Iraq continuously since 1991, and Russia has a long-standing military presence in neighboring Syria. And yet, on closer examination, the chances of great powers backing proxies on opposite sides in Iraq are not very high.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

Regional experts and analyses reveal at least two plausible paths that might plausibly lead the United States, China, and Russia to get involved in Iraq. The first scenario, the one most likely to draw in the competing powers, would be a return of the Islamic State. Since its 2003 invasion, the United States has continuously battled Islamic terrorism in the country. U.S. forces managed to tamp down the violent members of al-Qaeda in Iraq, thanks in part to agreements with the Sunni Arab tribes during the 2007 Anbar Awakening. However, the U.S. withdrawal of forces in 2011 and the subsequent actions of Iraq's Shia-dominated government, headed by Nouri al-Maliki, led to a reemergence of the terrorist group in the even more virulent form of the Islamic State.¹⁴⁰ In 2014, militants from the Islamic State captured large

¹³⁹ Samuel Stebbins, "These 15 Countries, as Home to Largest Reserves, Control the World's Oil," *USA Today*, May 22, 2019.

¹⁴⁰ Ryan N. Mannina, "How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Led to the Rise of ISIS," *Small Wars Journal*, December 23, 2018.

TABLE 3.6
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Security and geopolitical:	Strategic and geopolitical:	Strategic and geopolitical:
Afghanistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter Chinese or Russian military presence and support to the Taliban 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pursue economic development of western provinces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent the return of U.S. military presence
Pakistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter Chinese or Russian support to a destabilizing Pakistani regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance against India Establish strategic access to the Indian Ocean 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Balance against U.S. influence (limited)
Internal reasons	Security and humanitarian:	Security and economic:	Security and humanitarian:
Afghanistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent al-Qaeda and ISKP resurgence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent Uighur separatist presence Counter ISKP and other international terrorism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter ISKP and other international terrorism Prevent destabilization of Central Asian states
Pakistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent regional escalation and nuclear proliferation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent attacks on or threats against equities of the Belt and Road Initiative and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor 	
Whom might each power support?			
Afghanistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-Taliban groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taliban Ethnic armed groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Taliban Ethnic armed groups
Pakistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pro-democracy Pakistani groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pakistani military 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pakistani military
What form would support likely take?			
Afghanistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and covert 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and covert 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and covert Potentially overt through the Collective Security Treaty Organization
Pakistan scenario	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and covert 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and overt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect and overt
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Military equipment ISR Special operations forces (advise and assist) Air strike assets Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training Military equipment ISR Special operations forces (advise and assist) Economic aid Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training Military equipment Special operations forces (advise and assist)

swaths of the northern half of the country and came to the outskirts of Baghdad before being rolled back and ultimately defeated by an international coalition led by the United States, Iraqi security forces, and Iran-backed militias.¹⁴¹

Although the Islamic State had lost most of its territory by 2017, its potential resurgence—or that of similar terrorist groups—remains quite possible.¹⁴² As of 2021, there were still an estimated 10,000 members active in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴³ The Islamic State remnants continue to regularly target U.S. personnel and facilities with improvised explosive device, rocket, and explosive-laden drone attacks, and these fighters have contributed to ongoing internal displacement of people within Iraq.¹⁴⁴ More than 3 million Iraqis have been displaced since 2014, providing a breeding ground for future terrorism.¹⁴⁵ And ethno-sectarian tensions—with persecutions of ethnic and religious minorities, including Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans—persist.¹⁴⁶ In light of these conditions, Iraq could very well face another terrorism threat on a scale that compels the international community's attention. Continued U.S. withdrawal from the country, paradoxically, could contribute to an Islamic State resurgence, in an analogue to the 2011 troop withdrawal that facilitated the group's rise.¹⁴⁷

In a second, not wholly independent, scenario, the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran-backed proxies escalates—either through an emboldened Iran launching more proxy attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq or through U.S. entanglement in a broader conflict between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors. Iraq has been on the front lines of the Sunni versus Shia divide since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s (under the leadership of Sunni adherent Saddam Hussein), feuding at various points with both Iran and U.S. partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After U.S. forces invaded Iraq in 2003, Iran backed Shia militia groups in Iraq, and after the 2014 rise of the Islamic State, these militia groups—particularly Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF)—took on a newfound importance. Numbering between 45,000 and 142,000 fighters, these paramilitary forces were trained and

¹⁴¹ Becca Wasser, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jeffrey Martini, Alexandra T. Evans, Karl P. Mueller, Nathaniel Edenfield, Gabrielle Tarini, Ryan Haberman, and Jalen Zeman, *The Air War Against the Islamic State: The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A388-1, 2021.

¹⁴² Cameron Glenn, Mattisan Rowan, John Caves, and Garrett Nada, “Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State,” Wilson Center, October 28, 2019.

¹⁴³ Meghann Myers, “‘We’re Going to Stay in Iraq,’ Says Top US Middle East Commander,” *Military Times*, April 22, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Daniel Depetris, “It’s Time for the U.S. to Leave Iraq,” *National Review*, May 12, 2021.

¹⁴⁵ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Iraq: Background and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45025, November 21, 2017, p. 2.

¹⁴⁶ Maxim A. Suchkov, “Between Baghdad and Erbil: Russia’s Balancing Act in Iraq,” London School of Economics, May 3, 2018.

¹⁴⁷ Ben Connable, James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Raphael S. Cohen, and Becca Wasser, *Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Strategic Risks and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-362-OSD, 2020, p. 3.

advised by the Iranian Quds Force, and although they were incorporated into the Iraqi Security Forces in 2018, they retain some degree of autonomy and ties to Iran.¹⁴⁸ Iran's increasing political and, through the PMF, military power in Iraq does not sit well with Iraq's Sunni and Kurdish populations, its Sunni Arab neighbors, or the United States.

At the time of writing, the United States is engaged in a low-level proxy war with Iran, its primary competitor in Iraq. In February and June 2021, the United States conducted air strikes against facilities used by Iran-backed Shia militias in response to rocket and UAV attacks that these groups launched on U.S. personnel and facilities at Erbil International Airport, Baghdad International Airport, and Ain al-Asad Air Base.¹⁴⁹ In the context of a broader conflict involving the United States, the Sunni-Arab states, and Iran, Iraq is likely to become one potential battlefield. If so, it could draw in the three great powers—the United States because it is in Iraq already and China and Russia for reasons discussed in the next section.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

Of the three great powers, the one whose willingness to intervene in Iraq is perhaps the least in question is the United States. After all, it has done so repeatedly over the past three decades. And it remains engaged there today as part of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, the global coalition comprising “77 nations and 5 international organizations who are operating in Iraq at the request of the Government of Iraq and in Syria in support of a lasting political settlement based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254.”¹⁵⁰ Although successive U.S. administrations have expressed an interest in withdrawing from Iraq and the Middle East in general, the United States retains an interest in both countering terrorism and containing Iranian proxies, which threaten key U.S. allies and partners throughout the region.

By contrast, China's willingness to intervene in either the Islamic State or the Iran proxy war scenario may be the most in question. China has a security interest in defeating international Islamic terrorism and commitment to protecting Chinese state-owned companies and citizens in Iraq, but China so far has been content to avoid military entanglements in Iraq or elsewhere in the region.¹⁵¹ The threat of international terrorism has been insufficient to motivate military action or even substantial indirect support to actors combating the Islamic State in Syria. Although there were reports that China deployed special forces detachments to Syria

¹⁴⁸ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, Brussels, Middle East Report No. 188, July 30, 2018.

¹⁴⁹ Jeff Schogol, “US Strikes in Syria and Iraq Show the Evolving Fight Against ISIS and Now Iran,” *Task and Purpose*, June 28, 2021.

¹⁵⁰ Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, “History of CJTF-OIR,” September 3, 2020.

¹⁵¹ Han Xiaoming [韩晓明], Qing Mu [青木], Wang Panpan [王盼盼], Hou Tao [候涛], Liu Yupeng [柳玉鹏], “In Iraq, over 10,000 Chinese Citizens Participate in Rapid Rebuilding” [“在伊中国人人数上万 中国早已参与伊拉克重建”], *Global Times* [环球时报], December 23, 2015.

to monitor and fight Uighur militants, whose return to Central Asia and spread of extremism China fears, those reports remain unconfirmed.¹⁵²

In the future, however, China may be somewhat more willing to act. During the 2014 Islamic State offensive, the PLA's inability to meaningfully contribute to the defense of Chinese citizens in Iraq was a source of some consternation to some in Beijing, leading to calls for improved overseas operations.¹⁵³ China also has substantial economic interests in Iraq. Although its ranking has shifted over the years, Iraq has consistently provided about 8–10 percent of China's imports since 2014.¹⁵⁴ China is betting on Iraqi oil over the long term too. In November 2020, China's state-backed Zhenhua Oil took the unusual step of agreeing to pay \$2 billion up front on a five-year oil supply contract.¹⁵⁵ Iraq, however, backed out of the deal, as rising oil prices led it to rethink the idea of allowing China to lock in low oil prices with guaranteed, prepaid purchases.¹⁵⁶ Although oil dominates Chinese trade with and investment in Iraq, Chinese companies have also made investments in telecommunications, power generation, and other fields.¹⁵⁷ Whether this is sufficient motivation for China to get involved and overcome its fear of becoming embroiled in a resource-draining quagmire, however, remains far from certain.¹⁵⁸

Russia, for its part, would likely have strong reasons to become involved in Iraq, although what shape that involvement would take would depend on how the conflict unfolded. Russia intervened in Syria in 2015 to stabilize the Bashar al-Assad regime, but Moscow's interests in Syria were greater and ties to it deeper than is the case in Iraq. Nevertheless, Russia has been working with Iraq, Iran, and Syria to coordinate the fight against the Islamic State across the region.¹⁵⁹ Moreover, Russia is very much present in Iraq in less-overt ways. Russia's top

¹⁵² Alexander J. G. Simoes and César Hidalgo, "The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development," in *Scalable Integration of Analytics and Visualization: Papers from the 2011 AAAI Workshop*, San Francisco, Calif.: AAAI Press, 2011; and Logan Pauley and Jesse Marks, "Is China Increasing Its Military Presence in Syria?" *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2018.

¹⁵³ Liu Kun [刘昆], "Should We Take America's Gun? An Analysis of Chinese Military Interference in Iraq" ["接过美国的枪? 中国武力干涉伊拉克前景分析"], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 19, 2014.

¹⁵⁴ All trade statistics are from the Observatory of Economic Complexity, undated-a; and Observatory of Economic Complexity, "Iraq," webpage, undated-b, based on Simoes and Hidalgo, 2011.

¹⁵⁵ Dania Saadi and Oceana Zhou, "Iraq Fully Cancels Pre-Paid Oil Deal with China's Zhenhua, Sells Crude to Other Customers," S&P Global, June 23, 2021.

¹⁵⁶ Interestingly, this contract included the stipulation that Zhenhua could then re-sell this Iraqi oil (at least some of which had already been paid for in the \$2 billion prepayment) to third parties, possibly diverting it from China altogether (Saadi and Zhou, 2021; and Khalid Al Ansary, "Iraq Decides Against Oil-Supply Deal with China's Zhenhua," Bloomberg, February 21, 2021).

¹⁵⁷ Xiaoming et al., 2015; American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated.

¹⁵⁸ Liu Kun, 2014; and Eyck Feymann, "Influence Without Entanglement in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, February 25, 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Nicholas Muller, "Nicaragua's Chinese-Financed Canal Project Still in Limbo," *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2019.

energy companies (Lukoil, Rosneft, Gazprom-Neft, and Bashneft) have invested more than \$13 billion in Iraq's energy sector.¹⁶⁰ Iraq was also one of the top importers of Soviet arms and is becoming an increasingly important destination for Russian arms sales today.¹⁶¹ Between 2015 and 2019, Russian arms sales to Iraq increased by 212 percent from the 2010 to 2014 baseline, making Iraq one of the two top recipients of Russian weaponry.¹⁶² Finally, Russia's ambitions to build influence in the region and challenge U.S. dominance would begin to address its security and economic concerns. Russia views the 2003 invasion of Iraq as an egregious instance of self-serving U.S. interventionism that Moscow later vowed to resist—and one that removed Russia's long-term client.¹⁶³ In short, Russia has considerable reasons to intervene in theory; and if the United States continues to withdraw, and Iraq invites Russia's participation, Russia would have a convenient opportunity to do so.

The question for all three powers, of course, would be which actor to support if they did choose to get involved. Faced with a resurgence of the Islamic State, all three powers likely would support the Iraqi government and associated anti-Islamic State factions. The United States may perhaps be more willing to back Kurdish groups, and China and Russia would be more willing to at least tacitly support the PMF and other Iran-backed elements.¹⁶⁴ Consequently, like in the other terrorism scenarios, the United States, China, and Russia would be at least notionally on the same side, albeit with some differences, causing deconfliction challenges but not necessarily risking escalation to head-to-head engagement.

Escalation of the U.S.-Iran proxy war, which is rooted in a broader conflict between Iran and Arab states, creates more of a possibility to split the three powers. China and Russia, after all, have friendlier relationships with Iran than with the United States, and both have been cultivating relations with the PMF for years. At the same time, they would likely be very reluctant to decisively and overtly side with Iran-backed proxies in such a conflict. For China's part, only about 10 percent of its oil comes from Iraq, and more than 40 percent comes from the broader Persian Gulf area from both Iran and Arab states, giving China a good reason to stay out of regional conflicts.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, as we find in our analysis of China's approaches

¹⁶⁰ The Russian investment value is as stated by Lavrov (John C. K. Daly, "Russia and Iraq Deepen Energy, Military Ties," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 175, December 9, 2020; see also "Russia Promises Iraq \$20 Billion in Investments," *UA Wire*, February 11, 2020).

¹⁶¹ TASS, "Военно-техническое сотрудничество России и Ирака. Досье" ["Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and Iraq. A Dossier"], May 20, 2015.

¹⁶² Wezeman et al., 2020, p. 4.

¹⁶³ See Rumer, 2019. As noted in Appendix C, Moscow warned against such regime-change scenarios in 2011: As Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov put it, referring to the Western intervention in Libya, "As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Al Nahyan," November 1, 2011).

¹⁶⁴ Ruslan Mamedov, "After the Caliphate: The Prospects of Russia-Iraq Relations," Russian International Affairs Council, Working Paper No. 46, February 1, 2019, p. 10.

¹⁶⁵ Observatory of Economic Complexity, undated-a.

to foreign conflicts, China is considerably more likely to back governments than to support armed proxy groups, at least where the governments are not on the verge of collapse.¹⁶⁶

Russia's relationship with Iran is complex, and, notwithstanding the cooperation between the two countries, their interests often diverge.¹⁶⁷ On the one hand, Russia has been willing to sell Iran weapons, including such sensitive weaponry as the S-300 air defense system, and has expressed willingness to sell equipment that is even more advanced in the future.¹⁶⁸ And high-ranking Russian diplomats have engaged with the PMF, largely driven by Russia's interest in leveraging the group's ties to Assad to help regulate violence on the border between Syria and Iraq.¹⁶⁹ Russia might view backing Iran as a chance to impose costs on the United States; at the same time, however, Russia wants to cast itself as an alternative to the United States and an honest broker in the Middle East. Its own balancing of relations with Iran and its rivals in the region (Israel and the Gulf countries) and concerns about maintaining gains in Syria likely preclude Russia from taking too overt of a role in a regional conflict and siding decisively with Iran's proxies.¹⁷⁰ Russia's official position is likely well reflected by Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov, who assured his Iraqi counterparts in 2019 that, were Iraq to be caught in the crossfire of an escalating U.S.-Iran conflict, Russia would focus on protecting the stability of Iraq.¹⁷¹ In sum, were Russia, China, or both to decide to get involved in such a conflict, they might supply Iran with weaponry, including potentially high-end systems, and lend some sort of indirect but largely covert support to the PMF (or other Iran-backed elements).

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

If the United States did get involved in another iteration of conflict in Iraq, there is now considerable precedent for what such an operation would look like. A domestic political aversion to large ground wars, especially in the Middle East, may limit the United States' footprint in Iraq. However, as demonstrated most recently in Operation Inherent Resolve, U.S. forces are

¹⁶⁶ See Appendix B.

¹⁶⁷ Indeed, Russia's offer to sell Iraq its S-400 missile defense system three months after Iran launched missiles at the U.S. Ain al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq in retaliation for the killing of the chief of Iran's Quds Force is interpreted by some to be a tacit rebuke to Iran, weakening its ability to target U.S. bases in Iraq (Arman Mahmoudian, "Russia and Iran's Relations in Iraq," *Middle East Centre Blog*, July 2, 2021).

¹⁶⁸ "Russian Ambassador Says 'No Problem' Selling S-400 to Iran When Arms Ban Expires," *Times of Israel*, October 4, 2020.

¹⁶⁹ Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Strategy in the Central African Republic," Royal United Services Institute, February 12, 2021.

¹⁷⁰ Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russia's Middle Eastern Policy: Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives*, Warsaw: Ośrodek studiów Wschodnich, Centre for Eastern Studies, No. 71, December 2017; and Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, "About CJTF-OIR," webpage, undated.

¹⁷¹ Elnar Baynazarov, "Девять кругов Багдада: протесты в Ираке не повредили компаниям Из РФ" ["The Nine Circles of Baghdad: The Protests in Iraq Did Not Harm Companies from Russia"], *Izvestiia*, October 8, 2019.

proficient at conducting counterterrorism campaigns as part of a large international coalition primarily relying on airpower—providing intelligence and strike capacity—with a handful of advisers on the ground advising Iraqi security forces and other regional partners, such as the Kurds.¹⁷² Were the United States to be drawn in by Iranian attacks on U.S. interests in the context of a broader Iran–Sunni Arab proxy war, the force protection considerations would be different, given that Iran is a more militarily formidable opponent than any Islamic terrorist group has been. Nonetheless, the same basic airpower and special operations–centric model of involvement would likely still apply.

Meanwhile, Russia has the ability to project power into Iraq. It fought a blunt but nonetheless effective air war in Syria and is improving its military bases there, and the Mozdok Air Base in southern Russia in theory could enable Russian forces to project airpower into neighboring Iraq.¹⁷³ Whether Russia would opt for an overt use of force is questionable. As discussed in the previous section, any overt Russian intervention in a conflict between Iran and Arab states would risk jeopardizing Russia’s overarching goals in the region. Overt Russian involvement in countering a resurgence of the Islamic State would be more plausible, but this also carries other risks for Moscow—particularly if the United States already is operating in the same area. Moreover, the factors enabling Russian military operations were uniquely conducive in Syria, and Russia would likely face greater challenges in any other theater.¹⁷⁴

More likely, Russia would opt for an indirect and potentially covert response. Several analysts have suggested that Russia would exploit the opportunity to fill the void in Iraq (and elsewhere in the Middle East) should the United States leave voluntarily or be pushed out by the Iraqi government; thus, Russia might try to capitalize on any potential crisis to hasten a U.S. withdrawal.¹⁷⁵ Russia could back the PMF behind the scenes, helping ramp up the pressure on U.S. forces, although it would likely temper such support with support for the Iraqi government. Moscow could also send Russian PMSCs to Iraq, as in Syria, ostensibly to conduct counterterrorism efforts but in practice to also pressure U.S. forces. Russian PMSCs received their earliest experiences in Iraq, and members of smaller groups, such as Feraks, Redut-Antiterror, and the Moran Security Group, were reportedly operating in Iraq in more-recent years.¹⁷⁶ Such covert support could give Russia leverage in the conflict while also providing it with some degree of plausible deniability.

¹⁷² See Wasser et al., 2021.

¹⁷³ See Michael Simpson, Adam R. Grissom, Christopher A. Mouton, John P. Godges, and Russell Hanson, *Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A1170-1, 2022.

¹⁷⁴ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019; Simpson et al., 2022.

¹⁷⁵ See, for example, Robyn Dixon, “Russia Stands to Benefit as Middle East Tensions Spike After Soleimani Killing,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2020.

¹⁷⁶ Anna Maria Dyner, “The Role of Private Military Contractors in Russian Foreign Policy,” Polish Institute of International Affairs, Bulletin No. 64, May 4, 2018; and Irek Murtazin, “Служу Отчеству! Дорого” [“Serving the Motherland! Dearly”], *Новая Газета* [*New Gazette*], January 21, 2018.

China's role in Iraq would likely be the most restrained of the three powers. As described previously, China has shown little interest in overt uses of force in Iraq. Despite China and Iran's recent 25-year, \$400 billion deal, there are limits to cooperation between those two countries.¹⁷⁷ And although Iran and the PMF may want a closer relationship with China, China has good reasons to stay out of a broader Iran-Arab proxy war that could only disrupt energy supplies.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, unlike the United States and Russia, China lacks overseas bases nearby that could support operations. China allegedly tried to build a military facility in the UAE, but the project was halted amid U.S. pressure.¹⁷⁹ Although China may try to restart this project or seek alternatives in the future, China's closest base to date is in Djibouti, almost 1,500 miles from Baghdad. China could evacuate its citizens in the event of a crisis, but overt Chinese military intervention seems highly unlikely. More likely, China will play a role from the sidelines—by providing diplomatic, financial, and potentially military equipment support—and will back whichever side seems most likely to secure China's economic interests but will stay mostly removed from the actual fight.

Ultimately, as summarized in Table 3.7, Iraq scenarios may resemble those in Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East. In the counterterrorism scenario, the United States, China, and Russia would likely find themselves working to similar ends, even if backing a somewhat different set of actors. In the escalation of a U.S.-Iran proxy war in the context of a broader Iran-Arab state conflict, China and Russia have strategic and economic interests in staying out of the fray. Thus, as in previous scenarios, challenges in a future conflict in Iraq are more likely to entail deconfliction (as two or all three powers operate in a relatively narrow space) and subversion behind the scenes but less likely to entail a risk of escalation into direct conflict between competing great powers on opposite sides.

¹⁷⁷ Wang Xiyue, "China Won't Rescue Iran," *Foreign Policy*, December 18, 2020.

¹⁷⁸ Think-tank expert on non-state actors, telephone interview with the authors, July 27, 2021.

¹⁷⁹ Katie Bo Lillis, Natasha Bertrand, and Kylie Atwood, "Construction Halted on Secret Project at Chinese Port in UAE After Pressure from US, Officials Say," CNN, November 19, 2021.

TABLE 3.7
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Iraq

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Counter Iranian aggression and influence • Maintain status in Iraq 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase influence in Iraq and the region 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase or maintain status in Iraq and the region • Challenge U.S. dominance • Manage the relationship with Iran
Internal reasons	Security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent an Islamic State resurgence • Prevent Iran-backed PMF attacks on U.S. personnel and facilities 	Security and economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent an Islamic State resurgence • Protect the interests of Chinese firms and citizens in Iraq 	Security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prevent an Islamic State resurgence
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqi government and security forces • Kurds • Sunni tribal leaders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqi government forces • PMF • Potentially other Iran-backed proxies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraqi government forces • PMF • Potentially other Iran-backed proxies
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect overt support to Iraqi security forces and other counter-Islamic State factions • Direct military intervention (air strikes against the Islamic State, the PMF, or Iranian targets) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect overt (to government) and covert (to PMF) support • Low likelihood of direct military intervention (noncombatant evacuation operations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect overt (to government) and covert (to PMF) support • Low likelihood of direct military intervention possible (air strikes)
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Military equipment • ISR • Special operations forces (advise and assist) • Air strike assets • Logistics support • Intelligence collection and analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training and advising • Military equipment • ISR • Special operations forces • Naval forces (ships, naval aviation) • Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMSCs • Training • Military equipment • ISR • Air strike assets • Intelligence collection and analysis

Potential Conflicts in Latin America

As is the case in the other theaters, some of the Latin American states that figure prominently in the competition narrative, such as Brazil, are relatively stable (see Figure 3.3), and the mere degree of great-power involvement and the resulting potential for competition are not sufficient to indicate where future great-power conflicts might occur.

In contrast with the other two theaters, however, some of the more plausible conflict scenarios we examined in Latin America exhibit some features that potentially make them more likely to result in direct conflict between great powers. First, unlike in the Africa and Middle East scenarios, the potential triggers for intervention do not revolve around the threat of Islamic terrorism, where the United States, China, and Russia at least theoretically find common cause. Rather, the triggers in the Latin America scenarios focus on instability in authoritarian regimes with pro-democracy movements, where the United States and the other two powers would potentially back opposing sides. Second, more so than in the other theaters, events in Latin America affect the U.S. homeland—be it through immigration flows, drug-trafficking, and even potentially terrorism. Although U.S. decisionmakers deem the theater secondary in some senses, its geographic proximity to the United States means that Washington must be concerned that China and Russia could attempt to use the theater as leverage, if only to reduce U.S. presence in their own respective parts of the world. These dynamics are manifest in the cases examined here—the combined Venezuela and Colombia scenario and the Nicaragua scenario.

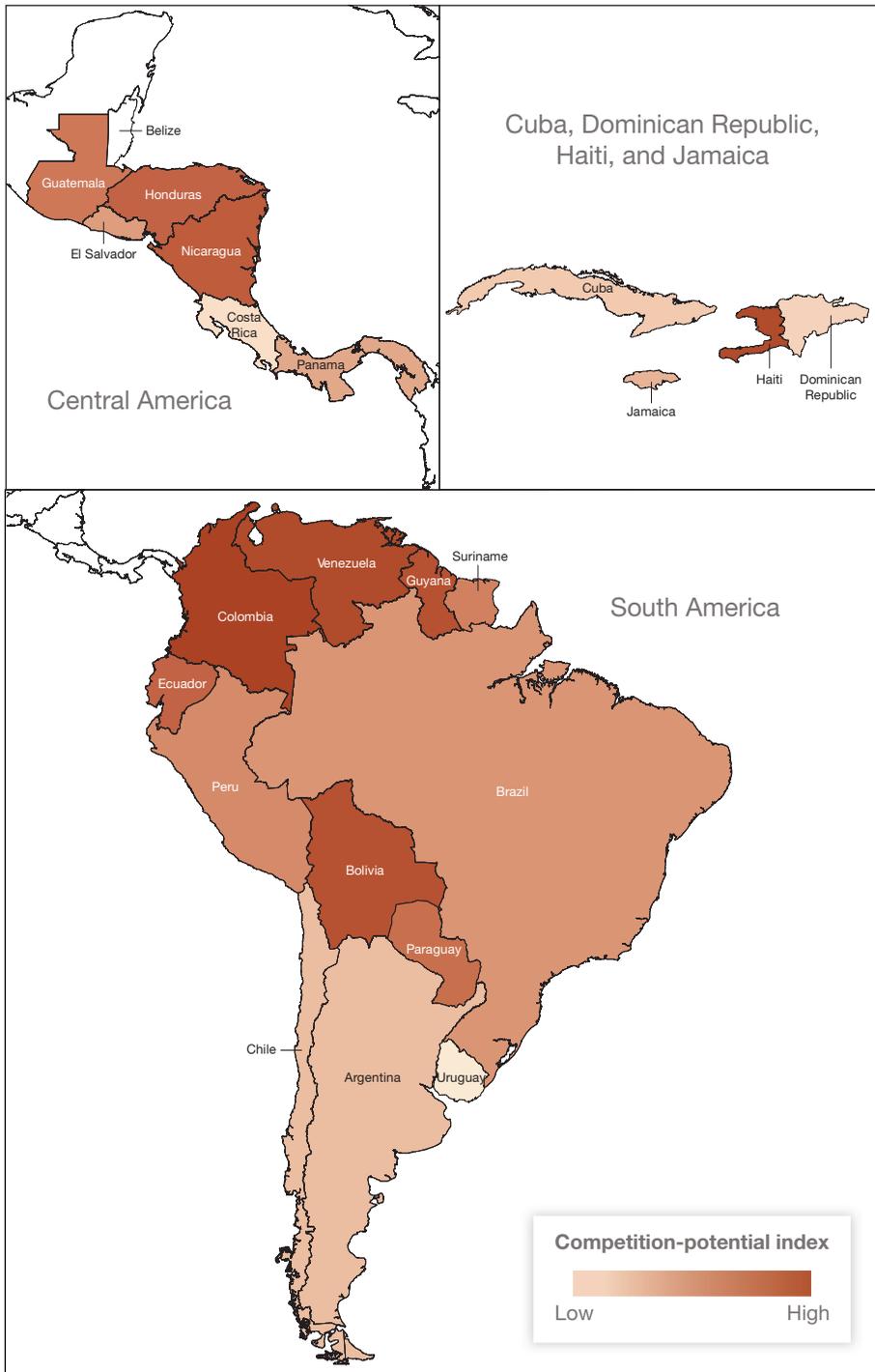
Venezuela and Colombia

Venezuela and Colombia are among the more plausible locations for a proxy or limited war in Latin America. Venezuela—under Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro—has developed warm relations with both China and Russia, while Colombia is one of the longest-established democracies and a long-standing U.S. security partner in the region. The region has been mired in internal conflict for decades, fueled by left- and right-wing insurgent groups and drug-trafficking. During the Cold War, as well as in the decades after its end, the United States supported the Colombian government as it battled left-wing guerrilla groups, including the Soviet- and Cuban-backed Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). And although the Cold War may be long over, turmoil in Venezuela and the legacy of internal conflicts in Colombia may mean that this region could once again erupt into conflict with the involvement of external powers.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

One potential scenario in Venezuela and one in Colombia, based on the most-salient sources of conflict, might lead to a renewed proxy war. The two cases are distinct but interdependent because of possible mutual interferences and conflict spillover across the border. Of the two, in our assessment, the scenario centered on Venezuela would more plausibly draw in rival great powers. It would produce a proxy conflict reminiscent of the Cold War, with the United

FIGURE 3.3
Conflict Potential in Latin America



SOURCE: Authors' analysis of Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020; Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated. Base map: Esri, Garmin, and CIA, 2019.

States supporting a pro-democracy movement and Russia and China backing a notionally left-leaning regime. Since Maduro became president after Chávez's death in 2013, Venezuela has been plagued by opposition protests that the security forces and local civilian militia groups loyal to the regime (known as *colectivos*) violently suppressed.¹⁸⁰ The 50-percent collapse in oil prices and its corresponding toll on Venezuela's oil-centric economy only further fueled unrest. Maduro's domestic policies exacerbated the instability. He asserted "military control over the economy" and "cracked down on the opposition, media, and civil society; engaged in drug trafficking and corruption; convened fraudulent elections, and impeded humanitarian aid distribution."¹⁸¹ As a result, some 96 percent of Venezuelans lived in poverty by 2019.¹⁸²

Against this volatile background, Venezuela plunged into a political crisis after Maduro was re-elected in May 2018 in an election marred by widespread allegations of fraud. As a result, some 60 countries, including the United States, recognized Juan Guaidó, the president of Venezuela's National Assembly and leader of the opposition, as the legitimate interim president. Guaidó offered to serve as interim president of Venezuela until new elections were held and "took the oath of office on January 23, 2019."¹⁸³ Maduro's party responded by taking de facto control of the National Assembly, leading to an ongoing standoff. Internal violence could plausibly be triggered for the foreseeable future, and the military and security forces would side with Maduro's government.¹⁸⁴

A second scenario, focused on Colombia, is somewhat less likely to draw great-power involvement. The FARC and the Colombian government signed a peace treaty ending the decades-long conflict in September 2016, but there are multiple factors that could reignite internal violence in the country.¹⁸⁵ Colombia is still struggling to integrate former FARC members into society.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, some FARC guerrillas took up arms again, driven by the sense that the Colombian government did not keep its side of the bargain negotiated during the peace process.¹⁸⁷ Similarly, although Colombia's major right-wing paramilitary group, the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia, demobilized in 2006, its place was taken by the so-

¹⁸⁰ Clare Ribando Seelke, Rebecca M. Nelson, Rhoda Margesson, and Phillip Brown, *Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44841, April 28, 2021, p. 3.

¹⁸¹ Seelke et al., 2021, pp. 1, 4.

¹⁸² Seelke et al., 2021, p. 9.

¹⁸³ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 4.

¹⁸⁴ Seelke et al., 2021, pp. 1, 4, 9.

¹⁸⁵ "Colombia Peace Deal: Historic Agreement Is Signed," BBC News, September 27, 2016.

¹⁸⁶ Steven Grattan, "Four Years After FARC Peace Deal, Colombia Grapples with Violence," Al Jazeera, November 24, 2020b.

¹⁸⁷ "Colombia Ex-Farc Rebel Iván Márquez Issues Call to Arms," BBC News, August 29, 2019; and John Otis, "Colombia's FARC Rebels Laid Down Their Weapons, but a Growing Number Are Being Killed," NPR, February 6, 2020.

called BACRIMs (which stands for *bandas criminales*, or criminal bands in English),¹⁸⁸ which still exist today.¹⁸⁹ Additionally, although the Cali and Medellín cartels were dismantled in the mid-1990s, the two organizations were succeeded by smaller and less-powerful criminal groups referred to as *cartelitos* (or small cartels) that fought for control over Colombia's drug trade.¹⁹⁰ Finally, Colombia also experienced widespread protests and violent clashes with the Colombian National Police in spring 2021, stemming from an economic downturn exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and an unpopular tax bill.¹⁹¹ Ultimately, some combination of disgruntled former guerrillas, popular economic unrest, and the still-present drug trade could lead to a return to large-scale instability in Colombia.

Importantly, the causes of conflict could originate in either Venezuela or Colombia, but a conflict in one will have impacts on the other. Under Chávez, Venezuela provided financial assistance and safe haven to the FARC guerrillas.¹⁹² By some estimates, there were 75 FARC encampments hosting 1,500 fighters in Venezuela by 2008.¹⁹³ The Maduro administration continued this support, which was also extended to insurgents from the National Liberation Army (Ejército de Liberación Nacional).¹⁹⁴ According to the U.S. State Department, Venezuela has provided “a permissive environment for known terrorist groups, including dissidents of [FARC], the Colombian-origin National Liberation Army (ELN), and Hizballah sympathizers.”¹⁹⁵

Colombia has been involved in turmoil in Venezuela as well. Approximately 1.72 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants had fled into Colombia by the end of December 2020,

¹⁸⁸ Jeremy McDermott, “The BACRIM and Their Position in Colombia’s Underworld,” *InSight Crime*, May 2, 2014.

¹⁸⁹ The groups were known by this label under the Álvaro Uribe presidency and during the first Santos presidency. In 2016, the government of Juan Manuel Santos issued Ministry of Defense Directive Number 015, which officially changed the name to Grupos Armados Organizados and, for the smaller and less-important groups, to Grupos Delictivos Organizados. For details, see Juana Valentina Cabezas Palacios and Leonardo González Perafán, “Informe Sobre Presencia De Grupos Armados En Colombia” [“Report on the Presence of Armed Groups in Colombia”], *IndePaz*, August 2020, p. 97.

¹⁹⁰ McDermott, 2014; and Hannah Stone, “Colombia Elites and Organized Crime: Introduction,” *InSight Crime*, August 9, 2016.

¹⁹¹ Agence France-Presse, “Colombia Protests Mark 2 Months of Social Crisis,” *Voice of America*, June 29, 2021a; and International Crisis Group, *The Pandemic Strikes: Responding to Colombia’s Mass Protests*, Brussels, Latin America Report No. 90, July 2, 2021.

¹⁹² Miguel Goncalves, “Conditional Convenience: Venezuelan Support for FARC Since Hugo Chávez,” *Yale Review of International Studies*, January 2014; and John Paul Rathbone, “Chávez Co-Operated with Farc, Files Say,” *Financial Times*, May 10, 2011.

¹⁹³ Annette Idler, *Borderland Battles: Violence, Crime, and Governance at the Edges of Colombia’s War*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 123; and Goncalves, 2014.

¹⁹⁴ Luis Jaime Acosta, “Colombia Union Leader Vows Bigger Antigovernment Protests If Demands Not Met,” *Reuters*, June 24, 2021; and José R. Cárdenas, “Maduro Is Playing a Dangerous Game on the Colombian Border,” *Foreign Policy*, October 7, 2019.

¹⁹⁵ Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2020, p. 196; see also Seelke et al., 2021, p. 32.

and the United States used Colombia as its staging location for its response to the crisis.¹⁹⁶ U.S. leaders, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, met Guaidó in the country.¹⁹⁷ And Colombia was a staging ground for a failed plot by a group of mercenaries led by a former U.S. soldier to overthrow the Maduro regime.¹⁹⁸

In short, no matter how the conflict starts, broader regional—and, as we explore in the next section, potentially global—implications are almost assured.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

The United States has more at stake in any kind of conflict in Colombia or Venezuela than do its strategic competitors. Colombia is the United States' most important security partner in South America. Plan Colombia, launched in 2000, is the flagship U.S. counter-narcotics initiative and is credited with “transition[ing Colombia] from being an aid recipient to a strategic ally of the United States and an exporter of security and political leadership in the region.”¹⁹⁹ Although Colombia's share of total U.S. global trade and investment is not significant,²⁰⁰ the United States is Colombia's largest trade and investment partner.²⁰¹ And Colombia is an important diplomatic partner of the United States, supporting U.S. efforts pertaining to North Korea, Syria, Iran, Ukraine, and elsewhere.²⁰² For all these reasons, the United States will likely back the Colombian government in the event of conflict.

By contrast, Venezuela is a headache for U.S. foreign policy. Although the United States was a major consumer of Venezuelan energy (the United States was Venezuela's largest trading partner prior to it suspending diplomatic relations in March 2019), the Chávez and Maduro governments became overtly hostile to the United States.²⁰³ Meanwhile, Venezuela pursued closer relations with China, Russia, and Iran, raising U.S. concerns that Venezuela could be used as a base for Russian, Chinese, or even Iranian power projection in the immedi-

¹⁹⁶ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, “Factsheet Colombia: January–December 2020,” April 3, 2021.

¹⁹⁷ Joshua Goodman, “Venezuela's Guaido to Meet Pompeo in Colombia,” Associated Press, January 19, 2020.

¹⁹⁸ Associated Press, “Jailed Suspect in Plot to Overthrow Venezuelan President Maduro Blames Colombia, Guaido,” NBC News, February 17, 2021.

¹⁹⁹ Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force, *The Untapped Potential of the US-Colombia Partnership: Creating a Modernized Plan for the Bilateral Relationship*, Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council, September 2019.

²⁰⁰ In 2019, Colombia was the United States' 25th-largest “goods trading partner with \$28.9 billion in total (two way) goods trade during 2019” (Office of the United States Trade Representative, “Colombia,” webpage, undated-a).

²⁰¹ World Integrated Trade Solution, “Colombia Trade,” webpage, undated-b.

²⁰² Atlantic Council US-Colombia Task Force, 2019.

²⁰³ Bureau of African Affairs, 2021b.

ate vicinity of the United States.²⁰⁴ Thus, apart from concerns about Maduro’s humanitarian and democratic values, the United States also has strategic reasons to prefer that Maduro (or one of his regime cronies) is not running Venezuela.

By contrast, the Chávez and Maduro regimes have been good for China. Venezuela’s rapprochement to China started soon after Chávez assumed the presidency in 1999. From China’s perspective, Venezuela provided minerals, energy resources, and agricultural products for China’s economy and a market for Chinese companies.²⁰⁵ Its hardline anti-U.S. policies also served China’s overarching political objective of making Latin America less dependent on the United States.²⁰⁶ Although Venezuela’s economic downturn and the corruption and mismanagement by the Maduro regime have diminished the profitability of China’s investments in the country, China still retains a substantial economic stake there and remains committed to the Maduro regime, if only to prevent a more pro-U.S. government from coming to power.²⁰⁷ By 2020, Venezuela was the “largest recipient in South America of Chinese official finance, [and] Venezuela has accepted more than \$60 billion in loans from the China Development Bank (CDB) since 2007 in exchange for future oil shipments.”²⁰⁸

China has less at stake in Colombia, at least for the time being. Given that Colombia remains a close U.S. partner, there is not the same strategic alignment that China has with Venezuela. China does have a budding economic relationship with Colombia: The number of Chinese companies in the country has increased from 20 in 2016 to approximately 80 in 2020, making China Colombia’s second-largest trading partner after the United States.²⁰⁹ And as of March 2021, China and Colombia were negotiating a free trade agreement.²¹⁰

Finally, Russia’s interests mirror those of China, to some extent. Venezuela-Russia ties have warmed since 2000, and even more so since 2014.²¹¹ Like China, Russia has economic

²⁰⁴ Alexander Brotman, “The Risk of American Military Involvement in Venezuela,” *Global Risk Insights*, February 6, 2019.

²⁰⁵ Xu Ye [徐焯] and Wang Ying [王瑛], “Expansive Opportunities for China, Venezuela Cooperation” [“中国、委内瑞拉务实合作前景广阔”], *China Military Net* [中国军网], July 19, 2014.

²⁰⁶ Wang Huizhi [王慧芝], “Accomplishments, Questions, and Outlook for Building the China-Latin America Forum [“中拉论坛建设成就、问题及前景”], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], October 29, 2018; and Zhao Hui [赵晖], “Latin America Regional Cooperation and China’s Sino-Latin America Cooperation Strategic Options” [“拉美区域合作与中拉合作的战略选择”], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], March 27, 2020.

²⁰⁷ Bu Shaohua [步少华] and Zhang Jieyu [章婕妤], “New Trends Worthy of Note in Pompeo’s Recent Trip to Latin America to Build Relations” [“蓬佩奥再访拉美 美拉关系新动向引关注”], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], September 28, 2020.

²⁰⁸ Policy Planning Staff, Office of the Secretary of State, *The Elements of the China Challenge*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, November 2020, pp. 24–25.

²⁰⁹ Steven Grattan, “China’s Strong Push into Colombia,” *Al Jazeera*, February 22, 2020a.

²¹⁰ Hui, 2020.

²¹¹ John E. Herbst and Jason Marczak, “Russia’s Intervention in Venezuela: What’s at Stake?” Atlantic Council, September 12, 2019.

interests in Venezuela as a fellow oil producer, and Venezuela has bought Russian arms.²¹² Although the economic downturn means that Russia is facing economic losses there, continuing support for Venezuela may be Russia's best bet to recoup its investments.²¹³ More importantly, Russia seeks influence in Venezuela for leverage in the United States' backyard, in response to what Russia sees as U.S. threats against Russia's central interests in its near abroad. And Venezuela is important as a supporter of Russian foreign policy: It was one of only 11 countries that voted against UN resolutions condemning Russia for annexing Crimea,²¹⁴ and it was one of two countries in the region to support the Russian view in recognizing the breakaway regions of Georgia (Abkhazia and South Ossetia) as independent states.²¹⁵ Venezuela has facilitated Russia's quest to project military power close to the United States—for example, by hosting Russian naval and air deployments.²¹⁶ Russia views U.S. pressure on the Maduro regime as a risk of yet another U.S.-sponsored regime change, which Russia views as a threat and generally seeks to thwart.²¹⁷ Thus, in 2019, to support Maduro, Moscow supplied Venezuela with S-300 systems, which came with Russian military "experts," who could also provide security for Maduro.²¹⁸ Russia has also supported Maduro's regime diplomatically at the UN, as well as with financial aid.²¹⁹

Russia has less at stake in Colombia. Russia views Colombia as a long-term partner of the United States and as hostile to its interests and has acted accordingly. Russian criminal organizations allegedly had ties to weapon shipments to the FARC and other left-wing groups in exchange for cocaine.²²⁰ Russian aircraft have breached Colombian airspace several times, perhaps as a signal that Russia intends to support its Venezuelan and Nicaraguan clients—both of whom have border disputes with Colombia—against a potential Colombian military intervention.²²¹ Russia was also allegedly behind a cyberattack on the Colombian voter registration system in 2018.²²²

²¹² Gurganus, 2018.

²¹³ See, for example, Alexander Gabuev, "Russia's Support for Venezuela Has Deep Roots," *Financial Times*, February 3, 2019.

²¹⁴ Brotman, 2019.

²¹⁵ Gabuev, 2019. To reward Chávez, Russia extended a \$2 billion loan to purchase Russian arms.

²¹⁶ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 16.

²¹⁷ See Appendix C.

²¹⁸ Herbst and Marczak, 2019.

²¹⁹ Anna Titova, "Налог на величие Как Кремль за 20 лет потратил 46 трлн рублей на геополитические спецоперации" ["A Tax on Greatness: How the Kremlin Spent 46 Trillion Rubles in 20 Years on Geopolitical Special Operations"], *Новая газета [New Gazette]*, January 29, 2021.

²²⁰ David Salvo and Stephanie De Leon, "Russian Influence in Mexican and Colombian Elections," *Alliance for Securing Democracy*, January 4, 2018.

²²¹ Warsaw Institute, "Russia's FSB Aircraft Stirs Tensions Between Russia and Colombia," *Russia Monitor*, April 26, 2021.

²²² Gurganus, 2018.

The central dynamic that distinguishes these cases from the potential conflict scenarios that we considered in Africa and the Middle East is that the United States, China, and Russia have opposing preferences in Venezuela and Colombia. The United States backs the Colombian government, but it would prefer someone other than the Maduro regime (or one of the regime's cronies) at the helm of Venezuela. By contrast, China and Russia would back the Maduro regime and would prefer a regime in Colombia that is more pliable (from their perspective) and less supportive of the United States. What makes this situation particularly dangerous is not just that the powers' interests are opposed but the fact that, at least in Venezuela, both the United States and Russia have shown that they would commit military resources on behalf of their preferred outcome.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

Of the two potential sources of conflict in this scenario, the one in Venezuela might be more foreseeable—because a preview of incipient proxy conflict occurred when the Maduro regime faced acute pressure in 2019. In response, Russia—which had already been backing the regime with military equipment and aid—sent 100 troops, believed to focus largely on assisting the regime with cyber expertise, ostensibly to “help shield Maduro from ‘regime change’ and ensure a foothold for Moscow in Latin America.”²²³ For its part, the United States condemned Russia's deployment to Venezuela, although the U.S. military later ramped up its own naval and air presence in the Caribbean to counter drug-smuggling and corrupt actors, such as the Maduro regime.²²⁴ Finally, although it did not send troops of its own, China supported Russia's move diplomatically.²²⁵

In the event that the Maduro or a similarly aligned regime faced a more significant threat to its survival, the three powers would opt for similar, or even more robust, responses (see Table 3.8). In Russia's case, there is a limit to how significant of a military presence it could deploy to Venezuela in a crisis before it faced logistical challenges. Although Russia has flown its nuclear bombers to the region as a show of force, a 2020 RAND analysis of Russian sustainment capabilities concluded that any significant deployment of Russian troops to the Western Hemisphere—including to Venezuela—would place a significant burden on Russian air- and sealift.²²⁶ Still, Russia maintains the ability to send PMSCs to support the regime, modest numbers of special forces, and military equipment and aid.

²²³ Matt Spetalnick, “Russian Deployment in Venezuela Includes ‘Cybersecurity Personnel’: U.S. Official,” Reuters, March 26, 2019.

²²⁴ Associated Press, “US Condemns Russia Troop Deployment to Troubled Venezuela,” *Military Times*, March 31, 2019; and Matt Spetalnick and Phil Stewart, “Trump Doubles U.S. Military Assets in Caribbean, Bolstering Drug Fight After Maduro Indictment,” Reuters, April 1, 2020.

²²⁵ Tom O'Connor, “China Takes on U.S. over Venezuela After Russia Sends Troops: It's Not Your ‘Backyard,’” *Newsweek*, March 26, 2019.

²²⁶ The analysis specifically looked at a deployment of four battalion tactical groups to Venezuela. See Ben Connable, Abby Doll, Alyssa Demus, Dara Massicot, Clint Reach, Anthony Adler, William Mackenzie, Mat-

TABLE 3.8

Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Venezuela

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prevent competitors from establishing an operational base in the Western Hemisphere 	Strategic and geopolitical (limited): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter-balance U.S. influence 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undermine U.S. influence Project military power
Internal reasons	Security and humanitarian: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure regional stability Prevent humanitarian disasters 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure access to oil Protect critical infrastructure investments 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Protect investments in energy Restore arms trade
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pro-democracy opposition forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of escalation to limited overt military intervention (noncombatant evacuation operations) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advise, assist, accompany, and enable ISR Conventional military and special operations forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Military equipment ISR Special operations forces Naval ships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training and advising Military equipment ISR Special operations forces

China could also ramp up its support to the Venezuelan regime—diplomatically, economically, and potentially even militarily in supplying military equipment. Deploying forces to Venezuela would be more challenging. Without much in the way of military presence in the Western Hemisphere, China would have to project power halfway around the world, which requires time—especially if Chinese military aircraft could not get permission to fly over countries friendly to the United States and Chinese military ships could not transit through the Panama Canal. This does not necessarily forestall direct Chinese military intervention, but the logistical hurdles may diminish its likelihood.

thew Povlock, and Lauren Skrabala, *Russia's Limit of Advance: Analysis of Russian Ground Force Deployment Capabilities and Limitations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2563-A, 2020.

By contrast, the United States would have a full suite of options—from aid on the low end to full-scale overt military intervention on the high end—to support the opposition. At the same time, a robust military intervention threatens to be protracted and costly (both financially and in terms of political capital) for the United States.²²⁷

Great-power intervention in a conflict in Colombia presents more of a speculative scenario (see Table 3.9). Aside from the fact that the United States would be backing the government and Russia the opposition in this scenario (with China likely to sit out the conflict in the initial stages), the willingness of the powers to get involved might be somewhat different from the situation in the Venezuela scenario. Given that the United States would be coming to the aid of a sovereign government and presumably would be welcomed into the country, the United States deploying forces overtly to support Colombia is somewhat more likely than in the Venezuela scenario.

By contrast, Russia and China would face greater challenges using military force or rendering substantial indirect support to a non-state actor overtly. They would face similar logistical constraints as in the Venezuela scenario (although China would benefit from the fact that Colombia—unlike Venezuela—has a coast on the Pacific Ocean) but would also be opposed by a state actor and, perhaps, the United States. Although both Russia and China could conceivably take some kind of show-of-force actions (e.g., naval presence), anything more would be difficult for either power to sustain. In this scenario, it is more likely that, were one or both competitors to support the opposition, they would do so covertly, seeking to bog down Colombia—and, by extension, the United States—in a protracted conflict.²²⁸ Whom China might choose to support, however, is less than obvious. If Sino-U.S. competition intensifies significantly, China might support non-state proxies. But this would represent a break with China's tendency to support standing governments. Thus, China might also initially attempt to wait in the wings for the conflict to play out—and might even ultimately back the government in Bogotá, which is better positioned to advance China's longer-term interests in the country.

Whether a conflict were to begin in Venezuela or Colombia, once the United States made the decision to intervene, it might end up in a drawn-out conflict in the region.²²⁹ Unlike in

²²⁷ Think-tank expert on non-state actors, interview with the authors, July 27, 2021; Beatrice Christofaro, “All Roads Lead to Occupation: Here’s What Would Happen If Trump Followed Through on Threats to Send Troops to Venezuela,” *Business Insider Nederland*, June 14, 2019; Frank O. Mora, “What a Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Look Like,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 19, 2019; Shannon K. O’Neil, “A U.S. Military Intervention in Venezuela Would Be a Disaster,” *Bloomberg*, September 17, 2018; and A. Trevor Thrall, “Why the United States Should Not Send the Military to Venezuela,” *Orlando Sentinel*, March 11, 2019.

²²⁸ The same logic could apply to other scenarios as well, but it arguably would be harder for the United States to extricate itself from Latin America than from some of the other regions.

²²⁹ It is impossible to predict exactly how long a notional conflict would last, but there is historical precedent for a conflict dragging on for years. The FARC in Colombia and groups in Nicaragua and Peru similarly had long life spans. Moreover, Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki found that insurgencies in the modern era average a decade (Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-965-MCIA, 2010).

TABLE 3.9

Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Colombia

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain Colombia as a capable strategic security partner in the region 	Strategic and geopolitical (limited): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter-balance U.S. influence 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Undermine U.S. influence Project military power
Internal reasons	Security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure regional stability 	Economic: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain stable business environment and critical infrastructure investments in a key strategic location 	
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Likely government forces, but insurgent support possible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-government or insurgent forces
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support Overt military intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect (covert and overt) support
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Advise, assist, accompany, and enable ISR Conventional military and special operations forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Weapons Financial support ISR Special operations forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> PMSCs Training Weapons ISR Special operations forces

the scenarios examined in Africa and the Middle East, there is little common ground among the three powers here, and Russia has already shown a willingness to commit resources on the side opposing the United States, increasing the chances of escalation.

Nicaragua

Situated at the crossroads of North and South America, Central America and the Caribbean tend to get little attention in U.S. defense strategy. The unclassified summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy does not mention Central America, the Caribbean, or any of the associated countries.²³⁰ Yet the region features countries with long-standing ties to Russia, emerging Chinese interests, and key U.S. national security interests that directly affect the homeland. In other words, Central America is emerging as a front for great-power competi-

²³⁰ DoD, 2018a.

tion and one that warrants more attention from the United States because it may also become a potential front for conflict.

This dynamic is perhaps best exemplified by Nicaragua. The country, after all, was a site of one of the longer-lasting and most well-known proxy wars in the Western Hemisphere during the Cold War. Beginning in the 1960s, the left-wing Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) (Sandinista National Liberation Front) engaged in low-intensity guerrilla warfare against the authoritarian but anti-Communist and pro-U.S. Somoza family regime.²³¹ After the FSLN seized power in 1979, Soviet-backed Nicaragua supported left-wing guerrilla groups throughout Central America, while the United States backed right-wing counter-revolutionary groups led mainly by former Somoza army officers known as the Contras.²³² Today, the possibility that Nicaragua will face internal instability should not be discounted, and, if that does happen, it may pit the United States against Russia and, to a lesser extent, China.

How Might a Conflict Erupt?

The most plausible, foreseeable scenario for a return of conflict in Nicaragua revolves around the collapse of the Daniel Ortega regime. A former Sandinista leader, Ortega was first elected president in 1984 but then came to power for a second time in 2007, winning re-election in 2011 and again in 2016 after persuading the FSLN-dominated National Assembly to change the constitution and remove presidential term limits.²³³ Since returning to power, Ortega has “dismantled nearly all institutional checks on presidential power;” systematically undermined and removed political opposition; consolidated control over state institutions (including gaining direct control over the police and armed forces); legislated by decree; and restricted freedom of expression using “threats, insults, physical attacks, detentions, arbitrary searches of documents, and forced closures” of media outlets.²³⁴

At the same time, Nicaragua’s economic situation has declined. The country depended on Venezuelan aid to finance its social programs, but when Venezuela, facing its own financial woes, decided to stop funding the regime in 2017, the regime’s popularity started to collapse.²³⁵ Public protests broke out in 2018; the National Police and armed pro-government groups violently repressed protestors, and many were arrested, detained, and subjected to

²³¹ U.S. Department of State, “Nicaragua (01/02),” webpage, archived content, undated-b.

²³² Robert P. Hager, Jr., and Robert S. Snyder, “The United States and Nicaragua: Understanding the Breakdown in Relations,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 2, 2015.

²³³ “Nicaragua Profile—Timeline,” BBC News, May 31, 2018; and National Democratic Institute, “Nicaragua,” webpage, April 9, 2008.

²³⁴ Human Rights Watch, “Nicaragua,” in *World Report 2020: Events of 2019*, New York, 2020a; and Seelke et al., 2021, p. 1.

²³⁵ Rocio Cara Labrador, “Nicaragua in Crisis: What to Know,” Council on Foreign Relations, November 26, 2018; and Salvador Martí, “The Impact of Nicaragua’s Crisis,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, October 23, 2019.

torture and other ill-treatment.²³⁶ Since then, discontent and economic conditions have only worsened, and the regime has become more repressive in turn.²³⁷ At the same time, the Ortega family has amassed significant wealth and influence, “inviting comparisons to the Somoza family dictatorship the Sandinistas overthrew in 1979.”²³⁸

Given this background, it is not impossible that the situation in Nicaragua could worsen and prompt an attempt to overthrow the regime. And if Nicaragua did descend into conflict, the United States, China, and Russia would all have a stake in the outcome. Geography alone dictates U.S. interest, and although the Ortega regime has struggled to maintain its popularity at home, it has developed close ties to Venezuela, Iran, and Russia, among others.²³⁹ Consequently, the chances that an internal crisis could become international are considerable.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?

As noted earlier, geography drives U.S. interests: Nicaragua, after all, is less than 750 miles from the continental United States and borders other stable democracies and U.S. partners, such as Costa Rica.²⁴⁰ The United States, consequently, has a vested stake in Nicaraguan prosperity, democracy, and security, if only as means to manage illegal immigration and transnational crime.²⁴¹ Beyond that, the United States has a general interest in maintaining a “favorable regional balance of power” in the Western Hemisphere at large, which in this case may mean rolling back foreign influence in Nicaragua.²⁴² For all these reasons, the United States may naturally back a pro-democracy, anti-Ortega movement in Nicaragua.

On the other end of the spectrum, Russia would likely back the Ortega regime (or a Russia-friendly post-Ortega regime) in the event of a crisis. First, in general, Russia views pro-democracy movements against Russia-friendly authoritarian regimes as threatening. Second, Russia’s ties to the Sandinistas date back to the Soviet period, so there is a historical bond there. Third, Nicaragua is a reliable international supporter of Russia on the world stage. Like Venezuela, it recognized the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after

²³⁶ Human Rights Watch, 2020a.

²³⁷ AQ Editors, “Another 5 Years for Daniel Ortega?” *Americas Quarterly*, March 4, 2021.

²³⁸ Seelke et al., 2021, p. 3.

²³⁹ Clare Ribando Seelke, *Nicaragua: Political Situation and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RS22836, March 17, 2008; and Seelke et al., 2021, p. 3.

²⁴⁰ As measured by Google maps, the 750 miles is the distance from Nicaragua to southern Florida.

²⁴¹ Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs, “U.S. Relations with Nicaragua: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, last updated September 14, 2021.

²⁴² Craig S. Faller, “Posture Statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the 116th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee,” U.S. Southern Command, January 30, 2020, p. 4.

the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, as well as Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014.²⁴³ Although Russia has no vital interests in Latin America, Russia has a stake in the continued success of the Ortega regime. It is one of Russia's strongest military partnerships in the Western Hemisphere and one of the potential levers that Moscow could use to relieve U.S. pressure on Russia's near abroad.²⁴⁴ In recent years, Russo-Nicaraguan ties have been strengthening. In 2013, Russia stood up in Nicaragua the Marshall Gregory Zhukov military training center. In 2014, Nicaragua made an exception to its constitution to allow Russian naval and air forces temporary access to its territory for training purposes, and a second agreement allowed Russian and Nicaraguan forces to carry out joint anti-narcotics patrols until June 2015.²⁴⁵ Furthermore, in 2015, the Sandinista-dominated Nicaraguan Parliament agreed on passing a resolution that permitted Russian warships to dock in Nicaraguan ports.²⁴⁶ In April 2017, just outside Managua (Nicaragua's capital), Russia inaugurated a GLONASS ground satellite monitoring station, which has dual-use potential for military and signals intelligence purposes and which could provide Russia with intelligence on U.S. activities in the region.²⁴⁷ Consequently, in the event that the Ortega regime (or a Russia-friendly post-Ortega regime) came under pressure, Russia would have strategic reasons to support the survival of the regime.

Compared with Russia, China has far less on the line with Nicaragua. The Latin American country has a small economy, and, although a Chinese investor did initiate a \$50 billion effort to build an alternative to the Panama Canal through Nicaraguan territory in 2015, the project stalled over protests concerning its environmental impact and its implica-

²⁴³ John Arquilla, Anna Borshchevskaya, Belinda Bragg, Pavel Devyatkin, Adam Dyet, R. Evan Ellis, Daniel J. Flynn, Daniel Goure, Abigail C. Kamp, Roger Kangas, et al., *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2019, p. 78; and Interfax-Ukraine, "Nicaragua Recognizes Crimea as Part of Russia," *Kyiv Post*, March 27, 2014.

²⁴⁴ Arquilla et al., 2019, p. 80.

²⁴⁵ Fiegel, 2014.

²⁴⁶ Joshua Partlow, "The Soviet Union Fought the Cold War in Nicaragua. Now Putin's Russia Is Back," *Washington Post*, April 8, 2017; Dmitry Sudakov, "Russian Armed Forces Returning to Latin America," *Pravda*, February 17, 2015; Ivan Ulises Klyszcz, "Russia's Engagements in Central America," Foreign Policy Research Institute, October 4, 2019; Gustavo Arias Retana, "Russia Seeks Strategic Positions in Central America," *Diálogo*, October 18, 2019; Kiersten Harris, *America's Newest Southern Neighbor? An Analysis of Russian Influence in Latin America*, Washington, D.C.: American Security Project, August 2018; and Xu Lei [许雷], "Russia and Nicaragua Sign Military Agreement Allowing Russian Ships to Operate Within Nicaraguan Waters" ["俄罗斯与尼加拉瓜签军事协议 俄军舰可进尼海域"], *China Military Network* [中国军网], February 13, 2015.

²⁴⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, "Will Nicaragua Become Russia's 'Cuba of the 21st Century?'" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 118, August 7, 2018a; John R. Haines, "Everything Old Is New Again: Russia Returns to Nicaragua," Foreign Policy Research Institute, July 22, 2016; Nick Raffey, "Russian Nicaraguan Relations: Putin's Ally in the Western Hemisphere," NATO Association of Canada, January 28, 2017; and Cristina Silva, "Is Russia Spying on the U.S. from a Nicaragua Military Compound?" *Newsweek*, May 22, 2017.

tions for national sovereignty and indigenous people.²⁴⁸ China seeks to persuade Nicaragua to withdraw diplomatic recognition of Taiwan, thus far unsuccessfully.²⁴⁹ Still, Nicaragua has supported China's international goals in other ways—such as backing China's positions about non-interference at the UN or being willing to challenge U.S. dominance in the Inter-American Development Bank.²⁵⁰

Although China's interests in Nicaragua remain limited, China would likely provide public support to the Ortega regime (or a post-Ortega, FSLN-dominated military government) against a pro-democracy movement; however, how much effort or resources Beijing would commit to such an endeavor remains uncertain. The Ortega regime backs some of China's interests, and the regime's weakness may give China newfound leverage in the country. Moreover, like Russia, China dislikes the precedent of democratic revolutions—and especially U.S.- or Western-sponsored pro-democracy movements—in general, and continued instability in Nicaragua only adds to the headaches of the United States. Were Nicaragua to change its position on Taiwan, it would open doors for greater Chinese involvement in the country and potential future conflicts among the great powers.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

Of the three powers, the United States is probably the most likely to overtly intervene in the region. Although it has not done so recently, the United States has intervened in such places as Grenada, Panama, and Haiti in the 1980s and 1990s, and it might do so again, especially if turmoil in Nicaragua directly threatened the U.S. homeland (e.g., by sparking immigration flows, increasing drug-smuggling, or destabilizing other regional partners). And doing so would be practically feasible: Although the United States does not have a military presence in Nicaragua, it is an easy reach from the continental United States. Indeed, unlike many of the potential conflict scenarios in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, any contingency in Central America puts the time-distance problem on U.S. adversaries because forces from the United States can arrive to the conflict faster and then enjoy shorter supply lines than either China or Russia can from its homeland.

Russia has military access and facilities in Nicaragua, but it may be hard-pressed to send forces in any numbers there. As discussed in the previous section, 2020 RAND analysis suggests that Russia's air- and sealift would come under significant strain if tasked with transporting and then sustaining even relatively small numbers of troops in Latin Amer-

²⁴⁸ Muller, 2019. For some of the negative impacts on Nicaragua, see Robert Nelson, "China's Fantasy Canal Doing Real Damage in Nicaragua," *The Diplomat*, March 17, 2016.

²⁴⁹ Ralph Jennings, "Taiwan Loans Nicaragua ¥100 Million in Ongoing Bonding Between Isolation Nations," *Los Angeles Times*, February 23, 2019.

²⁵⁰ Yan Jin [严谨], "Under U.S. Control, What Course Will the American Development Bank Take?" ["美国掌控下美洲开发银行将何去何从?"], China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations [中国现代国际关系研究院], October 16, 2020; and Xie E [谢锴], "Many Nations Call for an Immediate End to Unilateral Compulsion" ["多国呼吁立即取消单边强制措施"], *China Military Network* [中国军网], November 26, 2021.

ica.²⁵¹ Moreover, the United States could presumably try to blockade any Russian air or naval presence bound for Nicaragua, similar to what it did during the Cuban missile crisis, if it needed to do so. And if the United States did do that, Russia would not only face the operational challenge of breaking through the blockade but also incur the strategic risk of a direct military confrontation with the United States. Together, these reasons suggest that Moscow may deploy a token force but is more likely to rely on PMSCs or special forces to support the regime.

Whether China would get involved in a scenario in Nicaragua is doubtful. It has limited interests and would face even greater power projection challenges than Russia would. Consequently, it may be more likely to play a role on the margins by providing diplomatic support and military and economic aid to the regime.

Even with the relative power imbalance, as denoted in Table 3.10, the United States might get embroiled in a limited conflict in the country, where it would back a pro-democracy movement against a Russia-backed, and potentially China-supported, authoritarian Ortega

TABLE 3.10
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Nicaragua

	United States	China	Russia
Why would each power become involved?			
External reasons	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contain political, military, and economic advances by near-peer competitors 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support anti-American government 	Strategic and geopolitical: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect and support ally, project military power
Internal reasons	Security: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure regional stability 	Economic (limited): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical infrastructure investments 	
Whom might each power support?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pro-democracy opposition forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government
What form would support likely take?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of limited overt military intervention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indirect (covert and overt) support (if support for Taiwan is withdrawn) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially indirect (covert and overt) support, with low likelihood of overt military intervention
What capabilities would each power bring?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advise, assist, accompany, and enable • ISR • Conventional military and special operations forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Training • Military equipment • ISR • Special operations forces • Financial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • PMSCs • Training and advising • Military equipment • ISR • Special operations forces

²⁵¹ Connable et al., 2020, pp. xix–xxiii.

or post-Ortega regime. As previous Nicaraguan proxy wars have shown, such conflicts can last years. And unlike in the African or Middle Eastern scenarios, the country's proximity to the United States means that, once Washington becomes involved in the proxy confrontation, it is likely to have a more difficult time disengaging from the conflict than Moscow or Beijing would, making this scenario—even if not highly likely—one of the more concerning for U.S. interests.

Implications from the Conflict Scenario Analysis

All of the countries and regions considered here have unique histories and political dynamics, and the shape of future conflicts is difficult to foresee; however, several general propositions emerge from our analysis.

First, in the conflict scenarios we examined, we find that the external reasons for backing proxies in foreign conflicts are generally not very significant, with the exception of Latin America. This stands in contrast to numerous conflicts during the Cold War, when the United States and Soviet Union sought to back local actors in faraway wars as a way to impose costs on each other and shift the balance of power. The nature of present-day great-power competition—especially between the United States and China—has not yet reached a similar kind of zero-sum character, where any gain for one competitor is perceived as a loss for the other, even in relative secondary theaters. That is not to say that competition could not acquire such a character in the future, in which case we might expect a closer adherence to the proxy-war playbook from the Cold War.

Second, and as a corollary of the first implication, the threat of international terrorism likely often would drive great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters. For China and Russia, the strongest reason to be concerned about circumstances in a secondary theater is the presence of foreign fighters who have connections to the great power or to nearby countries and who might then galvanize terrorist actions within or near the great power's homeland. This presents one of the more likely reasons why great powers would choose to intervene in scenarios in Nigeria, Mozambique, Afghanistan, and Iraq. The finding is noteworthy particularly in view of the juxtaposition of counterterrorism and great-power competition in U.S. strategic discourse, as well as the call to retrench from the former challenge to the latter. Considering the most-plausible scenarios in these countries underscores the extent to which the two challenges to U.S. and allied interests may remain connected.

Third, we found few occasions where China likely would be willing to overtly use conventional military tools to intervene in foreign conflicts—barring major shifts in its strategic thinking and priorities. In most cases, it is Russia rather than China that is more likely to support proxies through military means, however limited. In part, this is unsurprising: Russia inherits the Soviet history of proxy warfare and has been involved in a good number of conflicts in the past couple of decades, in various ways (summarized in Appendix C), and it simply has fewer instruments to exert influence than China does. As discussed in Appen-

dix B, China may be comparatively more willing to get involved in foreign conflicts over the long term—as it becomes increasingly powerful militarily and more assertive abroad—but at least in the short run, Russia is more likely to resort to military force.

Fourth, in some of the more plausible conflict scenarios that could involve multiple great powers, this involvement does not place them on opposite sides. We cannot claim that the conflict scenarios that we selected for analysis are strictly representative of the kinds of conflicts that will erupt in the foreseeable future. Yet there are reasons to believe that, were great powers to become involved in conflicts even outside the countries we examined, the kinds of scenarios we identified would be at least reasonably likely. This is not only because of the first point noted earlier—the nature of great-power competition, as it is emerging thus far—but also because of the changing nature of conflicts in secondary theaters. Research reveals that internal conflicts that have been most likely to erupt in this century are different from the kinds of conflicts that were common during the Cold War. Notably, most 21st-century conflicts have erupted in Muslim-majority countries, “most of the rebel groups fighting these wars espouse radical Islamist ideas and goals,” and “most of these radical groups are pursuing transnational rather than national aims.”²⁵² In view of the common concerns about radical transnational terrorism, these characteristics make it likely that the United States, China, and Russia would view conflicts in secondary theaters through a similar lens.

That is not to say that the kinds of conflicts where the rival powers are theoretically more likely to back different sides—such as pro-democracy uprisings against authoritarian regimes—are unlikely to erupt. However, even in such cases, at least outside Latin America, elements of terrorist threats might be present as well. The Syrian civil war, for example, combined elements of a contest between a repressive regime and its more-democratic opponents with the threat of international terrorism. And in that conflict, the common cause against terrorist forces limited the risks of Russian support for Assad and U.S. support for the opposition escalating into a Cold War–style proxy war. Of course, there is still the possibility that such alliances of convenience break down or that infighting between rival factions backed by each great power escalate into a full-blown conflict despite the fact that they are theoretically supporting a common cause. Still, all else held equal, great powers should be less likely to end up in full-out conflict if they share a common objective.

This has implications for the nature of challenges in many of the scenarios that we identified. For instance, deconfliction and mutual harassment challenges are more prominent than direct conflict between great-power proxies. It is important to emphasize the nature of these challenges when at least one of the external powers—Russia—is likely to continue reliance on PMSCs. In hypothetical future conflicts, in addition to needing to establish deconfliction

²⁵² Barbara F. Walter, “The New New Civil Wars,” *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 20, May 2017; Sebastian von Einsiedel, Louise Bosetti, James Cockayne, Cale Salih, and Wilfred Wan, *Civil War Trends and the Changing Nature of Armed Conflict*, Tokyo: United Nations University Centre for Policy Research, Occasional Paper 10, March 2017; and Lars-Erik Cederman and Yannick Pengl, “Global Conflict Trends and Their Consequences,” background paper to the United Nations Sustainable Development Outlook, May 21, 2019.

channels between state actors, the U.S. military will need to prepare for operating alongside PMSCs that are not always under the firm operational control of the rival state military and whose relations with the latter may be complex.²⁵³

Finally, from a military capability standpoint, the scenarios highlight the importance of positional advantage. Although we did not formally model any of the potential conflicts, many of the more plausible conflicts seem to favor relatively small-scale uses of force—focusing on mobility, ISR, special operations, and covert influence—mostly because of the relatively small stakes at play. If this is so, these conflicts may not strain either the U.S., Chinese, or Russian militaries, unless multiple conflicts occur simultaneously.

Instead, the principal challenge that all three actors face is related to geography. With the exception of Nicaragua (for the United States) and Afghanistan and Pakistan (for China and Russia), projecting power into these scenarios can pose both distance and access challenges. For the moment, the United States seems to have the upper hand in terms of basing and access in many, although not all, of these scenarios. Going forward, though, this may not be guaranteed, especially as China and, to a lesser extent, Russia exert more influence in these areas.

²⁵³ See, for example, analyses of the clash between the United States and Russia's Wagner forces in Deir al-Zour in Syria (Kimberly Marten, "The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour," *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018).

Findings and Recommendations

Considering the clashes in Afghanistan, Vietnam, Nicaragua, and Angola, the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union was defined by competition and conflicts fought far away from Europe, generally considered the primary theater. Today, the United States is entering a new period of great-power competition, this time against China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. Much of the strategic focus has been on the Indo-Pacific and some still on Europe, but, as was the case during the Cold War, there is distinct potential for increasingly intense battles for influence in secondary theaters as well (as explored in Chapter Two). And yet, as we suggested in Chapter Three, in most cases, competition even in the context of local conflicts is unlikely to inaugurate a return to Cold War–style conflicts in secondary theaters. In this chapter, we therefore synthesize the lessons of the previous chapters and outline some of the key recommendations that this project offers for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the DAF in particular.

Findings

As defined in Chapter Three, the secondary theaters are vast, spanning three continents and dozens of countries. The form that competition and, potentially, conflict among the United States, China, and Russia might assume is very likely to vary across regions and countries, depending on their unique histories, geography, and local dynamics. Nonetheless, the preceding analysis suggests a few general propositions about competition and conflict in these theaters.

Competition in Secondary Theaters Is Most Likely to Focus on the Historical Power Centers

Perhaps the starting point to understanding the future of competition in secondary theaters is understanding where the United States, China, and Russia are most involved and therefore will potentially be competing. As detailed in Chapter Two, we find that the United States, China, and Russia concentrate their influence-seeking efforts in the larger, wealthier, and more-populous states in each region, which are often the historical power centers. This, in some sense, is an unsurprising finding, and it does not necessarily imply a deliberate strategic choice by any one of the three great powers to prioritize these countries. Because influence-

seeking is best captured by such metrics as trade or investment, wealthier and larger countries will almost always attract more attention in this regard than smaller, poorer countries will. Similarly, wealthier countries often have more ability to buy advanced weapons and develop advanced military relationships and therefore will score higher on influence-seeking metrics related to the military. Wealthier and more-populous states may likewise present more-attractive targets for informational levers of influence, because placing a regional bureau for a state-owned news agency in the largest market makes sense even absent competition motives.

Beyond this inevitable bias toward large, wealthy countries, there are often more-nuanced factors that do stem from competitive logic and drive the United States, China, and Russia to focus on these countries. For instance, many of these countries have historical relationships with one or more of the great powers. Egypt, for example, has historical ties to both the Soviet Union and the United States. In addition, there are obvious strategic reasons to court more-significant powers. For instance, in an effort to build multilateral institutions that are not dominated by the United States—and to serve as a counterweight to such—China and Russia have sought to unify the more powerful among developing countries under the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) framework, including Brazil and South Africa. More generally, if the three powers all face resource constraints to their influence-seeking efforts, focusing resources on the actors with the most clout and benefits to offer has obvious appeal as an approach.

China's Influence and, to a Lesser Extent, Russia's Influence Are Growing in Secondary Theaters, Although the United States Remains the Dominant Military Actor for the Time Being

Much of the United States' strategic focus has been on the Middle East and the global war on terrorism for the past two decades, but China's and Russia's influence has been growing across all three of the secondary theaters we examined. As detailed in Chapter Two, China's economic influence in particular has grown dramatically and now nearly equals or surpasses that of the United States across the three regions. Even in Latin America, the United States' backyard, China is or will soon be the dominant foreign economic actor in some of the largest economies.

Although China's global economic rise is widely recognized, what is perhaps more surprising is the parallel increase in China's and Russia's diplomatic and informational influence-seeking. As the data trends examined in Chapter Two show, both Russia and China have ramped up high-level diplomatic contacts, while U.S. activity has stagnated or declined, at least in Africa and Latin America. It is particularly striking that Chinese leaders have engaged with some of the most-important Latin American countries over the past decade more frequently than U.S. leaders have. Although this metric captures only one facet of states' complex diplomatic relationships, our findings should be a cause for concern for the United States.

With regard to military tools of influence, the United States retains primacy across all theaters. Yet Russia's military influence-seeking efforts have been expanding across most

regions, which is an artifact of the country's claimed return to the world stage as a power of consequence. To some extent, China has been more active as well. Nonetheless, the United States remains in a better position than China or Russia to project power into most secondary theaters—with a handful of exceptions, such as post-withdrawal Afghanistan. Consequently, in many of the scenarios for potential conflicts discussed in Chapter Three, the United States is in a stronger position. A key question that remains unanswered, however, is whether this advantage will last over the long term, especially if the United States' influence in other domains diminishes proportionally to the decline in some of its other influence-seeking activities.

Competition May Be a Necessary but Not Sufficient Condition for Conflict

Importantly, even when the United States, China, and Russia are competing for influence in a given country, that does not mean that the country may be the focus of future conflict. After all, for a conflict to develop, there needs to be some sort of *casus belli*, a reason why competition for influence transforms into conflict. Competition may be a necessary but not sufficient condition to bring great powers into conflict in secondary theaters. As explored in Chapters One and Three, as well as the appendixes to this report, drivers of violence require instability in a country to the point that great powers step in to support parties to the conflict.

In this sense, some of the same structural factors that make a country particularly attractive for great-power influence-seeking during competition—economic weight, higher levels of development, greater military capabilities, and overall stability—may also make them *less likely* to be a focal point for a future proxy war. Although larger, more-powerful countries are not entirely immune to the potential for instability (notably, the United States, China, and Russia have all experienced their own civil wars in the past), these countries tend to be less conflict-prone.

This mismatch has important second-order implications for the DAF in particular and the joint force at large: Namely, planning for competition and preparing for proxy wars and limited intervention do not necessarily go hand in hand. Indeed, the two objectives may require focus on two separate sets of countries. And because a proxy war requires both great-power motivation and opportunity, the countries that meet both conditions, and where DoD should anticipate and prepare for such conflicts in the future, may be relatively few.

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

In the subset of cases where the United States, China, Russia, or all three might have both motive and opportunity to become involved in a conflict, the conflicts may not resemble those of the Cold War. Fundamentally, this is because the current great-power competition, at least for the time being, lacks the same all-encompassing, zero-sum character of the Cold War.

First, contemporary strategic competition lacks an ideological character comparable to that of the Cold War.¹ Similar to how its communist rival viewed capitalism, the United States saw the spread of communism anywhere as an existential threat to U.S. national security. As U.S. diplomat George Kennan argued, “World communism is like a malignant parasite which feeds only on diseased tissue.”² Therefore, Kennan argued in 1947, “the main element of any United States policy toward the Soviet Union must be that of a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies.”³ Thus, as a leading historian of Cold War–era conflicts in secondary theaters argues,

the United States and the Soviet Union were driven to intervene in the Third World by the ideologies inherent in their politics. . . . Washington and Moscow needed to change the world in order to prove the universal applicability of their ideologies, and the elites of the newly independent states proved fertile ground for their competition. By helping to expand the domains of freedom or of social justice, both powers saw themselves as assisting natural trends in world history and as defending their own security at the same time.⁴

By contrast, ideological motivations for future conflicts in secondary theaters are likely to be less pronounced than they were in earlier periods. Russia lacks a distinct ideology, and although China is still notionally communist, the ideology plays little role in Beijing’s foreign policy approaches. To be sure, both China and Russia view themselves as champions of a different worldview than the one they allege that the United States and the West seek to coercively impose on other countries. And both China and Russia have frequently backed authoritarian regimes. Russia has supported such regimes against challenges—most forcefully in Syria but also in Sudan and Venezuela, among others. China has been active in exporting the technological tools to enhance authoritarian control and has used a variety of tools—from information operations to economic pressure—to meddle in other countries.⁵ These tendencies, however, are not comparable to the paramount role played by ideology during the Cold War and often represent simply the most-expedient means to achieving the great powers’ other interests.

As for the United States, democracy promotion—as a goal of foreign policy and especially a justification for war—has waned over the past several decades. According to polling from the Pew Research Center, democracy promotion ranked dead last of the 16 foreign policy

¹ Odd Arne Westad, “Has a New Cold War Really Begun?” *Foreign Affairs*, March 27, 2018.

² George Kennan, “The Charge in the Soviet Union (Kennan) to the Secretary of State, 861.00/2 - 2246: Telegram,” Moscow, Soviet Union, February 22, 1946.

³ George F. Kennan (originally published under the pseudonym “X”), “The Sources of Soviet Conduct,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1947.

⁴ Westad, 2005, p. 4.

⁵ See Charles Edel and David O. Shullman, “How China Exports Authoritarianism,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 16, 2021.

objectives surveyed in 2021; only 20 percent of U.S. adults believed that the goal should be a “top priority.”⁶ Similarly, although U.S. presidents have supported democracy promotion in the abstract, since the Iraq War, they have been reluctant to commit to fighting a war for this objective. At the beginning of his presidency, Barack Obama explicitly disavowed the idea of democracy promotion by force, arguing, “No system of government can or should be imposed by one nation by any other.”⁷ The Obama administration later participated in overthrowing the authoritarian Qaddafi regime in Libya, but it did so only half-heartedly, under pressure from U.S. allies and as part of an approach of “leading from behind.”⁸ The Trump and Biden administrations took a similarly skeptical approach to using military force to promote or protect democracy—as evidenced by the tacit acceptance of the authoritarian Assad regime in Syria and the decision to abandon Afghanistan. Although this could change in the future, at least in the near term, democracy promotion—in and of itself—seems like a less likely motive for war.

Second, the economic aspect of competition in secondary theaters is also unlikely to create zero-sum pressures. During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union led largely distinct economic blocs, with minimal trade between the two states and their respective allies.⁹ That is not the case for any of the strategic competitors today. Although the United States, China, and Russia can and do impose restrictions on the nature of their trade relations,¹⁰ by and large, these countries trade with each other and with each other’s allies. This ultimately may lower the economic stakes involved in influence-seeking in secondary theaters. A gain to the influence of a rival great power in one secondary country may not necessarily preclude that country from still trading with another great-power rival.

Third, the domestic political context of likely future conflicts in secondary theaters may be different from that of the Cold War. Then, many of the conflicts emerged from the struggles of decolonization and revolutionary uprisings.¹¹ As the colonial empires fell, the politics of these nascent states were fluid, and different types of groups—colonial factions, nationalists, communists, democracy advocates, and others—vied to define the future. By contrast, 21st-century civil wars and other internal conflicts overall have different characteristics. They have tended to erupt in Muslim-majority countries and featured rebel groups that pursue radical Islamist goals that have tended to be transnational rather than national in nature.¹²

⁶ Bruce Drake, “Americans Put Low Priority on Promoting Democracy Abroad,” Pew Research Center, March 2, 2021.

⁷ Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President at Cairo University, 6-04-09,” White House, June 4, 2009.

⁸ Ryan Lizza, “Leading from Behind,” *New Yorker*, April 26, 2011.

⁹ Abraham S. Becker, *U.S.-Soviet Trade in the 1980s*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, N-2682-RC, 1987.

¹⁰ For example, the United States limits what types of military technology can be sold to its adversaries.

¹¹ Westad, 2005, pp. 73–109.

¹² Walter, 2017.

This differing nature of the types of internal conflicts has major implications for future great-power involvement in secondary theaters. Whereas the primary cleavages in Cold War internal conflicts lent themselves to the United States and the Soviet Union supporting opposite sides (the United States backing the colonial powers or the democratic or authoritarian factions, and the Soviet Union backing communist groups), this may not be the case in present or future conflicts. Indeed, as explored in detail in Chapter Three, many of the most-plausible reasons for great-power involvement in the conflict scenarios are preventing international terrorism. In these cases, however, the United States, China, and Russia will more likely be fighting against the same adversaries, if not backing the same exact actors. Indeed, all three great powers share a common interest in combating international terrorism—specifically, radical Islamic terrorism—and denying terrorists safe havens from where they might launch attacks against the great powers and their allies.

All three reasons—the lack of a significant ideological dimension to competition, the economic context of influence-seeking, and the different political context of contemporary civil conflicts—may mean that future competition in secondary theaters is less likely to develop the same kind of zero-sum character that existed during the Cold War. Today, the United States, China, and Russia are leery of each other's presence in secondary theaters and will likely undermine competitors' influence when opportunities arise. However, competitors' presence in itself is not viewed as an existential threat, and the concerns about a domino-style contagion that characterized the Cold War are not present. That means—at least for the moment—that, in most cases and absent other motivations, none of the great powers is likely to become involved in a faraway conflict primarily to hurt its competitors' interests.

Future Secondary-Theater Conflicts May Involve Distinct Challenges of Deconfliction and Behind-the-Scenes Political Contests

Importantly, even if the three great powers become involved in secondary-theater conflicts notionally on the same side, it does not mean that the three will cooperate. As documented in other work, there are a host of challenges—such as legal constraints and lack of trust—that inhibit the United States from genuinely cooperating with China and Russia, and these obstacles appear, if anything, to be growing more formidable.¹³

If the powers become involved in a conflict on the same side, the dominant operational challenge for the United States in secondary theaters is more likely to be deconfliction rather than head-to-head proxy war. As demonstrated most recently by the United States' and Russia's interactions in Syria, deconfliction operations, particularly when both sides are operat-

¹³ See Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

ing in close proximity to one another, carry a host of operational challenges.¹⁴ The increasing involvement of PMSCs—leading to “double proxy wars,” as Russian commentators note, or conflicts where the intervening state seeks to hide its support for a local proxy behind yet another actor—compounds these problems.¹⁵ Although Russian experts express concern about this trend, it is largely driven by Russia’s own approach. As Appendix C details, PMSCs—such as Wagner—may not be fully subordinate to conventional military commands and may act on their own initiative. Thus, involvement in foreign conflicts alongside a competitor like Russia does not rule out periods of low-level and covert direct kinetic conflict between powers.¹⁶

Conflicts in Secondary Theaters May Not Be a Particularly Useful Force-Sizing Construct

The preceding findings—combined with the earlier finding that proxy wars may be limited to a reasonably small number of cases and that, when they do occur, they may pose more deconfliction rather than head-to-head engagement challenges—suggest that proxy wars in secondary theaters might not be a particularly good force-sizing construct for the joint force going forward. Given that DoD faces constrained budgets, made potentially more limited by the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, it needs to selectively choose where it should direct its resources, based on where threats are most dangerous, most likely to occur, or most resource-intensive. Conflicts in secondary theaters may not meet any of those criteria. Although one could imagine scenarios where conflicts in these theaters might strain the capacity of the joint force (e.g., if multiple conflicts occurred simultaneously), in most cases, these scenarios are unlikely to impose a significant enough resource demand or occur frequently enough that the joint force should direct resources away from more-likely or more-dangerous contingencies (e.g., conflicts in primary theaters of concern).

¹⁴ Raphael S. Cohen, Marta Kepe, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Michelle Grisé, Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in the Global Commons*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A597-4, 2023.

¹⁵ Vasilij Mikryukov, “Повоюйте за меня” [“Fight for Me”], *Военно-промышленный курьер* [*Military Industrial Courier*], October 5, 2015.

¹⁶ For example, Russian Wagner mercenaries attacked U.S. soldiers in Syria, although the connection to Moscow is unclear. In another example, Russia is alleged to have paid bounties for attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, but evidence is not conclusive. See Marten, 2018; and Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, “Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says,” *New York Times*, August 17, 2021.

Latin America Offers Several Plausible Scenarios for Conflicts in Which the United States Could Become Involved on a Side Opposing Russia or China

Finally, compared with the scenarios we considered in the Middle East and Africa, in those we examined in Latin America, the United States is more likely to back actors on the side opposite Russia or China. First, the United States arguably has stronger interests in Latin America than in the other two regions. Because of the region's geographical proximity to the United States, events in Latin America already affect the U.S. homeland—through migration, crime, and potentially terrorism—to a greater extent than events in the other regions do. This spillover may only increase or intensify in the future, especially if China or Russia intentionally tries to produce these effects.

The United States is therefore more likely to view foreign involvement in the region as directly threatening and may be more willing to support local actors in a conflict there than in the two other regions. At the same time, China and Russia have economic and strategic interests in Latin America and might view backing anti-U.S. actors there as a way to extend the United States or relieve U.S. pressure in regions closer to the great powers' core national security interests. All three powers may therefore have reasons to support proxies in a conflict by various means, up to limited overt military action. Finally, unlike the conflicts in the other regions, which are more representative of global trends, there is no element of transnational terrorism to serve as a common interest. Similar kinds of conflicts between authoritarian governments and democratic opposition are certainly possible outside Latin America, but those conflicts are more likely to be intertwined with threats of radical Islamic terrorism.

The considerable potential for conflict in numerous countries in the region might present opportunities for great powers to become involved. As described in Chapter Three, there has been popular unrest directed against both the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan regimes, both of whom are aligned with U.S. competitors. Similarly, although not investigated here as a potential scenario, there have been popular protests elsewhere in Latin America, prominently including against the regime in Cuba.¹⁷ In all these cases, the United States has expressed support for pro-democracy factions, whereas China and Russia back the standing authoritarian regimes. In other scenarios—such as the return of instability to Colombia—the roles would be switched, and the United States would support the government, while Russia, and potentially even China, might support the non-state opponents, even if covertly.

We emphasize that the available evidence *does not* indicate that a Cold War-style proxy war in Latin America is inevitable or even very likely. The evidence does, however, suggest that the potential for the United States to end up in a proxy conflict in Latin America on a side opposing China or Russia may be underappreciated in comparison with the potential in other regions. This finding has important implications for the DAF and the joint force

¹⁷ See Sarah Marsh, "The Facebook Group That Staged First in Cuba's Wave of Protests," Reuters, August 9, 2021.

at large, because the region attracts less attention in defense policy debates.¹⁸ At the very least, Latin America deserves more attention from defense analysts than is often the norm in today's policy discussions.

Recommendations

Since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the United States has concentrated much of its strategic focus on counterterrorism, often in secondary theaters—such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Africa. Although DoD's focus has since shifted to great-power competition, DoD has appreciated the fact that competition can often take the form of conflict below the threshold of war in secondary theaters, and, therefore, it must provide resources and train for these challenges.¹⁹ This project, in turn, offers some insight about what form that preparation should take.

Avoid Strategic Myopia and Secondary-Theater Blind Spots by Maintaining a Baseline Degree of Expertise in These Theaters

Perhaps the most foundational recommendation for both the joint force and the DAF is to avoid strategic myopia. The Indo-Pacific and Europe are the priority theaters for the joint force, for good reason. As previous research has concluded, these are the most likely flash-points for future conflicts.²⁰ Nothing in our series of studies questions these findings. To the contrary, we conclude that, although there may be competition in secondary theaters, the chance of great-power conflict—especially on the scale that would entail a substantial role for DAF assets—is low.

Nonetheless, the justified focus on the Indo-Pacific and Europe should not come at the expense of creating blind spots in secondary theaters. As highlighted in Chapter Two, the challenge of competing with China does not dictate an exclusive focus on the Indo-Pacific, any more than competing with Russia dictates an exclusive focus on Europe. Both powers have global interests and are therefore seeking influence on a global scale across the diplomatic, informational, economic, and (to a lesser extent) military domains.

¹⁸ The 2018 National Defense Strategy summary, for example, makes brief mention of the threats to the Western Hemisphere, placing it fourth on the priority list (behind the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East). It notes, "The U.S. derives immense benefit from a stable, peaceful hemisphere that reduces security threats to the homeland. Supporting the U.S. interagency lead, the Department will deepen its relations with regional countries that contribute military capabilities to shared regional and global security challenges" (DoD, 2018a, pp. 9–10).

¹⁹ This was some of the impetus behind DoD's irregular warfare annex to the National Defense Strategy (DoD, *Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy*, Washington, D.C., 2020).

²⁰ See Cohen et al., 2020.

The United States should consider a similarly global view and approach in response for two reasons. First, although the United States remains the dominant military actor in all three of the regions for the moment (see Chapter Two), this is not guaranteed going forward. Especially as China’s diplomatic and economic influence expands, it may be able to expand its military influence as well. Already, China has expanded its military footprint in these regions (e.g., with its base in Djibouti and its ground stations in Latin America), and it is reported to be eyeing bases elsewhere—in the UAE, Pakistan, and Afghanistan, for example (see Chapter Three).²¹ Consequently, if the United States does not counter rival influence-seeking today, it may find itself at a positional disadvantage in the future.

Second, the chances of wars in secondary theaters with strategic competitors on opposite sides may not be high, but, for the reasons discussed in Chapter Three and earlier in this chapter, the secondary-theater war that is most advantageous to U.S. interests is one that does not occur in the first place. One way to anticipate and minimize the risks of stumbling into such a conflict is to monitor the countries where preconditions are most favorable for a future conflict.

Ultimately, although DoD should likely focus on the Indo-Pacific and Europe in the next National Defense Strategy and prioritize those theaters when managing resources, it cannot turn a blind eye altogether to secondary theaters. DoD still needs to maintain some level of baseline intelligence collection, minimal presence, and language and cultural expertise to operate effectively in secondary theaters, if only as a hedge against uncertainty.

Recognize the Interconnection Between Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition and Conflict

As noted in Chapter Three, the most plausible scenarios for great-power military involvement are driven by the threat of international terrorism. Consequently, the United States still needs to recognize the interplay of great-power competition and counterterrorism. The 2018 National Defense Strategy casts these as two separate problems, arguing that “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security”; however, the two concerns are often intertwined.²² Terrorism can exacerbate great-power competition—for example, by drawing multiple powers into the same conflict in a secondary theater. And, conversely, great-power competition can reinforce terrorism, especially if it plays out through covert means. Consequently, strategic imperatives to shift from one to the other may not be as practically straightforward as U.S. strategy sometimes portrays them to be.

²¹ Pirnazarov and Auyezov, 2021; Lillis, Bertrand, and Atwood, 2021; Shinkman, 2021; Sutton, 2020.

²² DoD, 2018a, p. 1.

Strengthen Ties to Latin America

Latin America, listed as a distant fourth in priority in the 2018 National Defense Strategy, has been relatively neglected in U.S. defense policy.²³ The research presented in this report suggests that the region may deserve more attention. As we have noted, although logistical constraints on Chinese and Russian power projection make a large-scale conflict in the region unlikely, Latin America appears to present the most likely scenarios where U.S. interests clash with those of China and Russia and where, because of the region's proximity to the U.S. homeland, the United States cannot easily abstain from participating in the conflict.

To avert potential crises and maintain its primacy in the region, the United States should work today to strengthen its military ties in two dimensions. First, it should seek to deepen its military-to-military ties with key partners (e.g., Colombia) and direct effort to maintaining basing and access rights in the region. Second, it should be prepared to proactively respond to increased foreign presence in such countries as Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba.²⁴ Unlike in many potential crises in Europe or the Indo-Pacific, Russia and China—not the United States—face the greater time and distance challenges in the Western Hemisphere. Therefore, the United States should have the opportunity to prevent a challenge there, if U.S. policymakers choose to do so.

The effort to bolster ties with Latin America cannot fall strictly to the DAF or even just to DoD. In light of the United States' history of supporting authoritarian regimes in the region during the Cold War and the influence that China and Russia are building in the region on the diplomatic and economic fronts, any U.S. military-to-military engagement needs to be paired with increased diplomatic and economic engagement. It is possible that the most promising path to preventing China and Russia from growing influence in the military domain is to minimize the economic incentives for the countries of the region to engage with either U.S. competitor.

Work with Key Allies to Economize Resources in Secondary Theaters

The emphasis on working with allies and partners is a staple of almost every U.S. strategy document. The theme runs through the Biden administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance, for example, which features promises to “strengthen and stand behind

²³ DoD, 2018a, p. 4.

²⁴ Although in the context of a military challenge of a fundamentally different nature, U.S. actions following the Soviet deployment of missiles to Cuba in 1962 are one example of such a proactive response. Historians do not agree on a single factor that was responsible for the Soviet Union reversing its decisions, but authoritative accounts suggest that the cumulative effect of U.S. actions during the crisis communicated a clear and credible deterrent threat that contributed to the resolution of a crisis that risked nuclear escalation. See, for example, Graham Allison and Philip Zelikow, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis*, 2nd ed., New York: Longman, 1999, p. 110.

our allies, work with like-minded partners, and pool our collective strength to advance shared interests and deter common threats.”²⁵

Leveraging U.S. alliances and partnerships is applicable to a wide variety of security challenges, and engaging in competition and deterring conflicts in secondary theaters are no exception. After all, *secondary theaters* is defined for the present purposes as referring to interests that are secondary to the United States, China, and Russia—but not necessarily to U.S. allies and partners. In some cases, specific U.S. allies and partners care about particular countries in the regions examined here for a host of strategic, economic, political, and historical reasons and would be willing to take the lead in responding to challenges there, even if the United States may not have the resources or the interest to do so. For example, in 2000, the United Kingdom intervened in Sierra Leone to stabilize the country.²⁶ France’s 2013 intervention to roll back an Islamist insurgency in Mali is another example.²⁷ And, of course, the United States’ regional partners and allies have vested interests in the events in their own regions.

There may be limitations to relying entirely on allies and partners in these instances. Even such fairly capable allies as the United Kingdom and France mustered only relatively small forces in Sierra Leone and Mali, respectively, and in neither case were they directly opposed by rival great powers. And although these and other European powers have advantages in terms of local knowledge in secondary theaters, the very reason for these advantages creates the historical baggage of past colonial domination. Nonetheless, working with allies and partners in competition and conflicts in secondary theaters might lessen the burden on the United States, including DoD and the DAF, as demands on U.S. attention around the world proliferate.

Maintain Access Agreements Focused on Secondary Theaters

One of the cross-cutting themes running across almost all the scenarios we examined in Chapter Three is the challenge of access and basing in many secondary theaters. In some cases, such as Mozambique, the country is simply far from existing U.S. bases. In other cases, such as Afghanistan, the United States would need to overfly countries that have been, at best, lukewarm to U.S. presence in any renewed military operations. Even in the Nicaragua scenario—the closest one geographically to the U.S. homeland of those we considered—there is a potential need to leverage such bases as the Soto Cano Air Base in Honduras as staging locations. For the DAF and the joint force as a whole, the ability to operate in these locations requires access to bases and other places to base forces in theater.

²⁵ Biden, 2021, p. 6.

²⁶ See David H. Ucko, “Can Limited Intervention Work? Lessons from Britain’s Success Story in Sierra Leone,” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 5–6, 2016.

²⁷ See Michael Shurkin, *France’s War in Mali: Lessons for an Expeditionary Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-770-A, 2014.

The U.S. ability to maintain access in secondary theaters should not be taken for granted. As noted in Chapter Two, China and, to a lesser extent, Russia are making inroads into these regions and expanding their diplomatic, economic, and informational influence. Russia is expanding its military influence as well, although the United States maintains a clear military advantage. One question that U.S. decisionmakers might need to consider is whether China, Russia, or both might be able to use this newfound leverage to restrict U.S. military access or expand their own to secondary theaters. And if the battle for access heats up, then the stakes for the United States in preserving access to secondary theaters may similarly increase. For the moment, although the prospects for military interventions are not very likely, if the United States seeks to ensure that it can respond to crises in secondary theaters, it will need to devote effort to maintaining access and basing rights. These aspects of competition may largely fall outside the ambit of the DAF and DoD and instead fall to other parts of the U.S. government that wield the diplomatic and economic levers of power. In particular, the United States may need to build economic resilience in key countries to ensure that its current degree of access continues in the future.

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

For the reasons laid out in Chapter Three, most of the conflict scenarios in secondary theaters are relatively low stakes for the United States and are therefore unlikely to force a major commitment of U.S. conventional forces. Consequently, these conflicts may not be the best scenarios to drive the joint force's force-sizing or capability development. Nonetheless, the joint force must hedge against a full range of threats even if they are relatively low risk. Moreover, because most of these scenarios would likely draw on the same kinds of capabilities, if multiple scenarios occurred simultaneously, then the joint force at large—and the DAF in particular—might face a more significant resourcing demand. Because many of the more likely scenarios in secondary theaters would occur in remote locations, away from existing bases, the DAF could be expected to provide the mobility assets to deploy and sustain forces to the country in question and then potentially stand up an air base there or nearby to support operations.

As for what types of forces those mobility assets would be transporting and sustaining, recent operations provide some insight. Most of the more plausible scenarios for intervention in Africa and the Middle East focus on counterterrorism, and the relatively recent air war against the Islamic State might provide a rough sense of what assets might be in demand in such a scenario.²⁸ Specifically, ISR—to identify targets and the means of engaging them—

²⁸ Wasser et al., 2021.

would be needed, although with what platform may be somewhat fungible.²⁹ Moreover, in view of the need to work with and through local proxies, one can imagine that special operations forces and advising personnel could play a significant role.

A salient resourcing question for the DAF is whether the scenarios discussed in Chapter Three push the DAF toward lower-end capabilities. Counterterrorism alone does not require fifth-generation aircraft, but the fact that the United States may be operating near Chinese or Russian forces—who might be bringing along advanced air and air defense capabilities of their own—may merit these platforms as a precaution. Although we did not do the modeling necessary to answer this question in this study, it should be recognized as an area in need of future study.

The Future of Great-Power Rivalry in Secondary Theaters

The primary finding of this work suggests that, although there is potential for increasingly intense competition for influence in secondary theaters, the modern era of competition in these theaters may not lead to great-power conflict there. With the notable exception of the Latin American scenarios, most of the potential conflicts we examined in secondary theaters that are most likely to draw great-power involvement array the United States, China, and Russia on the same side, at least notionally. Such scenarios, even if they motivate great powers to mount limited military interventions, are most likely to produce problems of deconfliction, mutual harassment, and competition for political influence in the background—rather than problems of armed conflict between proxies backed by different great powers. Genuine cooperation among the three powers in such conflicts is unlikely, but they are likewise unlikely to be backing opposing sides in the regions examined.³⁰ Especially given that the joint force remains resource-constrained, the fact that the United States may be able to avoid fighting wars in secondary theaters and instead may be able to focus on the primary theaters of concern—where the risk of conflict is higher—should be welcome news.

At the same time, this finding holds only insofar as certain conditions hold. First, secondary theaters must remain peripheral to the core strategic, security, and economic interests of the United States, China, and Russia. Similarly, the finding rests on an assumption that other mechanisms to smooth or resolve competing interests in secondary theaters exist. For

²⁹ During Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. Air Force used a mixture of platforms, including A-10s, B-1s, F-15s, F-16s, and F-22s, in addition to aircraft flown by the Navy and coalition partners (see Wasser et al., 2021, p. 56). In the future, one could imagine this mission also falling to platforms not yet in the inventory, such as a light attack aircraft.

³⁰ For the reasons why genuine cooperation is unlikely, see Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

instance, it assumes that markets function, by and large, to provide a mechanism for resolving economic competition or disputes over resources and trade.³¹

Second, the United States, China, and Russia must retain the view of secondary theaters as largely unattractive options for cost-imposing strategies. This condition is tied to the first: If one of the three powers considers a region as of more than secondary importance, its competitors might view fueling conflicts in that region as opportunities for proxy wars intended to compel the adversary to expend resources. This logic underlies the need for Washington to pay attention to Latin America, which is less secondary to the United States than to its competitors, which may exploit the imbalance of interests.

Finally, the chances of a return to Cold War–style proxy wars in secondary theaters depend on whether inter-state competition acquires a zero-sum character. As highlighted in Chapter Two, China’s diplomatic, informational, and economic influence-seeking in secondary theaters is growing. How aggressive China will be at converting its involvement into influence, how it will use its influence, whether China and Russia will more effectively join forces, and how the United States and the rest of the world will respond are not at all obvious. If relations between the United States and its allies on one side and China, Russia, and their allies on the other deteriorate significantly and the two sides take on maximalist conceptions of their own security, then the prospect of Cold War–style proxy wars in secondary theaters would increase considerably.

³¹ For an analysis of how economics might shape the prospects of conflict globally in the future, see Howard J. Shatz and Nathan Chandler, *Global Economic 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-2849/4, 2020.

The U.S. Approach to Supporting Proxies and Intervening in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

The United States has a long history of support for proxies or local actors, directly and indirectly. It has—at points in its history—been both proxy and principal, wielding the tool of proxy warfare against others and defending against it in turn. It has participated in foreign conflicts for a host of reasons—sometimes because it had key interests at stake in the region and sometimes because it saw the conflict as a means to achieve broader strategic objectives. The United States has fought these campaigns all over the world and maintains a robust suite of capabilities to continue such activities.

Given the United States' expansive track record of supporting proxies or local actors, predicting where and how the United States might do so in the future is a tricky task. This appendix lays out some of what we know about the U.S. approach to proxy wars. We start by briefly recapping the United States' experiences with proxy wars and sharing thoughts about lessons learned. Then, we describe when, why, where, and how the United States might intervene in conflicts in secondary theaters and what capabilities it might employ in the future.

U.S. Proxy Warfare and Limited Interventions: Lessons Learned

The U.S. experience with supporting proxies or local actors dates to before the United States became an independent country. In some sense, proxy warfare was one of the dominant forms of conflict in North America during the colonial period. The French and British empires routinely used proxies—including Native American tribes and the colonists themselves—to advance their imperial aims.¹ During the American Revolution, the United States tried and failed to encourage French Canadians to rebel against Great Britain, while the Earl of Dun-

¹ See, for example, Eliot A. Cohen, *Conquered into Liberty: Two Centuries of Battles Along the Great War-path That Made the American Way of War*, New York: Free Press, 2011.

more and royal governor of Virginia, John Murray, offered freedom to any slave who would fight for Britain.²

For the first century after the Declaration of Independence, the United States fought wars of different types on the American continent. It fought a war with Great Britain in 1812, a war with Mexico between 1846 and 1848, a civil war, and almost continuous wars with different Native American tribes throughout the 19th century. Arguably, all these wars were central to the nascent United States' existence and ultimately defined the borders of the United States that exist today.³ Nonetheless, the United States still relied on local forces to augment the military in many of these campaigns.

Toward the end of the 19th century, the United States turned outward and often turned to local forces to assist with military efforts. For instance, the United States established local units—such as the Philippine Scouts and the Philippine Constabulary—to help suppress an insurgency in the Philippines after the Spanish-American War. It similarly stood up local constabulary units to help maintain order in smaller-scale interventions in such places as the Caribbean in the early part of the 20th century.⁴

During World War II, the United States developed relationships with resistance groups across Europe and Asia as a means to extend the Axis powers. Often under the auspices of the Office of Strategic Services, the United States fielded special operations units designed to link up with local resistance groups and fight behind enemy lines.⁵ These groups operated in both Europe and the Pacific, and, although their operational significance to the overall war effort remains open for debate, the U.S. special operations community often points to these efforts as their historical roots for more-modern wars.⁶

After World War II, military intervention through and with proxies was at the forefront of the new Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. The prospect of mutual annihilation prevented the two nuclear-armed adversaries from directly warring with each other, but they engaged in indirect wars all over the world.⁷ As a result, the United States

² Linda Robinson, Todd C. Helmus, Raphael S. Cohen, Alireza Nader, Andrew Radin, Madeline Magnuson, and Katya Migacheva, *Modern Political Warfare: Current Practices and Possible Responses*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1772-A, 2018, pp. 12–13.

³ Historian David E. Johnson, for example, argues that even the Indian Wars—the least intense of the four U.S. wars noted here—were nonetheless “existential” to the United States (David E. Johnson, *Doing What You Know: The United States and 250 Years of Irregular War*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017, p. 16).

⁴ Johnson, 2017, pp. 26–28.

⁵ For an overview, see Office of Strategic Services, “The OSS Primer,” webpage, undated; and David W. Hogan, Jr., *U.S. Army Special Operations in World War II*, Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, Department of the Army, 1992.

⁶ Office of Strategic Services, undated; Hogan, 1992.

⁷ See Richard D. Newton, “The Seeds of Surrogate Warfare,” in Richard D. Newton, Travis L. Homiak, Kelly H. Smith, Isaac J. Peltier, and D. Jonathan White, eds., *Contemporary Security Challenges: Irregular Warfare and Indirect Approaches*, Hurlburt Field, Fla.: Joint Special Operations University, February 2009.

began to fight the Soviet-backed Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese regime, as well as fund its own anti-Communist groups around the world, from Nicaragua to Afghanistan. In some cases—such as the U.S. backing of the Philippine government during the Hukbalahap insurgency or of the mujahedeen in Afghanistan—these latter missions were successful (or at least appeared so at the time).⁸ In other cases—such as the Reagan administration’s support for the Contras in Nicaragua—this support for local actors led to bloody debacles. Whether the United States was instigating or fending off a proxy conflict, these wars were almost invariably messy affairs.

Many of the proxy wars of the period were *intra-state* conflicts in which the United States and the Soviet Union backed opposite sides of an internal conflict, but the two powers fought *inter-state* proxy wars as well. For instance, multiple wars in the mid-20th century pitted largely U.S.-equipped Israeli military forces against Soviet-equipped militaries of the surrounding Arab states. In this sense, these proxy wars became more than just a geopolitical struggle; they served as a trial-by-fire test for U.S. weaponry and tactics and spurred U.S. military innovation.⁹

The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the collapse of the Soviet Union a few years later ended the ideological competition between democracy and communism and the global division between Western- and Soviet-aligned blocs, but it did not bring an end to proxy wars. To the contrary, U.S. military supremacy made proxy wars a particularly attractive tactic for states that wanted to thwart U.S. objectives but lacked the conventional military power to do so. Consequently, the United States faced Iran-backed proxies in Iraq, as well as groups supported by Pakistan, Iran, and later even Russia in Afghanistan throughout the long conflict there.¹⁰

Yet it was not always U.S. adversaries that saw proxies as expedient and cost-effective means to achieve strategic objectives. The United States routinely supported proxies in the post-Cold War period as well. It backed the Northern Alliance—augmented by U.S. special forces and airpower—against the Taliban in the early days of the war in Afghanistan in an

⁸ Newton, 2009, pp. 4–7, 11–14; Crile, 2007.

⁹ This is perhaps best demonstrated by the 1973 Arab-Israeli war. As Johnson writes, “The 1973 Arab-Israeli war was the wakeup call that shook the Army (and the other U.S. armed services) out of its somnolence, because it ‘demonstrated the new lethality of the future battlefield. The U.S. Army learned from this war that it was not prepared for mid-intensity conflict’” (David E. Johnson, “An Army Trying to Shake Itself from Intellectual Slumber, Part I: Learning from the 1970s,” *War on the Rocks*, February 2, 2018). The conflict ultimately spurred the U.S. military to rethink both its doctrine and some of its major weapon programs.

¹⁰ Over the 20-year conflict, all three actors—Pakistan, Iran, and Russia—have had mixed views of the Afghan insurgents, sometimes viewing them as a threat to the countries’ own security and sometimes viewing them as a strategic opportunity to impose costs on the United States. Consequently, all three have provided military aid to the insurgency at one point or another. See Seth G. Jones, *The Insurgent Sanctuary in Pakistan*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2018; and Barnett Rubin, “A New Look at Iran’s Complicated Relationship with the Taliban,” *War on the Rocks*, September 16, 2020; and Savage, Schmitt, and Schwirtz, 2021.

effort to keep the U.S. footprint in the country small and instead rely on U.S. technological advantages.¹¹ The United States supported Iraqi Shia and the Kurdish groups against Saddam Hussein's Iraq. And most recently, the United States backed opposition groups against Bashar al-Assad's Syria and against the Islamic State.¹² The reasons why the United States turned to proxy forces varied across these cases, but one of the major advantages of relying on such forces was that it allowed Washington to avoid incurring the relatively high political and economic costs associated with deploying large numbers of ground forces.

In the post-Cold War period, the United States also participated in inter-state proxy wars, albeit less frequently than intra-state conflicts. For example, the United States has provided substantial amounts of military and economic aid to Georgia, including \$1 billion in the aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War, although the U.S. support did not alter the course of the conflict.¹³ Similarly, in the aftermath of Russia's 2014 invasion of Ukraine, the United States provided an estimated \$2.5 billion in military aid—including everything from drones to anti-tank missiles—to Kyiv by spring 2021.¹⁴

And U.S. adversaries think that Washington is actively backing many more proxies. Russia believes that the United States is behind many of the *color revolutions*—pro-democracy revolutions in former Soviet republics.¹⁵ Although many of these accusations reflect more Russia's paranoia than reality, they are partly a testament to the United States' reputation for interventionism and support for local proxies.

Ultimately, there are many lessons that could be drawn from the United States' long history of supporting local proxies, but perhaps the key insight here is that proxy wars are not simply a tool of U.S. adversaries. Throughout its history, the United States has been on both sides of these conflicts. The reason is that fighting a conflict by proxy or through local actors makes sense in many cases. It can be cheaper both financially and politically and can bring a host of other potential strategic benefits—such as increased combat efficacy (due to local knowledge of the terrain), increased local legitimacy, and reduced costs of holding territory after the campaign is won.¹⁶

In the aftermath of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, future policymakers may be reticent to deploy large numbers of ground forces in future conflicts. Instead, the United States is likely to prefer less-robust military support and act primarily through local actors, if only to

¹¹ See Donald H. Rumsfeld, "Transforming the Military," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2002.

¹² For a brief overview of U.S. actions in Syria and support for the Syrian Democratic Forces, see Humud and Blanchard, 2020.

¹³ Cory Welt, *Georgia: Background and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45307, June 10, 2021, pp. 18–20.

¹⁴ Betsy Woodruff Swan and Paul McLeary, "White House Freezes Ukraine Military Package That Includes Lethal Weapons," *Politico*, June 18, 2021.

¹⁵ See Appendix C.

¹⁶ For the costs and benefits of proxy wars, see Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 3, June 2010.

minimize the costs to the United States in blood and treasure.¹⁷ Moreover, with the return of great-power competition, the United States may once again turn to proxy wars for similar reasons as it turned to this form of warfare during the Cold War. Both China and Russia are large, powerful, and nuclear-armed adversaries. Consequently, direct conflict risks nuclear Armageddon, and all sides have an incentive, at least in the abstract, to pursue more-indirect and less-escalatory means whenever possible.

When and Why the United States Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Since the United States emerged as a superpower after World War II, it has been continuously involved in conflicts in secondary theaters all over the world. Since the 2001 terrorist attacks, much of this involvement has been under the guise of the global war on terrorism. The scale of this involvement has been stunning. Between 2018 and 2020 alone, long after the height of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the United States was involved in counterterrorism operations in 85 countries to varying degrees, including having forces deployed in combat in 12 countries and conducting drone strikes in seven countries.¹⁸ Table A.1 presents just a small subset of the United States' overall involvement in foreign conflicts after 2000.

In general, the United States supports local actors for several reasons, including security, economic, strategic and geopolitical, ideological and humanitarian, and domestic political factors. These factors might constitute what we have called *internal* reasons for involvement; that is, the United States might have interests in a country and view support for local actors as a means of achieving or protecting those interests. In addition, the United States might believe that, by fighting a war in a given country, it can achieve some larger aim—well beyond the country's borders—or can prevent a larger catastrophe from happening. These factors constitute what we call *external* reasons for involvement.

¹⁷ Pew Research Center polling from 2021, for example, showed that the U.S. public was evenly split between those who thought the United States “should pay less attention to problems overseas and concentrate on problems here at home” and those who favored a more internationalist approach, and even those who did favor an internationalist approach may not necessarily back military intervention depending on the circumstances (Jacob Poushter and Stefan Cornibert, *Majority of Americans Confident in Biden's Handling of Foreign Policy as Term Begins*, Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, February 2021). There is a larger discussion about casualties and war. For some of this debate, see Christopher Gelpi, Peter D. Feaver, and Jason Reifler, “Success Matters: Casualty Sensitivity and the War in Iraq,” *International Security*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Winter 2005/06; and Scott Sigmund Gartner and Gary M. Segura, “War, Casualties, and Public Opinion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 42, No. 3, June 1998.

¹⁸ Stephanie Savell, “United States Counterterrorism Operations 2018–2020,” Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, Brown University, February 2021.

TABLE A.1

Selected List of U.S. Involvement in Foreign Conflicts Since 2000

Country	Actors Supported	Form of Support	Key Drivers of Involvement
Afghanistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Northern Alliance Afghan government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat troops Military and economic aid PMSCs Advisers Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Iraq	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Iraqi government (post-Saddam regime) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combat troops Military and economic aid PMSCs Advisers Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Libya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anti-Qaddafi forces NATO alliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Humanitarian concerns Global war on terrorism
Mali	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Malian government France 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Niger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerien government France 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Nigeria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nigerian government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Somalia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Somalian government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Syrian Democratic Forces Free Syrian Army 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Pakistan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pakistani government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military aid Airpower (drones) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Philippines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Philippine government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism
Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Yemeni government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and economic aid Advisers Special operations Airpower 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Global war on terrorism

SOURCE: Savell, 2021; Barbara Salazar Torreon and Sofia Plagakis, *Instances of Use of United States Armed Forces Abroad, 1798–2021*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R42738, last updated September 8, 2021; and Annika Lichtenbaum, "U.S. Military Operational Activity in the Sahel," *Lawfare*, January 25, 2019.

Security Factors

Perhaps the most direct reason why the United States has chosen to engage in proxy wars is to defeat threats to its own national security that originate or grow in specific countries, and proxy wars are a potentially cheaper, quieter, and more effective manner to defeat those threats than either diplomacy or direct, large-scale military intervention would be.¹⁹ For example, in an address to the nation on March 13, 1986, President Ronald Reagan argued that the Communist-aligned government in Nicaragua posed a grave and growing threat to U.S. national security:

I must speak to you tonight about a mounting danger in Central America that threatens the security of the United States. This danger will not go away; it will grow worse, much worse, if we fail to take action now. I'm speaking of Nicaragua, a Soviet ally on the American mainland only 2 hours' flying time from our own borders. With over a billion dollars in Soviet-bloc aid, the Communist government of Nicaragua has launched a campaign to subvert and topple its democratic neighbors. Using Nicaragua as a base, the Soviets and Cubans can become the dominant power in the crucial corridor between North and South America. Established there, they will be in a position to threaten the Panama Canal, interdict our vital Caribbean sea lanes, and, ultimately, move against Mexico.²⁰

Reagan essentially argued that a Communist Nicaragua posed an intolerable risk to U.S. national security, both because the small Central American state was strategically located at the crossroads of North and South America and because the regime—with the aid of the Soviet Union and Cuba—would attack U.S. allies and potentially the United States. Consequently, Reagan favored backing the “freedom fighters” of Nicaragua, a move that ultimately resulted in the Iran-Contra Scandal at the end of his presidency.²¹ In the more recent era, threats to national security have often come from international Islamic terrorism, a prominent factor in U.S. foreign policy and U.S. military action globally since 2001.

Economic Factors

Historically, the United States has supported local actors for economic reasons, although these were usually not the primary or driving reasons for involvement in foreign conflicts. For example, in 1953, the United States and the United Kingdom supported a military coup against Iranian Prime Minister Mohammed Mosaddeq. They feared that he was favorably

¹⁹ For a broader discussion of the uses of covert action and interventions on behalf of local actors, see William J. Daugherty, *Executive Secrets: Covert Action and the Presidency*, Lexington, Ky.: University of Kentucky Press, 2006; and Roy Godson, *Dirty Tricks or Trump Cards: U.S. Covert Action and Counterintelligence*, New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2008; and Salehyan, 2010.

²⁰ Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Situation in Nicaragua,” Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, March 16, 1986.

²¹ Reagan, 1986.

disposed to the Soviet Union and communism and—because he had nationalized the local infrastructure of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, today known as BP—that he was a threat to Western economic interests.²²

Strategic and Geopolitical Factors

Even if the United States does not have vital security-based or economic interests at stake in a given country, it might choose to support local actors in a conflict in order to accomplish some grander strategic aim, such as weakening a rival great-power adversary or preventing a rival from doing the same to it in return.

The Vietnam War is perhaps the best example of external interests driving the United States into a proxy war. In a news conference on April 7, 1954, President Dwight Eisenhower was asked why Vietnam (then Indochina) was important to the free world. He answered,

You have broader considerations that might follow what you would call the “falling domino” principle. You have a row of dominoes set up, you knock over the first one, and what will happen to the last one is the certainty that it will go over very quickly. So you could have a beginning of a disintegration that would have the most profound influences.²³

Eisenhower’s comment gave rise to the domino theory and one of the more prominent justifications for engaging in Vietnam and around the world. Eisenhower argued that, if Indochina fell, this would embolden the communist movements throughout Asia, and countries throughout the region soon would fall to communist control.²⁴

Conversely, as mentioned in the previous section, supporting local actors can also be used to impose costs on an opponent. In some sense, this represents the inverse logic of the domino theory. Rather than fearing the second-order consequences of not fighting a war, in this case, the idea is that a successful execution of such a war will set off a chain reaction that ultimately will undermine the adversary’s stability at home. This is perhaps best epitomized by the United States’ decision to back the mujahedeen in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union during the late 1970s and 1980s. The policy—along with an oil embargo and other diplomatic responses—represented “Washington’s collective attempt to make the Soviets’ ‘adventure’ in Afghanistan as painful and brief as possible.”²⁵

²² Andrew Glass, “Eisenhower Approves Coup in Iran, Aug. 19, 1953,” *Politico*, August 19, 2018.

²³ Office of the Historian, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1952–1954, Indochina, Volume XIII, Part 1: Editorial Note,” U.S. Department of State, undated-a.

²⁴ Interestingly, John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson, who were more directly responsible for the escalation in Vietnam, may have never been fully vested in the domino theory (Fredrik Logevall, “Presidential Address: Structure, Contingency, and the War in Vietnam,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 39, No. 1, January 2015, p. 9).

²⁵ Office of the Historian, “The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan and the U.S. Response, 1978–1980,” U.S. Department of State, undated-b.

Ideological and Humanitarian Factors

Strategic and geopolitical factors during the Cold War have been inseparable from ideological considerations. Underlying the United States' actions in both Nicaragua and Iran was an ideological commitment to combat the spread of communism. As Reagan said in his 1985 State of the Union address, "We must stand by all our democratic allies. And we must not break faith with those who are risking their lives—on every continent, from Afghanistan to Nicaragua—to defy Soviet-supported aggression and secure rights which have been ours from birth."²⁶

Ideological reasons for supporting local actors, however, did not completely disappear with the end of the Cold War. More recently, the United States has chosen to back local actors from Syria to Ukraine partly because of its ideological commitment to support democratic movements and combat authoritarianism.²⁷ Humanitarian concerns—such as preventing or putting an end to widespread atrocities—might also play a role in U.S. decisions, and they arguably were a factor driving U.S. involvement in the Syrian civil war.

Domestic Political Factors

Finally, though not discussed in this report at any length, U.S. domestic political factors also play into U.S. policymakers' decisions about whether to engage in a war.²⁸ Given the diversity of the U.S. population, there often is some U.S. domestic voice lobbying for engagement in each region. Moreover, presidents often face political pressure to engage in proxy wars to achieve large aims, such as supporting democracy or combating communism. As Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, argued about why the United States became embroiled in the Vietnam War,

More than anything else, it was domestic politics, and the concern of John F. Kennedy—and to an even greater extent Lyndon Johnson—that the American people would not forgive the politicians or the party that "lost" Vietnam. Both remembered the price paid by Democrats charged by Sen. Joe McCarthy (R-WI) and others with "losing" China.²⁹

²⁶ U.S. Department of State, "Reagan Doctrine, 1985," webpage, undated-c.

²⁷ For example, when a group of senators from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee introduced the Ukraine Security Partnership Act to provide security assistance and strategic support to Ukraine, they justified it partly on ideological grounds—supporting Ukraine's democratic transition and upholding international law in the face of Russian revanchism (Ranking Member's Press, "Bipartisan Group of Senators Re-Introduce Legislation to Provide Assistance, Support for Ukraine," U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, March 17, 2021).

²⁸ See, for example, Patrick M. Regan, "Choosing to Intervene: Outside Interventions in Internal Conflicts," *Journal of Politics*, Vol. 60, No. 3, August 1998.

²⁹ Richard N. Haass, "The Vietnam War in Hindsight," Brookings Institution, April 27, 2000. Historian Fredrik Logevall made a similar argument about escalation: "Partisan politics mattered greatly. Kennedy and Johnson had to contend with the legacy of McCarthyism and the claim that they were 'soft on Communism'" (Logevall, 2015, p. 10).

At least in Haass's estimation, the political cost of Kennedy or Johnson appearing weak on communism was simply too much to bear. So they doubled down on the war in Vietnam.³⁰

Ultimately, there are usually several factors at play—domestic political pressures, internal security reasons, and broader external aims—that lead the United States to become involved in a foreign conflict where rival powers also are already backing or are likely to back proxies.

Where the United States Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

As mentioned earlier, the United States has backed local actors around the world—in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North and South America—at one time or another for a host of reasons. Partly because the United States' reach has been so vast and its interests so varied, predicting where the United States might back other local actors proves a difficult task.

Given the factors outlined in the previous section about the reasons the United States might decide to support proxies, two considerations can help indicate where it might fight the next war. First, the extent to which the United States would have internal reasons to intervene in a particular locality—based on national security, economic, or other factors—matters. Even if internal factors are not the dominant reason that the United States engages in a proxy war in a given location, Washington usually has at least some sort of vested interest in the locations where it fights proxy wars. Interestingly, before laying out the domino theory of why the United States should get involved in Indochina (now Vietnam), Eisenhower started with a more straightforward reason: It was in the United States' economic interest to do so. He said, "two of the items from this particular area that the world uses are tin and tungsten. They are very important. There are others, of course, the rubber plantations and so on."³¹ In hindsight, of course, the domino theory is a more famous explanation for the Vietnam War than tin and tungsten are, but Eisenhower's reference hints that analysis of U.S. interests may offer some, if imperfect, predictive power for identifying where the United States may fight in the future.

Second, internal instability may be another predictor of where the United States might choose to intervene. In the U.S. interventions in the Philippines during the Hukbalahap rebellion, the Vietnam War, Nicaragua, and Afghanistan (in the 1980s and in 2001), there was some form of ongoing internal conflict before the United States intervened, and U.S. policymakers believed that it was in the United States' best interest that one or the other side prevailed in those conflicts. Although the United States could theoretically precipitate a crisis, doing so is a much greater investment of resources and would present the challenge of finding a suitable proxy. Thus, places where conflicts are brewing or have already erupted are more likely candidates.

³⁰ On the flip side, domestic politics can play a role in restraining or ending support for local actors as well. Arguably, this was the case in Vietnam.

³¹ Office of the Historian, undated-a.

How the United States Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

The United States maintains a large suite of capabilities that can be used to conduct and to counter proxy wars. Although much of the focus in proxy wars—like all wars—is on the military tools, all implements of national power have a role to play in these types of wars. Diplomacy, information, and economics (specifically, foreign aid) play a big role in determining public support for war, both in the conflict country and in the broader international community. In this section, we discuss various forms of support that the United States might use in a proxy or limited conflict in a secondary theater.

Economic Aid and Diplomatic Support

Foreign aid played a central role in the U.S. counterinsurgency strategies of the 20th century as part of what was colloquially called “hearts and minds” strategies.³² For example, between 1962 and 1975, South Vietnam was the largest recipient of USAID assistance as the United States tried to fight a communist takeover of the country.³³ In 1967 alone, South Vietnam accounted for \$550 million of the agency’s \$2 billion budget.³⁴ The United States similarly invested heavily in Afghanistan and Iraq during those conflicts. In Afghanistan alone, USAID spent some \$3.9 billion in humanitarian relief from 2002 to 2020.³⁵ In all these cases, the logic was that, if the United States spent resources on development, it could undercut support for insurgencies in these countries, as well as for their external backers.

At the same time, diplomacy, information, and economics can be used as a more offensive tool in these conflicts. Promises of U.S. economic assistance or diplomatic recognition or support can be one of the many incentives that the United States can offer potential local actors if they choose to fight.

³² Military doctrinal writing from the height of the later Afghanistan and Iraq wars often tends to emphasize the role of economics in this form of warfare. See, for example, David Kilcullen, “‘Twenty-Eight Articles’: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency,” *Military Review*, Vol. 86, No. 3, May–June 2006, p. 31; and Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24/Fleet Marine Force Manual 3-24, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2006, p. 3-14.

³³ Marc Leepson, “The Heart and Mind of USAID’s Vietnam Mission,” *Foreign Service Journal*, April 2000, p. 21.

³⁴ Leepson, 2000, p. 21.

³⁵ USAID, “The United States Provides More Than \$266 Million in Humanitarian Assistance for the People of Afghanistan,” press release, June 4, 2021c.

Arms Sales and Equipment Transfers

The United States has provided weaponry to local actors, sometimes covertly, as with the mujahedeen in Afghanistan and the Contras in Nicaragua.³⁶ Sometimes, however, the military aid is overt. In the five years after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, the United States provided some \$1.5 billion in security assistance, paying for such capabilities as counter-artillery radars and tactical equipment.³⁷

Private Military and Security Companies

Like China and Russia, the United States extensively uses PMSCs. In fact, during the height of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, between 2007 and 2012, DoD spent almost four times the United Kingdom's defense budget—roughly \$160 billion—on PMSCs, and this figure does not include PMSCs hired by other U.S. government agencies, such as the Department of State.³⁸ Moreover, contractors constituted 70 percent of the U.S. force presence in Afghanistan and nearly half the forces in Iraq during the height of those wars.³⁹ These companies perform a variety of functions for the United States, such as intelligence collection, protection of infrastructure and individuals, and military advising. Consequently, if the United States wanted to shape a conflict in a secondary theater without committing forces to the fight, PMSCs provide one method to do it.

Military Training and Advisers

If the United States wants to intervene more overtly, it maintains the ability to train local actors, particularly in the special operations community. Indeed, the original purpose of the U.S. Army Special Forces (commonly called the Green Berets) when they were founded in the early 1950s was to train and work with guerrilla groups against Communist states.⁴⁰ Later, the Army Special Forces trained forces on the government side of the equation, advising the South Vietnamese military on counterinsurgency tactics.⁴¹ The other services also have special operations forces that routinely train local actors. Air Force joint terminal air controllers, for example, have trained U.S. proxies on how to call for air support in such places as Syria.⁴²

³⁶ For an overview of the covert funding of the Contras and links to many of the declassified primary documents, see Brown University, "Understanding the Iran-Contra Affairs," webpage, undated.

³⁷ DoD, "DOD Announces \$250M to Ukraine," press release, June 18, 2019.

³⁸ Sean McFate, *Mercenaries and War: Understanding Private Armies Today*, Washington, D.C.: National Defense University Press, December 2019, p. 22.

³⁹ McFate, 2019, p. 18.

⁴⁰ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, "Special Forces History," webpage, undated.

⁴¹ U.S. Army Special Operations Command, undated.

⁴² Kyle Rempfer, "Air Force JTACS Training Syrians to Help Call in Helo Airstrikes Raises Questions," *Air Force Times*, April 5, 2021.

Ultimately, these operations have a mixed record of success. U.S.-led efforts to train the Free Syrian Army faltered early on, but later efforts to train the Syrian Democratic Forces notched important successes against the Islamic State.⁴³

Training local actors, however, is not simply a special operations mission. The U.S. military routinely hosts foreign students both in the United States and abroad. In 2020 alone, DoD trained 31,000 foreign military students in its schoolhouses and deployed military advisers to 13 ally countries.⁴⁴ The Army even has Security Force Assistance brigades to train conventional forces. Admittedly, many of the allies and partners being trained are not engaged in conflicts, and sending students to a U.S. military school does not make their home state a site of proxy warfare. Still, the United States' ability to train foreign students provides another potential lever to use in these conflicts.

Special Operations and Airpower

Finally, the United States has sometimes supported local actors directly with limited uses of military force—typically special operations and airpower. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld touted this model as the future of warfare when U.S. special forces and precision U.S. airpower linked up with local actors to help overthrow the Taliban during the early days of the Afghanistan war.⁴⁵ Since then, however, the United States has applied this basic model to other campaigns in other areas. U.S. and European precision airpower—assisting local actors—helped overthrow Libyan dictator Qaddafi.⁴⁶ In addition, U.S. airpower and a relatively small footprint of U.S. ground forces assisted Iraqi government forces and Syrian Kurdish proxies in rolling back the Islamic State.⁴⁷ The model has proven successful particularly against second-tier adversaries that lack sophisticated air defenses and significant airpower assets of their own.

Admittedly, the cocktail of precision airpower, special operators, and local proxies also has its limitations. Although this model has proven its efficacy at overthrowing second-tier adversaries, it has not been particularly successful at stabilizing the states afterward. In Afghanistan, the light footprint allowed al-Qaeda members to escape over the border into Pakistan, and substantial numbers of U.S. ground forces were ultimately required to help

⁴³ Kimberly Dozier, “Biden Wants to Keep Special Ops in the Mideast. That Doesn’t Mean More ‘Forever Wars,’ His Adviser Says,” *Time Magazine*, September 23, 2020.

⁴⁴ Augusta Saraiva, “Foreign Training Programs Could Become a Priority in Biden Administration, Experts Say,” *Military Times*, February 3, 2021.

⁴⁵ See Rumsfeld, 2002.

⁴⁶ Eric Schmitt, “US Gives Its Air Power Expansive Role in Libya,” *New York Times*, March 28, 2011.

⁴⁷ Wasser et al., 2021.

stabilize the country.⁴⁸ Similarly, in Libya, although the Qaddafi regime was toppled, the country was left destabilized.⁴⁹

Conclusions

Although the United States sometimes casts it as a tool primarily of U.S. adversaries, military intervention through supporting proxies or local actors is a U.S. form of warfare. Over the years, the United States has been on both sides of these types of wars—backing governments in some cases and insurgent groups in others. This was a staple of how the Cold War was fought, and the United States still retains and exercises these capabilities today and likely will continue to do so—as the strategic circumstances dictate—in the years to come.

⁴⁸ See Sean Naylor, *Not a Good Day to Die: The Untold Story of Operation Anaconda*, New York: Berkley Caliber Books, 2005.

⁴⁹ Bethan McKernan, “War in Libya: How Did It Start, Who Is Involved and What Happens Next?” *The Guardian*, May 18, 2020.

China's Approach to Supporting Proxies and Intervening in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Until recently, competition between the United States and China has been focused primarily within the Indo-Pacific region, where China has used a variety of tools and capabilities to coerce or incentivize regional nations to support its goals and objectives. However, that competition is expanding to secondary theaters as China looks outward. Xi Jinping's focus on national rejuvenation and the implementation of such policies as the Chinese Dream and the Belt and Road Initiative are aimed at expanding China's global interests, increasing Beijing's economic and diplomatic clout, and modernizing the PLA to be able to conduct operations overseas. With more-robust military capability and greater resources, assuming these trends continue, China will increasingly be able to compete with the United States in areas far from the Indo-Pacific region. Although future U.S.-China strategic competition will be multi-faceted and involve a variety of diplomatic, informational, military, and economic capabilities, a growing possibility is that China will seek to extend its influence by supporting actors or organizations working against the United States, its allies, and its interests in regions around the world.

In this appendix, we seek to assess how China will approach support for actors in secondary-theater conflicts in the next 30 years—particularly when, why, where, and how China might engage in this aspect of strategic competition. We begin by discussing China's views of proxy warfare by exploring lessons learned from other countries' support for proxies or local actors in foreign wars and Chinese assessments of future trends. We then examine economic, strategic and geopolitical, security, and domestic factors that could influence China's decision to support—or refrain from supporting—parties to foreign civil conflicts. Next, we analyze where China might be most likely to engage in proxy warfare based on Chinese assessments of the international environment, the U.S.-China competition, and areas where Chinese interests might predicate proxy involvement in a conflict. Then, we assess the capabilities that China could use to support proxies. Next, we discuss which groups China might support in proxy conflicts. We conclude with implications for China's future approach to proxy warfare and limited direct interventions.

China's Views of Proxy Warfare and Limited Interventions: Lessons Learned and Future Trends

This section examines China's lessons learned from other powers' experiences. For this analysis, we reviewed Western and Chinese historical texts regarding China's support for proxies during the Cold War, as well as Chinese literature and Chinese military sources that discuss China's perspectives on other countries' experiences in foreign conflicts, with a focus on proxy conflicts.

Beijing has a history of supporting Maoist and other insurgents around the world, stretching back to before the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 through the 1980s, when Deng Xiaoping's reform and opening-up philosophy focused China on developing economically and integrating with the West instead of fomenting revolution. Throughout these decades, Chinese proxy warfare activities consisted of providing military training and sending material support and supplies to armed rebel groups. Most of these groups were located in East Asia, including in Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Nepal, although Maoist insurgent groups in Africa and Latin America also received some support.¹ China also conducted direct military interventions during the Cold War, likewise primarily in Asia.²

The end of the Cold War meant that China no longer faced any major international threats that would justify the use of proxy warfare.³ As a further disincentive, Chinese leaders replaced revolutionary ideology with *peaceful development*, a concept that required a stable regional environment and a focus on economic progress and cooperation with neighboring states.⁴ Given these priorities, China turned instead to focus on economic growth and development.

Although there is some Chinese analysis on China's historical use of proxy warfare and its military intervention, much of China's approach was driven by ideology in a very different international environment than what exists today.⁵ Perhaps more relevant for Beijing's future approach to conflicts in secondary theaters is Chinese analysis of the more recent experience of other countries, including the United States and Russia. Recent Chinese military literature

¹ Stanislav Mysicka, "Chinese Support for Communist Insurgencies in Southeast Asia During the Cold War," *International Journal of China Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3, December 2015, pp. 212–213; and Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950–1975*, Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, April 2000, p. 24.

² See Timothy R. Heath, Christian Curriden, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *China's Military Interventions: Patterns, Drivers, and Signposts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A444-4, 2021, pp. 66–68.

³ Michael E. Marti, *China and the Legacy of Deng Xiaoping: From Communist Revolution to Capitalist Evolution*, Dulles, Va.: Potomac Books, 2002, pp. 134–135; and Watts et al., 2023.

⁴ Winberg Chai, "The Ideological Paradigm Shifts of China's World Views: From Marxism-Leninism-Maoism to the Pragmatism-Multilateralism of the Deng-Jiang-Hu Era," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, Vol. 30, No. 3, Fall 2003.

⁵ For an analysis of China's military interventions, see Heath et al., 2021.

assessing lessons learned, especially from the U.S. and Russian proxy war experiences, provides a window into how China views proxy warfare and the lessons Beijing has taken from studying other powers' involvement in such conflicts. According to these writings, these lessons include the following.

Supporting proxies reduces the costs, risks, and responsibility of war. Chinese analysis notes that one of the primary reasons why great powers enter proxy wars—rather than intervene directly using their own military forces—is to reduce costs and lower the potential for domestic political and international backlash to a conflict. Chinese analysts emphasize that great powers can transfer part of the costs of conflict to their proxies without having to bear the costs of maintenance or occupation. One author from the PLA's National Defense University notes that, following the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the West, led by the United States, is more reluctant to fight a deeply involved war. The article provides the example of the Syrian civil war and the Ukraine crisis, where the United States relied on proxies to maximize its interests and minimize risks. Part of minimizing these risks, in the author's opinion, is that supporting proxies can also mitigate the danger of running afoul of international law.⁶

Supporting proxies makes it easier to control the scale and scope of involvement in conflicts. Chinese authors note that, with proxy wars, it is easy to exit the “quagmire of war” if the situation turns dire. And, in terms of scale, great powers can control the intensity of conflict, fight a limited war, and reduce the risk of direct involvement with other great powers.⁷ Proxy wars also give great powers the opportunity to direct the process of war and expand regional influence, focusing on overall interests rather than simply pursuing a quick goal in a decisive conflict. One example highlighted in the literature is that the U.S.-led multinational coalition could have quickly resolved the conflict in the Syrian civil war. However, because of lessons learned from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, the U.S. military slowed the pace of attack to better control the process of the war. This achieved two major goals:

1. Dominating international public opinion. Over the course of a protracted war, Syrians, including supporters of the Assad regime, transformed their hostility toward the West into antipathy toward the present regime.
2. Tempering and testing the combat effectiveness and cohesion of anti-government forces in order to pave the way for the establishment of a new pro-Western government after the war.⁸

Great powers can leverage proxies to asymmetrically deplete the opposition. Chinese authors assess that, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union successfully used proxy wars, such as the

⁶ “Why ‘Proxy Wars’ Manipulated by Great Powers Are Becoming More and More Fierce” [“大国操纵‘代理战争’为何愈演愈烈”], *China Military Online*, June 5, 2016.

⁷ Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen, eds., *Chinese Lessons from Other People's Wars*, Carlisle, Pa.: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, November 2011, pp. 237–270.

⁸ Ma Rongsheng [马荣升], “An Exploration of Proxy Wars” [“代理人战争探析”], *Chinese Military Science* [中国军事科学], November 20, 2016, pp. 154–156.

Korean and Vietnam wars, to continuously deplete the United States and enhance the Soviets' strategic position. Some Chinese analysis notes that great powers still pursue these types of actions today. One author states that the crisis in eastern Ukraine is an example. Because of the Crimea crisis, Russia and Ukraine have had no choice but to enter a state of long-term, protracted confrontation. The “outsider,” the United States, asymmetrically depleted Russia's leverage by exaggerating Russia's threat, strengthened NATO's functions, tied all of Europe to sanctions and confrontation against Russia, and used the Ukrainian government as a proxy to prolong the conflict, all while depleting Russia with minimal military and economic assistance.⁹

A power's anonymity in using proxies can be compromised by changing international views on the legitimacy of the conflict. Some of the Chinese literature focuses on the effects of public opinion on legitimizing conflicts and potentially exposing proxy groups and sponsors. Examples given include the 2001 war in Afghanistan, for which the international community's public opinion was in favor of the United States countering terrorism. Another example cited by Chinese authors is the Libyan conflict in 2011, which prompted the UN Security Council to establish a no-fly zone to protect civilians, thus establishing a *Shangfang Baojian* (sword of state) that legitimized armed support proxies to operate (concealed) within that zone.¹⁰ The literature also points out that “internationalization” of a proxy conflict can result in the involvement of more intervening countries with different interests, leading to temporary alliances and compromising anonymity.¹¹

Capabilities to support local parties in foreign conflicts should include more than military intervention. Several writings state that China should use all the tools of proxy warfare and adopt a holistic approach instead of relying on just military activities. For example, one author notes that, in the 2014 Ukraine crisis, military intervention was not an option for the United States. Instead, Washington chose other, nonmilitary means of intervention, including providing economic assistance to the Ukrainian government, such as a credit plan and loans from the United States and Europe; pressuring Russia by jettisoning Moscow out of the Group of Eight and promoting European sanctions to tank Russia's economy and fiscal revenue; and providing deterrence and paramilitary assistance through shows of force and joint exercises nearby.¹² The author also discusses “hybrid warfare,” a concept that illustrates the “multidimensional” form of modern warfare—in which the military is still the primary

⁹ Qiaoming Li [李桥铭], “Studies on Russia's Modern War Practice—Study Russia's Strategic Transformation Based on Its Two Military Actions and What the Actions Have Taught Us” [“俄罗斯现代战争实践研判:从俄两次军事行动看其战略转型及对俄的启示”], *Guangming Daily* [光明日报], No. 11, 2016.

¹⁰ “Why ‘Proxy Wars’ Manipulated by Great Powers Are Becoming More and More Fierce,” 2016; and Changsheng Zhu, *Review of Russia's Counter Terrorism Operation in Syria*, Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 2017.

¹¹ Fei Shi [史飞], “New Mode of Military Interventions Following the Cold War” [“冷战后军事干预新模式”], *China Military Online*, February 14, 2019.

¹² Deng Xiumei [邓秀梅], “Is It a New Bottle of Old Wine, or Don't Open a New Face—An Analysis of the Characteristics of Mixed War Theory” [“是新瓶旧酒, 还是别开生面——浅析混合战争理论的特点”], *China Military Online*, May 16, 2019.

means of conflict but alone is not enough to win in the information age. Rather, the winning side will use all levers of influence, including economic, informational, diplomatic, and covert support for proxy groups, to gain advantage.¹³

The U.S. and coalition actions in Libya are often cited as an example of a power using multiple capabilities and technologies to support local forces on the ground and gain advantage in conflict. One scholar states that, although multinational coalition forces continued to conduct asymmetric air strikes, they also relied on such technologies as cyber warfare, electronic warfare, and information warfare to support local forces on the ground. The author notes that the coalition forces used electronic warfare aircraft and wireless intrusion technology to send data streams to the communications and radar antennas of the Libyan government army, successfully invading and attacking the government's network. U.S. and coalition special operations forces were sent to infiltrate Libya to carry out target reconnaissance, guided strikes, and damage assessment and to assist the anti-government armed forces with tactics and training. In terms of information warfare, Western media outlets were mobilized to discredit the Libyan authorities and bolster anti-government sentiment.¹⁴

Proxy warfare will be one of the predominant forms of warfare in the coming decades. Chinese authors note that, in the post-Cold War era, proxy warfare has generally declined. However, with the emergence of new technologies and such concepts as asymmetric and hybrid warfare, and with increased U.S. use of coalition warfare, proxy warfare will likely be one of the main forms of conflict between great powers in the future as they vie for influence. One author states that, in the Libyan war, the U.S.-led coalition used the Libyan anti-government armed forces to fight proxy wars in various ways. According to the author, this demonstrated that the United States and coalition partners grasped the limitations of military intervention, instead choosing to politically support the anti-Qaddafi forces, divide Qaddafi's army, and herald regime change by relying on Libya's internal opposition. This new model of military intervention, the author asserts, is likely to be replicated in the future.¹⁵

The assessment that proxy warfare will be one of the primary forms of future low-intensity conflict in the coming decades appears to be concerning to some Chinese scholars, who worry about proxy warfare increasingly being used by the United States against China, both in the Indo-Pacific region and in strategic overseas locations. One 2016 article in the authoritative journal *Chinese Military Science* notes that the challenging regional and external security environment provides ideal conditions for major powers to instigate proxy wars against China, including via ethnic and religious issues, territorial disputes, maritime rights disputes, and local conflicts along Belt and Road Initiative routes.¹⁶

¹³ Hybrid warfare was first introduced by former U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis in 2005. Chinese authors (e.g., Deng, 2019) cite this form of warfare in analysis of other countries' proxy conflicts.

¹⁴ Shi, 2019.

¹⁵ Shi, 2019.

¹⁶ Ma, 2016.

When and Why China Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

In this section, we identify the factors that could influence China's decision to engage in proxy warfare and potential regions and countries where these factors might push China to enter a proxy conflict. These assessments are based on our review of Western literature that discusses China's strategic, military, and foreign policy goals in secondary theaters, as well as an extensive review of Chinese foreign policy and military literature. Our analysis also includes the post-Cold War empirical record of China's involvement in foreign conflicts. Although China's involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters since the 1990s has been extremely limited, there are several examples of Beijing providing some support to forces in specific countries or conflicts where it has substantial interests. We use these examples, listed in Table B.1, to support our analysis of the key factors (economic, strategic and geopolitical, security, and domestic) that could drive China's involvement in secondary-theater conflicts in the future, as well as potential locations for such involvement.

TABLE B.1
China's Involvement in Foreign Conflicts Since 2000

Country	Actors Supported	Form of Support	Key Drivers of Involvement
Syria	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assad regime Russia 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intelligence-sharing Counterterrorism missions (special operations forces) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Counter terrorism to prevent Uighur and foreign fighters from targeting China and Chinese interests
Sudan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Omar al-Bashir regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms sales Peacekeeping operations (Darfur) Airstrips Repair facilities for the Sudanese Air Force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain stability Protect energy and mineral investments
South Sudan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Salva Kiir Mayardit regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms sales Peacekeeping operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain stability Protect energy interests
DRC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> DRC military 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Arms sales Peacekeeping operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Maintain stability (peacekeeping operations) Protect Chinese economic interests (copper and cobalt mining, oil)

SOURCE: Richard Gowan, "China's Pragmatic Approach to UN Peacekeeping," Brookings Institution, September 14, 2020; Ian Taylor and Zhengyu Wu, "China's Arms Transfers to Africa and Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2013, p. 458; International Crisis Group, *China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan*, Brussels, Asia Report No. 288, July 10, 2017; Liu Zhen, "Chinese Military to Provide 'Aid and Training Assistance' to Syrian Government," *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2016; and Courtney J. Fung, "Separating Intervention from Regime Change: China's Diplomatic Innovations at the UN Security Council Regarding the Syria Crisis," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 235, September 2018.

Economic Factors

Economic considerations are likely to strongly influence Beijing's decision whether to support local actors in a conflict in a secondary theater. Over the past decade, China has focused on developing economic ties and influence; Beijing's overseas interests have steadily increased since the late 1990s, when President Jiang Zemin launched his "going out" strategy, which encouraged firms to establish offices overseas and explore international markets. In the 2000s, the Chinese government subsidized outward investments, sent more Chinese citizens overseas, and diversified China's energy resources around the world.¹⁷ The Belt and Road Initiative, 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, is China's current effort to increase its economic ties and influence both regionally and overseas.¹⁸ Chief among the economic factors that could push China to become involved in conflicts in some way are China's energy interests. 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 the International Energy Agency projects that China's imports of natural gas will grow from 43 percent to 46 percent by 2035.¹⁹ Most of China's oil and natural gas imports come from the Persian Gulf, Africa, Russia, and Central Asia.²⁰

With the expansion of economic and energy interests has come the need to develop the means to protect overseas investments and citizens. In 2004, President Hu Jintao announced the New Historic Missions, which for the first time officially articulated China's need to develop the capabilities to protect overseas interests and resulted in the PLA's first steps toward developing expeditionary capabilities to support military operations outside East Asia.²¹ Since then, the PLA has continued to develop these capabilities—mainly in the maritime and air domains—and has increased its participation in peacekeeping operations, primarily in Africa. China has also begun to use PMSCs in countries where unrest or conflict could threaten Chinese factories, energy investments, or citizens.²²

¹⁷ Kristen Gunness, "The PLA's Expeditionary Force: Current Capabilities and Future Trends," in Joel Wuthnow, Arthur S. Ding, Philip 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; and Jiang Zemin, "Report at the 16th Party Congress," China Internet Information Center, November 17, 2002.

¹⁸ Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020.

¹⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 133.

²⁰ China Power Team, 2016.

²¹ Gunness, 2021.

²² For an in-depth discussion on China's use of PMSCs overseas, see Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2271-OSD, 2018.

Given China's still-limited but expanding expeditionary military capabilities and increased security presence in countries where China has substantial energy interests, there is potential for Beijing to become embroiled in a crisis in a region or country where its investments are at stake, should a conflict erupt. China has already been at least marginally involved in past conflicts in Sudan, South Sudan, and the DRC to promote stability and protect Beijing's access to oil from those locations. In the case of Sudan, Chinese support for Khartoum included arms sales, use of Chinese oil companies' airstrips and repair facilities for the government's military, and peacekeeping operations in Darfur in 2008 to help maintain stability.²³ In South Sudan, Beijing attempted to remain neutral given its strong ties to Bashir, but Chinese state-owned companies supplied arms to President Salva Kiir Mayardit and his military during the 2013 civil war.²⁴ China further provided troops for the UN Mission in South Sudan to support conflict mediation.²⁵ In the DRC, China has been accused of supplying weapons to the DRC military, particularly during the 2009–2010 time frame, while contributing troops to the UN Organization Stabilization Mission in the DRC at the same time to help with stability.²⁶

These cases illustrate that China is willing to be at least somewhat involved in disputes where investments and energy interests could be threatened. In the coming decades, these economic drivers could lead China to enter conflicts that could coincide with competition for influence with the United States. This competition could heighten conflicts in countries in the Middle East or Africa, for example, where China has significant energy investments and where the United States also has an interest in maintaining influence. In these cases, China might support proxy groups to ensure security and continued access to energy resources, should those investments come under threat, as well as to seek to gain advantage over the United States.

Despite competition for resources and influence, China's economic ties and desire to maintain its development trajectory, particularly with investment, trade, and market opportunities with Belt and Road Initiative partners around the world, likely would constrain Beijing's decision to become involved in conflicts in secondary theaters. Numerous official Chinese documents emphasize that a stable economic environment is critical for China's development trajectory, both regionally and overseas.²⁷ China's willingness to risk economic and political

²³ Taylor and Wu, 2013, p. 458; Gowan, 2020.

²⁴ Malte Brosig, "A Role Model for Africa or Exceptional Engagement? Assessing China's South Sudan Experience," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 29, No. 126, 2020.

²⁵ Brosig, 2020.

²⁶ Taylor and Wu, 2013. As of 2021, China provided 232 peacekeeping personnel (including 218 troops) to the DRC mission (China Power Team, "Is China Contributing to the United Nations' Mission?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 25, 2021b).

²⁷ See, for example, State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's National Defense in the New Era*, Beijing, July 2019a; and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China and the World in the New Era*, Beijing, September 2019b.

relationships to become involved in a conflict would largely depend on the circumstances of the conflict, location of the conflict, and national interests at stake, as well as the conflict's bearing on overall U.S.-China competition. The desire to maintain economic ties might also lead Beijing to take a low-profile or hands-off approach to supporting proxy groups should it choose to do so, which could entail mainly arms sales or cyber or intelligence support that is more difficult to attribute to Beijing.

Strategic and Geopolitical Factors

Strategic interests, including China's view of U.S.-China competition and the balance of power in a country or region as related to Chinese interests and influence, are factors that could influence Beijing's decision to engage in proxy warfare or intervene in conflicts. Many of Beijing's strategic concerns in secondary theaters are rooted in the view that U.S.-China competition is deepening and that China's national rejuvenation and role in the future international system are at stake. Official Chinese documents have noted a trend toward deepening international competition, especially among major powers, for years. The 2015 National Defense White Paper, for example, noted an "intensifying" international competition for the "redistribution of power, rights and interests."²⁸ China's 2019 Defense White Paper criticized the United States as the "principal instigator" of global instability and driver of "international strategic competition," highlighting this perception.²⁹

This view of U.S.-China competition means that China might be more sensitive to U.S. efforts to shift the balance of power in regions with significant Chinese interests, or where China perceives that the United States is impeding China's objectives related to its international standing or influence. As with economic interests, the degree to which the United States and its allies impede China's national objectives could dictate whether and where China considers involvement in foreign conflicts. This interference could include (1) hampering China's ability to increase political or economic influence in secondary theaters by forming a balancing coalition against Beijing or (2) shifting the balance of power, in Beijing's view, by introducing new military alliances or partnerships with countries where China has security concerns. A regional example of the former is China's concern about the United States forming a balancing coalition to oppose Chinese territorial claims in the South China Sea, which has spurred China's influence efforts directed toward Southeast Asian countries. An example of the latter is the United States drawing closer to India through reinvigorated defense ties, which has led to increased Chinese support for Pakistan.³⁰

²⁸ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Military Strategy*, Beijing, May 2015.

²⁹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, p. 7.

³⁰ Beijing has long complained that the United States has outsized influence, that the United States is seeking to co-opt other countries to balance against or contain Beijing, and that the current international system is unfairly tilted toward the West (Nadège Rolland, *China's Vision for a New World Order*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, Special Report No. 83, January 2020, p. 13).

Security Factors

China also has international security concerns that could drive it to take part in conflict abroad. These drivers could include concerns that affect the safety of China or its borders, as well as the potential to grow military partnerships or build military influence. China's very limited presence in the Syria conflict is one example, where Beijing is supporting the Assad regime and Russia primarily through intelligence-sharing and counterterrorism missions involving small contingents of special forces troops.³¹ Beijing's main interest in that conflict is preventing Chinese nationals, mainly Uighurs, who have gone to Syria to train or fight in the conflict from returning to China to carry out terrorist attacks. Therefore, China's rationale for supporting Assad has been couched as counterterrorism.³² China's other strategic interest in the Syria conflict is to support Moscow, as the Sino-Russian defense partnership has grown closer in recent years. In return, China can free-ride on Russia's military presence and intelligence-gathering capabilities, which augment Beijing's ability to track and mitigate terrorist threats emanating from the conflict.³³

Strategic interests could also constrain China's willingness to support groups overseas. Such principles as China's non-interference policy—which holds that China should abstain from intervention or interference in the internal affairs of another country—and China's emphasis on peaceful development as essential to China's economic growth could hinder Beijing's activities in conflicts in secondary theaters.³⁴ China's fear of becoming embroiled in a protracted conflict that it is unable to control outside of the region has been one of the key themes in Chinese literature advocating against more Chinese involvement in Syria.³⁵ Similarly, fear of escalation or direct confrontation with the United States could also constrain China's actions. Although Beijing might be willing to provide limited support for proxy groups in secondary locations in some form by 2030 or so—for example, through arms sales or training—it will not have the military capability to prevail in a direct U.S.-China conflict overseas and could fear that involvement in a conflict could escalate into a larger one with the United States.

³¹ Fung, 2018.

³² Sun Degang [孙德刚] and Wu Sike [吴思科], *China's Participation in Middle East Security Affairs in the New Era: Ideas and Exploration* [新时代中国参与中东安全事务—理念主张与实践探索], Shanghai, China: Fudan University, July 23, 2020.

³³ Michael Kofman, "The Emperors League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020.

³⁴ China has notably bent the non-interference policy in recent years. In 2015, China adopted a counterterrorism law that provides legal justification for the PLA to deploy overseas, stating that the PLA and the People's Armed Police "may assign people to leave the country on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission." Notably, the law does not state that China must receive the permission of the host country prior to deploying (Dirk van der Kley, "China's Security Activities in Tajikistan and Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 80, September 2019, p. 79).

³⁵ Zhu, 2017.

Domestic Factors

Domestic factors that might influence China's decision to become involved in conflicts abroad include the Chinese leadership's ability to maintain internal stability and regime legitimacy, achieve its domestic growth and policy agenda, and appear strong for the domestic audience.

Domestic interests are heavily tied to the economic interests discussed earlier, as the Chinese Communist Party has consistently linked national rejuvenation, regime legitimacy, and domestic stability to the party's ability to maintain economic growth.³⁶ Beijing might be more willing to interfere in countries where U.S.-China competition is fiercest, should the United States or its allies and partners significantly impede China's economic objectives overseas enough to threaten domestic growth and stability. This could particularly be the case in countries with Belt and Road Initiative projects, where Beijing has focused much of its economic and political capital. Should a conflict erupt in an area where Beijing perceives that it needs to be involved to protect national interests, China might engage in proxy warfare to avoid the domestic costs of a traditional war in a secondary theater where it seeks to gain influence, particularly in the near term when the PLA is still building the capabilities to project power overseas.³⁷

Another domestic trend that might support China's involvement in conflicts overseas is that a growing segment of the Chinese population appears to support a more proactive military abroad to exert China's influence and achieve its foreign policy goals. Xi Jinping's Chinese Dream construct links the achievement of China's foreign policy goals to a strong, rejuvenated country.³⁸ A 2019 survey conducted by a U.S. scholar on the Chinese public's views of China's foreign policy indicated that the majority of respondents endorsed greater reliance on military strength and supported more spending on national defense to achieve foreign policy goals.³⁹ A "hawkish" Chinese public that supports more use of the military to achieve China's overseas goals might also support increased security operations overseas. Beijing might be more willing to engage in proxy warfare if it feels that the Chinese public would support its actions.

However, domestic interests might also constrain China's involvement, should a conflict prove difficult to control or risk drawing China into a protracted war overseas. In this case, support of groups in a conflict could lead to a more costly endeavor that could impede domestic economic growth. China's leaders would also be cautious with risks to the country's

³⁶ Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," *China Daily*, November 4, 2017.

³⁷ Kristen Gunness, "The Dawn of a PLA Expeditionary Force?" in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 80, September 2019, pp. 33–40.

³⁸ These goals were reiterated in Xi Jinping's speech at the 19th Party Congress (Xi, 2017).

³⁹ The survey also found that the younger generation's 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).

reputation and domestic perception of leadership strength should China become embroiled in a protracted conflict or not prevail in an overt dispute stemming from proxy warfare.⁴⁰

In summary, in its decision whether to become involved in secondary-theater conflicts in some way, China likely would consider many of these economic, strategic, security, and domestic factors. Beijing's willingness to support groups overseas likely would come down to a pragmatic assessment of the perceived threat to China's national interests, including access to energy resources, political influence, and balance of power, as well as the broader issue of gaining advantage in the U.S.-China competition. These benefits likely would be measured against the constraints of maintaining economic and investment ties with key countries, particularly those with Belt and Road Initiative projects; China's assessment of the likelihood of proxy warfare leading to a protracted or escalatory conflict against the United States; and the perception of the Chinese public's opinion on support for proxy groups overseas.

Where China Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

In this section, we discuss potential locations and regions where China might become involved in conflicts. Chinese authors do not generally discuss China's potential involvement, but Chinese assessments of the international security environment; "hot spots" of security concerns; and locations that involve substantial Chinese economic, energy, or foreign policy interests suggest potential areas where China might engage in proxy warfare.

China's views of the international security environment provide a window into areas of concern overseas, which helps us understand when and where Beijing might choose to engage in the coming years. Analysis from official Chinese documents and scholarly writings indicates that China assesses that the security environment is going through "profound changes."⁴¹ The 2019 China National Defense White Paper states, "Global and regional security issues are on the increase."⁴² It cites eroding international arms control, nonproliferation, and disarmament efforts; growing signs 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.⁴³

Chinese analysts view increased geopolitical competition as an indication that Western influence is waning and that China has an opportunity to grow its influence with countries

⁴⁰ For a discussion of Chinese leadership and domestic perceptions related to foreign policy decisions, see Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018, pp. 13–20.

⁴¹ Rolland, 2020, p. 12.

⁴² State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 5.

⁴³ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a, p. 3.

that are receptive to the Chinese model of governance and development.⁴⁴ China's perspective that the world is becoming more multipolar suggests that Beijing sees an opportunity to take advantage of these changes. Authors perceive multipolarity as providing China with more freedom to maneuver while decreasing vulnerability to hostile action by the United States.⁴⁵

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.⁴⁶ Chinese authors assess that, along with this shifting of the international system, the future may bring shifts in China's alliances and partnerships, as well as those of the United States. Some current partnerships may grow weaker, while new ones may emerge. This may result in a more dynamic changing alignment of coalitions that will affect U.S.-China competition in secondary theaters. According to the literature, multipolarity would also allow China to expand its informal relationships with countries outside the Indo-Pacific, potentially allowing Beijing more military options in a conflict—ranging from bases or places for PLA presence to informal or proxy support for low-intensity conflicts.⁴⁷

These trends could exacerbate U.S.-China competition and potentially broaden it to include other countries in secondary theaters that are currently on the sidelines. From China's perspective, this suggests that, should the competition turn to conflict, China will have greater opportunity to influence or support client states because those states would already be open to partnering with China.⁴⁸

Chinese authors also evince concern about great powers turning to proxy wars to influence or impede China's goals—both within the Indo-Pacific region and overseas along primary Belt and Road Initiative routes. The following points summarize the concerns that Chinese analysts discuss about proxy warfare actions against China:

- Proxy wars caused by territorial disputes, maritime rights disputes, and ethnic divisions can easily lead to wars and armed conflicts between China and its neighbors, especially in the East China Sea and South China Sea. For example, some Chinese writers view the 2016 South China Sea arbitration, in which the Philippines brought a case against China protesting Beijing's maritime territorial claims, as the result of "behind-the-scenes" pro-

⁴⁴ Yang Jiemian, *Changes, Influences and Trends of the Current International Order* [当前国际大格局的变化、影响和趋势], Shanghai, China: Shanghai Institute of International Studies, March 20, 2019.

⁴⁵ Roy Kamphausen and David Lai, eds., *The Chinese People's Liberation Army in 2025*, Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: U.S. Army War College Press, July 2015, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Yang, 2019.

⁴⁷ Fang Changping [方长平], "The Future Trend of China's Surrounding Security Environment and the Logic Behind It" ["中国的周边安全环境未来走势及其背后逻辑"], Development Research Center of the State Council [国务院发展研究中心], November 2, 2018.

⁴⁸ Fang, 2018.

motion by external major powers and as the instigation of a “legal war” by (U.S.) proxies against China.⁴⁹

- Local armed conflicts in secondary-theater hot spots, such as the Kashmir region, may trigger proxy warfare; specifically, major powers may seek to bolster forces hostile to China with military assistance and intelligence support while containing countries friendly to China.⁵⁰
- Chinese analysts note concerns about proxy wars induced by color revolutions that are bolstered by support from Western powers against China. These revolutions use military containment, ideological subversion, and cultural infiltration and have the potential to disrupt China’s strategic layout along Belt and Road Initiative routes.⁵¹ Similarly, Chinese analysis is concerned with Western attempts to subvert Chinese objectives through information warfare, such as pushing Western propaganda to sway pro-China decisionmakers, countries, and populations away from China.⁵²
- Proxy wars in the third world, such as countries in much of Africa, have the potential to cultivate pro-Western forces, instigate pro-China forces, and draw in third parties through military infiltration, economic assistance, and export values. One author notes that, although China adheres to the principle of non-interference in international affairs, some countries have weak political foundations and are prone to instability under the influence of external forces.⁵³
- Assessments note that current conflicts present volatility that could lead to proxy war that would challenge China’s interests. Examples include the Syrian war and great powers’ involvement there; the Palestine-Israel conflict; civil wars and unrest in Africa, which are threatening to China’s energy interests; and the Iran nuclear issue, which could touch off conflict between Iran and the United States and potentially threaten China’s economic and energy relationship with Iran.⁵⁴

These Chinese assessments of the international security environment, external hot spots, and proxy warfare trends provide some basis for determining where China might become involved in the future. When we combine these factors with the factors discussed earlier—particularly economic and strategic interests—we can begin to assess locations where China

⁴⁹ Ma, 2016.

⁵⁰ Sheng Sai, *Changes and Future Trends in the International Security Situation* [当前国际大格局的变化、影响和趋势], Shanghai, China: Shanghai Institute of International Studies, March 20, 2019.

⁵¹ Beijing’s fear of color revolutions and the need to combat them is still highlighted in Chinese media (Xu Keyue, “China, Russia Continue to Cooperate on Fighting Color Revolutions, Safeguarding Political Security: Wang Yi,” *Global Times*, March 7, 2021).

⁵² Yang, 2019.

⁵³ Ma, 2016.

⁵⁴ Jie Zhang, *Assessment of China’s Surrounding Security Environment in the New Era* [新时期中国周边安全环境评估], Beijing: Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, February 16, 2019.

could plausibly consider some kind of support to parties in conflict. We have grouped these locations into three categories:

- regional countries that China views as outside its first circle of security concerns
- developing countries with significant Chinese investments and energy interests
- countries in secondary theaters where China seeks to expand relations or counter U.S. influence.

Regional Countries That China Views as Outside Its First Circle of Security Concerns

Western scholars have described China's security concerns as a set of concentric circles expanding outward from Beijing. The first circle involves Chinese territory (or what China perceives should be its territory) and the regional nations and groups within that area. The second ring includes countries that China considers to be outside its immediate first circle but that still affect China's regional interests because of geographic proximity, security concerns, and investment flows. This includes countries bordering China, such as India and Pakistan.⁵⁵ China has significant interests in Pakistan through the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and investments in Pakistani port facilities, reflecting a desire on China's part to pursue strategic competition by shoring up relations with Pakistan and increasing Pakistani dependence on Chinese investment.⁵⁶ There has been a rise in China-India tensions along the disputed border areas—including, for example, in October 2020—and China may someday wish to punish or harass India. If that happens, there is the potential that China could leverage its influence in Pakistan to increase the threat that Pakistan poses to India through Pakistani militant proxy groups.⁵⁷

Developing Countries with Significant Chinese Investments and Energy Interests

A second set of locations where Beijing could consider supporting local actors is in developing countries where China has significant energy interests or investments and where local instability could cause an armed conflict. There are two dimensions to China's potential support in these locations. First, China might support one side in a local conflict to protect its investments or access to energy resources. Second, China might engage in proxy warfare if

⁵⁵ For a discussion of how China views regional security concerns and the concentric-circle model, see Nathan and Scobell, 2012.

⁵⁶ James Schwemlein, *Strategic Implications of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, Special Report No. 459, December 2019.

⁵⁷ "India-China Dispute: The Border Row Explained in 400 Words," BBC News, last updated September 10, 2020.

the United States or its allies impede China's access to energy resources or attempt to influence local governments away from China economically or politically.

Countries where this could occur include African nations, such as Angola, the DRC, and Libya—China's fourth, 11th, and 14th top suppliers, respectively, of crude oil in 2019.⁵⁸ China already has peacekeeping forces in the DRC, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, and CAR, highlighting Beijing's concerns over protecting its energy interests and its desire to build influence in Africa.⁵⁹ China also considers countries in the developing world to have weak political foundations and therefore more susceptibility to foreign influence. As discussed earlier, Chinese authors mention Africa as one of the locations where pro-Western (anti-China) forces could be cultivated by Western powers.⁶⁰

China could also support local actors in Latin American countries where Beijing has substantial economic interests, including Venezuela, China's 15th top crude oil supplier, which has resumed oil shipments to China despite U.S. sanctions.⁶¹ Should a conflict erupt in a developing country that China considers to be important to its security or foreign policy interests and where the United States is competing for influence, Beijing might choose to engage in proxy warfare to strengthen relationships with local leaders and sway the conflict outcome to be friendlier to China. In the Venezuela example, China (along with Russia) has overtly supported the Maduro regime despite strong U.S. opposition. Although China has energy interests in Venezuela, the impetus to support the Maduro regime is also likely rooted in Beijing's desire to expand political and economic influence in a region where the United States is the dominant great power. Venezuela is also a country that could support a limited PLA naval presence should China negotiate port access agreements or invest in a logistics facility there; the same is true for Cuba.

Countries in Secondary Theaters Where China Seeks to Expand Relations or Counter U.S. Influence

A third category of locations where China might engage in proxy warfare is countries where China sees growing competition for influence with the United States. This category primarily includes countries in the Middle East—for example, Saudi Arabia, which is China's top oil supplier; Iraq; Iran; and Oman. Should conflict erupt in one of these countries, China might support local actors to counter U.S. influence, grow relations with local leaders, or sway the outcome to be aligned with Chinese interests.

⁵⁸ Daniel Workman, "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China," World's Top Exports, undated.

⁵⁹ Sheng, 2019; and State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Armed Forces: 30 Years of UN Peacekeeping Operations*, Beijing, September 2020.

⁶⁰ Ma, 2016.

⁶¹ Lucia Kassai and Fabiola Zerpa, "Venezuela Oil Exports Almost Triple Even as U.S. Adds Sanctions," Bloomberg, December 1, 2020.

Syria could also fall into this category because China does have a direct security stake in the war there. Hundreds of Uighur fighters have joined the conflict, a minority of them with the Islamic State and a majority fighting in organizations linked to al-Qaeda that are operating in the Idlib region at the border with Turkey.⁶² China's current approach in Syria combines free-riding on the Russian and Syrian governments to prevent these fighters from targeting Chinese interests while prioritizing intelligence collection, counterterrorism operations, and diplomacy. China so far has limited the military's involvement to accessing intelligence and performing counterterrorism missions.⁶³ Increased involvement in Syria, including proxy support to pro-Assad forces, likely would focus on counterterrorism, intelligence support, and military training with Syrian forces.

In addition, China's relationship with Russia is a relevant factor because China might seek to align with or support Russia in its conflicts in order to counter U.S. influence. Increased Sino-Russian coordination to counter the United States is evident in the numerous joint statements Xi and Vladimir Putin have issued on various security issues, including missile defense, the militarization of space, transnational terrorism, and regional security challenges (e.g., the Korean Peninsula). Both countries have protested against the deployment of the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile defense system and long-range strike capabilities, U.S. surveillance flights along the Russian and Chinese borders, and U.S. Navy freedom of navigation operations.⁶⁴ There has also been an increase in military cooperation between the Chinese and Russian armed forces.⁶⁵ Even if China and Russia do not enter into a formal alliance, the two nations will continue to collaborate in areas of mutual security interest in the coming years. In the future, this could include coordinating on support for local actors in conflicts where both countries have interests and could potentially build influence—including in Latin America and the Middle East.

These categories of locations provide an overall picture of where China might decide to engage in proxy warfare. China's future proxy warfare actions in specific countries are harder to predict but, as stated earlier, likely would depend on Beijing's pragmatic assessment of the

⁶² Pauley and Marks, 2018. As described in the 2018 article,

In 2017, [the Islamic State] issued its first direct threat against China, promising to shed "blood like rivers," in an attempt to fill its ranks with Uyghurs. Threats from supposed Uyghur terrorists circulated on Chinese social media around the same time, professing that, "when the Syrian War ends, that is the day when China's biggest fear begins." (Pauley and Marks, 2018)

⁶³ Sun and Wu, 2020; Giorgio Cafiero, "China Plays the Long Game on Syria," Middle East Institute, February 10, 2020; Mollie Saltskog and Colin P. Clarke, "The U.S. Withdrawal from Syria Is an Opportunity for China," *Lawfare*, February 15, 2019; and Arabi Souri, "Chinese Night Tigers Special Forces Arrive in Syria," *Syria News*, December 16, 2017.

⁶⁴ Richard Weitz, *The Expanding China-Russia Defense Partnership*, Washington, D.C.: Hudson Institute, May 2019, p. 8; and Robert Sutter, "How the United States Influences Russia-China Relations," National Bureau of Asian Research, February 27, 2018.

⁶⁵ 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, ed., "Expert: China-Russia Military Relationship Enters New Era," *China Military Online*, December 13, 2019).

benefits to China's national goals and international influence, weighed by the escalation risks of engaging in conflict overseas.

How China Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Although China has not engaged in proxy warfare or military interventions (outside the context of UN peacekeeping) since the 1980s, it does have capabilities that could be employed in a proxy conflict. The main tools that China has for proxy warfare include sales of arms and equipment to proxy groups; military training and advisers; paramilitary forces that could support proxy groups on land or in the maritime gray zone; information operations to augment proxy group capability; emerging technologies, including cyber, surveillance technology, and space-based assets for intelligence-gathering; and nonmilitary means, such as economic and political support. Chinese military operational concepts also would inform China's approach to proxy warfare or limited military actions.

Military Operational Concepts Relevant to China's Approach to Proxy and Limited Warfare

Several of China's military operational concepts are relevant to how Beijing might approach involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters. In particular, the PLA's operational concepts that focus on gaining the information advantage in warfare and controlling the information environment in strategic competition would likely be applied to China's approach to supporting proxy forces. These operational concepts include information dominance and the three warfares.

Information Dominance

Chinese strategists have concluded that the surest path to controlling escalation and prevailing in conflict is through information dominance. According to China's 2019 Defense White Paper, prevailing in today's wars requires attaining information dominance within the cyber, space, and electromagnetic domains and relies on applying advanced information technologies, not just information warfare, for carrying out all operational and support activities.⁶⁶

Chinese military writings emphasize that, to achieve information dominance, a country must defend its own capabilities in the informational domain while also coordinating ISR efforts to maximize the efficiency and effect of offensive operations and affect an adversary's combat systems. Thus, timely, high-fidelity information is critical for operational success.⁶⁷ The ability to achieve information dominance further hinges on the PLA's cyber and net-

⁶⁶ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019a.

⁶⁷ Burke et al., 2020, pp. 6–7.

work operations capabilities, which can be an “indispensable method for deterring powerful enemies” and can even have the potential to enable winning without fighting under certain conditions. Embedded within this concept of information dominance is the idea that society is a domain of warfare. The idea that cyber 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 2009.⁶⁸ China’s focus on information superiority includes targeting adversary capabilities with emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence. Under the concept of information dominance, China would likely use emerging technologies to augment its intelligence and data collection through supporting proxy capabilities, such as unmanned systems, information technology networks, and cyber tactics, should Beijing enter a proxy conflict.⁶⁹

The Three Warfares

Similarly, the Chinese concept of the three warfares (三战, *sanzhan*) illustrates the importance that China places on seizing the information initiative and continuously shaping the narrative during both peace 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 Chinese Communist Party’s agenda. The specific objectives of the three warfares’ pillars are to control public opinion, organize psychological offense and defense, engage in legal struggle, and fight for popular will and public opinion.⁷⁰ Although the days of China supporting Maoist insurgencies are over, Beijing does view U.S.-China competition as a clash of ideologies between the West and non-West. According to Chinese writings, meeting these objectives requires taking advantage of peacetime preparation to establish favorable conditions—particularly in the realms of diplomacy and public opinion, including social media platforms. Chinese authors emphasize that, in wartime, military activities should be synchronized with the 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.⁷¹ The three warfares likely would inform China’s activities related to supporting proxy group messaging, propaganda campaigns, and information operations to control the narrative and gain advantage over the adversary during a conflict.

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

⁶⁹ Mark Pomerleau, “China Moves Toward New ‘Intelligentized’ Approach to Warfare, Says Pentagon,” *C4ISRNET*, September 1, 2020.

⁷⁰ Elsa B. Kania, “The PLA’s Latest Thinking on the Three Warfares,” *China Brief*, Vol. 16, No. 13, August 22, 2016.

⁷¹ Peter Mattis, “China’s ‘Three Warfares’ in Perspective,” *War on the Rocks*, January 30, 2018. Mattis makes the point that the concept of three warfares is primarily a military tool to expand China’s political power, as the PLA is the armed wing of the Chinese Communist Party.

Arms Sales and Equipment Transfers

China has long used arms sales to build influence and pave the way for increased economic or political relationships. From the 1950s through the 1980s, China used arms sales to bolster various proxy forces in regional countries, including Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand, and provided arms to insurgents in Africa.⁷² As outlined in Table B.1, China has used arms sales to support various groups in nearly all of its overseas conflicts since 2000, with the exception of Syria. China's use of arms sales likely reflects that the sales are relatively low-profile, as opposed to other potential proxy warfare capabilities, and they bolster China's arms industry. Today, Beijing's growing share of the global arms export market has increased China's ability to provide countries in secondary theaters with military arms and capabilities. According to SIPRI, China's arms exports reached \$1.04 billion in 2018, making it the fifth-largest arms supplier in the world.⁷³ Most of the exports (around 86 percent) go to countries in the Indo-Pacific region and South Asia, and China supplies more arms to Pakistan than to any other country. In 2018, Pakistan also became the only country with access to the BeiDou satellite system's military service, which provides increased missile, vessel, and aircraft guidance.⁷⁴

Twenty percent of China's arms exports are sent to African nations, including Algeria, Tanzania, Morocco, and Sudan.⁷⁵ Chinese arms are also frequently found in conflict zones, including the DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Sudan, and Somalia.⁷⁶ In July 2014, China's largest arms manufacturer, China North Industries Corporation, delivered 100 guided-missile systems, more than 9,000 automatic rifles, and 24 million rounds of ammunition to the South Sudanese government, fueling Sudan's civil war (China halted ammunition shipments to South Sudan shortly after the sales became public).⁷⁷ Although China's arms exports to Latin America remain minimal, Venezuela is the top export recipient and has purchased Chinese armored vehicles, trainer jets, and anti-ship missiles.⁷⁸ China also leads in exports of medium-altitude long-range UAVs for reconnaissance and precision strike and has opened factories for UAV production in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia.⁷⁹

⁷² Watts et al., 2023.

⁷³ SIPRI, undated-a.

⁷⁴ "Pakistan Military to Use Chinese Navigation System BeiDou to Improve Interoperability," 2020.

⁷⁵ China Power Team, "How Dominant Is China in the Global Arms Trade?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 27, 2021c.

⁷⁶ Lynch, 2012.

⁷⁷ Lily Kuo, "China's Largest Weapons Manufacturer Is Allegedly Selling Arms to South Sudan—Again," *Quartz Africa*, August 26, 2015; and Robbie Gramer, "How European and Chinese Arms Diverted to South Sudan Fueled Its Civil War," *Foreign Policy*, November 29, 2018.

⁷⁸ Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2017*, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2018.

⁷⁹ Elsa B. Kania, "AI Weapons" in *China's Military Innovation*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, April 2020.

Although Chinese arms exports remain relatively low compared with those of the United States and Russia, Beijing's role in the global arms market is expanding as Chinese domestic production of military capabilities becomes more advanced and cost-effective for foreign militaries. Given this trend and the examples of China's arms sales to regimes engaged in regional conflicts or civil war, it would not be surprising for China to use existing networks and relationships to transfer arms and equipment to support proxy groups in a conflict.

Paramilitary Forces

China increasingly uses paramilitary forces to conduct counterterrorism and gray-zone operations. These forces consist of the People's Armed Police, the Chinese Coast Guard, and the People's Armed Forces Maritime Militia. China currently deploys these forces primarily in the Indo-Pacific region, but as China's military capabilities expand, these forces could be sent overseas to support Chinese interests, including proxy groups, in a conflict.

The People's Armed Police

The People's Armed Police is China's internal security force, but it also has a mandate to conduct counterterrorism missions overseas. In 2015, China adopted a counterterrorism law that provides legal justification for the force to deploy overseas, stating that it "may assign people to leave the country on counterterrorism missions as approved by the Central Military Commission."⁸⁰ Notably, the law does not state that China must receive the permission of the host country prior to deploying the force.

China's approach to deploying the People's Armed Police along the country's western border (with Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan) to address the threat of terrorism and unrest by bolstering other countries' security forces provides an example of how China might deploy the security force in secondary theaters to support proxy groups through joint training and security patrols.⁸¹ The approach focuses on instituting cooperative security agreements with key countries to boost security capacity and co-opt local security services, which then can aid the People's Armed Police in border security, protection of infrastructure and citizens, and counterterrorism missions. China also incorporates joint military training with host countries, meant to boost local capacity that can be used for Chinese missions and provide a baseline for increased military presence should Beijing decide to deploy more troops. In addition, China sells military equipment and constructs security facilities or other

⁸⁰ Mathieu Duchâtel, "Overseas Military Operations in Belt and Road Countries: The Normative Constraints and Legal Framework," in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 80, September 2019, p. 10.

⁸¹ Juanrong Fan and Wei Li, "Yidai Yilu jianshe mianlin de kongbu weixie fenxi" ["An Analysis of the Terror Threats Faced in the Construction of the Belt and Road"], *Zhongguo Renmin Gong'an Daxue Xuebao*, No. 1, 2018; and van der Kley, 2019, p. 73.

infrastructure—for example, in Tajikistan, where the People’s Armed Police has constructed a modest border outpost to monitor the Wakhan Corridor.

This approach allows China to both protect its interests and build security and political relationships with local governments and militaries. It also allows Beijing to establish a small-to-modest paramilitary presence in key border areas that can conduct reconnaissance, gather intelligence, and support border operations or incursions if a crisis erupts, as well as support local military groups aligned with Chinese interests. Although the People’s Armed Police has so far mainly been deployed along China’s borders, it conceivably could be sent overseas to assist forces in locations where unrest presents a security threat to Chinese interests.

Maritime Paramilitary Forces

China currently uses maritime paramilitary forces, including the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia and the quasi-military Chinese Coast Guard, to conduct gray-zone operations in the Indo-Pacific region.⁸² However, as China’s maritime capabilities grow, these types of operations could be replicated overseas to support proxy forces in a conflict. *Gray-zone operations* refers to operations intended to achieve military goals with primarily non-military means and using coercion to achieve national objectives below the threshold of war. Gray-zone activities involve quasi-military and paramilitary forces, as well as proxy forces, to coerce adversaries without provoking a military conflict.⁸³ They also involve capabilities in emerging technologies—such as artificial intelligence-enabled cyber capabilities and unmanned aerial and underwater vehicles—that can coerce and intimidate without the presence of military forces.⁸⁴ Gray-zone operations have played a pivotal role in China’s ability to gain influence and presence in disputed maritime territory in the East China Sea and South China Sea. They have been used to further China’s objectives on such issues as the protection of claimed territorial waters and resources and the seizure of disputed islands.⁸⁵

Given the relative success of these tactics in the Indo-Pacific maritime domain, it is possible that China would consider using paramilitary maritime forces to support proxy groups in a conflict, especially as these maritime capabilities increase. The Chinese Coast Guard could send ships to conduct patrols, surveillance, or training of foreign maritime forces. Or Chinese fishing fleets or commercial vessels could be used to harass adversary ships or transport supplies to proxy forces. It is unlikely that the Chinese Coast Guard and the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia would deploy far beyond the Indo-Pacific region in the immediate future, but this could change as China develops a more robust naval logistics capability and additional partnerships with countries that would support a Chinese military presence.

⁸² Andrew S. Erickson, *China’s Maritime Gray Zone Operations*, Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2019, pp. 30–40.

⁸³ Cohen et al., 2020, p. 21.

⁸⁴ Cohen et al., 2020, p. 21.

⁸⁵ Morris et al., 2019, pp. 27–40.

Military Training and Advisers

China has previously used military training and advisers to support local actors in conflicts—for example, during the Vietnam War.⁸⁶ Current examples of the PLA providing training to overseas forces during conflict are limited, but China's approach in Syria illustrates one way that Beijing could choose to involve the military to train or advise proxy groups for the purpose of advancing Chinese interests while limiting broader military involvement in an overseas conflict. Although China has publicly said that it is interested in maintaining stability in Syria and has no preference which side wins, Beijing's support for pro-government forces and its relationship with Moscow, which is supporting Assad, demonstrate a clear interest on China's part for Assad to prevail.

Since 2016, China has reportedly sent military advisers and intelligence officers to Syria to assist pro-Assad forces in intelligence-gathering and counterterrorism operations.⁸⁷ In addition, several PLA special forces units (known as the Night Tigers) arrived and were stationed in Tartus to help local pro-Assad militias train and fight against terrorist forces.⁸⁸ Beijing deployed these forces under the umbrella of fighting terrorism and extremism, given the prevalence of Uighur fighters in the conflict—a decision that played well domestically—while keeping military involvement at a low enough level that China could not be accused of interventionist actions.⁸⁹ This approach—in which the PLA sends military and intelligence advisers along with a small number of special forces or other military units to train or advise local actors under the guise of counterterrorism operations—is a potential model for China's involvement in future conflicts.

In addition to sending military advisers to conflict zones to assist with traditional operations, China might provide expertise in cyber, information operations, and other emerging capabilities. Areas where China could provide assistance include covert support to overseas proxy cyber threat groups and information operations targeted at the adversary or specific groups, institutions, or populations.⁹⁰

⁸⁶ Mark A. Ryan, David M. Finkelstein, and Michael A. McDevitt, *Chinese Warfighting: The PLA Experience Since 1949*, New York: Routledge, 2003, pp. 217–220.

⁸⁷ Saltskog and Clarke, 2019; and Yang Sheng, “China Boosts Syria Support,” *Global Times*, August 18, 2016.

⁸⁸ Liu, 2016.

⁸⁹ Fung, 2018.

⁹⁰ For a more complete overview of China's views on conducting information operations overseas, see Sun Wei [孙伟], “A Preliminary Study on the Winning Mechanism of Intelligent Warfare Political Work” [“智能化作战政治工作制胜机理初探”], *Political Studies Journal* [政工学刊], August 2019; and Li Hengrui [李恒锐], Wang Yu [王瑜], and Jiang Xi [姜希], “Data Link 2.0: The Victory Maker of Intelligent War” [“数据链 2.0: 智能化战争的制胜利器”], *Journal of Command and Control* [指挥与控制学报], Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2020.

Emerging Technologies

China is increasingly investing in emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence, machine-learning, cyber, and space capabilities that bolster its command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and navigational capabilities; its ability to conduct information operations; and its ability to deploy unmanned systems.⁹¹ Beyond the domestic push to develop these capabilities for regional use, Beijing has laid the groundwork over the past decade through the Digital Silk Road and Digital Space initiatives (parts of the Belt and Road Initiative) for China to export these technologies to partners overseas. This has implications for China's ability to support groups in a conflict. As noted in a 2020 report by Western scholars, "The provision of critical technology and digital structures in [Belt and Road Initiative] countries creates leverage, improves China's C4ISR capabilities, and increases economic and technological dependence on China while reducing reliance on Western-based networks and technology."⁹²

China's export of smart-city technology to countries with Belt and Road Initiative projects is an example of its ability to gain access to sensitive information for its intelligence services by providing host governments with tools to surveil their citizens and technology that can harvest data.⁹³ Similarly, smart-port technology along the Maritime Silk Road serves to expand and strengthen China's C4ISR capabilities by allowing Beijing to track movement along global supply chains in real time through increased automation and centralized data. China's deployment of 5G network technology and other information technology infrastructure gives Beijing access to communications and information networks that can be used to support proxy forces in a conflict. For any future proxy conflicts between the United States and China, these types of capabilities provided by China to countries participating in the Belt and Road Initiative would augment the PLA's C4ISR and navigational capabilities and provide intelligence and data-gathering capabilities to Beijing.⁹⁴ This, in turn, could increase China's ability to support local actors in a future conflict by providing these technologies to proxy groups or using them to support groups from afar.

Finally, China's use of proxy cyber groups—including advanced persistent threat groups, many of whom are contracted by China's Ministry of State Security—is another means of

⁹¹ Michael Dahm, "Chinese Debates on the Military Utility of Artificial Intelligence," *War on the Rocks*, June 5, 2020.

⁹² Daniel R. Russel and Blake H. Berger, *Weaponizing the Belt and Road Initiative*, New York: Asia Society Policy Institute, September 2020, p. 35.

⁹³ Katherine Atha, Jason Callahan, John Chen, Jessica Drun, Ed Francis, Kieran Green, Brian Lafferty, Joe McReynolds, James Mulvenon, Benjamin Rosen, and Emily Walz, *China's Smart Cities Development*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2020.

⁹⁴ Michael S. Chase, "China's Digital Silk Road," in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 80, September 2019.

concealment because these groups' activities are often unattributable.⁹⁵ The attractive aspect of these types of emerging technologies is that they can be deployed from a distance and that they offer deniability, which Beijing would seek in a proxy conflict. The trade-off is that China would give up some of its control by allowing these capabilities to be deployed remotely by proxy groups, perhaps in ways that Beijing may not like or feel it can control.⁹⁶ As discussed earlier, Chinese literature on lessons from other countries' wars often cites becoming embroiled in a conflict one cannot control as a risk that other countries have faced in proxy warfare. Emerging technologies could exacerbate this risk, potentially leading China to employ them cautiously in a proxy conflict.

Economic Support

China also has several nonmilitary means to support local actors in a conflict. This includes economic support through financial contributions to fund a group's cause or operations. There is historical precedent for this type of Chinese support for Communist rebels in the 1960s and early 1970s, when China sent military aid to Vietnam, Myanmar, and Thailand and built training camps in Africa to teach and supply rebels there.⁹⁷ And China has shown increasing willingness to use its economic clout to incentivize or punish behavior. An example of Beijing employing punitive economic measures to shape a policy decision occurred in 2016–2017, when it targeted specific South Korean companies over health and safety issues, held up goods at customs, and harassed South Korean employees in retaliation for South Korea's agreement to deploy the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense anti-ballistic missile defense system. Lotte, the South Korean retail group, was hit particularly hard, and 87 of its 99 Chinese stores closed because it had agreed to hand over a golf course to Seoul to assist the missile defense system deployment.⁹⁸ Although these examples do not involve proxy warfare, they illustrate that China potentially would use its economic leverage in a crisis to support its goals.

Future Trends in China's Proxy Warfare Capabilities

Beijing continues to lay the groundwork for an expanded military and security presence beyond its periphery to address threats and challenges to overseas interests. This includes increased PLA deployments in peacekeeping and the maritime domain, improved naval and air expeditionary capabilities, security assistance and military training programs with coun-

⁹⁵ For examples of the challenges of attributing attacks to China's advanced persistent threat groups, see Bradley Barth, "APT40 Hacking Group Linked to 13 Alleged Front Companies in Hainan, China," *SC Media*, January 15, 2020.

⁹⁶ Pomerleau, 2020.

⁹⁷ Watts et al., 2023; Qiang, 2000, pp. 19–20.

⁹⁸ Ben Bland and Tom Hancock, "China Wields Power with Boycott Diplomacy," *Financial Times*, May 3, 2017; and "Lotte's Development in China Should Come to an End," *Global Times*, February 28, 2017.

tries friendly to China, and military intelligence cooperation.⁹⁹ In the next 30 years, China likely will build on this foundation to be able to further increase its military footprint and power projection capabilities overseas. Specific to the capabilities discussed in this appendix, Beijing likely will continue to rely on lower-profile or deniable capabilities, such as arms sales, economic aid, military training, information warfare, cyber capabilities, and intelligence support, rather than military deployments to fight in conflicts in faraway regions. China's ability to support its military or proxy forces in conflicts overseas will improve as China develops capabilities in the areas discussed in this section.

Basing and Port Access

Access to ports and logistics facilities around the world is critical to China's ability to support forces overseas. In the coming decades, China will almost certainly negotiate increased port access overseas for its commercial and military vessels and establish more logistics hubs, akin to the base in Djibouti. And it will potentially construct formal military bases similar to those owned by the United States. China's selection of potential future basing sites is evolving and speculative, but the secondary-theater countries that Beijing has already approached for such discussions include Pakistan, Oman, Vanuatu, and Namibia.¹⁰⁰ Beyond 2030, China potentially will extend port access, basing facilities, and logistics hubs to East Africa and the Middle East. Potential locations include the UAE, Kenya, Tanzania, and Angola.¹⁰¹ These facilities will be critical for China to establish a global military logistics network, which will expand Beijing's ability to support both the PLA and proxy forces overseas.

Expeditionary Naval and Air Capabilities

Along with expanding port access, the PLA Navy will continue to develop its expeditionary capabilities, allowing it to deploy for longer periods and support combat operations overseas. By 2050, China will field a fully modernized fleet of surface ships capable of supporting combat operations overseas and, potentially, the capability to conduct amphibious operations overseas—although this is nascent and needs further development.¹⁰² Although the Chinese Coast Guard is primarily a regional force at the moment, it is possible that Beijing would use these vessels overseas in the future if it wishes to have a less escalatory paramilitary option for maritime support to proxy forces. The PLA Air Force is also fielding increasing numbers

⁹⁹ 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.: U.S. Army War College, July 2015, p. 308.

¹⁰⁰ Janes, "China's Military Logistics and Expanding Expeditionary Capability," intelligence briefing webinar, May 28, 2020.

¹⁰¹ Janes, 2020; DoD, 2018b.

¹⁰² For a description of the PLA's expeditionary capabilities and future trends, see Gunness, 2021.

of the long-range Y-20 transport plane, which it can use to transport troops and materiel overseas.¹⁰³

C4ISR and Information Operations

China will continue to integrate space-based capabilities and develop its C4ISR networks, which will result in a greater ability to use surveillance, navigation, and communications capabilities around the world in the coming decades. Improved ISR would enhance Beijing's ability to provide intelligence and surveillance support to proxy forces overseas. In tandem with increased ISR capabilities, China will continue to hone its abilities to conduct information operations, which can be used to support proxy forces through propaganda and psychological warfare targeted against the adversary.¹⁰⁴ China also will continue to integrate artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies as they are developed to augment ISR, space, and cyber capabilities, although this is currently more aspiration than reality.¹⁰⁵

Whom China Might Support

China's support to local actors in conflicts in secondary theaters will be driven primarily by its strategic and economic interests in areas where Beijing perceives a need to become involved to protect those interests or sees an opportunity to build influence or counter the United States. Historical evidence suggests that, rather than supporting armed non-state groups, China is more likely to back governments in power that Beijing estimates can bolster stability in countries with substantial Chinese interests and where the government is relatively pro-China. This has largely been the case in China's support to regimes in Africa during conflicts. However, China might support armed non-state groups when it assesses that a state government is weak and on the verge of collapse, and such groups could be swayed to support China's interests (or at least be dissuaded from hindering them). The meeting in August 2021 between China and the Taliban illustrates this possibility.¹⁰⁶ In that case, China likely assessed that the current Afghan government would fall soon or be too weak to rule Afghanistan. Meeting with the Taliban publicly and thus providing legitimacy to the group

¹⁰³ Janes, 2020.

¹⁰⁴ Elsa B. Kania and John K. Costello, "The Strategic Support Force and the Future of Chinese Information Operations," *Cyber Defense Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2018, p. 105.

¹⁰⁵ Chinese authors acknowledge that the country is constrained in the development and application of artificial intelligence and other emerging technologies by the lack of a technically literate workforce and overreliance on foreign technology (Jiang Jingchun, "Some Reflections on Accelerating the Development of China's Military Intelligence" ["关于加快我国军事智能化发展的粗浅思考"], *National Defense*, December 13, 2018; see also Ryan Fedasiuk, *Chinese Perspectives on AI and Future Military Capabilities*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Security and Emerging Technology, August 2020, p. 11).

¹⁰⁶ Steven Lee Myers, "China Offers the Taliban a Warm Welcome While Urging Peace Talks," *New York Times*, September 21, 2021.

allowed Beijing to pave the way for providing assistance to the Taliban to promote stability on China's borders and stem terrorism from the East Turkistan Islamic Movement, which the Taliban has ties with. In future proxy conflicts, China likely will balance these concerns over stability and security with the pragmatic assessment of which groups would most benefit China's strategic and economic objectives, should Beijing support those groups.

Conclusions

From the preceding analysis, there are several implications for China's future approach to involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters.

First, Chinese assessments of the international security environment and the international system include that the competition between the United States and China is deepening, the world is trending toward multipolarity, and the influence of the West is waning. Chinese writings indicate that, in this shifting international environment, Beijing sees opportunities to expand its network of relationships and client states. This could portend a deepening of China's networks in the security realm, as well as in the economic and political dimensions. More-robust Chinese relationships overseas and increased PLA collaboration with local military leaders in such locations as Africa, for example, could lead to a greater ability for Beijing to connect with and support overseas forces in a conflict where China's interests are threatened.

Second, pragmatic economic and strategic factors likely will dictate Beijing's decision-making on whether and where to become involved in conflicts in secondary theaters. Areas where conflict could endanger China's economic growth—particularly Africa or Latin America, where access to energy resources is a concern—are potential locations where China might engage in proxy warfare to secure access to resources or maintain influence. In addition, China might engage in proxy warfare to counter U.S. influence or expand relationships in areas where the strategic balance of power could shift depending on the outcome of a conflict. The Middle East is one region where this might occur, as China has economic interests and is seeking to expand strategic relationships with countries in the region. China also might collaborate with Russia in a proxy war if both countries determine that gaining advantage in a country or region would be beneficial to countering the United States—for example, in Syria. That said, much of the U.S.-China competition in secondary theaters is likely to be economic rather than military, and the need to build and maintain economic ties to bolster Chinese growth and increase Beijing's influence represents a constraint on China's engagement in proxy warfare.

Third, China's expanding expeditionary military capabilities provide a foundation for Beijing to be able to support local actors in a conflict through more-direct means in the next 30 years. China likely will be able to negotiate more military access overseas through port agreements, construction of logistics hubs, and potentially larger naval bases. PLA advances in naval and air expeditionary capabilities will provide China with greater ability

to support its own forces, as well as proxy forces further afield. Beijing's focus on developing emerging technologies that China has invested in and exported in recent years—artificial intelligence, cyber, space, and surveillance capabilities—likely will bolster Chinese C4ISR and intelligence collection in an overseas conflict. In addition, Chinese military operational concepts emphasize control of the informational domain, increasing the likelihood that China would assist proxy forces with information operations and information-based disruption during a conflict.

This appendix portrays a China that is building the capabilities, overseas relationships, and networks to potentially support local actors in secondary theaters in the next 30 years. Whether Beijing chooses to do so is another question. Although assessments indicate that China sees U.S.-China competition as deepening, potentially opening the door to low-intensity or proxy conflict as great powers vie for influence, Beijing also recognizes that much of the competition will be economic rather than military, and this requires building relationships and partnerships that could be threatened by China's involvement in a conflict. U.S. actions that directly threaten Chinese interests—for example, access to energy resources—are more likely to push China to support forces in a proxy conflict to secure its interests. Similarly, U.S. or allied actions that threaten to significantly shift the balance of power in areas where China seeks to gain influence could drive Beijing to engage in proxy warfare against the United States or its allies.

Russia's Approach to Supporting Proxies and Intervening in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Russia's resurgence as a more assertive power on the international stage has been accompanied by increasing support for local actors in conflicts around the world. In this appendix, we seek to assess Russia's likely approach to supporting local actors in foreign conflicts, up to and including through direct military intervention in a limited conflict. More narrowly, we focus here on the conditions under which Russia would support actors in conflicts outside the sphere of what Moscow understands to be its "privileged interests," or some of the countries that formerly made up the Soviet Union.¹ Although important lessons can be drawn about Russia's ways of warfare and subversion from its actions in Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and Tajikistan, Moscow's stakes and capabilities in its immediate neighborhood are not comparable to those in settings that are more distant geographically and from the core Russian national interests.

We begin with key observations about common Russian views of proxy wars and limited military interventions by external powers, as these views have coalesced since roughly 2010. We then identify the conflicts that Russian actors have been involved in over that time and draw on these cases to infer when, why, where, and how Russia might become similarly involved in conflicts in secondary theaters by 2030. Finally, we address the question of whom Russia might support in such conflicts. Importantly, many of these conflicts do not necessarily have rival great powers backing opposing sides, unlike many of the proxy wars of the Cold War. However, because it is possible that rival powers will become involved in comparable future conflicts, it is important to understand Russia's broader approach.

Russian Views of Proxy Warfare and Limited Interventions: Lessons Learned and Future Trends

Russia inherited a rich history of interventions in faraway conflicts during the Soviet era. The Soviet Union, often along with its allies, supported both foreign governments and non-state

¹ President of Russia, "Интервью Дмитрия Медведева российским телеканалам" ["Dmitry Medvedev's Interview with Russian TV Channels"], August 31, 2008.

actors the world over—especially in the last few decades of its existence.² Although Russian interference in internal affairs of countries around the world under Putin may harken back to the Soviet era, contemporary Russian leaders are unlikely to repeat aspects of this historical experience. Notably, Russia is unlikely to devote comparably significant economic resources for a similar kind of ideological, “anti-imperialist struggle” supported by the Soviet regime. This is not only because the ideological underpinnings of this enterprise—the proliferation of communism worldwide—have disappeared but also because Russia is faced with considerable and very tangible resource constraints. Russian political and military leaders observed that the Soviet successes resulting from the expenditure of resources were not overwhelming.³ Russia’s more-recent experiences, along with experiences of other powers, have shaped Russia’s views of proxy conflicts—and interventions by external powers in foreign conflicts more broadly. Works by military and strategic experts and analysts, in addition to statements by Russian leadership, suggest the following general propositions as reflective of the dominant views on such conflicts.

Proxy conflicts and external interventions are viewed as an increasingly prominent part of contemporary warfare. Russian military and political elites view proxy conflicts as an increasingly relevant aspect of present and future warfare. The realities of the Cold War and the post-Cold War experience have demonstrated that the vast majority of conflict experience for the Russian and other leading powers’ militaries has been in complex local conflicts rather than large-scale conflicts between technologically advanced geopolitical powers.⁴ The various Russian terms for proxy war are not employed consistently, but the conflicts identified in Russian sources as characteristic of this era include proxy wars and limited conflicts as defined in this study.⁵ Russian analysts point to several reasons for the trend away from large-scale conventional inter-state wars toward “local conflicts.”

First, confrontations between large military formations, especially between nuclear powers, are too risky and, at least from a Western point of view, unacceptably so.⁶ This fact

² See, for example, Westad, 2005; and Piero Gleijeses, “Moscow’s Proxy? Cuba and Africa 1975–1988,” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 2006.

³ See, for example, Sergey Sukhankin, “The ‘Hybrid’ Role of Russian Mercenaries, PMCs and Irregulars in Moscow’s Scramble for Africa,” Jamestown Foundation, January 10, 2020a.

⁴ Aleksandr Kudryavtsev, “Военные конфликты третьего тысячелетия” [“Military Conflicts of the Third Millennium”], *Независимое военное обозрение* [*Independent Military Review*], January 4, 2016.

⁵ The descriptions of such conflicts range from military interventions aimed primarily at affecting the local power structures to “international conflicts between two or more geopolitical centers of power waged on territories of other countries, who depend on those centers of power,” under the pretext of “internal conflict resolution” (Kudryavtsev, 2016; and Aleksandr Serzhantov, Sergey Mazhuga, and Vladimir Loyko, “Войны грядущего: какими они будут?” [“The Wars of the Future: What Will They Be Like? New Scenarios, Challenges, and Implications”], *Независимое военное обозрение* [*Independent Military Review*], September 27, 2019). Literal translations of *proxy war*—*proski-voyna*, *voyna po doverennosti*, or *oposredovannaya voyna*—are not invariably used in discussions of such conflicts.

⁶ Kudryavtsev, 2016; Mikryukov, 2015.

continues to displace geopolitical contests onto the territory of third countries, as was the case during much of the Cold War. Russia's Chief of the General Staff, General Valeriy Gerasimov, thus described the Syrian conflict as a "prototype of a 'new generation war,'" the key feature of which is that "state adversaries of Syria wage covert, evidence-less actions against it," while avoiding the risk of "being pulled into direct military conflict."⁷

Second, Russia views the United States as striving to maintain global superiority, which leads it to exploit local conflicts to ward off challengers and maintain or establish friendlier regimes.⁸ Russian writers tend to view any humanitarian or peacekeeping motives for U.S. interventions in other countries as pretextual: The United States and its allies may be expected to exploit "manufactured crises" to support their interests in "strategically important regions" with the aim of "containing competitor states."⁹ A common perception is that the United States and its allies manufactured the crises that sparked the Arab Spring; exploited such crises as pretexts for the intervention in Libya; attempted to do the same in Syria (but were successfully thwarted by Russian actions); and, according to some, attempted the same in Venezuela but abandoned it.¹⁰ As Colonel General Aleksandr Dvornikov, the commander of Russia's Southern Military District, wrote, supporting local actors is meant to instill an "obedient" regime, acquire control over resources, and establish military bases while the conflict "country is reduced to ruins."¹¹

Contemporary and future proxy wars are hybrid wars and part of broader hybrid warfare. The concept of hybrid warfare frames Russian discussions of proxy wars and limited conflicts in two senses. First, Russian sources suggest that future proxy wars will be waged predominantly, though not exclusively, with nonmilitary and nonlinear means. Following Gerasimov's formulation, Western powers will use nonmilitary subversion to erode the sovereignty of "undesirable regimes," in some cases to pave the way for potential military intervention later.¹² Iraq (2003), Libya (and the Arab Spring more generally), and Ukraine are often cited as examples of this approach.¹³ The advantages of nonmilitary methods, includ-

⁷ Viktor Khudoleyev, "Voyennaya nauka smotrit v budushcheye" ["Military Science Looks into the Future"], *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], March 26, 2018.

⁸ Khudoleyev, 2018.

⁹ Serzhantov, Mazhuga, and Loyko, 2019; see also A. A. Bartosh, "Стратегия и контрстратегия гибридной войны" ["Strategy and Counterstrategy of the Hybrid War"], *Военная мысль* [Military Thought], Vol. 27, No. 4, 2018.

¹⁰ Serzhantov, Mazhuga, and Loyko, 2019; and Valeriy Gerasimov, "Ценность науки в предвидении" ["The Value of Science in Foresight"], *Военно-промышленный курьер* [Military-Industrial Courier], No. 8, February 2013.

¹¹ Aleksandr Dvornikov, "Штабы для новых войн" ["Staffs for the New Wars"], *Военно-промышленный курьер* [Military-Industrial Courier], July 23, 2018.

¹² Gerasimov, 2013, p. 476; and *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], "Vektory razvitiya voyennoy strategii" ["Vectors of Military Strategy Development"], April 3, 2019.

¹³ *Krasnaya Zvezda* [Red Star], 2019.

ing their lower costs and relative effectiveness, have received ample attention in Russian discourse. Russian military thinkers do not expect great powers to be involved in the future at the scale of the U.S. intervention in Iraq in 1991.¹⁴ And insofar as the nonmilitary means are clandestine, they also limit the political or reputational costs of direct action.¹⁵

Second, Russian writings portray proxy wars as one instrument of the broader hybrid warfare that the United States and other Western powers are continuously waging against Russia. As relations between Russia and the West became more adversarial, every (real and perceived) U.S. and Western action—“from the crisis in Ukraine to the war in Syria, the fighting in Libya, [and] disagreements over human rights issues”—became viewed through the lens of hybrid warfare against Russia.¹⁶ In this light, Russian leaders have been concerned about U.S. use of proxy warfare to threaten Russia’s interests, including the Russian regime.

Supporting proxies carries risks and presents challenges. Russian leaders surely recognized the drawbacks of proxy support that were manifest in the Soviet era; notably, proxies could not be controlled fully, and on several occasions, parties supported by the Soviet Union exploited the aid received to attack Soviet interests and personnel.¹⁷ The experience of the United States in Afghanistan—where, in the 1980s, Washington supported the groups that transformed into the al-Qaeda organization that attacked the United States on September 11, 2001—was also a stark lesson in this regard.¹⁸

Even if surrogates do not turn against their sponsoring power’s interests, local actors can be challenging to direct. Russia’s own experience supporting Assad served as a more recent reminder of a similar challenge, as Assad has often eluded Russian attempts to direct or constrain his actions. Moreover, proxy actors may be weak, disorganized, or both. As Russia engaged in the conflict directly, Syria’s government forces in 2015 were demoralized and not very effective. This required Russia to forge a more effective proxy force, or, as Dvornikov described, an “integrated grouping” of disparate irregulars, volunteers, and security forces.¹⁹

The ability of states to control their surrogates is complicated by what one Russian scholar described as “double proxy wars,” or conflicts where the intervening state seeks to hide its support for a local proxy behind yet another actor—such as a PMSC or a transnational corporation.²⁰ Additional intermediaries like these are bound to pursue their own advantages and

¹⁴ Dvornikov, 2018.

¹⁵ Khudoleyev, 2018; Bartosh, 2018.

¹⁶ Maxim A. Suchkov, “Whose Hybrid Warfare? How ‘The Hybrid Warfare’ Concept Shapes Russian Discourse, Military, and Political Practice,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 32, No. 3, 2021, p. 422; and Aleksey Fenenko, “Какой будет война будущего?” [“What Will the Future War Be Like?”], *Российский совет по международным делам* [*Russian International Affairs Council*], May 10, 2016.

¹⁷ See, for example, Directorate of Intelligence, *Sub-Saharan Africa: A Growing Soviet Military Presence*, Washington, D.C.: Central Intelligence Agency, January 1985.

¹⁸ Mikryukov, 2015.

¹⁹ Dvornikov, 2018.

²⁰ Mikryukov, 2015.

commercial interests, which may be at the expense of the intervening great power. Double proxy wars may be becoming more frequent, partly because of great-power aversion to the human and economic costs of conflict and partly because of the additional layer of plausible deniability they offer.²¹

Defending national interests may warrant the use of military force abroad. Russian writings note the need for military capabilities to meet the transforming character of war and global security threats. During public statements in 2013, while reflecting on Russia's war with Georgia, attacks on the U.S. embassy in Benghazi, piracy, and hostage-taking in Algeria, Gerasimov highlighted the need to develop strategic concepts for defending the interests of significant states abroad by using military power.²² Developing capabilities to use force abroad is necessitated by the transforming global security threats, as well as the threat of other great powers' use of proxy warfare against Russia's partners or allies. Relying on its Syrian experience, the Russian military establishment has heeded the call. In 2019, Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu declared that Russian forces have become capable of combat in remote parts of the world.²³ And Gerasimov offered a "strategy of limited action"—a concept intended to guide the operations of Russia's armed forces in the promotion of Russia's national interests abroad.²⁴

Russia's Involvement in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Our analysis of when, why, where, and how Russia might become involved in proxy wars in the rest of this appendix relies heavily on Russia's recent record of support for local actors in conflicts beyond its self-declared sphere of privileged interests in the former Soviet space. Whether through state or non-state actors, Russia has been involved in several conflicts in secondary theaters since 2000. Table C.1 summarizes these conflicts, which we selected on the basis of reasonable confidence in some degree of Russian support to one or more local actors there. In the first two cases, Syria and Afghanistan (in the post-2014 conflict period), overt support by Russian state actors to local parties in the conflicts has been dominant, although Russian non-state actors certainly played a significant role in Syria. In the remaining cases—all in Africa—Russian non-state actors (notably, PMSCs) are the main mode of Russian involvement. Other countries where Russian involvement was prominent are not presented because, although civil conflict was likely, it did not fully break out (such as Venezuela or Madagascar). In yet other cases, evidence for Russia's involvement was more speculative at the time that this research was completed (e.g., Chad), or Russia's involvement stayed

²¹ Mikryukov, 2015.

²² Gerasimov, 2013.

²³ "Russian Defense Minister Says Army Now Capable of Remote Combat Missions," Sputnik International, November 3, 2019.

²⁴ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

TABLE C.1

Russia's Involvement in Foreign Conflicts Since 2010

Country	Actors Supported	Form of Support	Key Drivers of Involvement
Syria ^a	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assad regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overt and covert military intervention by state and non-state actors (aerospace forces, ground force support, special operations, PMSCs engaged in combat supporting Russian conventional forces) Overt and covert indirect aid by state and non-state actors (training and advising, security provision, economic aid, military equipment, diplomacy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security factors: transnational terrorism Strategic and geopolitical factors: regional influence, strategic access Economic factors
Afghanistan ^b	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Afghan government Taliban 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overt indirect aid (to the government: economic and humanitarian aid, training military forces and law enforcement, arms, and diplomacy; to the Taliban: diplomacy) Likely covert indirect aid (suspected arms, military intelligence, possible PMSC and paramilitary activity) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Security factors: threat of terrorism spillover Strategic and geopolitical factors: regional influence, counter U.S. influence
Libya ^c	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Libyan National Army under Khalifa Haftar Government of National Accord 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covert military intervention by state and non-state actors (military intelligence, special forces, PMSCs engaged in combat, recruitment of other foreign mercenaries) Covert indirect aid by state and non-state actors (PMSCs providing security, train and equip, and information warfare; state arms transfers of heavy military equipment; economic aid) Overt indirect aid (economic, training, and ISR support to Libyan National Army operations; diplomacy) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic and geopolitical factors: regional influence, strategic access Economic factors
Sudan ^d	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Bashir regime Post-Bashir Transitional Military Council 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covert indirect aid (PMSC train, equip, and assist support; intelligence, security, and informational support; suspected suppression of protests) Overt indirect aid (military training, likely only from PMSCs) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strategic factors: strategic access to the Red Sea
CAR ^e	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Touadéra regime Non-state militants (suspected) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overt indirect aid by the state (arms sales, military training and advising, diplomacy) Covert indirect aid by state and non-state actors (PMSCs providing training and security, protection of Russian economic interests, suspected arms smuggling; information and political warfare; suspected arming of rebels) Covert military intervention by PMSCs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic factors Strategic factors: strategic access, expanded influence in the region

Table C.1—Continued

Country	Actors Supported	Form of Support	Key Drivers of Involvement
DRC ^f	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regime Non-state militants (suspected) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Indirect overt and covert aid (military and suspected PMSC trainers; suspected financial support; arms smuggling to non-state militants) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic factors
Mozambique ^g	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Regime 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Covert military intervention by non-state actors (PMSCs engaged in combat), suspected presence of military personnel) Overt and covert indirect aid (economic-debt forgiveness, information warfare) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Economic factors Strategic access: project power into the Indian Ocean and sub-Saharan Africa

SOURCE: Sources for each conflict are listed in the individual table notes.

^a Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019; Sarah Fainberg, "Russian Spetsnaz, Contractors and Volunteers in the Syrian Conflict," *Russie.NEI.Visions*, No. 105, December 2017, pp. 12–13; and Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, "Moscow's Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies," Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020.

^b Farrell, 2018; Rowlatt, 2018; Walsh and Popalzai, 2017; Dilanian and Memoli, 2021; Katz et al., 2020; and Mikhail Khodarenok, "Частные армии желают узакониться" ["Private Armies Want Legitimacy"], *Gazeta.ru [Gazette]*, 2017.

^c Phil Stewart, Idrees Ali, and Lin Noueihed, "Exclusive: Russia Appears to Deploy Forces in Egypt, Eyes on Libya Role—Sources," Reuters, March 13, 2017; Harchaoui, 2021; Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020; Sergey Sukhankin, "Wagner Group in Libya: Weapon of War or Geopolitical Tool?" *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 13, June 26, 2020d; Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Russian Disinformation Campaigns Target Africa: An Interview with Dr. Shelby Grossman," February 18, 2020; Katz et al., 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "О задержанной на Мальте партии ливийских динаров" ["About Libyan Dinars Detained in Malta"], May 30, 2020; and Patrick Wintour, "Libya Talks in Moscow in Diplomatic Coup for Putin," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2020.

^d Katz et al., 2020; Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020; Sukhankin, 2020d; Jane Flanagan, "Russian Mercenaries Help Put Down Sudan Protests," *The Times*, January 10, 2019; and TASS, "Песков: инструкторы РФ работают в Судане легитимно в рамках двусторонних договоренностей" ["Peskov: Russian Instructors Work in Sudan Legitimately Within the Framework of Bilateral Agreements"], January 28, 2019. It is unclear whether Russian military personnel also were present (see, for example, Maria Tsvetkova and Tom Balmforth, "Russia to Send Military Specialists to Congo Republic: Kremlin," Reuters, May 24, 2019).

^e Pudovkin, 2020; John Lechner, "To Counter Russia in Africa, America Should Rethink Its Own Role," *War on the Rocks*, May 20, 2021; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Artyom Kozhin's Answer to a Media Question on Cooperation Between the Russian Federation and the Central African Republic," March 22, 2018; Sukhankin, 2020d; Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020; Eric Schmitt, "Russia's Military Mission Creep Advances to a New Front: Africa," *New York Times*, March 31, 2019; Carl Schreck, "What Are Russian Military Contractors Doing in the Central African Republic?" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, August 1, 2018; "Russian Military Hardware Delivered to Mozambique," *DefenceWeb*, September 27, 2019; Dionne Searcey, "Gems, Warlords and Mercenaries: Russia's Playbook in Central African Republic," *New York Times*, May 4, 2020; Aleksandr Gostev, "Миссия в Африке. Российских военных обнаружили в Мозамбике" ["Mission to Africa. Russian Military Identified in Mozambique"], Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 3, 2019b; Ramani, 2021; Cassandra Vinograd, "There's a New Battle for Influence in Central Africa, and Russia Appears to Be Winning: Central African Republic," *Washington Post*, May 31, 2018; Africa Defense Forum, "Mine Attack Stokes Fear of Russia Destabilizing CAR," September 23, 2020; and Gervais Lenga, "RCA: Affaire des Mines Antipersonnel et Antichars Utilisées par le 3R, Tous les Regards se Tourment Désormais vers les Mercenaires Russes de Wagner" ["CAR: Affair of Anti-Personnel and Anti-Tank Mines Used by the 3R, All Eyes Now Turn to Wagner's Russian Mercenaries"], *Corbeaunews-Centrafrrique*, July 19, 2020.

^f Sukhankin, 2020d; News-Front, "Российские военные специалисты отправятся в Республику Конго" ["Russian Military Specialists Will Go to the Republic of the Congo"], May 23, 2019; and Planeta Press, "ИС: каковы интересы Кремля в Центральной Африке?" ["Information Resistance: What Are the Kremlin's Interests in Central Africa?"], March 18, 2018.

^g Gostev, 2019b; Polonskiy, 2019; Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020; Sukhankin, 2019b; Interfax, "В Кремле опровергли присутствие российских военных в Мозамбике" ["The Kremlin Denied the Presence of the Russian Military in Mozambique"], October 8, 2019; and Edward Chesnokov, "Президент Мозамбика: Россия списала 90% нашего долга, мы ценим таких партнёров" ["President of Mozambique: Russia Has Written Off 90% of Our Debt, We Value Such Partners"], *Комсомольская правда [Truth of Komsomol]*, August 21, 2019.

largely in the realm of diplomacy (e.g., Yemen).²⁵ Nonetheless, we draw on some of these cases to illustrate aspects of Russia's likely approach to becoming involved in conflicts outside its near abroad.

When and Why Russia Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

In this section, we identify the factors that are likely to influence Russia's decision to support state or non-state actors in foreign conflicts. This discussion relies on the cases presented in Table C.1 and is informed by the extensive Russian and Western literature bearing on Russia's strategic, military, and foreign policy goals in secondary theaters. Multiple overlapping motivations for involvement underlie Russia's activities to date and will probably continue to drive decisions about involvement in conflicts abroad. As the U.S. Office of the Director of National Intelligence assessed, "We expect Moscow to insert itself into crises when Russian interests are at stake, it can turn a power vacuum into an opportunity, or the anticipated costs of action are low."²⁶ Russian interests can be rooted in strategic and geopolitical factors, security factors, or economic factors. In addition, domestic factors, though unlikely to be decisive in Russian decisions about faraway conflicts, can play a role. We discuss these considerations in turn.

Strategic and Geopolitical Factors

Strategic and geopolitical factors are likely to influence Russia's decision on whether to support local actors in a foreign conflict. These considerations include boosting Russia's status as a great power, seeking strategic access, and undermining U.S. and Western influence. At the same time, a risk of coming into direct conflict with the United States and its allies would serve as a restraining factor on Russian involvement.

Boost Status and Role

Russia looks for opportunities to make itself an indispensable power for other states to deal with to resolve or manage conflicts—including for the West. If Russia positions itself as a power broker in consequential conflicts, it might compel the United States and its Western allies to deal with Moscow as an equal and thus break their policies of diplomatic isolation in the wake of Russia's aggression toward Ukraine. This was a considerable motivation behind Russia's involvement in Syria, although it was not a primary factor behind the decision to turn

²⁵ Declan Walsh, "Russian Mercenaries Are Driving War Crimes in Africa, U.N. Says," *New York Times*, June 27, 2021; and Mark N. Katz, "Russia Is Friendly with the Houthis in Yemen. But It's Complicated," Atlantic Council, April 9, 2021.

²⁶ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, *Annual Assessment Threat of the US Intelligence Community*, Washington, D.C., April 9, 2021.

to an overt military intervention. Moscow appears to have viewed the intervention as a way to increase leverage with the West and demonstrate the necessity of involving Russia in managing the conflict.²⁷ Importantly, Russia also viewed Assad as one of the very few remaining established partners in the Middle East, whose fall would greatly diminish Russia's standing in the region.²⁸ In Afghanistan, aspects of Russia's involvement have also been partly motivated by international status considerations, which are evident in Russia's diplomatic initiatives that bypassed and preempted those of the United States. Although Moscow supported the U.S. process, it also convened its own talks among Afghan parties in 2019 and a series of "Moscow format" talks among regional powers, which would assure Russia a key role in any peace agreements. Russia's diplomatic initiatives in other conflicts, where leverage with the West is not a prospect, also strongly suggest that Russia seeks to grow its regional status. In CAR, for example, Russia sought to position itself as "an indispensable diplomatic arbiter"—notably, to countries in sub-Saharan Africa—by cooperating with the African Union and the UN and playing a key role in the 2019 peace agreement to end decades-long fighting there.²⁹

Seek Strategic Access

Moscow's involvement in conflict abroad is also likely influenced by strategic access considerations, as Moscow seeks to establish or increase its footprint or influence in strategic locations. Even if Russia's resort to military action in Syria was not motivated primarily by this consideration, Syria did host Russia's only military outpost in the region. Retaining—and building up—its bases provides Russia with an important strategic foothold in the region along NATO's southern flank.³⁰ Increasing its clout in Libya would further enlarge Russia's presence in the Mediterranean region; create access to warmwater ports; and offer the potential ability to affect refugee flows into Europe, a problem that Russia has seized upon to divide and destabilize Europe.³¹

Strategic access was also very likely a significant motivation for the Russian support for Sudan's now-deposed leader Omar al-Bashir: A secret deal struck by Russia and Sudan under Bashir provided Russia with a naval base—hosting up to 300 Russian troops and up to four navy ships, including nuclear-powered ones—in exchange for weapons, military equipment, and security support. Although the extent to which this was a motivating factor in Sudan has been debated, Russia's interest in strategic access in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa was evidenced by its unsuccessful approaches to secure access agreements in Djibouti and

²⁷ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

²⁸ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 7.

²⁹ Ramani, 2021.

³⁰ As Kofman and Rojansky explain, "Russia did not seek bases in Syria; it had to establish them and expand existing infrastructure to save the Syrian regime" (Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?" *Military Review*, January 24, 2018; see also Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 8).

³¹ Amy Mackinnon, "Russia and Turkey's Proxy War in Libya Heats Up," *Foreign Policy*, June 19, 2020a.

Eritrea.³² Strategic access considerations are likely playing a role in other cases as well; for example, in 2020, there were reports that Russia may be harboring interests in setting up military outposts in CAR and Mozambique.³³

Undermine U.S. and Western Influence but Avoid Direct Conflict

Russia's pursuit of greater international or regional standing also entails undermining the United States and its allies, a major component of Russia's broader foreign policy. In the context of foreign conflicts, the form of U.S. influence that is particularly likely to lead Russia to consider supporting local parties to a conflict is the perceived threat of U.S.- or Western-sponsored regime change. Concerns about another Libya scenario were prominent in Russia's decision to intervene in Syria. Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov put it starkly in the early phases of the Syrian civil war: "Some leaders of the coalition forces, and later the NATO secretary-general, called the Libyan operation a 'model' for the future. As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future."³⁴

Such concerns are not merely about the loss of influence to competitors in secondary theaters; the concerns blend into Russian anxieties about U.S. threats to Russia's regime. U.S. actions in Kosovo, the Middle East, and North Africa—as well as closer to home with the alleged support for color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia—are viewed, as Putin stated in 2014, as "a lesson and a warning for us, and we are obliged to do everything necessary so that it never happens in Russia."³⁵ Thwarting Western support for non-state actors could be perceived by Russia as important to undermining the success of an approach that may be someday deployed against its own regime.³⁶ These considerations are likely to be particularly weighty when it comes to Russia's self-declared sphere of influence, as well as Russia-friendly governments in secondary theaters.³⁷ Russia's actions in Venezuela in support of the autocratic Maduro regime should be understood in this light. Russia perceived U.S. support for

³² Amy Mackinnon, "With Base in Sudan, Russia Expands Its Military Reach in Africa," *Foreign Policy*, December 14, 2020b; and Bloomberg, "Putin's Indicted 'Chef' Descends on Africa, Mercenaries in Tow," *Moscow Times*, November 20, 2018.

³³ On CAR, see, for example, Gostev, 2019b. On Mozambique, see Sukhankin, 2019b; and TRT, "Bild: Россия готовится создать 6 военных баз в странах Африки" ["Bild: Russia Is Preparing to Create 6 Military Bases in African Countries"], August 5, 2020.

³⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2011.

³⁵ President of Russia, "Заседание Совета Безопасности" ["Security Council Meeting"], November 20, 2014b.

³⁶ Although some of the rhetoric surrounding these propositions is intended for propaganda purposes, efforts to centralize power, tighten control over information, and establish new structures to tamp down any unrest—such as reestablishing the National Guard—suggest that the Russian government is seriously concerned about such threats to regime security (Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2018, pp. 103–106).

³⁷ See, for example, President of Russia, "Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club," October 24, 2014a.

the pro-democracy challenger Juan Guaidó against Maduro as a threat of another sponsored regime change, which was asserted plainly by high-ranking Russian officials, such as Gerasimov.³⁸ Moreover, Russia's continued perception that the United States is ready to support color revolutions on Russia's borders creates an additional incentive for Moscow to demonstrate a similar capability to complicate such U.S. goals in a region of greater importance to Washington.³⁹ Undermining the influence of other Western powers may also play a role. For example, Russia's role in CAR challenged long-standing French influence over the country.⁴⁰

At the same time, although Russia might view countering U.S. influence as a geopolitical benefit worth its involvement in a conflict, Russian leaders are unlikely to seek out actions that present a significant risk of escalation into armed conflict with the United States or its allies. Notably, in Syria, even though preventing a Libya scenario was a motivation, Russian leaders also appeared to have assessed that the risk of direct conflict with the United States was low.⁴¹ Indeed, Russians have largely avoided challenging Washington directly in settings where escalation to an armed conflict with U.S. forces was plausible. Instead, Russians have exploited opportunities and openings left by U.S. retrenchment, reluctance, or cooling relations with different states.⁴²

The goal of undermining U.S. or Western influence, however, is unlikely to be a primary cause of interventions in conflicts absent other factors—such as those rooted in security or economic factors.

Security Factors

Russia's support for local actors in recent conflicts is often driven by security threats, primarily terrorism and violent extremism. Russia is most concerned about terrorist threats that present a risk of spillover beyond borders—into Russia in particular, in the form of radicalizing its own Muslim population in the Caucasus. Counterterrorism was front and center in Russia's explanations of its military action in Syria. As Gerasimov articulated, if Russia did not act to arrest the rise of the Islamic State, Russia “would have to confront that force on our own territory . . . in the Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Volga region.”⁴³ Although experts

³⁸ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

³⁹ Herbst and Marczak, 2019.

⁴⁰ Ramani, 2021. Russia's role in CAR is not necessarily to the detriment of the Russia-France relationship, as both states share concerns about insurgent threats to stability in North Africa and the Sahel and have even cooperated in other conflicts, which bears on the first strategic consideration noted earlier (Samuel Ramani, “Russia Takes Its Syrian Model of Counterinsurgency to Africa,” Royal United Services Institute, September 9, 2020).

⁴¹ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

⁴² For example, in Libya, Russia faces the risk of a confrontation with the numerous external powers intervening in the conflict—Turkey in particular—but the United States is not among them (Harchaoui, 2021).

⁴³ Viktor Baranets, “Начальник Генштаба Вооруженных Сил России Генерал Армии Валерий Герасимов: ‘Мы переломили хребет ударным силам терроризма’” [“Head of the General Staff of the

tend to view these concerns as overstated and a cover for other motivations, there is ample evidence that terrorism is a genuine concern that can drive Russia to intervene abroad.⁴⁴ Security-based motivations for involvement in conflict are more likely to apply to areas that are geographically close to Russia—and most of the countries in secondary theaters are simply too remote to present a realistic threat of this sort, unless there is a significant foreign fighter problem. To be sure, virtually every conflict where Russia is involved in some way involves the presence of terrorist or violent extremist groups, but this is because such conditions are the ones that most often invite Russian involvement.⁴⁵

Economic Factors

Through its involvement in secondary theaters, Russia also seeks economic advantages—most centrally, access to energy, natural resources, markets for arms, and opportunities for infrastructure projects. Since 2014, the sanctions imposed on Russia have heightened the importance of economic motivations. In both Syria and Libya, Russia stood to lose—or to gain—control over substantial economic assets. Russia lost potentially billions of dollars in revenue from contracts when Libya’s Qaddafi was overthrown in 2011, and its involvement in the subsequent civil conflict is motivated partly by the desire to restore some of the lost economic opportunities.⁴⁶ Russia’s apparent shift from supporting both sides of the conflict to supporting Khalifa Haftar might be because the latter “reportedly promised Moscow ‘huge concessions’ in the oil, transportation/construction, and defense sectors in exchange for military support.”⁴⁷

In Africa, Russian security support to state or non-state actors has been explicitly predicated on specific economic gains to Russian entities.⁴⁸ Following its Syrian experience, Russian (usually state) actors entered into an agreement offering security support in exchange for access to natural resources. This *protections-for-concessions* approach was present in Sudan, where Russia supported President Bashir in exchange for gold-mining concessions (among other things), and in CAR, where Russian military training and security for the president and

Armed Forces of Russia, General of the Army, Valeriy Gerasimov: “We Broke the Ridge of the Attack Forces of Terrorism”), *Комсомольская Правда* [*The Truth of Komsomol*], December 26, 2017.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Kofman and Rojansky, 2018; Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, pp. 4–5.

⁴⁵ As Ramani (2020) summarizes,

Russia has deployed Wagner Group private military contractors (PMCs) to Libya and Mozambique for ambiguously defined “counterterrorism purposes.” . . . Russia also signed 19 military cooperation agreements with African countries between 2014–18. In the Horn of Africa and the Sahel, these agreements are strictly confined to counterterrorism training. Russia has notably refrained from deploying PMCs or active duty forces to the two African regions that are most severely impacted by transnational terrorism.

⁴⁶ Harchaoui, 2021.

⁴⁷ Sergey Sukhankin, “Continuation of Policy by Other Means: Russian Private Military Contractors in the Libyan Civil War,” *Terrorism Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 3, February 7, 2020b; quoting Nikita Kovalenko, “Ливийский фельдмаршал начинает оправдывать сделанную на него Москвой ставку” [“The Libyan Field Marshal Begins to Live Up to the Bet Placed on Him by Moscow”], *Взгляд* [*Opinion*], July 6, 2017.

⁴⁸ Sukhankin, 2020b.

mining operations were provided in exchange for access to gold, uranium, and diamonds. The deals in CAR, for example, benefited Lobaye Invest, a mining company with close ties to the Wagner Group, the PMSC providing that security. This arrangement was not only to enrich mercenaries, however; the Russian state had a stake also, as evidenced by its parallel efforts to “lift export restrictions on diamond sales from the Central African Republic.”⁴⁹ Economic interests in securing concessions are likely to play a particularly important role when Russia’s involvement in the conflict is limited to its PMSCs.

Domestic Factors

Domestic politics might support or limit the extent of Russia’s involvement in foreign conflicts. Russian experience shows that successes can deliver a boost to the regime with the general population, but this can be hard to foresee. Moreover, foreign wars far away from Russia’s neighborhood are, on balance, not very popular with the Russian public—and, short of the kinds of resonance that Russia’s “returning” Crimea has had, are unlikely to generate much enthusiasm. Of course, as in any state, there are political actors in Russia whose interests align with greater involvement in faraway conflicts and who are liable to lobby for such. Russia is operating with significant resource constraints and is unlikely to deliberately get into a situation in a secondary theater that could turn into a significant resource drain. Notably, even the intervention in Syria does not appear to have been a drain on the Russian budget.⁵⁰

Where Russia Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

This section offers some insight into where Russia might get involved in proxy wars or limited conflicts in the future. Although it is not useful or possible to identify specific countries, the factors that have driven Russia’s foreign entanglements since 2000 (see Table C.1) suggest conditions for locations that might indicate higher chances of proxy support or limited military interventions.

Direct Military Interventions

Russia is unlikely to commit significant resources to a conflict abroad—much less consider an overt military intervention—in the absence of strong strategic and security-based motivations.⁵¹ Moreover, even in cases where strategic, security, or economic interests are weighty, Russia is likely to resort to other means of influencing the conflict first before it commits to

⁴⁹ Ramani, 2020.

⁵⁰ Thomas Schaffner, “Five Years After Russia Declared Victory in Syria: What Has Been Won?” *Russia Matters*, March 18, 2021.

⁵¹ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 21.

military force, as it did in Syria. There, the overt direct action by Russia's armed forces was the last resort, after other means of intervening—such as providing arms, equipment, and economic and diplomatic support—failed.⁵² Direct military action by Russia is also not very likely elsewhere largely because the same enabling military factors are not likely to be present in many other circumstances. Past RAND and other research established the following factors as important to enabling military action:

- air base and port access
- (relatively) uncontested airspace
- friendly ground forces
- history of defense cooperation with proxy forces
- significant on-the-ground intelligence sources
- maritime ease of access.⁵³

Although some of these enabling factors—such as friendly ground forces and uncontested airspace—might materialize in specific potential future conflicts, others are firmer constraints that cannot easily be created where they do not exist. Unless Russian military planners become more tolerant of risk in the future, Russia's access, history of defense cooperation, and on-the-ground intelligence sources are very likely to limit where Russia could move beyond indirect proxy support. Air base and port access likely limit the span of plausible military interventions to those within range of Russia's bases in Syria, Central Asia, and Russia proper. This makes such countries as Afghanistan and Iraq more conducive to limited conflict—although this does not mean that Russia would perceive sufficient reasons to send troops there.⁵⁴ Russia's potential future bases—such as the planned naval base in Sudan—and access rights might expand the set of locations that meet some of these preconditions.

Proxy Warfare

Support to local actors short of an armed military intervention by Russian armed forces and in an area outside Russia's self-declared sphere of privileged interests is likely to follow the constellation of factors described earlier. Generally, this means that countries that offer Russia strategic advantages and implicate its security concerns or economic interests would be potential candidates for future proxy warfare. Strategic considerations are likely to focus Russia's attention on conflicts in countries with the following characteristics:

- countries of regional importance where Russian success would boost Moscow's status with regional powers or offer it leverage against the West

⁵² Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, pp. 6–7.

⁵³ See Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

⁵⁴ For a detailed discussion of these cases, see Chapter Three and Rhoades et al., 2023.

- countries that can offer strategic access to Russia that might shift the balance of power
- countries whose governments have established good relations with Russia and that are perceived to be a target for U.S. or Western interventions aimed at regime change.

Moreover, Russia's concerns about the risk of escalation into direct conflict with the United States, as well as its characteristic opportunism in foreign relations, suggest that it will be more likely to consider involvement in countries that are diplomatically isolated (e.g., Sudan, CAR) and those that are experiencing a cooling or a downgrading of relations with the United States.⁵⁵

Where security factors underlie Russian decisions, the threat has invariably been connected to the spillover of terrorism and violent extremism. States that are geographically closer to Russia would generally present greater concerns of this sort. A significant presence of foreign fighters with links to Russia or the nearby former Soviet states could make a farther-away location consequential for these reasons.

Unlike for China, whose spreading global economic interests are likely to be a relatively weighty driver for its involvement in proxy warfare, economic interests alone have not been sufficient for Russia to engage to date. Countries that are either important or potentially important importers of arms or are rich in energy and other natural resources probably raise the stakes for Russia, but such considerations alone are unlikely to prompt substantial resource expenditures. However, involvement at the lower levels of intensity—notably, through allowing PMSC activities, discussed later—are cheap for Russia. Thus, where Russian involvement is limited to its PMSCs, the presence of natural resources (and an actor willing to contract for PMSC services) may be sufficient. It is not surprising, therefore, that Russian PMSCs have found resource-rich sub-Saharan Africa with often-corrupt governments to be conducive to their operations.

How Russia Might Become Involved in Conflicts in Secondary Theaters

Russia has developed a variety of capabilities to support surrogates outside its immediate neighborhood, including through engaging in limited conflict. In this section, we review the military concepts relevant to potential engagements in limited conflict, as well as the tools that Russia relies on short of such conflict. A significant feature of Russia's support for proxy actors since 2000 has been its reliance on PMSCs, special forces, and intelligence units rather than conventional Russian soldiers.⁵⁶ Other tools that Russia has used and will continue to

⁵⁵ Rumer, 2019; Polonskiy, 2019. Addressing Africa in particular, Sukhankin adds a third option: countries that belong to the sphere of interest of France, Belgium, or Portugal, which “Russia does not see as capable of” countering Russian involvement (Sukhankin, 2020a).

⁵⁶ For an overview, see Katz et al., 2020.

use in proxy warfare include arms sales and equipment transfers, military training and advisers, information warfare and political interference, and economic support.

Military Operational Concepts Relevant to Russia's Approach to Proxy and Limited Warfare

Moscow's support for actors in foreign conflicts is not very likely to take the form of an overt military intervention by Russian armed forces.⁵⁷ However, were Russia to consider entering a limited conflict with military force, its experience in Syria would serve as a model. Moscow's approach likely would be guided by what Gerasimov termed a "strategy of limited action."⁵⁸ This approach is intended to guide Russia's goals of protecting and promoting its national interests beyond Russia's territory, based on lessons learned in Syria.⁵⁹ The strategy is a culmination of an emphasis on a limited application of hard power by Gerasimov and other military strategists since the outset of the Syria conflict.⁶⁰ As leading scholar of Russian military thought Dmitry Adamsky puts it, the strategy of limited action is about "limiting the scale of military intervention to the minimum possible that would still allow Russia to project regional influence."⁶¹

At the core of this strategy is the creation of a "self-sufficient grouping of troops (forces) based on force elements of one of the branches of the Russian Armed Forces, which possesses high mobility and the capability to make the greatest contribution to executing assigned missions. In Syria, that role was set aside for elements of the Aerospace Forces [Vozdushno-Kosmicheskiye Sily—VKS]."⁶² To the extent that conventional military forces might be used directly, they likely would follow the Syria model in this respect. A key implication of the

⁵⁷ As concluded in RAND research on Russia's military capabilities, "While Russia has invested in special forces, long-range strike, and air defense, the Russian military is not configured to be a global expeditionary military, especially given its gaps in expeditionary logistics and standing basing arrangements" (Andrew Radin, Lynn E. Davis, Edward Geist, Eugeniu Han, Dara Massicot, Matthew Povlock, Clint Reach, Scott Boston, Samuel Charap, William Mackenzie, Katya Migacheva, Trevor Johnston, and Austin Long, *The Future of the Russian Military: Russia's Ground Combat Capabilities and Implications for U.S.-Russia Competition*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3099-A, 2019, pp. 75–76).

⁵⁸ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

⁵⁹ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

⁶⁰ Roger McDermott, "Russia's Entry to Sixth-Generation Warfare: The 'Non-Contact' Experiment in Syria," Jamestown Foundation, May 29, 2021.

⁶¹ "[T]he concept is a Russian variation on the theme of long-range power projection operations by a limited but self-sufficient grouping of combined arms forces, which are based on a specific service, the most relevant for a given operational context (the Aerospace Force (VKS), in the case of Syria)" (Dmitry Adamsky, *Russian Lessons from the Syrian Operation and the Culture of Military Innovation*, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, February 2020).

⁶² *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

intervention in Syria is the importance of airpower, the introduction of which has been widely deemed to be a turning point in the conflict.⁶³

Gerasimov also emphasized “preemptive readiness of command-and-control and comprehensive support systems” as an important element of Russia’s strategy of limited action, and he identified a fuller integration of C4ISR as a priority area of development.⁶⁴ Other areas for development are robotic complexes, UAVs, and systems to counter UAVs and high-precision weapons.⁶⁵ Syria served as a testing ground for improving Russia’s ability to integrate the ISR, command and control, and fire systems. And although its precision strike capabilities are still nascent, Russia continuously seeks to improve them, and this evolving non-contact warfare capability could play an important role in future limited conflicts.⁶⁶

As Adamsky observes, “For experts in Russia, the Syrian operation is probably the most illustrative demonstration of a war waged on the principles of the [New Generation Warfare].”⁶⁷ The notion of New Generation Warfare minimizes the role of large-scale conventional military operations, and the emphasis is placed on combining military and non-military action; similarly, the strategy of limited action calls out the need for “winning and holding information superiority” and “covert deployment of the necessary grouping.”⁶⁸ The importance of information confrontation in internal foreign conflicts with external involvement has been a prominent concern since Gerasimov’s 2013 articulation of the characteristics of modern warfare.⁶⁹ Covert deployments have also played a prominent part in the Syrian campaigns; notably, Russia’s special operations command featured prominently throughout the conflict, “conducting diversionary operations, targeted killings, and reconnaissance.”⁷⁰ As concluded in prior RAND research, “Russian special operations forces (primarily Spetsnaz) and airborne forces ([Vozdushno-Desantnye Voyska]) are generally highly capable and ready to deploy on short notice.”⁷¹ Spetsnaz have been the “go-to units for Russian political and military leaders,” and these are likely to be employed to support surrogates abroad, including to potentially ignite conflicts.⁷²

⁶³ Simpson et al., 2022.

⁶⁴ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019; McDermott, 2021.

⁶⁵ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

⁶⁶ McDermott, 2021; Adamsky, 2020.

⁶⁷ Adamsky, 2020.

⁶⁸ *Krasnaya Zvezda [Red Star]*, 2019.

⁶⁹ Gerasimov, 2013; Dvornikov, 2018.

⁷⁰ Kofman and Rojansky, 2018.

⁷¹ Connable et al., 2020, p. 53.

⁷² Connable et al., 2020, p. 53. Since at least 2014, the intelligence directorate (commonly known as the GRU, or Glavnoye Razvedyvatelnoye Upravlenie, and especially unit 29155) is believed to be behind various subversive efforts in Europe and the United States, including the attempted coup in Montenegro, the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal, and the theft and leak of emails from the Democratic National Com-

Private Military and Security Companies

Russian PMSCs have become virtually synonymous with Russia's proxy warfare. Russia's use of PMSCs in conflicts abroad has been expanding, and their activities have been increasingly well documented, but significant gaps in reliable information certainly remain. Russian PMSCs have been detected in up to 30 countries since roughly 2010. Not every country where PMSCs are present is embroiled in active civil conflict, but PMSCs have confirmed or suspected roles in all the conflicts identified in Table C.1.⁷³

PMSCs are technically not permitted by Russian law. The continuing illegality of PMSCs, even with their growing use and prominent lobbying for legal changes, suggests that the status quo suits the interests of Russian political leaders, providing them with both leverage over PMSCs and plausible deniability.⁷⁴ That deniability, however, is becoming more challenging to maintain as public investigation of PMSC activities grows. There is little doubt, for example, that Yevgeny Prigozhin and the Wagner Group (which Prigozhin is thought to financially back) are closely tied to Putin and coordinate their activities with the Russian military and political leaders; in fact, many experts describe the Wagner Group as the Kremlin's de facto private army.⁷⁵ There is evidence that Wagner personnel have penetrated other PMSCs,⁷⁶ but those companies have different roots and likely somewhat different relationships with the Russian state.⁷⁷ However, no Russian PMSC is likely to enter a conflict setting without some degree of approval from, or coordination with, Russia's military or political apparatus; in view of their legal status in Russia, running afoul of the powers that be in Moscow carries

mittee and Hillary Clinton's campaign. The same unit is also suspected of having offered the Taliban bounties to kill U.S. military personnel in Afghanistan. See Kimberly Marten, "The GRU, Yevgeny Prigozhin, and Russia's Wagner Group: Malign Russian Actors and Possible U.S. Responses," testimony before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe, Eurasia, Energy, and the Environment hearing on Exposing and Demanding Accountability for Kremlin Crimes Abroad, Washington, D.C., July 7, 2020, p. 2; and Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian Special Operations Forces: Image Versus Substance," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 16, No. 43, March 27, 2019a.

⁷³ Although evidence of PMSC presence, numbers, and activities is not complete, evidence that PMSCs have intervened in some way in nearly every one of those conflicts is strong (see Sukhankin, 2020a).

⁷⁴ "Kremlin Blocks the Bill Legalizing Russian Private Military Companies," UAWire, March 28, 2018; Candace Rondeaux, "Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare," *New America*, November 7, 2019; and Pavel Luzin, "Российские ЧВК: точки над і" ["Russian PMCs: Dotting the I's"], *Riddle Russia*, February 20, 2019.

⁷⁵ Investigations by Bellingcat and *The Bell* convincingly demonstrate that idea (Bellingcat Investigation Team, "Wagner Mercenaries with GRU-Issued Passports: Validating SBU's Allegation," *Bellingcat*, January 30, 2019; and Irina Malkova and Anton Baev, "Частная армия для президента: история самого деликатного поручения Евгения Пригожина" ["A Private Army for the President: The Story of Yevgeny Prigozhin's Most Delicate Assignment"], *The Bell*, January 29, 2019). See also Marten, 2020.

⁷⁶ Rondeaux, 2019.

⁷⁷ Nathaniel Reynolds, "Putin's Not-So-Secret Mercenaries: Patronage, Geopolitics, and the Wagner Group," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 8, 2019; and Andrey Kamakin, "Сафари для Вагнера" ["Safari for Wagner"], *Новая Газета* [*New Gazette*], June 13, 2018.

great risks.⁷⁸ At the same time, there are good reasons to think that Wagner—and likely other PMSCs—does not enjoy uniformly good relations with every segment of Russia's military and political elite. Notably, some within the Russian Ministry of Defense, including Defense Minister Shoigu and Russian commanders, seem to be hostile to Prigozhin.⁷⁹ This has implications for how Wagner might operate—and the challenges that Wagner poses to rival great powers—in future conflicts.

Several advantages accompany the use of PMSCs instead of conventional military forces. First, there is the deniability of official participation from Russia, which allows Moscow to take risks where it would not otherwise do so.⁸⁰ Second, lower costs and lower potential for domestic political backlash for loss of life are commonly cited.⁸¹ Finally, as some experts observe, allowing PMSCs to thrive in faraway conflicts may serve an important domestic-stability function by redirecting the population of armed men in Russia who might otherwise cause problems domestically.⁸²

Russian PMSCs represent a versatile capability that can serve many of the same functions as military forces—as well as some functions that military forces cannot easily fulfill. In the conflicts outlined in Table C.1, PMSCs have played a variety of roles, including combat and other uses of lethal force, such as suppression of protests or uprisings; training and advising; intelligence collection; security for facilities, people, and businesses; information warfare; and political meddling.

Russian PMSCs engage in direct combat operations, either on their own or alongside Russian forces.⁸³ In Syria, Wagner's role in military operations grew from support tasks (e.g., reconnaissance) to ground assaults and special operations. With Russian military operations concentrated in the air domain, Wagner and smaller PMSCs bolstered Syrian forces on the ground and constituted the greatest share of Russian casualties in the conflict. Estimates

⁷⁸ For example, the experience of the Slavonic Corps was instructive; its early involvement in Syria ended with criminal sentences for mercenary activities (Fontanka, “Командиры ‘Славянского корпуса’ в Сирии осуждены за наемничество” [“Commanders of the ‘Slavonic Corps’ in Syria Convicted for Being the Mercenaries”], October 28, 2014).

⁷⁹ Marten, 2018; Murtazin, 2018.

⁸⁰ However, Russian official positions have not invariably denied PMSC presence. For example, in CAR, after initial denials, Russia acknowledged 300 “military instructors” in the country but did not clarify their affiliation (“Russia Pulling ‘Military Instructor’ Out of Central African Republic: Diplomats,” France 24, January 15, 2021).

⁸¹ Marten, 2020, pp. 7–8.

⁸² Luzin, 2019.

⁸³ Indeed, Wagner's original commander, Dmitry Utkin, was a lieutenant colonel in the intelligence directorate reserves who led a Spetsnaz detachment, and the group trains at a camp in Russia for the Spetsnaz GRU (the special forces of the foreign military intelligence agency). See András Rác, “Band of Brothers: The Wagner Group and the Russian State,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 21, 2020.

vary, but the number of PMSC members was estimated to reach 1,000–3,000 in Syria, including the Wagner Group, Vegacy, E.N.O.T., and Vostok Battalion.⁸⁴

In Libya, Russia has also waged a military intervention through its PMSCs, which made a significant contribution that helped determine the balance of power on the ground. Wagner, which U.S. Africa Command estimated to have 2,000 personnel on the ground in 2020, supported General Haftar’s Libyan National Army forces in their attempt to seize Tripoli.⁸⁵ Other PMSCs are reportedly present, and Wagner recruited and coordinated hundreds of Syrian mercenaries, in addition to reportedly coordinating with Sudanese fighters.⁸⁶

In Mozambique, Wagner is reported to have rendered combat support to the Mozambican government troops in the campaigns against al-Shabaab in Cabo Delgado, and Wagner personnel were reportedly equipped with drones.⁸⁷ These operations were not successful for Wagner, and after facing multiple difficulties and the deaths of several Wagner operatives, Wagner reportedly left the country in March 2020.⁸⁸ In CAR, according to UN investigators, PMSCs led government forces in military operations to dislodge rebels from several towns in winter 2021.⁸⁹

PMSCs have also been implicated in uses of lethal force outside the context of combat, although evidence is of variable strength. For example, Russian PMSCs were suspected of helping Sudan’s Bashir violently suppress anti-government street protests that ultimately led to his ouster.⁹⁰ There is also weighty evidence that Wagner is responsible for assassinating Russian nationals in CAR who were investigating the company’s activities.⁹¹ Such actions likely involved PMSC personnel in war crimes: According to a UN draft report obtained by the *New York Times*, “Russian mercenaries in the CAR are committing and encouraging war crimes—and driving further violence in this already volatile, mineral-rich nation.”⁹²

Russia’s PMSCs can facilitate military actions or render support to local actors by providing intelligence support, such as recruiting sources and guiding ISR assets, as Wagner did in Syria, Libya, and Sudan.⁹³ PMSCs provide security for military and government facil-

⁸⁴ Katz et al., 2020.

⁸⁵ U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs, “Russia, Wagner Group Complicating Libyan Ceasefire Efforts,” press release, July 15, 2020a.

⁸⁶ Sukhankin, 2020a; Harchaoui, 2021.

⁸⁷ Kachur, 2020.

⁸⁸ Media outlets also reported that the group included 200 soldiers, three attack helicopters, and crew (Sukhankin, 2019b; Kachur, 2020).

⁸⁹ Walsh, 2021.

⁹⁰ Flanagan, 2019.

⁹¹ Lilya Yapparova, “Investigators Find Evidence Tying Last July’s Murder of Three Russian Journalists in Africa to ‘Putin’s Chef,’” trans. Kevin Rothrock, *Meduza*, January 10, 2019.

⁹² Walsh, 2021.

⁹³ Katz et al., 2020.

ities and personnel, as well as commercial facilities, as they have in virtually all the conflicts in Table C.1. Such activities include providing security for Russia's military outposts (as in Syria), protecting high-level officials of the conflict country (as in CAR), and guarding energy and infrastructure facilities. Security provision is one of the most common functions of PMSCs generally. A distinguishing characteristic behind these activities by Wagner and other Russian PMSCs stems from the protection-for-concessions approach to proxy support noted earlier, whereby Russia enters into an agreement that offers security or political support in exchange for concessions to access a country's natural resources.⁹⁴ Thus, in Sudan, Russia supported President Bashir in exchange for gold-mining concessions (as well as other benefits). In CAR, Russia provided military training and security for the president and mining operations in exchange for access to gold, uranium, and diamonds. The approach is not limited to cases where civil conflict has erupted. In Madagascar too, political support for the then-president's re-election was in exchange for economic agreements on mining, among other things.⁹⁵

PMSCs play a role in this approach, deriving rents from their security functions.⁹⁶ This includes retaining shares of proceeds from the economic assets that they secure (e.g., oil and gas fields in Syria, oil infrastructure in Libya) and licenses to extract natural resources (e.g., precious minerals in CAR and Sudan).⁹⁷ PMSCs' kinetic activities can thus be tied to this aspect of their incentive structure, exploiting military advances to secure key economic assets that might be a source of profit.⁹⁸

PMSCs have also been, and likely will continue to be, involved in most forms of support for surrogates that Russia provides—notably, through arms transfers, training and advising, and information warfare, as described in the next sections.

Arms Sales and Equipment Transfers

Russia's involvement in conflicts and instability worldwide hinges on what Russian experts termed the strategy of *security export* to strategically important or unstable countries.⁹⁹ Arms

⁹⁴ Sukhankin, 2020a.

⁹⁵ Sukhankin, 2020a.

⁹⁶ For example, after rumors in fall 2017 about "Russian mercenaries being sent to the CAR and Sudan, that same year Lobaye Invest and M-Invest (Russian companies connected to Prigozhin) received licenses to extract gold, diamonds, uranium and other precious minerals in these countries" (Sukhankin, 2020a).

⁹⁷ Dyner, 2018. Kimberly Marten suggests that Prigozhin and Wagner are probably not profiting from his mining and energy production contracts; instead, Prigozhin likely benefits "by taking a substantial cut for himself and his network members off the top of every contract signed" and possibly using the activities as cover for other illegal behavior (Marten, 2020, p. 8).

⁹⁸ For example, in February 2018, "Wagner attempted to seize the U.S.- and partner-controlled Conoco gas plant both to secure an economically valuable site and test U.S. resolve" (Katz et al., 2020).

⁹⁹ Sukhankin, 2020a; Sergey Sukhankin, "Russian PMCs in Yemen: Kremlin-Style 'Security Export' in Action?" *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 144, October 12, 2018b; and Ivan Loshkaryov, "Экспорт

sales and transfers are the first component of that strategy and have been used by Moscow as a way to cement relationships and support surrogates in conflicts since Soviet times. Notwithstanding a decline in the volume of its arms exports since 2014, Russia remained the world's second-largest arms exporter in 2020 and is seeking to expand its reach beyond traditional customers (e.g., into sub-Saharan Africa).¹⁰⁰ Arms sales are a particularly attractive tool of involvement and influence over countries with Soviet-era economic ties because these enable Russia's use of debt forgiveness to expand arms sales (as in Ethiopia in 2019).¹⁰¹

Notably, Russia specializes in selling weapons and equipment to countries that have no other willing sellers because of their own diplomatic or legal sanctions and isolation. For example, Russia has supplied light weaponry to Mali, CAR, and Sudan when all were faced with "varying degrees of isolation from international arms markets."¹⁰² Russia's provision of weapons to CAR is a particularly apt example of Russia's determination to aid a country subject to an international embargo. There, Russia obtained a UN waiver to export the arms as part of a peacekeeping initiative.

Arms transfers or sales often are accompanied by "experts" or advisers, who can support Russia's surrogates in other ways. For example, in 2019, to support Venezuela's weakening leader Maduro, Moscow supplied the country with S-300 air defense systems; the equipment came with Russian military "experts," who could also provide security for Maduro.¹⁰³ In addition, the UN waiver that Russia secured for CAR was then exploited to deliver a large cache of AK-47s to the CAR government—along with 170 Wagner military trainers and five uniformed Russian officers.¹⁰⁴

Beyond its overt arms sales and donations, Russia also engages in covert and illicit transfers as part of its involvement in foreign conflicts. This includes covert transfers to militants, and Libya is the most far-reaching recent example: "Lethal equipment deliveries to the Libyan National Army have been linked to Russian entities since late 2014. This happened in part at the instigation of Egypt, which asked Russia to back Haftar's military campaign."¹⁰⁵ In May 2020, however, Russia went further and transferred heavy military equipment, in violation of

безопасности: как России вернуться в Африку и не сделать ошибок" ["Exporting Security: How Russia Can Return to Africa and Not Make Mistakes"], MGIMO University, October 28, 2019.

¹⁰⁰ Sukhankin, 2020a.

¹⁰¹ Yevgeniy Korendyasov, "Россия наступает на рынки вооружений и военной техники в Африке" ["Russia Advances on Arms and Military Equipment Markets in Africa"], Российский совет по международным делам [Russian International Affairs Council], 2017.

¹⁰² Ramani, 2020.

¹⁰³ Herbst and Marczak, 2019.

¹⁰⁴ Kimberly Marten, "Russ-Afrique? Russia, France, and the Central African Republic," PONARS Eurasia, Policy Memo No. 608, August 21, 2019.

¹⁰⁵ Harchaoui, 2021. For evidence since 2014, see United Nations Security Council, *Final Report of the Panel of Experts on Libya Established Pursuant to Resolution 1973 (2011)*, New York, S/2015/128, February 23, 2015, p. 38.

UN Security Council Resolution 1970. According to evidence from U.S. Africa Command, 14 unmarked Russian Mig-29 and Su-24 combat aircraft, as well as military armored vehicles and air defense systems, were provided to the Wagner Group in Libya, in an apparent effort to shift the balance of power after Wagner suffered a defeat.¹⁰⁶

Military Training and Advisers

Alongside arms transfers, “anti-terrorism and anti-insurgency training and consulting” are the second major form of Russian “security exports.”¹⁰⁷ Russia bills itself as an experienced partner in successfully combating violent non-state actors on the basis of its Syrian experience—a narrative that appears to find some resonance among several regimes facing insurgencies.¹⁰⁸ Russia’s training and advising activities enjoy a degree of popularity and will no doubt continue to feature in Moscow’s approach to intervening in conflicts. Training and advising are tools that may be wielded by both formal military advisers and PMSCs—in some cases, both at once. As Sukhankin explains, Russia’s strategy has been the “hybridization” of these practices, as the examples of CAR, the DRC, and Sudan show, using a “blend of legal technical-military support (which includes sending limited numbers of uniformed military instructors) with services rendered by illegal formations—that is, Russian” PMSCs.¹⁰⁹

Information Warfare and Political Interference

The full menu of informational and political interference tools that are characteristic of Russia’s post-2014 activism on the world stage is not limited to Russia’s near abroad and the Western world but can be and has been employed as part of support for local actors in conflicts in secondary theaters. Russia’s tools for these efforts include state-sponsored media, such as RT and Sputnik, whose content appears in the most-common languages used in the three secondary theaters examined in this report.¹¹⁰ The tools also include PMSC-run social-media operations, which closely resemble the Russia-based Internet Research Agency’s operations in the 2016 U.S. election and across Europe.¹¹¹ For example, Facebook has identified networks

¹⁰⁶ Korendyasov, 2017; and U.S. Africa Command Public Affairs, “Russia and the Wagner Group Continue to Be Involved in Ground, Air Operations in Libya,” press release, July 24, 2020b. See also Cragin and MacKenzie, 2020.

¹⁰⁷ Sukhankin, 2020a.

¹⁰⁸ Sukhankin, 2020a.

¹⁰⁹ Sukhankin, 2020a. In the case of CAR, for example, Russia’s official position is that “five military and 170 civilian instructors from Russia were sent to train CAR service personnel” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2018).

¹¹⁰ Jensen, 2017; and Coda Story, “The Russian Offensive in Syria You Haven’t Heard About,” November 28, 2017.

¹¹¹ Katz et al., 2020; and Tim Lister, Sebastian Shukla, and Nima Elbagir, “Fake News and Public Executions: Documents Show a Russian Company’s Plan for Quelling Protests in Sudan,” CNN, April 25, 2019.

of pages on its platform targeting users in CAR, the DRC, Madagascar, Mozambique, and Sudan, including evidence tying these groups to Wagner.¹¹²

With its information efforts, Russia also can seek to undermine other local actors in support of its surrogates.¹¹³ And these activities can be more driven by competition with external powers; for example, in Mozambique, Russia sought to fuel anti-Portugal and anti-Italy—as well as anti-U.S.—sentiments because these countries would be the key contenders to compete for Mozambique’s natural gas.¹¹⁴ In CAR, “Russia is also embroiled in an information war with France in the country, as Yevgeny Prigozhin-aligned Facebook profiles bolster [CAR President Faustin-Archange] Touadéra’s standing and counter messages from French government-aligned social media accounts.”¹¹⁵ And during its military campaign in Syria, Russia has sought to blame other external actors for their proxies’ crimes, spreading disinformation that it is not Assad’s government but the White Helmets (also known as the Syrian Civil Defense, a search-and-rescue organization based in opposition-held areas) who are responsible for chemical attacks in Syria.¹¹⁶

Russian involvement in this area also includes political meddling—notably, by so-called political consultants or political technologists, some of whom are also affiliated with Prigozhin and may work closely with PMSCs, military intelligence, and the Federal Security Service. Russian sources have reported numerous political technologists consulting regimes prior to elections in most of the cases listed in Table C.1 (CAR, the DRC, Libya, Mozambique, and Sudan), as well as in Angola, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Madagascar, and Zimbabwe.¹¹⁷

Information and political efforts by Russian actors are often not successful.¹¹⁸ However, these forms of intervening are at the heart of Russia’s asymmetric approach to proxy support and influence more broadly. In view of the relatively low cost of these techniques, it should be expected that these lines of effort will be present in future conflicts and that repeat actors might learn and adapt from past failures.

¹¹² Shelby Grossman, Daniel Bush, and Renée DiResta, *Evidence of Russia-Linked Influence Operations in Africa*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Internet Observatory, October 29, 2019. For example, in 2019, Facebook took down a network of Prigozhin-linked Facebook pages maligning Mozambique’s opposition party, RENAMO (Kachur, 2020; Nathaniel Gleicher, “Removing More Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior from Russia,” Facebook, October 30, 2019; and Grossman, Bush, and DiResta, 2019).

¹¹³ Grossman, Bush, and DiResta, 2019.

¹¹⁴ Sukhankin, 2020a.

¹¹⁵ Ramani, 2021.

¹¹⁶ Brian Ross, Megan Christie, and James Gordon Meek, “Behind #SyriaHoax and the Russian Propaganda Onslaught,” ABC News, April 13, 2017.

¹¹⁷ Sukhankin, 2020a. As Sukhankin summarizes, “many of these countries have established military-technical cooperation with Russia and either have rumored or are openly hosting Russian ‘military advisors.’” See also Olga Churakova, “В странах Африки работают до 200 политтехнологов, связанных с Пригожиным” [“Up to 200 Political Strategists Associated with Prigozhin Work in African Countries”], *Dozhd’*, March 20, 2019.

¹¹⁸ Sukhankin, 2020a.

Economic Support

Relative to the resources available to other powers operating in the regions that we examined in this study, Russia's resources limit how much economic support Moscow can offer proxy actors.¹¹⁹ Nonetheless, Russia is able to extend targeted economic support to its surrogates. For example, it has given loans to and made investments in Venezuela to support the embattled Maduro regime; it also "helped Caracas obtain urgently needed cash by assisting it in oil sales and financial transactions in spite of U.S. sanctions."¹²⁰ Russia has written off 90–95 percent (\$40 million) of Mozambique's Soviet-era debt, and, in return, Mozambique's government voiced the possibility for Russian ships to access the country.¹²¹ Debt forgiveness has served Russia's interests well, but there are few countries whose Soviet-era debts remain unforgiven.¹²²

Russia's economic support has also taken more-subversive forms. Notably, Russia has printed the equivalent of more than \$10 billion of banknotes for the Libyan National Army without authorization from Libya's central bank. The "rogue injections of Russian paper . . . enabled Haftar to triple Libyan National Army personnel salaries, bolstered the armed coalition's independence from the Government of National Accord during the key year that was 2016, and helped keep it afloat."¹²³

Whom Russia Might Support

Above all, whom Russia supports in any future conflict will be a pragmatic decision driven by the factors behind its involvement. That said, two observations are in order.

First, the narrative that Russia seeks to advance is of a defender of sovereignty; in particular, Russia uses its Syrian model of counterinsurgency to recommend itself as a patron superior to the United States or European powers. Moscow seeks to distinguish its actions from Western interventions, which it sees as flagrantly violating sovereignty norms. Russia has always emphasized that, in contrast to Western actions, its intervention in Syria, for example, was at the invitation of a sovereign state government. Russia's model of counterinsurgency and its legitimacy narrative emphasize support to states against non-state actors. Moreover, to the extent that more-extensive support should be expected to actors with whom Russia has long-standing historical ties, as with Syria's Assad, these are also likely to be state actors.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Sukhankin, 2020a.

¹²⁰ Vladimir Rouvinski, "Russia's Continuing Engagement with Venezuela in 2019 and Beyond—An Update," Wilson Center, February 18, 2020.

¹²¹ Chesnokov, 2019; Ivanov, 2020.

¹²² Lyudmila Alexandrova, "Why Russia Forgives Debts," TASS, May 22, 2014.

¹²³ Harchaoui, 2021.

Second, however, Russia's pragmatism and the nature of its interests often favor support to multiple parties. As a way to increase status, Russia often presents itself as a broker or mediator among multiple parties. Russia's gains from involvement in proxy wars may well be tied to the parties that emerge victorious, which means that Russia might continuously reevaluate who is likely to win.¹²⁴ Finally, within Russia, different influential actors are quite likely to have different positions on proxy support, which leads it to engage multiple actors (as in Libya).

Conclusions

Russian officials and prominent commentators often accuse the United States and its Western allies of meddling in other countries' internal affairs and violating their sovereignty—especially through instigating and fighting proxy wars and military interventions. However, Russia has been involved in a considerable number of recent conflicts, albeit at a relatively low level and often semi-covertly. Russia is highly likely to continue those activities because it perceives opportunities to advance its strategic and economic interests—including in building influence at the expense of the United States—and ward off threats to its security and that of its allies and partners.

¹²⁴ As recounted in a 2020 paper, "Russian foreign policy analyst Sergei Karaganov admitted, 'We are playing a very complicated game—sometimes we support somebody, sometimes we help somebody else. . . . If needed we will support Taliban, if needed, we will support anti-Taliban forces'" (David G. Lewis, "Return to Kabul? Russian Policy in Afghanistan," George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, Security Insights No. 60, June 2020a). Thus, until about 2019, Russia supported multiple parties in Libya—then shifted to Haftar, who allegedly promised lucrative economic rewards (Nurlan Aliyev, "How Russia Views Afghanistan Today," *War on the Rocks*, October 19, 2020).

Abbreviations

ASWJ	Ansar al-Sunna Wa Jamma
C4ISR	command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
CAR	Central African Republic
CCTV	China Central Television
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DAF	Department of the Air Force
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DRC	Democratic Republic of the Congo
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique
FSLN	Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional
GLONASS	Globalnaya Navigazionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema
ISKP	Islamic State – Khorasan Province
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
ISWAP	Islamic State – West Africa Province
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PMSC	private military and security company
RENAMO	Resistência Nacional Moçambicana
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UAV	unmanned aerial vehicle
UN	United Nations
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
ViEWS	Violence Early-Warning System

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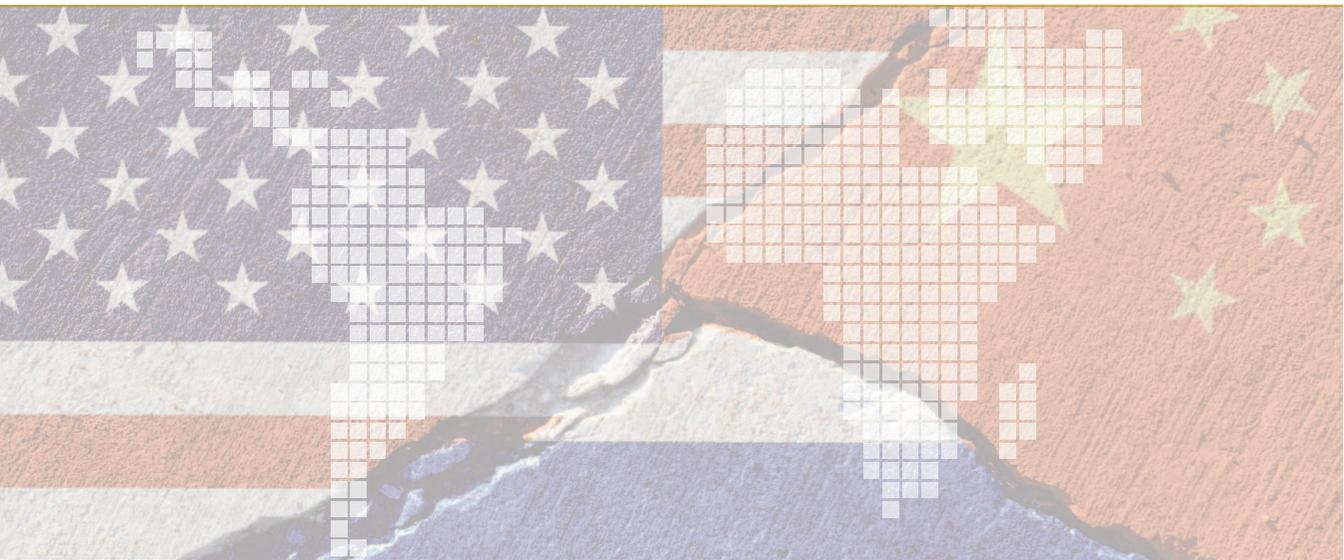
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