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China's Quest for Global Primacy

An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States



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Preface

This research explores possible international and defense strategies that China might employ to outcompete the United States and achieve a position of international primacy. The posited strategies, although created by the authors, are framed by findings regarding Chinese political processes, concepts, policies, and national goals. The purpose of the analysis is threefold: to support U.S. planning and decisionmaking, to educate readers about China's strategy and policymaking process, and to spur discussion about the stakes and nature of the competition.

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Summary

U.S.-China relations have entered a new phase characterized by sharpening competition. As the gap in comprehensive national power has narrowed, Beijing's pursuit of national revitalization has coincided with a deepening of tensions with the United States over long-standing disputes regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the U.S. military presence in Asia. In addition, new points of contention, including China's crackdown on Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and escalating feuds over trade and technology have pushed bilateral ties to their worst condition in decades.¹ Even shared threats, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, have proved to be occasions for the two sides to trade accusations and compete for influence.² The unsettled relationship between the world's two largest economies has unnerved the international community.³ More ominously, observers anxiously warn of the risk that the intensifying rivalry could follow a well-established pattern of conflict between rising and status quo great powers.⁴

¹ Jeff Seldin, "Concerns Growing That China's Influence Operations Getting Bolder," *Voice of America*, August 21, 2019.

² Franco Ordoñez, "U.S., China Accuse Each Other of Mishandling Covid-19," NPR, March 23, 2020.

³ Tom Fairless, Sha Hua, and Bojan Pancevski, "U.S.-China Tensions Leave Germany Squirring in the Middle," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2020.

⁴ Leslie Fong, "Could U.S., China Rivalry Lead to War? History Shows It Might," *South China Morning Post*, June 23, 2020.

Chinese authorities frankly acknowledge the inevitability of competition but reject the notion that conflict is inevitable.⁵ This perspective suggests that Beijing recognizes the importance of having a balanced and nuanced competitive strategy that avoids disastrous missteps. No official Chinese document that outlines a strategy for managing competition with the United States is known to exist. If it does exist, its contents have not been made available to the public, nor should we expect Beijing to publish them, given the sensitivity of the topic. Yet the questions that any such strategy might have addressed remain imperative. How should we understand Beijing's approach to the competition with the United States? What might be Beijing's desired end state for the bilateral relationship? What does *success* in the competition mean to China? What foreign policy and defense-related objectives regarding the United States might China have? What might Beijing view as vulnerabilities in its approach? This research aims to shed light on such questions.

Focusing on the foreign policy and defense dimensions of the competition, the authors propose with this research to make three contributions. First and foremost, we intend the report to serve as a planning tool by positing international and defense strategies that could allow China to outcompete the United States. Such a tool could facilitate U.S. government efforts to formulate its own strategies and policies to protect U.S. interests. Second, the analysis is meant to educate readers on how the Chinese view the competition with the United States. In hopes of more closely approximating how Beijing might actually conceptualize the competition, the authors aim to reflect a Chinese perspective as much as possible. Third, we seek to raise awareness and encourage greater public debate about the stakes of a U.S.-China competition that has expanded in scope and complexity.

Because the authors seek to present competitive strategies from a Chinese perspective, we rely primarily on unclassified Chinese documents. U.S.-China relations remains a topic of intense interest among Chinese officials and analysts. An enormous volume of official docu-

⁵ Xinhua, "Commentary: China, U.S. Can 'Coopete' to Make Bigger Pie for Lunch," May 6, 2019d.

ments, commentaries, and scholarly writings has examined the relationship from many angles. This literature provides an important resource for discerning key themes and ideas in Chinese policy and debates. As much as possible, the team from the RAND Corporation has sought to adhere to the same authoritative sources and intellectual materials that Chinese officials would draw from to develop any foreign policy or defense strategy document. In addition to these documents, the authors also examined Western reporting and academic scholarship on issues related to the U.S.-China competition.

As presented by the authors, China's international strategy aims to establish the country's primacy in the Asia-Pacific region. It also seeks to establish Chinese leadership of the international order. However, China's contest for global leadership need not wait until after it has secured regional primacy. The strategy proposes that China pursue both at the same time, underpinned by the notion that progress toward either regional- or global-level objectives could enable progress toward the other. If successful, China will have surpassed the United States to become the paramount regional power and the leading global power. However, China's international leadership would bear little resemblance to the forms exercised by previous global leaders such as the United States and Great Britain. Exercising a partial global hegemony centered principally on Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, Chinese international leadership would be characterized by a reliance on finance, diplomatic engagement, and security assistance to exercise influence while maintaining a modest overseas military presence.

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

and diplomatic presence worldwide; (6) the United States and China manage their differences according to norms upheld by China; and (7) the two cooperate on shared concerns on terms defined largely by the Chinese.

The consequences of Chinese success in strategic competition could be severe for the United States. Sitting astride the heart of the global economy, Beijing would be well situated to privilege its needs and those of its clients over those of the United States and its allies. This situation would likely entail a deleterious downgrading in the prospects for the United States. Poorly positioned to unseat China or easily reverse its own flagging fortunes, the United States could face dwindling economic prospects, international marginalization, and a diminishing ability to shape global affairs.

The international strategy presented seeks to achieve this end state through peaceful methods, although it does not rule out the possibilities of militarized crises or even conflicts of a limited scope, such as proxy wars. The core of the proposed international strategy is a reliance on China's economic prowess and diplomatic maneuver to put Beijing into a position of advantage from which it cannot be dislodged by the United States. Regarding major powers, the posited strategy seeks to ensure the United States and Europe remain divided in their approach to China while Russia cooperates closely as a junior partner. The Asia-Pacific region remains a priority area, and the strategy envisions Beijing weakening U.S. alliances, expanding its own network of client states, renovating and leading regional multilateral institutions, and deepening the region's integration into a Chinese-led economic, political, and technological order. Beijing regards the developing world as a key constituency for its international leadership, and the strategy posited here aims to build a network of client states across Eurasia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Chinese success in establishing itself as a principal arbiter in Middle Eastern affairs, as the main sponsor of Africa's economic development, and as a major partner in Latin America could result in a severe weakening in the strategic position of the United States as a global leader and undercut its position in the Indo-Pacific theater as well. In the multilateral domain, the strategy envisions a broad effort to shape rules, norms, and agendas to favor

the interests of China and its clients at the expense of the United States. Beijing's global governance strategy similarly aims to bolster China's influence and delegitimize that of the United States in appropriate venues. For each section of this chapter, the authors have proposed objectives for the 2035 time frame that could guide the development of relevant criteria against which China's progress could be assessed. An appendix offers some sample subobjectives that could be used to evaluate Chinese progress toward relevant objectives.

Defense strategy plays an important but supplementary role to the proposed Chinese international strategy. A complementary defense strategy would aim to constrain Washington's ability to forestall or prevent its own eclipse by building a superior Chinese military that renders the risks of military conflict intolerably high in the Asia-Pacific theater. The defense strategy also aims to deter the United States from challenging China in any contingency along its periphery and provide support to gray-zone activities that incrementally change the status quo at the expense of the United States and its allies. A major military responsibility would be to support diplomatic efforts to shape a favorable international environment by building strong security ties with client states and discrediting or weakening the appeal of the United States as an alternative. The defense strategy also raises the possibility of engaging in proxy or other more-limited conflicts to protect the interests of client states and demonstrate the superiority of Chinese power. To address concerns about the risks of miscalculation and escalation in any incident involving the United States, however, the defense strategy emphasizes the importance of preventing conflict, managing crisis, and strict control of military forces by civilian authorities in any contingency. At the same time, the strategy leaves open the possibility for cooperation with the U.S. military on shared security threats.

The strategies depicted in this research should not be construed as predictions of how the competition may evolve. Whether China can prevail is hardly predetermined, and the United States continues to enjoy many strategic advantages. The outlook is further complicated by the sheer variety and types of factors—some of which may not be well understood today—that could affect the trajectory of the competition. The sudden emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has already

shown how unexpected shocks can drive the international situation in unexpected directions. Moreover, China has serious liabilities that could impair its ability to compete with the United States. Some of these have been posited by Chinese analysts and commentators, but others can be deduced by analysis. The most-important vulnerabilities highlighted by Chinese leaders center on the country's domestic situation. China continues to face severe economic imbalances, problems of corruption, regional unrest, and daunting demographic challenges. In terms of international attributes, China suffers from a position of disadvantage as the rising power. It has a weaker leadership role in multilateral venues and an inferior influence on global discourse than the incumbent power, the United States. China's defense strategy has drawbacks as well. The People's Liberation Army (PLA) remains an unattractive partner for many countries, especially in Asia. And the military's lack of power-projection capabilities limits its ability to provide the public security goods that helped make U.S. global leadership so successful. These vulnerabilities suggest advantages for the United States, but they also underscore areas that China could address in coming years if it hopes to improve its competitive position. One final point deserves emphasis. The most-critical factors that will determine the outcome of U.S.-China competition are fundamentally domestic. Which side can build the more technologically innovative and prosperous economy, flourishing and well-governed society, and durable and responsive politics will likely be the side to gain a decisive advantage in competition. A thorough analysis of the potential trajectory of U.S.-China competition would examine such variables closely, but such a task lies beyond the scope of this analysis. The importance of domestic policy should nonetheless be borne in mind when analyzing the international and defense dimensions of competitive strategies.

The research carries several implications for U.S. decisionmakers and the Department of Defense (DoD). The first is the enduring importance of strengthening America's network of alliances and partnerships. China recognizes this network to be a tremendous strategic advantage for the United States, one that Beijing has struggled to match. This analysis has underscored the importance of initiatives undertaken by the past two presidential administrations to shore up

U.S. influence and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. The Indo-Pacific remains a critical domain of U.S.-China competition, and its importance for the broader global competition merits emphasis. U.S. policies that facilitate China's consolidation of influence and leadership in the Indo-Pacific could simply accelerate Beijing's efforts to challenge U.S. leadership at the global-systemic level.

The importance of areas outside the Indo-Pacific and of developing countries as constituencies for international leadership deserves emphasis as well. China's cultivation of client states and influence in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America could directly affect the ability of the United States to compete in the Indo-Pacific. As one example, Chinese success in consolidating influence with vital energy suppliers in the Middle East could affect the ability and willingness of countries like Japan and India to support measures that constrain Chinese power. The need to bolster the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific may need to be balanced by the need to uphold U.S. credibility as a global leader. At the very least, closer coordination between competitive strategies both within and outside the Indo-Pacific will be imperative. In terms of developing countries, China's lack of allies leaves it in a weak position to challenge the United States. Washington could strengthen its hand further by bolstering its relationships with those states that have only recently experienced substantial growth in gross domestic product (GDP). Given the long-term trends favoring the rise of the "non-West," cultivation of support in the developing world appears prudent in any case.

While multilateral organizations and institutions for global governance have endured considerable criticism for their many failings and inefficiencies, this research has concluded that engagement with those entities will remain an important component of U.S.-China competition. Greater U.S. investments in shaping and reinvigorating international institutions and multilateral venues can help consolidate U.S. influence and restrain Chinese challenges. In some cases, this may involve initiatives to grant China more influence and extend cooperation. The goal here, as in other areas, is to weaken the force of Chinese criticisms by demonstrating responsive, effective U.S. leadership,

thereby reducing the incentive for other countries to back Beijing's efforts to renovate those organizations in ways that harm U.S. interests.

In terms of defense strategy, the posited strategy has emphasized the importance of deterrence, crisis management, and military diplomacy in the competition. As presented in this report, China's defense strategy could expand the geographic range of potential crisis situations and contingencies. Along the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) routes and as part of the effort to expand a network of client states worldwide, China has a strong incentive to offer arms sales, military training, and other forms of assistance. Such transactions have been increasing in recent years. In coming years, China may take on even more security responsibilities to protect its BRI investments. An imperative to demonstrate its credibility as a patron to client nations could incentivize PLA forces to carry out more-frequent acts of military diplomacy that coerce U.S. allies or partners, or even to contemplate the development of alliance-like obligations.

These possibilities suggest that the U.S. military faces a compelling need to bolster conventional deterrence and invest in capabilities to ensure the superiority of the armed forces in the future. A focus on traditional deterrence through conventional military superiority remains the bedrock of any security strategy to counter China. A robust U.S. military capability to defend its interests and those of its allies and partners provides a critical source of U.S. credibility as a leader in the Indo-Pacific. A strong conventional military capability is also essential for incentivizing regional powers, such as Japan, Vietnam, and others, to resist Chinese coercion and demands. By contrast, clear evidence that the United States had lost the military advantage could persuade other countries to either adopt a position of tacit submission and accommodation to Chinese demands or step up a potentially destabilizing arms race to shore up their defense.

Ensuring the capability to deter China in the short term will remain critical, but investment to ensure long-term advantage will be critical as well. Sustaining investment in the future capabilities of the U.S. military will be essential not just for ensuring the long-term credibility of U.S. deterrence, but also for bolstering America's position in the broader competition. Finding ways to better protect U.S. interests

in the Indo-Pacific but also in the cyber, space, and other domains can backstop broader competitive efforts. DoD may need to maintain a significant presence in the Middle East and other theaters to bolster the U.S. position in the Indo-Pacific as well.

Strengthening U.S. conventional capabilities and investing in a technologically advanced future force remain critical tasks. But military diplomacy could assume greater importance, too. The diplomatic struggle for influence and leadership suggests that the U.S. military could play an important role in incentivizing cooperation with the United States and helping countries resist unreasonable Chinese demands. U.S. experience in military advisory missions and assistance can help strengthen diplomatic partnerships and counter Chinese influence efforts. The provision of public goods, such as security for key shipping lanes and humanitarian aid in the face of disaster, can help maintain the appeal of the United States as the global leader.

As the competition intensifies, U.S. military planners may need to expand the portfolio of possible contingencies involving China. The flashpoints between the United States and China today may not be flashpoints in the future, or they may coexist alongside new ones. Scenarios involving Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, and cyberspace tend to occupy the concerns of military planners today, but these issues may be augmented by new ones that arise from China's efforts to exert greater leadership, especially along its BRI routes and with client states on other continents. As just one illustration, China's willingness to court Iran despite U.S. sanctions raises the possibility over time of proxy conflicts between forces backed by China and those by the United States in the Middle East. The more that China assumes the role of patron for client states, the higher the likelihood that, at some point, PLA forces or Chinese-backed host nation forces could engage in hostile acts against parties aligned with the United States.

The appeal and feasibility of Chinese military efforts to resolve longstanding issues, such as Taiwan, may need to be reexamined through the lens of the broader competition as well. From Beijing's perspective, the potential cost and risk of escalation in war increase the more the competition with the United States intensifies. Thus, it is in China's interest to delay the resolution of Taiwan's status and

that of other disputed regions until it has prevailed in its competition with the United States. This might mean that Beijing tolerates a stable cross-strait relationship premised on Taiwan's rejection of formal independence so long as the United States retains the international upper hand and a credible military intervention option. Other PLA missions may be more pressing for the near term. However, the calculus could change, should China succeed in gaining a decisive competitive advantage in international and regional leadership and in its military posture near Taiwan. Similarly, China may regard as satisfactory a continued reliance on gray-zone tactics that incrementally change the status quo within the first island chain in a low-risk manner while it prioritizes efforts to weaken the U.S. position in Asia and elsewhere. To maximize deterrence and the protection of U.S. interests, the defense and foreign policy dimensions of any U.S. competitive strategy may need to be even more closely coordinated.

Any Chinese deliberation on how to tailor the controlled use of force in any confrontation involving U.S.-backed forces would carry serious risks, of course. The dangers of escalation and miscalculation paradoxically underscore the importance of finding ways for both countries to cooperate and ease tensions as a component of successful competition. The development of a strategy that includes some degree of reassurance and cooperation could help stabilize the competition and reduce risks of miscalculation and dangerous incidents. Moreover, as the international security environment experiences more fragmentation and breakdown, collaboration between the world's two largest powers could prove nearly unavoidable in any case.

The return of great-power competition after decades of unchallenged U.S. global primacy has introduced new challenges and risks. Washington enters the contest burdened by fiscal strains, domestic political polarization, and competing international and domestic priorities. These constraints raise the imperative of developing effective strategies that allocate resources efficiently and effectively. The derivation of a Chinese strategy can, hopefully, provide a useful tool for that important task.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the sponsors. We are also grateful for the insightful comments and helpful feedback from the reviewers, Michael S. Chase and Eric Heginbotham.

Abbreviations

6PT	Six Party Talks
AIIB	Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank
ADMM	ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting
ARF	ASEAN Regional Forum
ASAT	antisatellite (weapon)
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia
CICIR	China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
DPRK	Democratic People's Republic of Korea
FOCAC	Forum on China-Africa Cooperation
G-20	Group of 20

GDP	gross domestic product
IMF	International Monetary Fund
NATO	North American Treaty Organization
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PPWT	Prevention of Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROK	Republic of Korea
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Trade Organization
UN	United Nations

Introduction

The United States has long played an outsized role in the foreign and security policies of the People's Republic of China (PRC). In the early decades of the Cold War, the two sides feuded bitterly and even fought a large-scale conflict in the Korean War. Beijing's turn toward reform and opening up in the late 1970s and its cooperation with the United States against the Soviet Union heralded a relaxation of tensions and a warming of bilateral relations. From the 1980s through the 2000s, both countries benefited enormously from largely cooperative relations and robust trade despite persistent tensions over Taiwan, human rights, and other issues. U.S. markets, investment, and capital helped fuel China's rapid economic growth, and greater diplomatic and popular engagement helped ease mistrust and stabilize China's security situation. Beijing may have resented the U.S. military presence in East Asia, but it also benefited from the regional stability that U.S. power provided. Beyond the Pacific, U.S. political leadership and military strength secured vital energy and shipping routes, enabling the global economy to prosper.

Since around 2010, however, U.S.-China relations have entered a new phase characterized by sharpening competition. As the gap in comprehensive national power has narrowed, Beijing's pursuit of national revitalization has coincided with a deepening of tensions with the United States over longstanding disputes regarding Taiwan, the South China Sea, and the U.S. military presence in Asia. In addition, new points of contention, including China's crackdown on Hong Kong and Xinjiang and escalating feuds over trade and technology

have pushed bilateral ties to their worst condition in decades.¹ Even shared threats, such as the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, have proved to be occasions for the two sides to trade accusations and compete for influence.² The unsettled relationship between the world's two largest economies has unnerved the international community.³ More ominously, observers anxiously warn of the risk that the intensifying rivalry could follow a well-established pattern of conflict between rising and status quo great powers.⁴

The intensifying great-power competition has, in many ways, continued to underscore the outsized importance of the United States to China. On the one hand, China continues to face strong incentives to cooperate with the United States. The United States remains an important market for Chinese exports and a key source of vital technologies needed for the country's efforts to upgrade its industrial competitiveness. Chinese shipping, energy imports, and many other interests abroad also continue to rely on the security provided by the U.S. military. U.S. diplomatic and economic power also makes collaboration imperative for Beijing to effectively address transnational threats, such as climate change, nuclear nonproliferation, and terrorism.

On the other hand, China also faces a growing array of incentives to weaken and erode the strength of the United States, which has become its chief competitor. U.S. power remains the single most important impediment to China's unification with Taiwan, the achievement of which Chinese leaders have deemed essential to national revitalization. U.S. efforts to counter a rapidly modernizing Chinese military by bolstering the U.S. position in the Asia-Pacific has complicated Chinese efforts to assert regional leadership. And, as its economy matures

¹ Jeff Seldin, "Concerns Growing That China's Influence Operations Getting Bolder," *Voice of America*, August 21, 2019.

² Franco Ordoñez, "U.S., China Accuse Each Other of Mishandling Covid-19," NPR, March 23, 2020.

³ Tom Fairless, Sha Hua, and Bojan Pancevski, "U.S.-China Tensions Leave Germany Squiriming in the Middle," *Wall Street Journal*, June 24, 2020.

⁴ Leslie Fong, "Could U.S., China Rivalry Lead to War? History Shows It Might," *South China Morning Post*, June 23, 2020.

and converges in many ways with the structure of that of the United States, China's ability to achieve higher growth depends, in part, on its ability to outpace that of the United States. The global struggle for access to markets, technologies, and resources overlaps with an intensifying political struggle for influence and international leadership as both sides feud over the value of liberal democracy, human rights, and other issues.

Chinese authorities frankly acknowledge the inevitability of competition but also reject the notion that conflict is inevitable.⁵ This perspective suggests that Beijing recognizes the importance of having a balanced and nuanced strategy that avoids disastrous missteps. No official Chinese document that outlines a strategy for managing competition with the United States is known to exist. If it does exist, its contents have not been made available to the public, nor should we expect Beijing to publish it, given the sensitivity of the topic. Yet the questions that any such strategy might have addressed remain imperative. How should we understand Beijing's approach to the competition with the United States? What might be Beijing's desired end state for the bilateral relationship? What does *success* in the competition mean to China? What foreign policy and defense-related objectives related to the United States might China have? How might Beijing assess progress, and what might it see as vulnerabilities in its approach? This research was undertaken to shed light on such questions.

Focusing on the foreign policy and defense dimensions of the competition, the authors of this research propose to make three contributions. First and foremost, we intend this analysis to serve as a planning tool by positing international and defense strategies that could allow China to outcompete the United States. Such a tool could facilitate U.S. government efforts to formulate its own strategies and policies to protect U.S. interests. Second, we seek to educate readers on how the Chinese view the competition with the United States. Third, we seek to raise awareness and encourage greater public debate about

⁵ Xinhua, "Commentary: China, U.S. Can 'Coopete' to Make Bigger Pie for Lunch," May 6, 2019d.

the stakes of a U.S.-China competition that has expanded in scope and complexity.

A primary purpose of this research is to directly support U.S. planning efforts by positing international and security-related goals, objectives, and competitive strategies from a Chinese perspective. Because the project is envisioned as a planning aid, it prioritizes the function of planning support over fidelity to available sources. First, the authors seek to articulate a plausible set of international and defense strategies for China. The presentation of challenging Chinese strategies could help U.S. decisionmakers and planners better plan for and respond to the competitive challenge posed by Beijing. At the very least, this project could provide a starting point for evaluating how China approaches the competition.

While designed to support U.S. planning and spur public discussion, the report is also intended to avoid grossly misrepresenting Beijing's viewpoint by adhering as much as possible to the current state of knowledge on Chinese strategy and policy. The analysis is designed to simulate how Chinese leaders might approach the challenge. We achieved this by remaining faithful to the general approach, ideas, and ways and policies pursued by Beijing, as far as can be discerned from unclassified sources. China's goals and objectives may be presented in a more strenuous and challenging manner than publicly available Chinese documents show, but the strategies presented in the following pages should be broadly consistent with what we know about China's political system, national strategy, and foreign policy. Nor should anything presented in this project contradict established knowledge about China's strategic behavior and aims. Where gaps in the record exist or knowledge about a relevant topic incomplete, we note that here. However, on many topics related to China's intentions regarding competition with the United States, it is unrealistic to expect Beijing to publicly acknowledge its goals, given their sensitivity. This reality presents a methodological problem for researchers who want to rely on official Chinese documents to deduce China's strategy for U.S. competition.

To resolve this conundrum and fulfill this report's purpose of support to planning, the authors will, in some cases, propose objectives and goals that may not found in authoritative Chinese documents.

Caution is certainly required in doing so. The contents of this research should *not* be interpreted as a report on China's official strategy to compete with the United States. Absent access to authoritative government documents that clearly provide such content, China's actual strategy for U.S. competition remains unknown. If, in fact, one does exist, its contents will have to be deduced from clues. Accordingly, this report should be understood as an analytic construct based on careful analysis of Chinese documents, policies, and actions that collectively posit a plausible set of international and defense strategies for China to compete with the United States. If this analysis achieves its purpose, it will have balanced fidelity to Chinese sources and known Chinese strategies and policies with the imperative to present an insightful and useful planning tool for U.S. decisionmakers.

A second purpose of the report is to educate readers on Chinese perspectives regarding competition with the United States and on Chinese policymaking processes. A detailed analysis of Chinese documents on this topic lies beyond the scope of the study, but this report does provide a brief review of some of the more salient sources and what they say about how Chinese officials and analysts regard the competition. While Chinese leaders routinely call on the United States to "abandon a Cold War mentality" and enhance cooperation, they do not disavow competition with the United States. Indeed, as subsequent chapters will show, China's government has perceived itself to be in a strategic competition with the United States for more than a decade. Officials also regard successful competition with the United States as critical to their ambitions for national revitalization. At the same time, Chinese commentators and analysts generally express an optimism that the two countries can cooperate on shared threats and generally regard as unlikely the prospect of great power war. What is often left unsaid in these sources, however, is the question of how the Chinese will succeed in persuading the United States to accommodate itself to a position of inferiority if Beijing succeeds in outcompeting the United States. The unspoken conclusion appears to be that China can out-compete the United States in a way that leaves Washington little choice but to accommodate itself to the reality of its supersession.

As part of its educative purpose, this analysis also hopes to replicate, to some degree, China's approach to strategy and policy formulation. China's political system remains defined by its adherence to a Leninist political organization and Marxist ideology, albeit one so heavily attenuated as to bear little resemblance to the theories of class struggle that have traditionally defined orthodox Marxism. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) adheres to a method of analysis designed to reinforce the legitimacy of the political system, and this methodology informs its goals and policies. While a detailed description of this process and how it affects the CCP's approach to strategic competition lies beyond the report's scope, we do review several fundamental features to provide readers a sense of how Chinese leaders might conceive of the competition. An important lesson is that context is key to understanding why China may not have a specific strategy for U.S. competition. The authors of this report argue for the importance of viewing China's approach through the lens of its pursuit of national rejuvenation, also called the *China Dream*. The pursuit of the China Dream and the foreign policy and defense strategies undertaken to achieve that end state provide the framework within which any competitive strategy with the United States should be understood.

Whether and how China could carry out the proposed strategies is another matter, of course. Like any large country, China's government has experienced significant challenges in implementing and coordinating complex policies. As examples, ministries have failed to cooperate or share information, and provincial authorities have sometimes acted in a manner at odds with central directives. Poor implementation at other times has generated blowback that endangered entire initiatives.⁶ Institutional deficiencies and bureaucratic missteps similarly impair, to some degree, Beijing's efforts to orchestrate national competition with the United States. The authors touch on the topic briefly in our discussion of vulnerabilities to China's competitive efforts but recognize that

⁶ Kenneth G. Lieberthal and David M. Lampton, eds., *Bureaucracy, Politics, and Decision Making in Post-Mao China*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992.

a rigorous evaluation of the country's ability to carry out the proposed policies lies beyond the scope of the research.

A third purpose of the analysis is to encourage greater awareness and stimulate a deeper examination of the U.S.-China competition. U.S. leaders and commentators have focused considerable attention on specific issues, such as Chinese trade practices, espionage, and efforts to influence political discourse. Much discussion has also centered on the struggle for influence in the Indo-Pacific. This research is intended, in part, to encourage greater debate about the competition for global influence and the linkages between the contests in the Indo-Pacific and other regions. We also hope that the report highlights important issues related to the international and defense dimensions of the competition, such as the way rivalry might influence Beijing's approach to flashpoints involving the United States or the importance of bilateral and multilateral cooperation as a means of stabilizing the competition.

As presented by the authors, China's international strategy aims to establish the country's primacy in the Asia-Pacific region. It also seeks to establish Chinese leadership of the international order. However, China's contest for global leadership need not wait until after it has secured regional primacy. The strategy proposes that China pursue both at the same time, underpinned by the notion that progress toward either regional- or global-level objectives could enable progress toward the other. If successful, China will have surpassed the United States to become the paramount regional power but also the leading global power. However, China's international leadership would bear little resemblance to the forms exercised by previous global leaders, such as the United States and Great Britain. Exercising a partial global hegemony centered principally on Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, Chinese international leadership would be characterized by a reliance on finance, diplomatic engagement, and security assistance to exercise influence while maintaining a modest overseas military presence.

The consequences of Chinese success in strategic competition could be severe for the United States. Sitting astride the heart of the global economy, Beijing would be well situated to privilege its needs and those of its clients over those of the United States and its allies. This situation would likely entail a deleterious downgrading in the

prospects for the United States. Poorly positioned to unseat China or easily reverse its own flagging fortunes, the United States could face dwindling economic prospects, international marginalization, and a diminishing ability to shape global affairs.

The research unfolds in two parts. The first part, constituting Chapters Two through Four, provides essential background information and context for the posited Chinese strategy for competition with the United States. Any plausible strategy for U.S. competition must serve the CCP's broader pursuit of national revitalization captured in the concept of the China Dream. These chapters provide critical context through the frameworks and archetypes that define key CCP strategies. The second part, in Chapters Five through Eight, outlines the posited strategies themselves. These chapters draw from the preceding ones as we explore the international and defense dimensions of a possible Chinese strategy for U.S. competition.

Chapter Two will provide a brief introduction to China's distinctive approach to strategy and policy formulation and implementation. Drawing from authoritative sources and scholarly studies of the ruling CCP's organization and ideology, we describe four key steps in the CCP's approach to strategy development, which inform any strategy proposed by the CCP, including any that might exist for U.S. competition. Because trend analysis forms an important intellectual context to all Chinese policymaking, this chapter reviews some of the key judgments that inform the most recent official policy documents. These trends inform the strategies and goals presented in the rest of the report and may be understood as a set of important "planning assumptions." We then describe the principal analytic framework used by the CCP to organize policy directives related to national development. We also briefly review the main tenets of the China Dream as the principal goal and aim point of all of the CCP's strategies and policies. These basic features of China's political system and national strategy provide the fundamental framework for the posited competitive strategies outlined in this report.

Chapters Three and Four provide additional important context for the analysis of China's strategy to compete with the United States. Chapter Three is an examination of the international dimension of

China's strategy to achieve the China Dream; we describe the foreign policy framework that serves as the template for relevant work. Drawing from official sources and Chinese scholarly writings, we posit a potential international end state consistent with the national end state of the China Dream. To achieve such an end state or something like it, Chinese authorities have outlined a variety of directives and policies. In this chapter, we review the most relevant foreign policy directives. The foreign policy framework, end state, and directives provide essential context for understanding how China might organize and understand the international dimension of its competition with the United States.

Chapter Four outlines a similar approach for defense strategy. We define the principal framework used in Chinese defense policy and posit a possible end state for defense issues based on analysis of Chinese official documents. Because the military largely serves domestic and foreign policy objectives, a defense "end state" is largely described in terms of the military's readiness and ability to support relevant domestic and foreign policy objectives. Even so, the CCP has outlined goals for military modernization by midcentury, which we consider in this chapter. As with Chapter Two, the material presented in this chapter provides essential background for understanding how China might conceive the defense aspect of its competition with the United States.

In Chapter Five, we pivot more directly to the topic of China's competition with the United States. We begin by examining the competition from the perspective of Chinese leaders, analysts, and scholars. National leaders have given speeches and the government has issued white papers and other official documents addressing the topic of U.S.-China relations. These sources do not shy away from prescribing to U.S. policymakers recommendations on how to manage the relationship to minimize the risks of conflict and enable China to achieve its goals. Commentators, analysts, and scholars have generated volumes of papers on U.S.-China relations. These sources provide valuable insight into how authorities may regard the competition. For example, the drive to prevail in strategic competition does not necessarily stem from any particular animus toward the United States. In contrast to the Cold War, modern China is animated more by a desire for achieving national greatness, not by ideological imperatives to destroy global

capitalism and realize communist revolution, as Mao Zedong hoped. Simply put, China's ability to deliver a high standard of living for the people and achieve a position of national greatness depends, in part, on its ability to outcompete the United States. As a corollary, Beijing appears to have judged that its interests are best served by an international order led by China, not the United States.

In Chapter Six, we build on the preceding chapters to propose a possible Chinese strategy for U.S. competition. This chapter outlines the desired end state for U.S.-China relations, as seen from Beijing's perspective. As posited by the authors, China's standard for *successful competition* with the United States thus entails the following conditions by midcentury: (1) War with the United States is avoided, although this does not exclude the possibility of militarized crises or conflicts of a limited scope (e.g., proxy wars); (2) the United States respects China's authority as the global leader, even as the United States remains a powerful but clearly inferior nation; (3) the United States largely refrains from harming Chinese interests; (4) China has established primacy across much of Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, principally through patronage of client states; (5) U.S. primacy has been reduced to the Americas, although it may still maintain a military, economic, and diplomatic presence worldwide; (6) the United States and China manage their differences according to norms upheld by China; and (7) the two cooperate on shared concerns on terms defined largely by the Chinese. The chapter contains more-detailed analysis for each of these tenets.

In Chapter Seven, we explore in more detail a posited Chinese international strategy for competing with the United States. Regarding major powers, the posited strategy seeks to ensure that the United States and Europe remain divided in their approach to China while Russia cooperates closely as a junior partner. The Asia-Pacific region remains a priority area, and the strategy envisions Beijing weakening U.S. alliances, expanding its own network of client states, renovating and leading regional multilateral institutions, and deepening the region's integration into a Chinese-led economic, political, and technological order. Beijing regards the developing world as a key constituency for its international leadership, and the strategy posited here aims

to build a network of client states across Eurasia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. China's success in establishing itself as a principal arbiter in Middle Eastern affairs, as the main sponsor of Africa's economic development, and as a major partner in Latin America could result in a severe weakening in the strategic position of the United States as a global leader and undercut its position in the Indo-Pacific theater as well. In the multilateral domain, the strategy envisions a broad effort to shape rules, norms, and agendas to favor the interests of China and its clients at the expense of the United States. Beijing's global governance strategy similarly aims to bolster China's influence and delegitimize that of the United States in appropriate venues. For each section of this chapter, the authors have proposed objectives for the 2035 time frame that could guide the development of relevant criteria against which China's progress could be assessed.

Similarly, Chapter Eight maps the defense strategy component of competition with the United States. Military-related goals generally aim to support foreign policy, but a superior People's Liberation Army (PLA) also provides benefits to Beijing's pursuit of national prestige and influence. The defense strategy seeks to deter the United States from harming any of China's interests but also to provide support to gray-zone activities that incrementally change the status quo. The defense strategy also calls on the military to support diplomatic efforts to shape a favorable international environment through security assistance and military engagements. Crafted with concern about the risks of miscalculation and escalation in any incident involving the United States, the defense strategy also emphasizes the importance of preventing conflict, managing crisis, and strict control of military forces by civilian authorities. At the same time, the strategy envisions Chinese leaders directing the PLA to leapfrog past the U.S. armed forces to become the world's premier military.

Chapter Nine lists an array of potential vulnerabilities in China's strategy. Some of these have been posited by Chinese analysts and commentators, but others can be deduced by analysis of Chinese strategy and policy. The most important vulnerabilities that could impair the nation's ability to compete stem from its domestic situation. In terms of international attributes, China suffers from a position of disadvan-

tage as the rising power. It has a weaker leadership role in multilateral venues and an inferior influence on global discourse than the incumbent power, the United States. China's defense strategy has drawbacks as well. The PLA remains an unattractive partner for many countries, especially in Asia. And the military's lack of power-projection capabilities limits its ability to provide the public security goods that helped make U.S. global leadership so successful. Chapter Ten concludes with observations on the competition and implications for U.S. strategy and planning. An appendix provides a set of subobjectives that could be used to develop more specific indicators for evaluation. These are not meant to be definitive or exhaustive but could provide a starting point for analysts seeking to better understand Beijing's perspective on its relative progress in the competition.

Sources and Research Approach

The research approach adopted by the authors consists of analysis to derive a strategy for U.S. competition based on a careful examination of unclassified Chinese and Western official documents, news reports, and scholarly writings. The basic steps taken for this project involved first collecting and summarizing current knowledge about Chinese intentions regarding the nation's goals, especially regarding foreign policy and defense topics. Analysis of writings by Chinese scholars and experts, as well as authoritative commentary, provides insight into the meaning and logic of key concepts and directives. From this source material, we then construct international and defense strategies for U.S. competition. In constructing these strategies, we have tried to adhere as closely as possible to the frameworks, logic, and goals of Chinese authoritative sources. The strategies proposed in this report unavoidably involve some degree of speculation to fill out details not addressed in Chinese documents for one reason or another, which we readily acknowledge. In sum, although we have tried to provide a plausible roadmap for Chinese strategic competition with the United States, we emphasize that it is ultimately an analytic construct.

Because the study seeks to present a competitive strategy from a Chinese perspective, it will rely primarily on Chinese-language unclassified sources from around 2010 to the time of writing. China has been competing with the United States since before that time, of course, and much of the contextual information that we use dates from further in the past. However, we have chosen to focus on the years immediately preceding Xi Jinping's ascent to power and afterward because the striking change in policies toward a more vigorous challenge of U.S. power appears most relevant for our purposes.

U.S.-China relations remains a topic of intense interest among Chinese officials and analysts. An enormous volume of official documents, commentary, and scholarly writings have examined the relationship from many angles. These provide an important resource for discerning key themes and ideas in Chinese policy and debates. As much as possible, the research team from the RAND Corporation has sought to adhere to the same authoritative unclassified sources and intellectual materials that Chinese officials might draw from to develop any foreign policy or defense strategy document. The most important of these were issued under the collective authority of the top party leadership, such as Party Congress reports and Party Congress plenary decisions. Speeches by presidents Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping at venues such as Politburo study sessions and meetings or at work conferences provide authoritative guidance as well. Government documents, such as five-year plans, action plans, and other programmatic documents, record how officials intend to implement policy in accordance with the directives provided by the CCP central leadership. White papers provide concise summaries of official policy and are cited as appropriate as well. Analysis by Chinese experts and scholars in journals such as *Outlook* (Liaowang), *Seeking Truth* (Qiushi), and *Study Times* (Xuexi Shibao) helps illuminate the logic and thinking behind the strategy. These sources, many of which are available on Chinese-language websites, provide the key source materials from which we developed the report's intellectual framework and essential content.

The RAND team also examined Western and Chinese reporting, scholarly writings, and academic studies on topics related to Chinese strategy and policy. The basics of how Chinese leaders articu-

late national strategy have been well established, for example. Western scholarship has described the central role that the CCP plays in developing and overseeing policy.⁷ The party's Leninist organizational features, such as the penetration and control of all government and social organizations by party cells, and its adherence to a heavily modified Marxist ideology also inform Beijing's approach to strategy. This research draws on this knowledge for our description of the CCP's basic approach to strategy and policy.

The reliance on unclassified sources for this research raises an immediately potential objection. Given the sensitivity and importance of the topic of competition, are unclassified documents really the best sources of information? Ought we not to expect the Chinese to disguise their intent in public and instead reveal their true policy intentions only in classified sources and documents? If the proposed strategy drawn from unclassified sources contradicts classified information, then this report may misinform U.S. planners. The objection is a reasonable one, especially given the tendency of past rising powers, most notably Germany and Japan in World War II, to prepare secret plans for war. However, the objection may be answered with two points. First, this report's main purpose is to present a Chinese perspective on the competition. To imaginatively construct a strategy from the Chinese perspective, immersion in the ideology, frameworks, logic, and concepts employed by CCP officials provided the most important source of information. These are all available from unclassified sources. Classified materials may build on, expand, or even fundamentally change the strategy depicted in this analysis, but the integration of such information represents a different, albeit no doubt important, task than that undertaken here. Second, the Chinese government has provided a surprising amount of information about its policies and intentions for those inclined to analyze Chinese-language documents

⁷ Kenneth Lieberthal, *Governing China: From Revolution Through Reform*, 2nd ed., New York: Norton Publishing, 2003; Richard McGregor, *The Party: The Secret World of China's Communist Rulers*, New York: Harper Collins, 2010; Timothy R. Heath, *China's New Governing Party Paradigm: Political Renewal and the Pursuit of National Rejuvenation*, Surrey, UK: Ashgate Publishing, 2014.

that, admittedly, include considerable jargon.⁸ Indeed, as argued elsewhere, the CCP faces strong political incentives to publish considerable detail of its goals and ambitions, to both sustain public support and guide the work of cadres charged with implementing the party's agenda. For example, the CCP's insistence on its socialist ideology as a source of legitimacy provides a strong incentive for it to demonstrate the "infallibility" of its theory by trumpeting the goals and logic of policies of the party.⁹ These sources have in the past provided valuable insight into Beijing's broader national strategy and intentions and will, absent a major change in the political system, likely continue to do so. To be sure, the interpretation of these terms and their nuances remains a contentious topic among experts on China. Defining the meaning of key concepts has occasionally spurred considerable debate and analysis in the scholarly community.¹⁰ While such controversies underscore the importance of approaching the task of interpretation with humility, they nonetheless underscore the importance of these resources for research on topics related to China's approach to strategy and competition.

⁸ Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, Beijing: Foreign Language Press, 2014; Timothy R. Heath, "What Does China Want? Discerning the PRC's National Strategy," *Asian Security*, Vol. 8, No. 1, March 2012, pp. 54–72.

⁹ Lieberthal, 2003, p. 189.

¹⁰ Joel Wuthnow, "Deciphering Chinese Intentions: What Can Open Sources Tell Us?" *Asian Forum*, July 29, 2019.

Context: Strategy, Frameworks, and Processes for Achieving the China Dream

As is well known by now, China's leadership has declared an intention to realize the country's revitalization as a great power by midcentury, an end state that authorities under Xi Jinping have hailed as the China Dream. The vision of national rejuvenation aims to comprehensively increase the standard of living for Chinese citizens and revitalize the nation as a wealthy, prosperous great power under the leadership of the CCP by the centenary of the founding of the People's Republic of China in 2049.¹ To achieve this end state, the CCP leadership has formulated an array of strategies and policies. They have also directed party cadres, many of whom are dual-hatted as government officials, to oversee the development and implementation of appropriate policies in all ministries and at multiple levels of government.

This chapter covers the basics of the process by which the Chinese government formulates and implements strategies and policies. Understanding this process is important for the purposes of this analysis because these processes inform the development of any strategy, including one that might support competition with the United States. Moreover, the goals, concepts, and logics related to Beijing's pursuit of the China Dream will also frame counterparts for the competitive strategy.

While the development and implementation of strategy and policy may be a cumbersome process in any modern country, the process

¹ Xinhua, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 19th CPC National Congress," November 3, 2017d.

gains added complexity in China given the unusual role played by the CCP's Leninist political organization and Marxist-Leninist ideology. For example, the CCP relies on its Party Congress work report, widely acknowledged to be the most authoritative and important national strategy document, as a guiding document for the work of the nation. Developing the report, which is issued every five years, involves years of meetings, drafts, and revisions. Implementation of policy, in turn, involves a broad variety of planning and other documents, all of which are typically infused with an often abstruse political terminology and a dialectic logic derived from the official socialist ideology, albeit an ideology that has been so attenuated as to bear little resemblance to the orthodox Marxist doctrines of proletarian revolution.²

To provide the basic context for analytically constructing competitive strategies from the Chinese perspective, we review in this chapter salient features of the CCP's political processes, such as its reliance on trend analysis and policy templates. This chapter will then briefly relay the desired end state of the CCP's national strategy, the China Dream, within which any desired end state for China's relationship with the United States should be nested.

Policy Processes

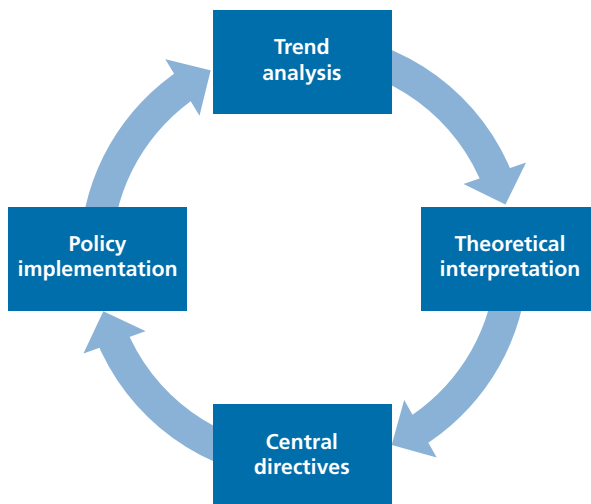
Mastery of the CCP's unique political vocabulary, processes, and activities—in addition to those imposed by the Chinese language—poses a formidable obstacle to any serious student of China's politics and government. For purposes of this research, the Chinese strategy and policy-development process may be distilled into four steps. The steps represent tasks that any Chinese official involved in policy implementation would recognize, even without accepting the labels assigned by the report's authors. Most of these steps would be familiar to a policymaker in any country. Leaders and their staffs must analyze trends and gather facts, for example, before developing directives to address challenges and overseeing policy implementation accordingly. China's

² Heath, 2014, p. 75.

approach differs from others primarily in the way ideology plays a role in the analysis and interpretation of trends, as well as in the methods, derived from the Leninist system of rule, used to ensure policy implementation. These four steps are briefly reviewed in Figure 2.1.

Trend analysis. Analysts located primarily within organizations that are subordinate to the Central Committee carry out authoritative analyses of broad trends in China's domestic and international situation to discern the most pressing challenges to the CCP's policy agenda. Key organizations include the Central Policy Research Office, Central Party School, and think tanks associated with the State Council.³ Reflecting the influence of the party's Marxist ideology, this analytic methodology purportedly identifies the material trends that drive history forward through the resolution of contradictions. In the words of the 19th Party Congress report, "Society advances under the movement of contradiction."⁴ Because of this methodology's importance in underscoring the political legitimacy of the CCP's monopoly on power,

Figure 2.1
Four Steps in Chinese Policy Process



³ Heath, 2014, p. 34.

⁴ Xinhua, 2017d, p. 13.

virtually every policy document issued by central leaders provides a similar summary of the most relevant positive and negative trends as a prelude to any policy directives.⁵ This step may be understood as a set of *key assumptions*. It is important for this project's purposes because any strategy for U.S. competition must respond to the same trends and contradictions that inform all of the CCP's other national strategies and foreign policies. Moreover, the validity of the proposed strategy depends on the continuation of such trends. Should the trends change in a dramatic fashion or new ones emerge, relevant strategies may need to be reconsidered or discarded.

Theoretical interpretation. The CCP interprets the contradictions through the lens of its official ideology, known as “socialism with Chinese characteristics.” CCP theorists propose major concepts derived from the theory to guide the resolution of the contradiction through the formulation of appropriate policies. The theory includes many concepts that have more-specific applications for policy purposes. Examples of key concepts derived from the official ideology include the “community of common destiny,” “new security concept,” “new type major power relations,” and a “just and equitable international order.”

To guide the development and implementation of major strategic tasks and all supporting work, the CCP has articulated an array of guiding principles and policies. PRC officials and media often refer to the collection of the party's guidance and policies, either in general or in regard to specific policy topics, as *guidance-policy* (*zhidao fangzhen*). Although these may appear to be general rules, they carry the force of law because of the close association with the leadership's intent and derivation from the guiding ideology. As with all of the party's principles and policies, the meaning of each may be updated when the party updates the guiding ideology.

Chinese leaders incessantly cite concepts drawn from the guiding ideology to justify relevant policies. The CCP most recently updated its guiding ideology at the 19th Party Congress to incorporate “Xi Jinping Thought.”⁶ The role of theory is important because its invocation

⁵ Heath, 2014, p. 56.

⁶ Xinhua, 2017d.

suggests that derived policies bear directly on the credibility of the party's guiding ideology. In the language of central authorities, the guiding ideology serves as the "guide to action" for all of the party's activities, including its political, theory, organizational, and policy work. To uphold its legitimacy, the CCP thus has an incentive to ensure that the nation's strategies and policies appear to conform in spirit to the logic and ideas found in the guiding ideology. Any posited strategy for U.S. competition should share much of the same terminology, concepts, and logic as appear in the party's other national-level strategies. The roles of ideology and political legitimacy also have implications for foreign policy. Adoption of the party's ideology could reinforce the narrative of the party's infallibility. Accordingly, the CCP may seek to persuade or coerce others to accept Chinese terms, phrases, and concepts, no matter how opaque or abstruse, as a means of strengthening the CCP's domestic legitimacy.

Central directives. The central leadership outlines the nation's strategy and issues broad guidance on how to achieve relevant goals through an array of strategy and policy directives, which may be understood as the set of authoritative instructions by central leaders to relevant party, government, and other organizations and bureaucracies. The highest-level document that carries such directives is the Party Congress report issued by the National Party Congress, a gathering of the collective leadership of the CCP that is held every five years. In 2017, the 19th Party Congress described the CCP's vision for national revitalization by midcentury, the China Dream, as well as interim strategic objectives for 2020 and 2035.⁷ Party committees, in turn, hold work meetings to transmit the instructions into more-detailed planning and policy guidance for their respective ministries and bureaucracies.⁸ The directives issued by central leaders provide an authoritative and valuable body of guidance that should inform the formulation of any strategy, including a posited one for competition with the United States. In China, it is common for authorities to specify the precise wording (*tifa*) by bureaucrats, officials, and propaganda out-

⁷ Xinhua, 2017d.

⁸ Heath, 2014, p. 79.

lets to be used in articulating directives. The tifa helps orient officials to the proper political meaning and appropriate interpretation of the directives.⁹

Policy implementation. While the processes of developing a baseline assessment of strategic trends and articulating directives are, by and large, controlled by the central leadership, the task of policy implementation is far more diffuse. All relevant ministries and levels of government, as well as enterprises and other social organizations, are charged with developing plans and policies to carry out the higher-level directives as appropriate under the supervision of their respective party committees. Coordination between the many actors responsible for policy implementation can be uneven or even poor, depending on the complexity of the challenge and the variety of actors involved. Moreover, owing to the fragmentation of authority between ministries and decentralization of the political system, ministries and provincial governments may carry out policies without careful coordination. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's global infrastructure development strategy, may have been promoted by Beijing, but its promulgation obscures the reality of overlapping, cross-cutting, and often poorly coordinated efforts by provincial governments and their state-owned enterprises, the Foreign Ministry, the State-Owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission of the State Council, national-level state-owned enterprises, and other actors to secure major deals and profits. In some cases, projects deemed part of the BRI predated the initiative itself.¹⁰ Each of these actors interprets central directives as they see fit, often with little coordination with other actors. This may lead to poor decisions, miscues, or inefficiency. As an example, central authorities have investigated and judged several BRI-associated projects initiated by provincial-level authorities to be unviable or wasteful.¹¹

⁹ Anne-Marie Brady, *Marketing Dictatorship: Propaganda and Thought Work in Contemporary China*, Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009, p. 101.

¹⁰ Daniel R. Russell and Blake Berger, *Navigating the Belt and Road Initiative*, New York: Asia Society Policy Institute, June 2019.

¹¹ "China-Africa Summit: Xi Denies Money Being Spent on Vanity Projects," BBC News, September 3, 2018.

As part of implementation, higher-level officials must monitor compliance and provide oversight for their subordinates. As time goes on, analysts examine the results. They also consider the state of trends and countertrends for clues as to how policies should be adjusted, starting the process anew.

This concise summary of Chinese political processes has shown that the CCP's approach to developing strategy remains a highly centralized process. Owing to concerns about its political legitimacy, the CCP remains sensitive to the role that its ideology plays in the justifications for strategy and policy. However, in our summary, we have also suggested that the fragmented nature of the political system raises the possibility of miscalculation and misalignment. The United States has already experienced instances in which Chinese local officials may have exceeded the intent of authorities in Beijing in acting aggressively toward individual ships and airplanes operating within China's near seas, as in the 2001 EP-3 aircraft collision incident near Hainan Island. In such cases, the local authorities generally acted in accordance with the spirit of high-level guidance, but the vagueness of the directives allowed the same officials considerable latitude in interpreting them, occasionally resulting in dramatic incidents that authorities in Beijing then scrambled to manage. The deepening of U.S.-China competition, which involves a complex and balanced mixture of cooperative and competitive impulses, raises the possibility of miscalculation among various bureaucratic actors charged with policy implementation.

Trend Analysis and Theoretical Interpretation: Pursuing the China Dream

The CCP's judgment about the principal trends and countertrends inform its general strategy for achieving the China Dream. The trend analysis consists of two broad sections: a review of trends favorable to the CCP's political agenda, and countertrends that could threaten the party's agenda. All of the CCP's strategies and policies, including its foreign policy and defense policies, purportedly address and aim to resolve relevant contradictions in a manner that propels China closer

to its desired end state of the China Dream. They will also inform the construction of any supporting strategy for U.S. competition. In the words of the 2019 “China and the World in the New Era” white paper, China’s foreign policy and development strategy “comes from a profound understanding of the general trend of world development.”¹² The following section provides a brief review of some of the more salient trends.

Favorable Trends

Chinese official documents highlight several encouraging trends in the broader international situation. These include the persistence of peace and development, a shifting balance of global power, the deepening of economic globalization, a changing mode of global governance, and trends toward multipolarity.

Persistence of peace and development. Official documents observe that China continues to face a low risk of war for the foreseeable future. The 19th Party Congress report observed that “peace and development” had become “irreversible trends.”¹³ Similarly, the 2019 defense white paper stated that the “pursuit of peace, stability, and development has become a universal aspiration of the international community.” These sources generally assess a low risk of war.¹⁴

Shifting global balance of power. Official documents note a global shift in power away from developed countries and toward the rising non-West. The 2019 foreign policy white paper observed, “One of the most notable changes is that the rise of China and other emerging market and developing countries is fundamentally altering the international structures of power.”¹⁵ The 2019 defense white paper similarly stated that “the realignment of international powers accelerates

¹² State Council Information Office, “China and the World in the New Era,” white paper, September 27, 2019b.

¹³ Xinhua, 2017d.

¹⁴ State Council Information Office, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” July 24, 2019a.

¹⁵ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

and the strength of emerging markets and developing countries keeps growing.”¹⁶

Deepening economic globalization. Official documents judge that conditions remain favorable for the deepening of economic globalization. The 19th Party Congress report highlighted this as a positive trend, and the 2019 foreign policy white paper similarly observed favorable trends toward economic globalization.

Changing mode of global governance. The 19th Party Congress noted “accelerating changes” in the “global governance system and the international order.”¹⁷ The 2019 foreign policy white paper also highlighted growing opportunities for “collaboration in global governance.”

Trend toward multipolarity. The 19th Party Congress repeated a judgment seen in official documents for at least a decade when it hailed trends toward *multipolarity*. Chinese officials and scholars have anticipated the arrival of a multipolar world since the fall of the Soviet Union. This judgment consistently appears in defense and foreign policy white papers as well.

In sum, the CCP views these positive trends as opportunities for advancing its goals of achieving the China Dream. These positive trends suggest that the power of the United States and its allies in the Western world will weaken, the power of China and its partners in the developing world will grow, and future global economic growth will depend on a reorganization of some aspects of the global economy. The trends also suggest that there are growing opportunities for China to expand its role in global governance and raise the possibility of achieving its strategic aims peacefully.

Countertrends

Despite some promising conditions, Chinese officials also identify a range of challenges. These are listed in the same authoritative documents as the ones that list the positive trends.

Increasing instability and diverse security threats. The 19th Party Congress report noted that “uncertainties and instability” had become

¹⁶ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

¹⁷ Xinhua, 2017d.

“prominent.” Other white papers have similarly noted evidence of disorder. The 2019 foreign policy white paper highlighted “deep seated problems” in the world, as well as the challenge of “increasing instability and uncertainties.” Chinese official documents have also noted the variety of security challenges facing the nation. The 19th Party Congress stated that “regional hot spot problems rise one after another” and noted nontraditional threats including “terrorism, cyber security, major infectious diseases, and climate change.” These sources also tend to highlight “hegemonism” and “unilateralism” as threats to international peace, which are thinly veiled criticisms of the United States.

Gaps in global governance. In its report, the 19th Party Congress hinted at problems of global governance when it noted that the “polarization between the rich and poor is becoming more and more serious.” The 2019 foreign policy white paper more directly stated that “deficits in governance, trust, peace and development are growing.” It cited as evidence the same evidence of widening inequality, which it attributed to “capital’s excessive pursuit of profit.” It also noted growing protectionism and deepening “global public and private debt” as evidence.

Slowing growth. The 19th Party Congress report observed that “the world’s economic growth momentum is insufficient.” The 2019 foreign policy white paper similarly cited the slowing global economy as a serious challenge.

Intensifying major-power competition. Official documents have noted a trend toward deepening international competition, especially among major powers, for years. The 2015 Military Strategy white paper, for example, noted an “intensifying” international competition for the “redistribution of power, rights and interests.”¹⁸ Defense white papers since the early 2000s have similarly observed an “intensifying international competition.”

These countertrends may be read as the flip side of many of the positive trends. From the Chinese perspective, they provide further evidence of an international order in transition from an older, U.S.-dominated one to something featuring greater opportunity for China. To take advantage of the opportunity, China needs to develop appro-

¹⁸ State Council Information Office, “China’s Military Strategy,” Xinhua, May 27, 2015.

priate economic, diplomatic, and defense policies that respond effectively to both the positive and negative trends of the situation. If these policies are well designed, China’s leaders could better position the country to reach its desired end state of the China Dream. However, each of the challenges carries a risk that missteps could result in serious setbacks and possibly endanger the nation’s revitalization.

Table 2.1
Commonly Cited Trends in Chinese Documents on Foreign and Security Policies

Trend	Countertrend	CCP Theory Interpretation	Implication of Theory Resolution
Peace and development still predominate; low risk of war	Drivers of instability increasing; diverse security threats; threat from “hegemonism” (United States)	Build a “community of common destiny”	China leads an international network of partners and client states that adhere to Chinese norms to resolve differences peacefully and prosper through trade
Shifting balance of global power in China’s favor	Growing gap in global governance, current system favors developed world	Make the international order just and equitable; China plays an active role in reforming the global governance system	China leads an effort to renovate the existing international order in a manner that allocates a greater share of benefits to Beijing and its clients
Deepening economic globalization	World economic growth slowing, current system favors developed world	Promote a “new model of economic globalization”	China oversees a Belt and Road network of trade, infrastructure, and investment to energize global growth
General trend toward multipolarity	Intensification of major power competition (United States)	New type major-power relationship	A cooperative relationship between the United States and China is established on a “spheres of influence”-like basis

SOURCES: State Council Information Office, 2019b; Xinhua, 2017d; Xinhua, “Chinese Defense Minister Calls for Coordinated, Cooperative, Stable China-U.S. Relationship,” June 2, 2019e.

Theoretical Interpretation of Trends

Table 2.1 summarizes these trends and countertrends. It also provides a sample of the CCP's ideology-based "theoretical interpretation" of how best to resolve the contradictory trends in a manner that advances China toward its goals of national rejuvenation. While an in-depth analysis of the key theory concepts lies beyond the scope of this report, a brief mention of some of the more salient ideas may provide helpful background. Although each of the concepts addresses multiple pairs of trends and countertrends, we have grouped each concept with one pair of trends and/or countertrends for illustrative purposes.

Chinese authorities propose a "community of common destiny" as a blueprint for reorganizing international relations in a manner that maintains peace and stability while managing the sources of tension and instability.¹⁹ The "community" envisions a world in which China leads a network of partner and client states that adhere to norms of mutual cooperation, economic interdependence, and mutual respect as they prosper through trade and resolve differences peacefully. Chinese authorities contrast this vision with a Western-led model that they regard as outdated.²⁰

Authorities have long upheld the demand to make the international order "just and equitable." This demand reflects the view that the current order unfairly benefits the United States and its allies and disadvantages the non-West, which plays an increasingly large share in global affairs. Under Xi Jinping, officials have stepped up efforts to more actively shape institutions and government-to-government organizations associated with global governance.²¹

Chinese authorities have promoted a "new model of economic globalization" as a way to reenergize global economic growth through major initiatives featuring Chinese leadership. The concept also sug-

¹⁹ Daniel Tobin, *How Xi Jinping's 'New Era' Should Have Ended Debate on Beijing's Ambitions*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 8, 2020.

²⁰ Jacob Mardell, "The Community of Common Destiny in Xi Jinping's New Era," *The Diplomat*, October 25, 2017.

²¹ Xinhua, "Global Governance Reform at Core of Xi's G20 Summit Speech, Say Experts," July 13, 2020.

gests that China has a larger influence on the terms of global trade and investment. The Belt and Road Initiative is often cited as a model.²²

While Chinese officials have anticipated an era of multipolarity for years, they have also recognized that the end of a unipolar era led by the United States carries risks of intensifying competition among major powers. To stabilize relations and reduce risks of conflict, authorities have proposed a “new type of major power relations” to guide diplomatic interactions. The concept consists of norms derived from the “Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence,” which in turn involve political norms such as reliance on peaceful methods to resolve disagreements and mutual noninterference in the internal affairs of other countries.²³

Each of these concepts, while reflecting, in part, an interpretation of current events through the lens of the guiding ideology, carries important implications for policy. These are discussed in subsequent chapters, but the logic and reasoning for their adoption may generally be traced to the types of trend analysis and theoretical reasoning briefly touched upon here.

Framework for Development Strategy

Given the size of its bureaucracy, some degree of standardization of political processes in China’s political system is unavoidable. In fact, Chinese officials rely on a broad array of standardized conceptual schema and document types to communicate instructions. Among these, frameworks [*buju*], or templates, stand out as important for their role in presenting strategy and policy directives. Consistent adherence to a framework permits officials to efficiently and confidently identify changes to standing policy.

²² “Belt and Road Initiative the New Norm for Globalization: Economist,” *Global Times*, March 24, 2019.

²³ Joseph Y. S. Cheng, “Xi Jinping’s ‘New Model of Major Power Relationships’ for Sino-American Relations,” *Journal of Comparative Asian Development*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2016.

The CCP organizes all of its policy work to achieve the China Dream by a nested array of such frameworks. The most fundamental of these is that of national development. The realization of the China Dream ultimately hinges on the party's ability to oversee the nation's development. For this reason, all other frameworks serve and support the CCP's focus on national development. This chapter will briefly outline the national development framework, but an in-depth analysis of the domestic policies that most directly determine national development lies outside the bounds of this research. In subsequent chapters, we describe the frameworks for international and defense strategy.

The CCP organizes its work for the nation's development through a conceptual schema that it calls the *general framework* (*zongti buju*), which is often also called the *five in one* (*wu weiyi ti*) framework.²⁴ The general framework consists of five basic policy areas (Table 2.2). The five policy areas are politics, economics, culture, social welfare, and ecology. For each policy area, the central leadership describes the desired end state, benchmarks, and directives on implementation. Occasionally, the central leadership can add or modify the gen-

Table 2.2
CCP's Development Policy Framework

Domain	Sample Policy Topics
Political	CCP rule, system of consultative parties, people's congresses
Economic	Industry, finance, trade, investment
Cultural	Chinese culture, socialist ethics, arts, literature
Social welfare	Education, health, housing, social welfare benefits
Environmental	Pollution control, clean environment

SOURCES: Xinhua, 2017d.

²⁴ Xinhua, 2017d.

eral framework, although in practice this is rare. At the 18th National People's Congress, held in 2007, the CCP added the "environmental" policy area and accordingly added relevant policy objectives and guidance to support this newly defined facet of national rejuvenation.²⁵ Prior to that change, however, the party had added only one other policy area to a standard set of politics, economics, and culture derived from the Mao era—that of "social welfare" (*shehui*). Although primarily designed to serve domestic policy, the five in one framework does provide important context for the posited competitive strategy with the United States. Moreover, China's pursuit of national development carries important implications for its relationship with the United States, a topic discussed in more detail in the chapter on foreign policy.

The End State: China Dream

Although the CCP in the Mao era pursued utopian communist goals, in the reform era it has focused on the more pragmatic goal of realizing the country's potential as a wealthy and powerful nation. The leadership under Xi Jinping has designated this end state the China Dream, but previous governments since at least the early 1990s also used the term *rejuvenation of the Chinese people*. The features of this end state are updated at every party congress held every five years and were, thus, last revised in an authoritative manner at the 19th Party Congress in 2017.

Per the 19th Party Congress, the CCP aims to develop China into a "prosperous, strong, democratic, civilized, harmonious, and beautiful modernized socialist strong country." The report provides some detail on what each of these policy end states might entail, but details are understandably vague, given the distant time horizon. To briefly summarize, the CCP seeks to maintain its current political system and monopoly on power but also build a more responsive and effective government. Economically, the "common prosperity" of the populace

²⁵ Xinhua, "Full Text of Hu Jintao's Report at 18th CPC National Congress," November 27, 2012.

Table 2.3
China Dream Domestic End State by 2050

Domain	Sample Objectives
Political	Responsive governance but maintenance of CCP-led single-party rule
Economic	Prosperous economy with high per capita GDP; China a global leader in technology
Cultural	CCP values widely adopted in China; Chinese culture is internationally admired and influential
Social welfare	Citizens enjoy quality health care, education, and social welfare benefits
Environmental	Pollution is largely controlled and citizens enjoy a healthier and cleaner environment

SOURCE: Xinhua, 2017d.

will have been “basically realized,” resulting in a high per capita gross domestic product (GDP) and elevated material standard of living. Culturally, the CCP’s values prevail in China, and Chinese culture may be admired worldwide. In social welfare terms, the China Dream promises to provide citizens access to quality health care, education, welfare benefits, and other benefits. Ecologically, the end state promises to control pollution and to have restored a cleaner and healthier environment (Table 2.3).

Authoritative party documents outline a variety of policy benchmarks to be achieved by 2035. According to the 19th Party Congress report, China will have “basically accomplished modernization.” Among a variety of political, economic, social welfare, and environmental goals, the report listed the aim of China becoming “a global leader in innovation.” Although many of these development-related topics center on domestic policy, many have important implications for the international community because of China’s size and integration into the global economy. Chinese leaders thus must consider the

United States as an important factor for many key development-related strategic objectives.

In terms of unresolved territorial issues, Beijing's position on Taiwan and other disputed territories is unambiguous. The 19th Party Congress report stated, "Resolving the Taiwan question to realize China's complete reunification is the shared aspiration of all Chinese people." It emphatically declared that Beijing will "never allow anyone, any organization, or any political party, at any time or in any form, to separate any part of Chinese territory from China!"²⁶ The Chinese government upholds a "One China" principle that asserts that Taiwan is a part of China, and it has made adherence to that policy a condition of formal diplomatic relations.²⁷ China has also enacted an "Anti-Secession Law" that provides a legal basis, if needed, for armed attack against the island.²⁸ These documents suggest that Beijing views unification with Taiwan as one condition of fully realizing the China Dream, at least at some level. Indeed, in his 2019 speech on the topic, Xi Jinping stated that Taiwan "must and will be reunited with China."²⁹ He described unification with the mainland as an "inevitable requirement for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese people." In this same speech, Xi warned China to "make no promise to renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures." He claimed that this threat "does not target compatriots in Taiwan, but the interference of external forces and the very small number of 'Taiwan separatists.'"³⁰ This phrasing suggests a sort of timeline for the two sides to achieve unification by midcentury, by force, if necessary.

Although there can be little doubt that Chinese leaders regard unification with Taiwan as a condition of the China Dream, it may not be possible to achieve both the development objectives listed in

²⁶ Xinhua, 2017d.

²⁷ State Council Information Office, "The One China Principle and the Taiwan Issue," February 21, 2000.

²⁸ Xinhua, "Anti-Secession Law Adopted by NPC (Full Text)," *China Daily*, May 14, 2005.

²⁹ Xinhua, "Xi Expounds Best Approach to Reunification," January 2, 2019a

³⁰ Xinhua, 2019a.

Table 2.3 and unification. Most polls indicate that about 10 percent of Taiwan's populace favors unification, and that number is expected to decline in coming years as the older generation of mainland-born residents passes on. Meanwhile, pro-independence sentiment has continued to grow.³¹ If Taiwan will not willingly submit to Beijing's authority, then the only way left for China to resolve the island's status is through military conquest and subjugation. But aggression risks a large-scale war with the United States, the escalation and termination of which Beijing has no way to control. Nuclear annihilation, mass death, a shattered economy, and political upheaval are all possibilities if the United States refuses to quit after an initial clash near the island. War with the United States thus carries an extremely high risk of catastrophe that could well spell the end of the nation's hopes of achieving the China Dream. If forced to choose between peacefully achieving the development objectives of the China Dream and securing Taiwan by risking war with the United States, Beijing's behavior over the past few decades suggests that it would continue to favor development objectives over Taiwan unification. Underscoring this point, the 19th Party Congress report continues to affirm the CCP's focus on realizing domestic prosperity and national revival as the foundation of its legitimacy. Any outcome that falls short of achieving the development-related objectives is likely to be regarded as a failure, even if that outcome yielded Taiwan unification—as a small consolation for economic and political ruin. Of course, the leadership could change its priorities and redefine priorities anytime. The attractiveness of military options to secure unification could also grow if Beijing judged that the United States had signaled that it no longer intended to aid Taiwan. However, absent such conditions, Chinese leaders retain a strong incentive to exercise caution regarding the use of military power to compel unification so long as there remains a nonnegligible chance of U.S. military intervention.

Similar judgments may be made about China's position regarding disputed regions, such as the East China Sea, South China Sea, and the disputed territories on the border with India. In each case, Chinese

³¹ Huang Tzu-ti, "Poll Shows Highest Ever Support for Taiwan Independence," *Taiwan News*, June 22, 2020.

leaders have declared a firm commitment to controlling the regions in dispute. However, in practice, China has proceeded cautiously and avoided actions that could provoke conflict that might involve the United States. The value of recovering these other regions is less than that of Taiwan because they are mostly unoccupied or uninhabited. The maritime regions also lack the political salience of Taiwan as a symbol of an unfinished civil war. Thus, if forced to choose between peaceful tolerance of an unresolved status for disputed maritime regions and war with the United States to secure them, China has even less motivation to sacrifice the nation's China Dream development objectives for the sake of controlling uninhabited and desolate maritime regions. This should not mean that China will never risk a conflict in any disputed region, but only that the desire to achieve the China Dream by itself is unlikely to drive high-risk military actions to recover disputed regions. More likely, any crisis or conflict that does erupt in any disputed region will stem from a complex and overlapping mixture of intense threat perceptions, rivalry, competition for influence and dominance, and other structural drivers.³² In most plausible situations, moreover, China continues to face strong incentives to deescalate a crisis, not risk a major war.

This chapter has provided an overview of some of the fundamental features of China's political and strategy development process. Familiarity with the notion of trend analysis and the key trends highlighted by Chinese officials as especially important, the general framework for development, and the end state of the China Dream supplies foundational knowledge that informs any effort to articulate a Chinese strategy for competition. However, since this analysis focuses on foreign policy and defense strategy, a basic understanding of the government's approach to these topics provides essential context for constructing a Chinese competitive strategy in those domains. We turn to the first of these specialized topics, foreign policy, in the next chapter.

³² Timothy R. Heath and Matthew Lane, *Science-Based Scenario Design: A Proposed Method to Support Political-Strategic Analysis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2833-OSD, 2019.

Context: International Framework, End State, and Directives

This chapter summarizes China's international strategy to realize the China Dream. The international strategy provides essential background, as well as the basic structure within which the foreign policy dimension of any posited strategy for U.S. competition is likely to be nested. Drawing from authoritative documents and Chinese scholarly writings, we briefly review the CCP's framework for foreign relations before summarizing an international end state to accompany the China Dream. The chapter will then list some of the key directives for China's international strategy aimed at guiding foreign policy work to achieve this end state over the next decade or more.

General Framework for Foreign Relations

Like the “general framework” that organizes the major strategic tasks for national development, the CCP central leadership has set a “general framework for foreign relations” (*waijiao zongti buju*) to organize foreign policy–related major tasks and policy objectives. The general framework for foreign policy is derived from a construct employed by Mao Zedong, who grouped countries according to whether they belonged to the *first world* (capitalist), *second world* (communist), and *third world* (all others). Deng Xiaoping refined this structure in less ideological terms by invoking *major powers* to take the place of *first world*, proposing the *periphery* or *neighboring countries* as a second category and dropping the *second world*, and refining the *third world* to

developing countries. In subsequent years, CCP leaders added *multilateral organizations* and *global governance*, alternatively called *domains* (*lingyu*), to the schema. The CCP continues to adhere to this framework to organize its foreign policy directives, as can be seen in most any foreign policy–related speech or document. As with the “general framework,” this framework provides Chinese diplomats and foreign policy officials with an easy-to-identify and consistent format for efficiently communicating directives (Table 3.1).

Major powers [*daguo*]. This category of countries includes the wealthiest, most-powerful countries in the world. Countries in this category include the United States, those in the European Union, and Russia. Although *daguo* is often translated as *great power*, the Chinese meaning is different from the traditional Western understanding of *great power*. In traditional Western international relations theory, a *great power* is a sovereign state with the power and ability to profoundly influence and shape the global economic and political order.¹ As used

Table 3.1
CCP's Foreign Policy Framework

Domain	Examples
Major powers	United States, Russia, European Union
Periphery	Countries in the Asia-Pacific region
Developing world	Developing countries in Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East
Multilateral	United Nations, G-20, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, ASEAN, SCO, ARF
Global governance/domains	Public diplomacy, global media, cyber, space, maritime

SOURCES: Xinhua, 2017d, 2019a; State Council Information Office, 2019b.

NOTE: G-20 = Group of 20; ASEAN = Association of Southeast Asian Nations; SCO = Shanghai Cooperation Organization; ARF = ASEAN Regional Forum.

¹ Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

in Chinese diplomatic discourse, *major powers* focuses on different criteria. *Major powers* refers principally to those few, large countries that have achieved the highest level of development and that feature extensive economic and military power, as well as considerable international influence (soft power). However, *major powers* do not need to have the sort of dominating influence traditionally associated with the Western notion of a *great power*.² Underscoring this point, some documents employ the term *developed countries* for this grouping, as the 2011 Peaceful Development white paper did.³ In general, Chinese official documents list the United States, European Union, and Russia in this category. However, there is some inconsistency regarding Japan (sometimes included, but usually categorized with periphery countries).⁴ Under Xi Jinping, authorities also regard China as being in this category. For example, Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, refers to Xi's foreign policy thought as "major power diplomacy with Chinese characteristics."⁵

In recent years, some documents and scholarly articles have also added a category of countries that straddle major powers and the developing countries category as part of the "new type major power relationships," which they call *major developing countries* (*fazhanzhong daguo*).⁶ These countries include China, Brazil, India, and South Africa. However, this category has not appeared in authoritative documents such as the 19th Party Congress report or the 2019 State Council foreign

² Jean-Pierre Cabestan, "China's Relations with the Major Powers," in David Shambaugh, ed., *Charting China's Future: Domestic and International Challenges*, New York: Routledge Press, 2012.

³ State Council Information Office, "China's Peaceful Development," September 6, 2011.

⁴ Yang Jiemin [杨洁勉], "New Type Great Power Diplomacy: Theory, Strategy, and Policy Construction [新型大国关系: 理论, 战略和政策建构]," *International Problems Research* [国际问题研究], May 30, 2013.

⁵ Wang Yi [王毅], "Compose a New Chapter in Major Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics" [谱写中国特色大国外交的时代华章], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, September 23, 2019.

⁶ Ren Xiao, "Modeling a New Type of Great Power Relations: A Chinese Viewpoint," *Asian Forum*, October 4, 2013.

policy white paper, “China and the World in the New Era,” which suggests that the category remains an informal one.⁷

Periphery [*zhoubian*]. The periphery, or neighboring region, consists of the countries along China's border, stretching from northeast, southeast, Central, and South Asia to Oceania and as far as the second island chain (principally composed of the Bonin Islands, Marianas Islands, and Caroline Islands, from Honshu to New Guinea). These also include countries that overlap in other categories, such as Japan (major powers), India (major developing countries), and most of the countries in south and Southeast Asia (developing countries). In 2013, Chinese leaders held their first-ever work forum on diplomacy to the periphery, underscoring the importance of the region to the country's strategic ambitions.⁸

Developing world [*fazhanzhong shijie*]. The developing world encompasses much of what is considered the *global south*, i.e., low- and middle-income, less-developed countries primarily in Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East. Here, too, there is overlap with other categories. Countries in Southeast Asia and parts of Oceania sometimes appear in discussions of the developing world. However, in the most recent documents, these have been grouped in the periphery category. Chinese leaders have emphasized the importance of this group of countries in recent years as potential backers of Chinese power.⁹

Multilateral organizations [*duobian zuzhi*]. These include the global institutions, including the United Nations, IMF, World Bank, and G-20, as well as regional ones, such as the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), SCO, and ARF. Chinese foreign

⁷ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

⁸ Bonnie Glaser and Deep Pal, “China's Periphery Diplomacy Initiative: Implications for China Neighbors and the United States,” *China US Focus*, November 7, 2013.

⁹ Andrew Scobell, Bonny Lin, Howard J. Shatz, Michael Johnson, Larry Hanauer, Michael S. Chase, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Ivan W. Rasmussen, Arthur Chan, Aaron Strong, Eric Warner, and Logan Ma, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2273-A, 2018.

policy has emphasized the importance of such organizations for promoting international trade, development, and stability.

Global governance/domains [quanqiu zhili/lingyu]. A category that Chinese documents employ inconsistently, this includes such global domains as international media, space, cyber, and global finance. It is mentioned in the 19th Party Congress report, which stated that China “will take an active part in reforming and developing the global governance system.”¹⁰

The CCP’s reliance on the foreign policy framework to organize its international strategy carries several important implications for its competition with the United States. Most obviously, Beijing should organize the bulk of its strategy and policy directives related to the United States within the category of major powers. China’s highlighting of its periphery as an important category in its own right underscores the significance of its strategy and policy in this category as a crucial part of the U.S. competition. The framework also provides an incentive for China to view U.S. activities around the world through the lens of how they affect Beijing’s own goals for the relevant regions. In Latin America, for example, Chinese officials will likely aim to discern how U.S. diplomatic, commercial, and military activity might enable or impair the PRC’s achievement of its own goals and devise strategies to manage or counter the United States in that region accordingly.

International End State: China as Preeminent Power

The CCP’s primary focus for the China Dream centers on domestic conditions, the true linchpin of the party’s legitimacy. However, China’s deepening integration into the global economy has increasingly blurred the line between domestic and foreign policy. China’s ability to realize its domestic policy agenda, in many cases, depends in part on its international agenda. As one example, Chinese leaders have designated the BRI as a major foreign policy initiative, but they also regard

¹⁰ Chen Xiangyang [陈向阳], “The Direction of China’s Great Diplomacy in the New Stage [中国外交政策新阶段的指导],” *Outlook* [瞭望], August 27, 2009, p. 58.

it as an important element of domestic policy because of its potential to expand markets for Chinese construction and export industries.

Similarly, Chinese leaders have linked the domestic end state of a China Dream with that of a World Dream.¹¹ What the Chinese leadership means by the term *World Dream* is not entirely clear. At the very least, it appears to encompass a vision of “enduring peace and common prosperity,” which officials regard as the “common aspiration of people from different countries.”¹² In many ways, the World Dream may be understood as an international order that is compatible with the realization of the China Dream. In the words of one analyst, it would “provide a sound external environment” for the China Dream.¹³ As part of this vision, officials uphold basic aspects of the existing order, such as the United Nations. However, the order is also “updated” to reflect Chinese norms and leadership. The World Dream is tied, for example, to the concept of a “community of common destiny” discussed in Chapter Two that officials describe as a “Chinese solution for the changing international order and system.” These officials tend to highlight the BRI and similar Chinese-led efforts as illustrations of how Chinese leadership and policies support the World Dream.¹⁴

Chinese leaders do not shy from the notion that Beijing should assume greater involvement in global governance. Xi Jinping has stated on numerous occasions that China intends to expand its role in global governance and has directed officials to “inject Chinese voices” into organizations responsible for aspects of global governance, even as he insisted China upholds the international order.¹⁵ To diffuse suspicions and alleviate anxieties about Beijing’s growing power, Chinese officials

¹¹ Zheng Bijian, “Xi Jinping’s Dream for China and the World,” *China Daily*, April 13, 2018.

¹² Bijian, 2018.

¹³ Xinhua, “Xi’s Foreign Debut Illuminates China’s ‘World Dream,’” *China Daily*, March 22, 2013a.

¹⁴ Wang Yi, “Work Together to Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, May 31, 2016.

¹⁵ Xinhua, “Xi Stresses Need to Improve Global Governance,” April 8, 2018c; Xinhua, “China Ready to Promote Reform of Global Governance System,” September 14, 2017c.

also insist that they have no intention of contesting America's status as top power or seeking "hegemony" at the global level.¹⁶

As this brief summary shows, Chinese authorities have not provided a clear statement of an international end state in the same way that they have done for domestic policy. This reluctance likely stems from both the political sensitivity of declaring end states for other countries and the reality that China has only a limited influence on the behavior of other states. At most, officials have described Chinese concepts, guiding principles, and proposals for foreign policy, all of which provide important clues as to Chinese intent. Combined with evidence of actual policies implemented, such as the establishment of BRI, AIIB, and other actions, we deduce a desired international end state to support the realization of the China Dream by midcentury.

We begin by positing that China seeks a form of primacy at the level of the Asia-Pacific, but that it also seeks a form of leadership at the global level as well. The notion that China seeks primacy at the Asia-Pacific level stirred controversy years ago when experts debated the possibility of Chinese and U.S. competition in the region.¹⁷ However, the notion is no longer seriously disputed after Chinese leaders made clear their intent to lead the region's economic integration and to take a more active role in leading security for the region as well.¹⁸ However, the idea that China may seek leadership at the global level is more contentious. Many Western experts have dismissed such a possibility. A letter published by top Western experts on China in 2019, for example, regarded as "exaggerated" the idea that China might "replace the U.S. as a global leader."¹⁹

This study's focus on supporting U.S. planning alone provides justification for assuming that China seeks some form of global leader-

¹⁶ Xinhua, "China Not Interested in Hegemony: Ambassador to U.S.," January 25, 2018b.

¹⁷ Aaron Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy*, New York: W. W. Norton, 2011.

¹⁸ Xi Jinping, "New Asian Security Concept for New Progress in Security Cooperation," remarks at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, Shanghai, May 21, 2014.

¹⁹ M. Taylor Fravel, J. Stapleton Roy, Michael D. Swaine, Susan A. Thornton, and Ezra Vogel, "China Is Not an Enemy," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2019.

ship, so long as the assumption is clearly labeled. A strategy premised on China deferring to U.S. global leadership, after all, would probably be of little use, as this would more accurately reflect China's situation in the 1990s or early 2000s than at the time of this writing. But the argument that a desired end state should include some sort of Chinese global leadership is important enough to merit a closer investigation. The first point to note is that the ambition is not on its face implausible. Given that China is already the world's second-largest economy and second only to the United States in national power, Beijing's ability to sustain its development as a rising great power will depend in part on its ability to exercise influence and leadership at the global level. Many observers claim that China is already acting in a way that suggests it seeks to overtake the United States as a global leader. For example, tensions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 spurred a large literature on Chinese efforts to diminish the United States and wrest global leadership from Washington's hands.²⁰ Whether one accepts the arguments or not, the fact that many observers regarded them as credible suggests that the notion that China aspires to some form of global leadership strikes many reasonable people as far from preposterous.

A second point to note concerns the concept of *global leadership*. This term is not immediately obvious in meaning. There are many possible interpretations of what global leadership might entail. Chinese leaders consistently criticize the notion that Beijing seeks *global hegemony*, which they seem to interpret as a sort of global dominance in which Beijing directly administers affairs in all or most parts of the world. This interpretation may resemble, in exaggerated form, a type of domination and control similar to that practiced by past European imperial powers. Such an argument may be a bit of a strawman because hegemony exercised in these terms would be beyond the capability of any country, including the United States. A Chinese effort to assert global dominance with a high degree of administrative control could also lead to war with the United States and many other coun-

²⁰ Kurt Campbell and Rush Doshi, "The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order: China Is Maneuvering for International Leadership as the United States Falts," *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020; Fred Kaplan, "The End of American Leadership," *Slate*, April 13, 2020.

tries in any case, an unappetizing prospect that Beijing understandably appears keen to avoid. But Chinese officials may also mean that they renounce any ambition to replicate a U.S. style of global leadership. The United States exercises considerable influence around the world, in part through a worldwide network of alliances and partnerships. The United States maintains hundreds of military bases in over 70 countries and exercises considerable diplomatic influence around the world. Given its lack of alliances, competing domestic demands for spending, and slowing economy, China simply lacks the capability to replicate a U.S.-style leadership.²¹ If either global domination or U.S.-style primacy is what is meant by *global leadership*, then Beijing's renunciation of such ambitions appears well-founded.

But these are not the only options. It is possible to imagine alternative forms of global leadership featuring a much lower degree of direct control than either the United States or past colonial powers exercised. Global leadership could take the form of a "first among equals" partnership between major powers that oversee a sort of spheres-of-influence arrangement. The leadership could take the form of a country's predominant influence in setting international norms, rules, and values, owing to its leadership of a larger and more globally distributed network of client states than that of rivals and a preponderance of comprehensive national power. Such a large network of client states could provide the informal basis for exercising true global leadership, as demonstrated by the ability of the global leader to respond to international crises and coordinate global efforts to address shared problems. Leadership in formal global and regional multilateral organizations could complement the influence gained from a global network of supporters. The international order under such a global leader might look considerably different from the way it appeared in the era of U.S. primacy. For example, networks of client states of one leading major power might overlap geographically with those of another major power, resulting in a malleable and porous arrangement that dilutes considerably the boundaries of the spheres of influence. Such a form of

²¹ Timothy R. Heath, *China's Pursuit of Overseas Security*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2271-OSD, 2018a.

leadership might appear considerably weaker and less orderly than that of the United States in the post–Cold War era. Even so, it could prove adequate to the needs of the global community, especially if alternatives appeared lacking.

Moreover, there are four reasons why China might seek some form of global leadership of the type just described. First, statements by Chinese leaders suggest a strong interest in exercising international leadership in a manner consistent with such a description. In addition to the many documents outlining ambitions to shape global rules and norms, the 19th Party Congress report stated that China should “become a global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence.”²² Relatedly, Chinese officials and many commentators regard the prospect of rejuvenation as incomplete without attainment of the summit of world power. In the words of Chinese scholar Ye Zicheng, “If China does not become a world power, the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation will be incomplete. Only when it becomes a world power can we say that the total rejuvenation of the Chinese nation has been achieved.”²³ Interpretations of such statements that suggest that Beijing merely seeks to become one of several world powers or the second-most powerful country after the United States beg the question: If such interpretations are accurate, why state the ambition at all? China is, after all, already the world’s second most powerful country and, thus, it may already be regarded as a world leader, surpassed only by the United States.

Second, China’s requirements for sustained economic growth, security, and influence as a major power provide a powerful incentive to seek global leadership. The CCP’s ambition to achieve the China Dream ultimately depends, to a large extent, on its ability to sustain a healthy gross domestic product growth rate. Global leadership would greatly aid that task by enabling China to gain a disproportionate share of global growth by shaping international rules, norms, and institu-

²² Xinhua, 2017d.

²³ Ye Zicheng, *Inside China’s Grand Strategy: The Perspective from the People’s Republic*, Steven I. Levine and Guoli Liu, eds., trans., Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2011, p. 74.

tions in a manner that privileges Chinese companies and industries. Politically, global leadership would also provide the CCP greater security because it would presumably entail a large network of supporting client states upon which Beijing could draw to help protect China's interests around the world and support its leadership of global norms, rules, and institutions. The CCP could also gain security by renovating the international order to become more compatible with the party's values and idiosyncrasies. And the more influence China exercises on the global level, the more confidently it can maintain a position of primacy in Asia. Similar such incentives have spurred past rising powers to seek the prize of global leadership, and there is no reason that China might not find them attractive as well.

Third, the end state is over three decades away, which provides ample time for China to contemplate such a path. Even if Chinese leaders sincerely reject any aspiration to global leadership today—despite evidence in their own documents to the contrary—there is ample time to reconsider that ambition. In the meantime, it would be in the best interest of the United States to think through how best to shore up its international position and prepare for a possibility, however remote, that could carry profound consequences for its own prosperity and security.

And fourth, the political science literature on *hegemonic stability* and international politics has provided a theoretical explanation of why China might pursue such an outcome. These writings underscore the considerable economic and strategic benefits that accord to any nation that reaches a position of global leadership.²⁴ As many observers have noted, no country maintains a position of global prominence indefinitely, and China is the most logical potential challenger to the U.S. position as the incumbent hegemon.²⁵ The interaction between China and the United States has spurred a large literature on the possibilities

²⁴ Robert Gilpin, *The Political Economy of International Relations*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987; George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK: Macmillan Press, 1987.

²⁵ C. Fred Bergsten, "China and the United States: The Contest for Global Economic Leadership," *China and World Economy*, Vol. 26, No. 5, September–October 2018.

of power transition, although experts continue to debate the possibilities of an actual shift in systemic leadership.²⁶ But the broader point is that, from Beijing's perspective, China's desire to reap the benefits of global leadership is as reasonable as Washington's desire to maintain the same sorts of privileges as the incumbent global leader. In many ways, it would be more surprising if Chinese leaders refused the benefits that could be gained from a position of international leadership.

For these reasons, this report proposes that China seeks global leadership, but of a form that is considerably different from that exercised by the United States. In this vision, China maintains a porous form of primacy in the Indo-Pacific, in which it coexists uneasily with major powers Japan, the United States, and India. In this theater, China is regarded by all nations as the single most important power and exercises considerable influence through a network of partner and client states, primarily among developing countries in Central, South, and Southeast Asia. Outside Asia, China serves more as the central interlocutor among major powers that, in turn, oversee a set of somewhat permeable spheres of influence. The vision of a "partial, loose, and malleable hegemony" offered by French scholar Nadège Rolland provides a good starting point for imagining how this end state might look. She explained that this vision of hegemony is "partial because the vision seems to imply the existence of a sphere of influence, as opposed to an ambition to 'rule the world.'" Rolland added,

Left unclear is the size and extent of the sphere of influence on which China would exert its power. This order is loose because the vision does not seem to imply direct or absolute control over foreign territories or governments. And it is malleable because the countries included under China's hegemony do not seem to be strictly defined along geographic, cultural, or ideological lines. Immediate neighbors and far-flung countries, Asian and non-Asian powers, and democracies and autocracies could all be

²⁶ Steve Chan, *China, the U.S., and the Power-Transition Theory: A Critique*, New York: Routledge, 2007; David P. Rapkin and William R. Thompson, *Transition Scenarios: China and the United States in the Twenty-First Century*, Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2013.

included, as long as they recognize and respect the primacy of Beijing’s authority and interests.²⁷

Table 3.2 provides a summary of Chinese global leadership as defined for this report. Again, we wish to emphasize that this is an assumption to support the planning purposes of the analysis, but it is an assumption with some grounding in logic and evidence. In this

Table 3.2
China Dream International End State by 2050

Domain	Sample Objectives
Major powers	China is the global leader with the largest network of client states and predominant international influence; major powers maintain stable, cooperative ties with China under a permeable spheres-of-influence–type arrangement. Major powers manage their differences according to norms established by China, but all respect the primacy of China’s interests and authority worldwide.
Periphery	China has become the predominant economic, political, and security power in the Indo-Pacific while coexisting with major powers, such as Japan and India. China leads a network of client states based primarily among developing countries in South, Southeast, and Central Asia.
Developing world	China has developed a political and security constituency of developing countries around the world, based mainly along the BRI routes in Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. Most of the developing world is integrated into BRI-related trade, investment, and infrastructure architecture led by China. China maintains clients, primarily along the BRI routes and into Latin America, that help protect Chinese interests and promote its authority.
Multilateral	The United Nations remains a key institution, but it has been renovated to uphold principles, norms, and values favored by China; established and newer Chinese-led regional and global multilateral relationships generally reflect Beijing’s preferred norms, values, and clients.
Global governance/ domains	Chinese discourse is dominant in Asia and widely understood globally; Chinese norms, values, and preferences are predominant in the global management of space, cyber, law, and maritime domains. China acts as a provider of global goods, principally in collaboration with its clients.

²⁷ Nadege Rolland, “China’s Vision for a New World Order,” *National Bureau of Asian Research*, NBR Special Report No. 83, January 2020, p. 49.

end state, China is the most indispensable global power, but its influence is most clearly felt in Asia. In other parts of the world, China may generally defer to other major powers that, in turn, coordinate policy with Beijing through institutionalized relationships reminiscent of a spheres-of-influence-type arrangement—but mediated through norms led by China. However, even in other parts of the world, China has client states and would accordingly expect relevant major powers to respect Beijing's relationship with those countries.

As previously noted, authorities have proposed a *community of common destiny*, sometimes translated as “global community of shared future,” which may be interpreted as a vision of such an end state. The community features a renovated international order in which countries interact with one another in accordance with norms and principles upheld by China.²⁸ The 2019 white paper on “China and the World in the New Era” described this ideal. Politically, the community is characterized by countries that operate according to the principles of “mutual respect and consultation on an equal footing,” which means that countries defer to China on core interests, and the United States and China interact as equals—although the description suggests that the United States interacts with China in a manner consistent with Chinese norms. It features “dialogue rather than confrontation and seeks partnerships rather than alliances,” which means alliances worldwide are weakened or discarded in favor of partnerships based on economic ties and adherence to the norms and values upheld by China. It also calls for “countries with different social systems, ideologies, histories, cultures, and levels of development to align their goals and interests, enjoy equal rights, and share all responsibilities in international activities for the progress of humanity as a whole.”²⁹ This may be read as a call for countries to support Chinese-led development projects, such as the BRI, which Chinese commentators identify with progress of humanity. The linkage of economic benefits reinforced with politically aligned relationships suggests a sort of clientelist network that would

²⁸ Liza Tobin, “Xi’s Vision for Transforming Global Governance: A Strategic Challenge for Washington and its Allies,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1, November 2018.

²⁹ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

represent a Chinese variation on the types of international relationships exercised by past global leaders. In short, under a Chinese community of common destiny, the major powers avoid war with China and differences are resolved through dialogues at established venues and managed in accordance with norms upheld by China. In this end state, Chinese power sits near the center of the global economy, thanks to its network of client states based principally across the Eurasian continent, the Middle East, and Africa, but also reaching into Latin America.

Such an end state follows the logic of a *multipolar* arrangement upheld by Chinese thinkers, albeit one in which China plays a leading role. Here, the United States maintains primacy in the Americas as one of several *poles*, with China as the most important broker. The European Union and the United States maintain a friendly relationship, but the tight alliance bonds have attenuated considerably. Meanwhile, China has developed close relations with Russia as one of its most important clients. The multipolar arrangement featuring China in a leadership role becomes more plausible if U.S. power has weakened to the point that it has little choice but to go along with the new arrangement.

In terms of the periphery, China, in this end state, has become the clear leader of the Asia-Pacific. In the developing world, China maintains an extensive network of client states, which, by midcentury, could include the largest and most important economies in the world. The relationship goes well beyond economics, although trade, investment, and infrastructure projects lie at the heart of China's client network. The BRI provides the principal mechanism by which China organizes its clients through associated economic, political, and security institutions.³⁰

In terms of multilateral organizations, the end state features a prominent role for the UN, albeit a UN that is renovated to better accord with Chinese norms and values. In this end state, the UN is at the core of a global governance system led by China, featuring a blend of older institutions, perhaps including the IMF, World Bank,

³⁰ Xinhua, "Xi's World Vision: A Community of Common Destiny, a Shared Home for Humanity," January 15, 2017a.

and G-20, as well as new ones established by China to better serve its needs. The blend of new and old institutions might well look considerably different from the current array, but it is unlikely to feature a radically different order.³¹ In addition to leadership in both global and regional multilateral organizations, China's influence will be widely perceived in its ability to largely define international norms, values, and preferences related to politics, cyberspace, international law, and maritime rights. In terms of global governance, China asserts a leadership role and provides more public goods than it does today.

As posited by this report, the international end state is thus the global situation that would best facilitate Beijing's realization of the China Dream. In this end state, Chinese power is demonstrated in part by a large network of client states, integrated into a BRI-based economic, political, and security collaboration that backs Chinese leadership.

Directives: International Strategy Through 2035

To achieve an international end state to support the China Dream, the central leadership has outlined a series of foreign policy directives. No timeline has been provided in publicly available documents, but the objectives appear sufficiently broad that they could arguably remain in place for the next 15 years. The foreign policy directives provide important context for China's competitive strategy with the United States for two reasons. First, because the international strategy aims to directly serve the goal of national rejuvenation, any competitive strategy with the United States should nest under the broader strategy. Second, to maintain CCP authority and legitimacy as the political party uniquely capable of realizing the China Dream, officials have a compelling incentive to regard the strategy for successful competition with the United States as one that must accord within, or at least not contradict, the international strategy to achieve the China

³¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018, p. 1.

Dream. There may, no doubt, be classified policies and elaborations of the strategy to deal with the United States, but a broad conformity between the competitive strategy for the United States and the broader international strategy, as articulated by senior leaders, would best serve the party's needs for both attaining its strategic goals and reinforcing its political legitimacy.

The CCP has discussed the basic features of its international strategy in authoritative documents, some of the most important of which include the 19th Party Congress report, President Xi's directives issued at the 2017 Diplomacy Central Work Conference, and the 2019 foreign policy white paper on "China and the World in the New Era." The international strategy aims to guide the formulation and implementation of foreign policy for the near future and will be taken as basic guidance through 2035. Because the foreign policy white paper provides the most detailed description, it will be used as the principal source.

As presented in Table 3.3, China's basic international strategy for the "new era" under Xi Jinping consists of five main lines of effort. The pattern corresponds roughly with the foreign policy framework introduced in the first chapter. Each of the main directives is reviewed in the following sections.

Pursue Mutual Beneficial Cooperation to Uphold Economic Globalization

The first two directives carry clear implications for China's foreign policy work with major powers, the periphery, and the developing world. As explained in the white paper, the pursuit of "mutually beneficial cooperation and common development" refers to the idea of countries around the world deepening economic relations with China.³² Among initiatives, it refers to the BRI's efforts to strengthen the integration of Eurasia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Latin America with the Chinese economy. It also involves policies designed to build political goodwill in the developing world, such as support for UN-led poverty reduction efforts. The second directive, "uphold and advance eco-

³² State Council Information Office, 2019b.

Table 3.3
China's International Strategy Directives

Category	CCP Directives	Interpretation
Major powers, developing, periphery	1. Pursue mutually beneficial cooperation and common development	Expand economic cooperation to enable growth; invite BRI participation, support UN poverty reduction
Major powers, periphery, developing, multilaterals, domains	2. Uphold and advance economic globalization	Expand trade zones, promote renminbi internationalization, oppose protectionism, bolster Chinese leadership role in global trade, deepen Eurasia, Middle East, Africa and Latin America's integration into a Chinese-led technological and economic order
Major powers, periphery, developing	3. Develop global partners	Build coalition of client countries, organizations, and multilateral groups that support China's policy agenda
Multilateral	4. Support multilateralism and uphold international justice and equity	Establish Chinese leadership via norm-, rule-, and agenda-setting; reform UN, World Trade Organization (WTO), and IMF to favor Chinese interests; where necessary, create competing multilateral relationships
Global governance/ domains	5. Take the lead in reforming and developing the global governance system	Shape global norms and discourse in China's favor; bolster China's role in governance, especially along BRI routes; increase China's role in providing public goods and addressing transnational issues

SOURCES: Xinhua, 2019b.

omic globalization,” as explained in the white paper, calls for efforts to “oppose protectionism,” expand trade zones, and promote renminbi internationalization. The 19th Party Congress report also adds requirements to “promote trade and investment.” This requirement is also informed by the thinking about developing China as a “strong trading power” and may be read as a directive to bolster the country’s leader-

ship role in the global economy, in part by deepening the integration of countries along the BRI routes into China's economy.³³

Develop Global Partnerships

Greater Chinese international leadership depends, in part, on the expansion of a supportive network of nations that support Chinese policies and preferences.³⁴ Chinese officials employ the term *partnerships* [*huoban*] to describe a global network of supportive nations, political organizations, and influential individuals.³⁵ Chinese writings depict partnerships as flexible arrangements in which China bestows financial and other goods in return for deference and responsiveness to Chinese policy preferences. A *People's Daily* commentary explained that "those who share the same ideals can be partners and those who seek common ground while maintaining differences can also be partners." It stated that China has established partnerships with "about 100 countries, regions, and regional organizations."³⁶ According to Foreign Minister Wang Yi, partnerships are bilateral or multilateral relationships defined by convergent interests. Yang stated that any country, organization, or multilateral grouping can become a partner.³⁷

The language of "partnership" is a diplomatic one that disguises, in part, China's pursuit of asymmetric relationships characterized by the dependence of other nations in a patron-client type arrangement. Nor is this unusual. All great powers depend, to some extent, on a broad network of client states to exercise power. Past great powers, including the United States and Great Britain, relied on patron-client ties to

³³ Timothy R. Heath, "China's Evolving Approach to Economic Diplomacy," *Asia Policy*, No. 22, July 2016b.

³⁴ Xinhua, "Xi Eyes More Enabling International Environment for China's Peaceful Development," November 30, 2014b.

³⁵ Cao Desheng, "Xi Calls for Expansion of Global Partnerships," *China Daily*, September 9, 2019.

³⁶ Zhong Sheng [中声], "Taking a New Path of State-to-State Exchanges [推动构建人类命运共同体]," *People's Daily* [人民日报], November 24, 2017.

³⁷ Wang Yi [王毅], "Use Xi Jinping's Thought in the New Era for Socialism with Chinese Characteristics to Break New Ground in China's Diplomacy [以习近平新时代中国特色社会主义思想引领中国外交开新境界]," *People's Daily* [人民日报], December 19, 2017.

exercise international influence; China's rejection of formal methods of control, such as imperialism, as well as its own domestic practices suggest that informal methods, such as patronage, will remain central to the way it exercises leadership.³⁸

To help explain how Chinese international leadership might operate, it may be helpful to distinguish between relationships between countries of roughly equal strength and those between a clearly stronger and a weaker power. As used in this report, a *clientelist* relationship state is a consensual asymmetric relationship in which a more powerful country (or organization or multilateral group) provides goods in the form of economic, political, and security benefits in exchange for deference and political support. The weaker party, or *client*, may, of course, occasionally reject demands by the stronger party (*patron*), but in general will be inclined to cooperate to continue receiving benefits. A *partnership*, by contrast, will be used in this report to describe relationships between relatively equal parties, in which both sides feel relatively free to reject the demands of the other. Chinese notions of *partnership* [*huoban*] are compatible with the definitions of *clients* or *partners* that we have proposed. However, China's might and wealth means that the vast majority of *huoban* will operate more as clients, especially in poorer and less-developed countries. Clients, in general, are more responsive to the needs of the patron. Indeed, a burgeoning scholarship has debated the topic of patron-client ties as a model for Chinese foreign policy.³⁹ Only a few countries, such as the United States, Japan, or those of the European Union, might maintain what we would consider genuine partnerships with China, although Beijing might seek to set the terms of those partnerships so that they operate with some level of deference. In both cases, China's influence may turn out to be less than that exercised by the United States. Scholarship has emphasized serious limitations on China's approach to building clients

³⁸ David Sylvan and Stephen Majeski, *U.S. Foreign Policy in Perspective: Clients, Enemies, and Empire*, New York: Routledge, 2009.

³⁹ Patrick Hein, "The Patterns of Authoritarian Patronage and Implications for Foreign Policy: Lessons from Sri Lanka, Myanmar, and Cambodia," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2020.

in recent years, although this could change in coming years. One study of the China-Cambodia relationship, for example, concluded that a *Chinese model* for patron-client ties might well prove “less intrusive but also less rewarding diplomatically and strategically than the U.S. model.”⁴⁰

Patron-client ties, as well as partnerships with wealthier powers, are especially important in the Asia Pacific, which has become a priority direction for Chinese diplomacy.⁴¹ The focus on building a coalition of clients represents a novel shift in foreign policy for a country that, until recently, downplayed international coalition-building in favor of an “independent” foreign policy and a “low profile” foreign policy.⁴²

Support Multilateralism

The directives to “support multilateralism” and “uphold international justice and equity” are interrelated and refer to a longstanding demand by Chinese leaders that the international order be renovated to more fairly represent Chinese power and preferences. Xi has stated that China should carry out policies that reflect “justice and equity” to win the support of the developing world and change the norms, values, and rules of multilateral institutions to reflect those values. Authorities also continue to regard the UN as a key institution, even as they advocate the renovation of the existing order to better reflect Chinese preferences and interests.⁴³

Reform Global Governance

Finally, the directive to step up China’s role in global governance reflects Beijing’s judgment that the country is uniquely positioned to increase its leadership role to compensate, in part, for a decline in the capacity

⁴⁰ John D. Ciorciari, “A Chinese Model for Patron-Client Ties? The Sino-Cambodian Relationship,” *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 15, No. 2, May 2015.

⁴¹ Xinhua, “Xi Jinping Gives Important Remarks at Central Work Forum on Diplomacy to the Periphery [习近平在周边外交工作座谈会上发表重要讲话],” October 25, 2013a.

⁴² Timothy R. Heath, “What Does China’s Pursuit of a Global Coalition Mean for World Politics?” Pacific Forum International, Honolulu, Hawaii, October 3, 2018c.

⁴³ Wang Yi [王毅], 2017.

of Western powers. In a 2019 meeting, Xi proposed the strengthening of the UN, a revising of governance rules, extensive consultations, and other measures to address the “global governance deficit.”⁴⁴ Because influence and leadership are zero-sum, an unspoken corollary to these directives is the need to erode the influence of the United States in all of the same venues.

The overarching international strategy provides the basic lines of effort under which the competitive strategy with the United States is subsumed. Each of these lines of effort carries important implications for China's relationship with the United States, which will be discussed in Chapter Six.

⁴⁴ Xinhua, “Xi Outlines Four-Pronged Proposal on Global Governance,” March 27, 2019c.

Context: Defense Framework, End State, and Directives

In this chapter, we briefly review China's defense strategy to realize the China Dream. As with the preceding chapter, the material presented provides essential context, as well as the basic framework within which the defense aspect of China's strategy for U.S. competition should be nested. It will follow the pattern of the preceding chapter in describing the framework for defense strategies, desired end state, and key directives.

Defining China's "Defense Strategy"

A national defense strategy is a government's authoritative guidance that defines defense-related strategic objectives and directs the ways and means to achieve those objectives. In the U.S. government, the strategy is produced by the civilian leadership of the defense department.¹ Strictly speaking, China does not have a formal "national defense strategy" in the manner of the United States. However, as in the U.S. case, China's civilian central leadership provides authoritative guidance on the goals and the ways and means to achieve those goals to the military. In the Chinese case, elements of the strategy may be

¹ Jim Mattis, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2018.

found in the country's national security strategy, defense policy, and military strategy.²

A defense strategy is important for China's competition with the United States principally because the strategy defines the military's responsibility for supporting the China Dream. Thus, it also governs the military's role in a competition with the United States. Strategies promoted by the military to compete with the United States or interact with the U.S. military in a friendly or hostile manner should comply with the central leadership's broader national strategies. Studying China's defense strategy can thus help analysts better understand the most likely trajectory of Chinese defense strategies of competition with the United States. The following sections briefly review salient features from China's security and defense strategies.

National security strategy. China's national security strategy exists as a subset and important part of its national strategy. The 2011 version of the PLA dictionary defines the national security strategy as the set of guiding principles and tactics that "guide actions to ensure comprehensive security for the nation's survival and development."³ In 2015, Chinese leaders issued the country's first national security strategy, although its contents remain only indirectly known.⁴

Defense policy. China's *defense policy* provides the "basic norms governing the conduct of all activities undertaken to meet national defense responsibilities for a prescribed period."⁵ However, China does not issue a document called a defense policy, and indeed, officials generally characterize the defense policy in a few sentences. Instead, China's defense policy is described in the Party Congress report, Defense White Papers, and other authoritative sources. For the military, defense

² Timothy R. Heath, "An Overview of China's National Military Strategy," in Joe McReynolds, ed., *China's Evolving Military Strategy*, Washington, D.C.: Jamestown Foundation, 2016a.

³ PLA Press, *Military Dictionary* [军语], 2011, p. 51.

⁴ Xinhua, "China Warns of Unprecedented National Security Challenges," January 23, 2015a.

⁵ PLA Press, 2011, p. 18.

policy provides a critical mechanism for the central leadership to govern the general spirit of the military's posture, construction, and activities.⁶

Military strategy. The Central Military Commission provides the more specialized, granular details of the national military strategy, which is often referred to as China's *military strategy*. The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* similarly defines *military strategy* as the "guiding principles and stratagems for planning and guiding the overall construction and employment of military power, centered on war."⁷ In 2015, China issued its first white paper on "Military Strategy," which summarized a threat assessment, listed missions and tasks of the PLA, discussed force modernization efforts, and described the military strategic guidelines for operating military forces.⁸ These definitions make clear that the purview of the military strategy lies principally in guiding military modernization and military activities to support national objectives in peace and war. Indeed, the 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* states that "military strategy proceeds from international strategy and the general situation of national development" and is thus "subservient to and serve the general situation of national development."⁹ The PLA's leadership also formulates military strategic guidelines to guide the implementation of such guidance.¹⁰

From these sources, we can construct China's national defense strategy, which includes authoritative directives regarding the principal threats, strategic missions of the military, force development, and force employment.

⁶ Chen Zhou [陈周], "China's National Defense Policy [中国的国防政策]" *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], September 2009.

⁷ Sun Zhaoli [孙兆丽] et al., *Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], Beijing: Academy of Military Sciences Press, 2013, p. 3.

⁸ State Council Information Office, 2015.

⁹ Sun Zhaoli et al., 2013, p. 10.

¹⁰ M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy Since 1949*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2019.

Threat Assessment

The military's assessment of the threats to China's security and development ultimately derives from the central leadership's overall assessment of strategic trends and threats to the CCP's agenda. The threat assessment provides an analytic foundation for much of the defense strategy. Following the broader trend analysis discussed in Chapter Two, authorities regard the security environment as generally favorable, but one that features persistent security threats and challenges. The 2019 defense white paper observed that China "continues to enjoy political stability, ethnic unity, and social stability." At the same time, the white paper highlighted persistent threats from Taiwan "separatist forces," which it characterized as the "gravest immediate threat to peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait." It also criticized unnamed "external separatist forces" for "Tibet independence" and in Xinjiang as "threats to China's national security and social stability." It also noted the persistence of disputes over land territorial boundaries and "maritime demarcation." However, threats that the PLA must address go beyond Taiwan and territorial issues. The white paper also noted "immediate threats" to overseas interests, including "international and regional turmoil, terrorism, and piracy," as well as "threats to outer space and cyber security." In addition, the paper warned of an "intensifying global military competition" in which the PLA "still lags far behind the world's leading militaries."¹¹

Although official statements on the issue remain scarce, one may deduce from military writings that the main strategic direction continues to emanate from the maritime regions. The 2015 military strategy white paper lends support to this interpretation. In its review of threats, the paper is principally focused on dangers emanating from China's maritime direction, namely the U.S. effort to bolster its leadership and influence in Asia, Taiwan, and Japan, and disputes with neighbors over "China's maritime rights and interests." The paper also states that preparations for military struggles now "highlight maritime military struggle" in particular. Underscoring this point, it describes as a prior-

¹¹ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

ity the development of a “modern maritime military force structure” capable of “safeguarding” China’s “national sovereignty and maritime rights and interests.”¹²

Yet the consistency with which defense white papers enumerate a long list of dangers beyond Taiwan suggests that Chinese leaders see a variety of threats to the China Dream, of which Taiwan separatism is but one. The main strategic direction of Taiwan and the maritime domain should thus be regarded more as the “first among equals” among a broad menu of threats for which the PLA must prepare, rather than the near-exclusive driver of defense strategy. The same 2015 defense white paper noted that China faces “various threats and challenges in *all* its strategic directions and security domains.” The PLA must be prepared to execute a variety missions and tasks that address the breadth of threats, and in a manner that does not jeopardize the focus on achieving the China Dream.

Framework for Defense Strategy

As with its development and foreign policy work, the central leadership issues guidance to the military in the form of standard frameworks or templates. The basic framework for defense strategy consists of three main parts: (1) strategic missions, (2) force development, and (3) force employment. The most recent iteration of these frameworks can be seen in such authoritative documents as the 19th Party Congress report and the 2019 defense white paper.¹³

Strategic missions. The central leadership defines the military’s responsibility in the pursuit of the China Dream through a set of strategic missions, or statements of the military’s role in national strategy (Table 4.1). Since 2004, central leaders have invoked the term “historic missions of the armed forces in the new period of the new century,” often referred to by the shortened term *New Historic Missions*, to describe these missions. The historic missions concept outlines four

¹² State Council Information Office, 2015.

¹³ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

Table 4.1
CCP's Defense Strategy Missions Framework

Mission	Explanation
Safeguard CCP rule, socialist system	PLA supports government efforts to protect CCP rule, socialist system from subversion.
Defend sovereignty, national unity, territory	PLA supports whole-of-government effort to prevent crisis, deter aggression, and control any conflict situation.
Protect overseas interests	PLA supports whole-of-government effort to ensure legal rights and security for citizens and their assets abroad.
Promote world peace, common development	PLA supports diplomatic efforts to promote stability and shape a favorable environment through military engagement, exercises, participation in nonwar missions, and military diplomacy.

SOURCE: State Council Information Office, 2019a.

responsibilities, which call on the PLA to, first, provide an important guarantee of strength for the party to consolidate its ruling position. This mission directs the PLA to defend the CCP's rule from domestic threats and external threats, such as those that may be posed by cyber-attacks designed to provoke upheaval. The second mission directs the military to protect the nation's sovereignty, national unity, and territorial interests. This directs the military to prepare for contingencies related to Taiwan and disputed maritime and land areas. The third mission directs the military to protect overseas interests, such as BRI investments and citizens abroad, primarily through nonwar missions. A fourth task directs the PLA to promote world peace and common development, as China requires a stable international environment to further its development.¹⁴

Force development. The *construction of armed forces* [*jundui jianshe*] is a PLA term of art that includes direction regarding (1) the development, procurement, and acquisition of weapons, platforms, and equipment; (2) developments in the command and organization of the mili-

¹⁴ "Full Text of the 17th Party Congress Report," Xinhua, October 24, 2007.

tary, as well as institutional and personnel reform; and (3) doctrine, training, and education (Table 4.2). The central authorities set the tone for the general orientation of the military's construction to ensure conformity with the party's overall agenda. In particular, leaders frequently employ the phrase "base point for preparations for military struggle" to define the fundamental type of conflict for which the military must prepare. The 2019 defense white paper and other documents explain that the PLA seeks to develop into a military characterized by "informationization," which involves the integration of digital technologies, reliance on joint operations, and a systems of systems doctrine.¹⁵

Force employment. Guidance on how to use military power to achieve the political and strategic goals outlined by central leaders lies at the heart of China's military strategy (Table 4.2). Central authorities provide broad guidance to govern the PLA's use of force in service of strategic objectives. The PLA translates generalized central guidance into a more specialized form featuring an authoritative set of precepts, maxims, and guiding principles (also known as *military strategic guidelines*) informed by key strategic concepts, the most important of which

Table 4.2
CCP's Defense Strategy Military Modernization Framework

Topic	Explanation
Force development	Equipment and weapons research, development, and acquisition; organizational reforms; professional military education; personnel management; training; exercises; patrols; defense planning; discipline; and anticorruption measures
Force employment	Guidance on how to use force to carry out missions and tasks assigned by the central leadership in a manner consistent with the national strategy

SOURCES: State Council Information Office, 2019a; RAND analysis.

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

is *active defense*.¹⁶ Indeed, the 2015 military strategy white paper calls the “strategic concept of active defense” the “essence of the party’s military thought.” It defined *active defense* as the “unity between strategic defense and operational and tactical offense,” encompassing numerous related and subordinate precepts and principles.¹⁷ The 2013 *Science of Military Strategy* explained that the basic posture is of “self-defense,” which directs the military to “strike back” but does “not preclude preemptive strikes in campaigns and combat.”¹⁸ Other concepts to guide the employment of the military include the notions of war control, crisis management, deterrence, and war containment.¹⁹

China's Defense Strategy End State

As an instrument of national power, the military primarily serves the goals of domestic and foreign policy. Policy objectives regarding flash-points, such as Taiwan, disputed islands, and other securities, rest in the domain of domestic or foreign policy, not the military. For objectives that overlap with both military and domestic and/or foreign policy, the central leadership is responsible for achieving the domestic or foreign policy end state. Relatedly, the decision of how to resolve hot-spot issues, such as Taiwan’s status or that of disputed maritime territories, is, strictly speaking, a political question that lies outside the purview of military leaders, although they may advise on relevant military options. Military leaders, by contrast, are responsible for setting goals for military modernization and supporting the national leadership in executing strategies to achieve national goals. For this reason, we defined the *end state* for the military’s strategic missions in terms

¹⁶ David Finkelstein, “China’s National Military Strategy: An Overview of the Military Strategic Guidelines,” *Asia Policy*, No. 4, July 2007.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office, 2015.

¹⁸ Sun Zhaoli et al., 2013, p. 47.

¹⁹ Timothy R. Heath, “Dispute Control: China Recalibrates Use of Military Force to Support Security Policy’s Expanding Focus,” *Journal of Social, Political and Economic Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 1–2, Spring–Summer, 2018b.

of whether it is capable of and ready to carry out any and all missions assigned by the central leadership (Table 4.3).

In terms of force development, the 19th Party Congress report stated that by midcentury, China intends to build a “world class military.” Given that the PLA is already one of the world’s most powerful militaries, this wording may be interpreted to mean that China intends to build a military equal or perhaps superior to that of the United States

Table 4.3
End States for Defense Strategy

Category	End State
Safeguard CCP rule, socialist system	PLA capable of and ready to carry out all missions to consolidate CCP rule and socialist system and deter and defeat relevant threats.
Defend sovereignty, national unity, territory	PLA capable of and ready to carry out all missions and tasks to prevent crisis, control any conflict situation, and deter and defeat relevant threats.
Protect overseas interests	PLA capable of and ready to carry out all missions and tasks to protect overseas interests and deter and defeat relevant threats.
Promote world peace, common development	PLA capable of and ready to carry out all missions and tasks to promote stability and shape a favorable environment through military engagement, exercises, participation in nonwar missions, and military diplomacy.
Force development	The PLA is the most technologically advanced military in the world. In Asia, the PLA is the dominant military.
Force employment	The PLA operates as an integrated joint force that employs artificial intelligence and related technologies. In all contingencies and operations, the PLA adheres to the guiding principles of active defense.

in some ways. However, this does not mean that China intends to build a force that surpasses the United States as a globally distributed military.²⁰ Even under the most ideal conditions, the PLA will likely have a far more limited capability to project combat power abroad than the U.S. military has today. In Asia, however, Chinese leaders could plausibly set a goal of building the most powerful military to backstop the country's economic and political power. In terms of the quality of the force, PLA experts have signaled a strong interest in building a military that "leapfrogs" over that of the United States through the incorporation of artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies, although they continue to dispute how to do so.²¹ Given Xi's ambition about China becoming a global technology leader, as well as the PLA's clear interest in becoming a more technologically advanced force, a posited goal that China aims to have the most technologically advanced military in the world by midcentury seems reasonable. This, of course, does not imply that the PLA will aim to replace or surpass the United States in global presence or combat projection capability. The goal refers only to the notion of technological advantage that could, in turn, buttress PLA power principally in the Asia-Pacific and protect Chinese interests in a limited way in cyberspace, outer space, and other areas. In terms of force employment, appropriate goals would center on the military's ability to operate as an integrated, joint force employing artificial intelligence and related technologies. The PLA's operations and activities, similarly, would adhere to the military strategy of active defense and other concepts designed to manage any dispute in a manner consistent with the central leadership's overall agenda (Table 4.3).

²⁰ M. Taylor Fravel, "China's 'World Class Military' Ambitions," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 1, March 2020.

²¹ Elsa B. Kania, "Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission: Chinese Military Innovation in Artificial Intelligence," Washington, D.C., June 7, 2019.

Directives: Strategy Through 2035

Chinese leaders have directed the military to support the focus on national revitalization for the next few decades. For purposes of this study, we will assume that the directives outlined in official documents in the past few years will persist, with minor variation, through 2035. In addition to traditional responsibilities regarding deterrence and preparation for hot-spot contingencies, recent documents emphasize the importance of building a “favorable strategic posture” and the need to “guarantee the country’s peaceful development,” in the words of the 2015 military strategy white paper.²² In particular, the leadership has directed the military to support the government’s efforts to build a “community of common destiny,” in part by expanding China’s network of clients across the BRI routes in Eurasia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Latin America. Consistent with this logic, military leaders have highlighted, in particular, the importance of military diplomacy (e.g., senior leader visits and attaché activity), combined exercises, and dialogues with client states. To help demonstrate the value of Chinese patronage, officials have called for greater efforts to provide some public goods. For example, the 2019 defense white paper explained that China needs to support UN efforts to promote peace and stability. It also directs China to “play a constructive role in the political settlement of regional hotspots,” such as the Korean peninsula. The 2019 defense white paper is also the first to feature a section outlining the PLA’s role in “building a regional security cooperation architecture.” This section discussed the PLA’s role in collaborating with regional organizations, such as the SCO, CICA, ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM Plus), and ARF.

The emphasis on building clientelist relationships, contributing to public goods, and supporting efforts to build international stability and peace reflects priorities in the international strategy discussed in Chapter Three. Other directives regarding security, civil-military relations, and crisis management together support the view that a key PLA responsibility in coming years is to shape a favorable security environ-

²² State Council Information Office, 2015.

ment. Regarding hot-spot issues, such as Taiwan and maritime disputes, central leaders appear to have directed the military to maintain a “deterrence” posture while the government relies on the lower-risk whole-of-government or “gray zone” methods to incrementally change the status quo and continue to build a favorable military balance of power. The following section reviews a few of these drivers of the current directives.

Expansion in Security Concept and Domains

The recent adoption of an *overall* or *holistic* security concept suggests a blurring between the lines of traditional military affairs and broader issues of diplomacy, economics, and technology. According to the 2019 defense white paper, the expanded concept combines domestic and international security; security for the homeland with security for overseas citizens, enterprises, and other interests; and interests related to the nation's survival with those needed for its development. Security now encompasses 11 fields, including not only the political, economic, and military spheres but also territorial, cultural, social, scientific and technological, informational, ecological, financial, and nuclear domains.²³ Moreover, security is required for the interests that have expanded into the open ocean, outer space, and cyberspace. Chinese authorities in 2018 also published an Arctic strategy that identified national interests as access to natural resources, securing Arctic sea lines of communication, and promoting an image of a “responsible major country” in Arctic affairs.²⁴

Increased Need for Centralized Control

This changing view of security has somewhat blurred the lines between civilian and military tasks and actors. To support these broader security requirements, the military must carry out both war and nonwar missions. As the military steps up its involvement in nonwar activities, nonmilitary assets have become more involved in actions formerly reserved for the military. This can be seen in the maritime domain,

²³ Xinhua, “Xi Jinping Speaks at Politburo Study Session on Security,” April 15, 2014a.

²⁴ State Council Information Office, “Full Text: China's Arctic Policy,” January 26, 2018.

where the Chinese Coast Guard was created from disparate maritime agencies in 2014, in part to defend Chinese maritime territory, and has now become militarized.²⁵ The increasing complexity of security and of military-civilian coordination has raised the demand for centralized security-related decisionmaking. The creation of the National Security Commission and the issuance of a National Security Strategy in 2015 underscore the importance with which Chinese leaders regard the task of calibrating policy to balance competing security objectives and control risk.²⁶

Increased Need for Crisis Management and Deterrence

The intensifying competition between China and the United States raises the risk of a crisis or even a clash. This, in turn, provides a compelling incentive for Chinese leaders to develop policies and mechanisms to control and manage any crisis. In 2013, Xi Jinping urged the United States to adopt a “new type of major power relationship” premised largely on U.S. strategic concessions as a way to reduce the risk of conflict.²⁷ China’s willingness to establish a military hotline and to conclude confidence-building measures governing maritime and air-to-air military encounters reflects an underlying anxiety about the potential for militarized crises.²⁸ The elevation of the status of China’s strategic missile force through the creation of the PLA Rocket Force as a fully independent service similarly signals, in part, the growing importance placed on strategic deterrence to influence the response

²⁵ Ryan D. Martinson, “The Militarization of China’s Coast Guard,” *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2014.

²⁶ Zhao Kejin, “China’s National Security Commission,” Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, July 14, 2015.

²⁷ Jane Perlez, “China’s ‘New Type’ of Ties Fails to Persuade Obama,” *New York Times*, November 9, 2014.

²⁸ Phil Stewart, “U.S., China Agree on Rules for Air-to-Air Military Encounters,” Reuters, September 25, 2015.

of the United States and its allies to China's coercive, but nonviolent, expansion of influence.²⁹

In sum, Chinese leaders seem intent on using the PLA as an instrument of military diplomacy to reshape the security architecture in Asia and, to a lesser extent, globally to expand Chinese leadership and influence, weaken those of the United States, and build a supportive network of client states. They appear keen to control risks around flashpoints and, accordingly, have relied on civilian and paramilitary means to incrementally change the status quo. With a military still in transition toward a joint force, the central leadership seems keen to focus on building a powerful, advanced military. This all suggests that the PLA remains in a deterrent posture for flashpoint issues. The subsequent sections look at directives from central leaders to the PLA more closely, through the lens of the frameworks introduced earlier in this chapter.

Missions and Tasks

The central leadership has refined the PLA's missions and responsibilities to focus on strategic support to the whole of government efforts to shape an international environment that favors China's rise as the premier power in Asia and, eventually, as the global leader (Table 4.4).

According to official documents and military reporting, the military's missions remain largely defined by the historic missions outlined by Hu Jintao in 2004.³⁰ However, central leaders have made a slight modification to these tasks to better support the country's international strategy.³¹

In the *new era* designated by CCP authorities as coinciding largely with Xi's ascent to office, the PLA provides *strategic support* [*zhanlue*

²⁹ Ministry of National Defense of the People's Republic of China, "China Establishes Rocket Force and Strategic Support Force," webpage, January 1, 2016.

³⁰ Cortez A. Cooper III, "The PLA Navy's 'New Historic Missions': Expanding Capabilities for a Re-emergent Maritime Power," testimony presented before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-332, June 11, 2009.

³¹ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

Table 4.4
China Defense Strategy Directives

Directive	Explanation
Strategic support for consolidating CCP, socialist system	Military capable and ready to deter and defeat all threats to CCP rule in support of central leader objectives.
Strategic support for safeguarding sovereignty, national unity, territory	Military capable and ready to deter and defeat all threats to sovereignty, national unity, and territorial integrity in support of central leader objectives.
Strategic support for protecting overseas interests	Military supports whole-of-government efforts to ensure security for overseas interests, in part by providing security assistance to clients.
Strategic support for the promotion of world peace, common development	The PLA supports diplomatic goals of promoting stability and peace through participation in multilateral operations and by becoming a key security partner for clients along BRI routes.
Force development	The PLA completes modernization by 2035.
Force employment	The PLA adheres to the guiding principles of active defense, operates as an integrated joint force employing artificial intelligence and related technologies, and supports international strategy by shaping a favorable environment and deterring and containing wars.

SOURCES: Yan Wenhu [闫文虎], "Correctly Understand the Military's Missions in the New Era [正确理解新时代军队使命任务]," China Military Online [中国军网], July 26, 2019; State Council Information Office, 2019a; Xinhua, 2017d.

zhizhang] to each of the missions. As explained in an article in the *PLA Daily*, the modification reflects the perspective that China's security challenges are intertwined with its ambition to become a regional and international leader, which has increased the need for close coordination between the military and civilian government to control risks.³² The article emphasized the importance of the military playing a role in shaping a favorable international security environment. In the words of

³² Yan Wenhu, 2019.

the *PLA Daily*, the change reflects China's evolution "from a large to a strong power."

The revised missions are to

1. "provide strategic support for consolidating the leadership position of the CCP and the socialist system." The article warned that "Western forces" have "stepped up efforts to Westernize and divide China" and "subvert and destroy the CCP." It called on the PLA to carry out duties to ensure CCP rule, presumably by deterring Western countries from carrying out cyber and other operations to erode CCP legitimacy.
2. "provide strategic support for the safeguarding of national sovereignty, unity, and territorial integrity." The PLA ensures the security of borders, coasts, air defense, maritime rights, and national unity. The article highlighted the importance of collaboration to shape the security environment, stating that the mission requires the PLA to "shape a peaceful, secure environment." The article also explained that the change reflected an interest in finding ways to manage and effectively control crisis situations and flashpoints so that they do not escalate into major conflict. It stated that the revised directive calls on the PLA to "prevent crisis, resolve confrontations, and deter conflict." The same mission reaffirms the importance for traditional missions to deter and prevail in conflict. As the article explained, the PLA must be able to "control and win wars as necessary."
3. "provide a strategic support to protecting China's overseas interests." The PLA "keeps up with the expansion of the country's overseas interests" and improves its ability to carry out "diversified tasks" to protect overseas personnel, resources, shipping lanes, and interests.
4. "provide strategic support for promoting world peace and development." Acknowledging the intensifying competition with the United States at the regional and global level, the *PLA Daily* article noted a "sharp and complex dispute" over "dominance of the regional order" and over international "rules" and "development paths." It called on the PLA to "strengthen bilateral

and multilateral strategic consultations and dialogues” with countries around the world, to “promote multi-level development of military exchanges,” and “actively participate” in a variety nonwar missions to “maintain regional stability and world peace.”³³

The military’s principal missions aim to address this broad array of threats. The military strategy white paper affirms that the PLA’s strategic role remains defined by the New Historic Missions announced by Hu Jintao. To carry out this strategic role, military authorities have elaborated a number of strategic tasks. The 2019 defense white paper named nine such tasks, including (1) deterring and resisting aggression; (2) safeguarding national political security and social stability; (3) opposing and containing “Taiwan independence”; (4) cracking down on proponents of separatist movements such as “Tibet independence” and the creation of “East Turkistan”; (5) safeguarding national sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security; (6) safeguarding China’s maritime rights and interests; (7) safeguarding China’s security interests in outer space, electromagnetic space, and cyberspace; (8) safeguarding China’s overseas interests; and (9) supporting the sustainable development of the country.³⁴

Force Development

The 19th Party Congress report directed the military to modernize in a manner that incorporates more information technology. It stated, for example, that officials should “intensify efforts to accomplish the dual historic tasks of military mechanization and full informatization, striving to basically complete military mechanization and make major progress in full military informatization.” It stated that military modernization should focus on enabling the military to fight “localized wars under conditions of informatization.” Chinese sources have already discussed a further evolution in the nature of informatization in the direction of a greater use of artificial intelligence. Some sources

³³ Yan Wenhu [闫文虎], 2019.

³⁴ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

use the term *intelligentization* to describe an anticipated transformation in the way of war. The 2019 defense white paper stated that “there are indications intelligentized warfare is emerging.” PLA writings explain that the future form of war is likely to involve a greater reliance on unmanned systems, autonomous decisionmaking, and artificial intelligence.³⁵

Military authorities revised the “base point for military struggle” to focus on “local war under conditions of informatization” as the most likely type of conflict. Modernization efforts have accordingly emphasized qualities of power projection, rapid movement of troops, employment of networks of weapons and sensors, and joint operations. The 2019 defense white paper briefly described changes accordingly expected of the services. It noted reforms in the leadership and command system featuring joint theater commands, shifts toward an army-brigade-battalion system of organization, and the development of a military characterized by the use of “strategic, cutting-edge, and disruptive technologies,” such as the Tianhe 1 supercomputer.³⁶ Authorities formed a Strategic Support Force responsible for managing defense assets in space and cyberspace as part of a broader reorganization of the military in 2015, reflecting China’s growing emphasis on securing its interests in those domains and the PLA’s judgment that the struggle for information dominance will be central in future wars.³⁷

Force Employment

The central leadership has directed the military to maintain the principles of *active defense*, in which the country remains strategically defensive but maintains operational flexibility. At the same time, authoritative documents emphasize the proactive use of military power to support the party’s international strategies and shape a favorable security environment. According to the 2019 defense white paper, the mili-

³⁵ Qi Jianguo [戚建国], “Seize the Commanding Heights of the Development of Artificial Intelligence Technology [抢占人工智能技术发展制高点],” *China Military Online* [中国军网], July 31, 2019.

³⁶ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

³⁷ Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 2016.

tary upholds the longstanding military strategic guidelines of active defense. For the “new era,” the PLA will “strive to keep in alignment with and contribute to the general strategies of the CCP.” The military will also “place emphasis on both containing and winning wars.”³⁸ The 2019 paper reaffirmed the country’s adherence to “no first use” regarding nuclear weapons. Similarly, the 2015 military strategy white paper emphasized qualities of strategic foresight, coordination with nonmilitary efforts to enhance security, and the military’s role in shaping the peacetime international system, crisis management, and deterrence. It also directed the military to “strengthen international security cooperation in areas crucially related to China’s overseas interests to ensure the security of its interests” and called on the military to “deal with threats” in the network and space domains “in a manner that maintains the common security of the world.”³⁹

In sum, China’s defense strategy in recent years directs the PLA to support the focus on achieving the China Dream by building a world-class military, improving readiness, and carrying out key missions, including deterrence. The military also plays an important role in supporting diplomacy through the execution of a range of nonwar missions designed to bolster the nation’s image and strengthen the network of client states around the world.

³⁸ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

³⁹ State Council Information Office, 2015.

Chinese Perspectives on Competition with the United States

The U.S. government has identified the current era as one of “competition” and has labeled China as one of the United States’ primary competitors.¹ But how does China regard the United States? What do the Chinese view the competition to be fundamentally about, and what do they regard as the stakes? This chapter is intended to shed some light on the Chinese perspective on such questions. While an exhaustive treatment lies beyond the scope of the research, a survey of official documents and scholarly analysis can provide a sense of commonly encountered themes.

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

Officials and commentators perceive an intensifying competition for influence and leadership, primarily at the Asia-Pacific regional level but at the global level as well. In general, Chinese officials and commentators emphasize the diplomatic, economic, and technological dimensions as the most decisive domains in the competition. By con-

¹ Donald J. Trump, White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C.: White House, December 2017.

trast, they tend to view the military as playing more limited but important roles in deterrence, crisis management, and supporting diplomatic efforts to build influence. However, despite the pursuit of robust military modernization and heightened tension over a proliferating array of issues, Chinese analysts describe the competition as one with a generally low risk of war because of the primarily economic nature of the competition and a disinclination in both capitals to risk war with the other.

Chinese Perspective: Structural Drivers of U.S. Competition

Authoritative strategy and policy documents regularly depict the era as one featuring international competition. The same documents acknowledge the United States as a primary competitor, and official documents tend to criticize the United States for aggravating tensions in recent years. Defense white papers since at least 2002 have mentioned “intense competition” between the major powers. For example, the 2002 defense white paper version stated “competition in comprehensive national strength has become increasingly fierce,” a point that has been regularly made in subsequent defense white papers.² The 2019 defense white paper, noted, for example, that “international strategic competition is on the rise.” However, the 2019 version was the first to blame the United States for “provoking” an “intensified competition” among major powers.³

Chinese commentaries and scholarly writings tend to view competition between the two giants as inevitable, owing to the narrowing gap in comprehensive national power. Commentaries in official news sources consistently acknowledge the competition but dispute the inevitability of confrontation or conflict.⁴ In a typical formulation,

² Xinhua, “Full Text: China’s National Defense White Paper,” December 9, 2002.

³ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

⁴ Xinhua, “Commentary: Washington Needs to Let Reason Prevail on China Ties,” June 26, 2019g.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi stated that “competition is normal,” but he warned that “exaggerating competition will squeeze the space for cooperation.”⁵ A 2020 article by Li Yan, a professor at the Ministry of State Security think tank China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR) noted a growing “antagonism” between the United States and China in Asia, which he attributed to a “changing balance of power.” Li concluded that a security dilemma had taken hold, although he expressed a cautious hope that the restraining influences of economic interdependence, deterrence, and potential cooperation on nontraditional threats remained strong enough to ensure a low risk of war.⁶

The view that U.S.-China competition is inevitable derives from the judgment that broad structural drivers have exacerbated questions of systemic leadership. Citing the types of trends raised in Chapter Two, Chinese officials and analysts point to the relative decline of the United States and the industrialized West and relative rise of China and other developing countries as a primary driver of competition for influence and status between the status quo and rising powers. This narrowing gap in comprehensive national power may be measured, in part, by comparison of the share of world gross domestic product generated by China and the United States. Chinese sources cite studies by the WB, IMF, and others, which have observed how the U.S. share declined from 21 percent in 1980 to 15 percent in 2018, while China’s grew from under 3 percent to 21 percent (adjusted for purchasing power parity) over the same period.⁷ Hinting at these broad changes, Xi Jinping stated at a Politburo study session on global governance that the “structure of global governance depends on the international balance of power.” He declared that “China must make the international order more reasonable and just to protect the common interests

⁵ Xinhua, “China, U.S. Stand to Gain from Cooperation, Lose from Confrontation: Foreign Minister,” March 8, 2019b.

⁶ Li Yan [李岩], “Analysis of the Model of Competitive Cooperation Between China and the U.S. in Asia [中美亚太 ‘竞争性共处’ 模式探析],” *International Security Research* [国际安全研究], No. 2, April 7, 2002.

⁷ IMF, “GDP Based on PPP, Share of World,” database, undated.

of China and other developing countries.”⁸ Similarly, then–Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi observed in 2011 that the “rise of newly emerging market economies will reshape the world’s politics.” Alluding to the intersection in trends between the decline of the West and rise of the non-West, Yang anticipated a “significant and far reaching impact on the balance of world powers and the international system and order.”⁹

In addition to changes in the international balance of power, Chinese analysts and officials identify major changes in China’s economy as another driver of competition with the United States.¹⁰ In 2010, researchers with the Chinese Ministry of Commerce concluded that China’s trade and investment strategy depended, in part, on its ability to exercise international influence commensurate with its status as one of the world’s largest economies. The study outlined a vision of China as a leader that shapes the terms of world trade and investment, rather than being merely a country that passively follows established rules. It used the term *strong trading power* [*maoyi qiangguo*] to describe this condition, a term that senior leaders also adopted.¹¹ In December 2014, for example, Xi Jinping called for China to “take part in the formulation of international economic and trade rules” and to “strive for the institutional right to global economic governance.” Major economic and geostrategic initiatives to deepen Asia’s economic integration through the “Silk Road and Maritime Silk Road Initiative” (BRI), AIIB, and other initiatives provide just some examples of Beijing’s implementation of policies aimed at restructuring the economy of Asia to better support China’s economic needs.¹² Explaining the reason for such initiatives, Xi stated that “there is a need to accelerate the pace of

⁸ Xinhua, “Xi Calls for Reforms on Global Governance,” *China Daily*, September 29, 2016.

⁹ Yang Jiechi [杨洁篪], “China’s Interaction with the World in the New Era [中国和世界交流在新时期],” *Research in International Problems* [国际问题研究], September 13, 2011.

¹⁰ Heath, 2016b.

¹¹ Ministry of Commerce Research Institute (China) Topic Group, “Strategic Readjustment and Structural Innovation in China’s Foreign Trade Policy in the Post-Crisis Era [后危机时代我国对外贸易的战略性调整],” *International Trade* [国际贸易], 2010.

¹² Rolland, 2017.

China's transformation from a major trading country to a strong trading power."¹³

China's Grievances with U.S. Global Leadership

The combination of a growing confidence in broad historic trends and an awareness of the country's shifting needs as an economic power exacerbate long-standing Chinese resentment of U.S. international leadership. As far back as 2002, Chinese leaders criticized the existing order even as they sought opportunities to grow within it. In 2002, then-President Jiang Zemin stated that the "old international political and economic order" had become "unfair and has to be changed fundamentally."¹⁴ Since then, criticism of the existing order has only intensified. In recent years, Chinese officials have characterized the existing order as incompatible with China's needs. In 2016, senior diplomat Fu Ying compared the existing U.S.-led international order and its compatibility with China to an old suit that no longer fits.¹⁵

Chinese discontent with U.S. leadership of the regional and global order centers on three complaints: First, the Chinese argue that U.S. international regional and international leadership harms China's interests. Second, they argue that U.S. leadership unfairly privileges Western countries. Third, they argue that U.S. leadership has become ineffective and is increasingly destabilizing and chaotic. According to Chinese officials and commentators, the best way to address these concerns is for China and its developing world partners to take on a greater international leadership role—and, by definition, for the United States and its Western allies to play a lesser role.

Chinese leaders argue that U.S. international leadership harms China's interests by fomenting disputes and encouraging Taiwan and

¹³ Xinhua, "Xi Jinping Speaks at 19th Collective Study Session of the CCP Central Committee Political Bureau: Stresses Need to Accelerate Implementation of Free Trade Zone Strategy [习近平在第十九中共中央政治局总体学习: 加快实施自由贸易区战略]," December 6, 2014c.

¹⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Jiang Zemin Delivers Report to the 16th CPC National Congress," webpage, November 8, 2002.

¹⁵ Fu Ying, "The US World Order Is a Suit That No Longer Fits," *Financial Times*, January 6, 2016a.

other countries in Asia to defy Beijing in territorial disputes. In Fu Ying's phrasing, Washington "meddles in the problems China has with its neighbors."¹⁶ Beijing also perceives U.S. alliances as a threat to its security interests, and top leaders, including Xi Jinping, have lambasted such arrangements as unnecessary.¹⁷ In a different speech, Fu Ying stated, "The U.S.-led military alliance puts their interests above others' and pays little attention to China's security concerns. It is even asserting increasing security pressure on China in the Asia-Pacific these days."¹⁸ The belief that Western power can be used to attack China and other developing countries unilaterally underpins the criticism of an "unjust" order as well.¹⁹

Chinese officials also regard U.S. leadership as unfairly privileging the United States and the developed world. In explaining their criticism about the "unjust" nature of the order, for example, Chinese officials argue that Western countries reap enormous benefits while disadvantaging the developing world.²⁰ Xi Jinping cited such a disparity when he called for China to champion "justice"—which government officials define as the shift of more resources from the developed to the developing world—when appealing to the developing world for political support.²¹

Chinese officials and commentary frequently denounce U.S. leadership of the international order as chaotic, immoral, and violent. At a Politburo study session on global governance in 2015, Xi Jinping criticized the behavior of unnamed "major powers" that for centuries "fought over hegemony through wars, colonization, the division of

¹⁶ Fu Ying, 2016a.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office, "China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," January 11, 2017.

¹⁸ Fu Ying, "China and the Future of the International Order," Chatham House, July 6, 2016b.

¹⁹ Guo Yage, "Commentary: China's Peaceful Development a Rising Tide That Lifts All Boats," Xinhua, June 5, 2019.

²⁰ Fu Ying, 2016b.

²¹ Xinhua, "At the 27th Collective Study Session of the CCP Political Bureau; Xi Jinping Stresses the Need to Push Forward the System of Global Governance," October 13, 2015b.

spheres of influence, and other ways” and predicted a more peaceful future predicated on the rise of the developing world.²² State Councilor Yang Jiechi observed in 2017 that “it has become increasingly difficult for Western governance concepts, systems, and models to keep up with the new international situation.” He said Western-led governance had “malfunctioned” and the accumulation of “various ills” showed the system had “reached a point beyond redemption.”²³ Commentaries in official media regularly denigrate U.S. international leadership as selfish, violent, and ineffective.²⁴ In a typical commentary published in July 2018, China’s official English newspaper, *China Daily*, vilified the United States as having a “dictatorial bent.”²⁵ Another typical commentary in *Global Times*, a popular newspaper owned by the Communist Party, slammed the United States for “reckless behavior.”²⁶

Criticism of the United States as a nation in decline has only intensified in recent years, although some scholars caution against assuming U.S. decline to be irreversible. Zhang Dongdong, a scholar at the CCP’s Central Party School, attributed the weakening U.S. position to an inevitable cycle of rising and falling great powers. Zhang also cited the 2008 global financial crisis, costs associated with the War on Terror, and the rise of the non-West as “severe challenges to U.S. power.” At the same time, he stated that although U.S. decline presented some opportunities for China, the United States retained a strong position, and the gap in national power remained substantial. Zhang also cautioned that the U.S. ability to “recover should not be underestimated.”²⁷ However, the popular press has been more adamant

²² Xinhua, 2015b.

²³ “Yang Jiechi: Push Forward the Construction of a Community of Common Destiny [杨洁篪:推动构建人类命运共同体],” *People’s Daily* [人民日报], November 19, 2017.

²⁴ Xinhua, “Commentary: Washington’s Hegemonic Thuggery on Hong Kong Only a Mockery of Human Rights,” November 29, 2019m.

²⁵ “Dictatorial Bent of US is the Real Global Threat: China Daily Editorial,” *China Daily*, July 2, 2018.

²⁶ Yang Sheng, “US to Pay for Reckless Behavior,” *Global Times*, March 23, 2018.

²⁷ Zhang Dongdong [张东冬], “The Decline of U.S. National Power and Changes in the International Power Structure [美国国家实力衰落 与国际权力格局的变化],” *International*

in harping on the theme of U.S. decline. One typical commentary in *Global Times* derided President Trump's confrontational policies as evidence of a nation in denial about its weakening position. It judged that the shocks of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, 2008 Global Financial Crisis, and COVID-19 pandemic had accelerated U.S. decline and that the mounting political problems of the United States revealed a country "sinking deeper and deeper into the quagmire of degeneration."²⁸

The convictions that China has outgrown the existing order and that a declining U.S. leadership is fundamentally incompatible with China's needs as a rising great power suggest that proposals to avoid competition by "accommodating" China or offering to share global leadership as partners, sometimes called a *G-2* approach, are unlikely to work.²⁹ Because these proposals aim to ensure that the United States retains the upper hand, China is unlikely to be satisfied with arrangements in which Washington retains for itself the power to "grant" concessions to China and "veto" policies not to its liking. Only a decisive downgrading of U.S. power and firm establishment of China as the clear international leader appears to offer Beijing the freedom of action that could enable it to realize the China Dream.

Regional and Global Competition

The structural drivers and specific criticisms of U.S. international leadership in Chinese sources directly inform how Chinese officials and analysts regard competition with the United States. A survey of authoritative and scholarly writings shows a focus on the diplomatic and economic dimensions of the competition at both the regional and global levels. However, officials also acknowledge a growing security competition, especially at the regional level.

Outlook [国际展望], March 2018.

²⁸ Gongping Shijie [公平世界], "U.S. Decline Is Accelerating [美国从衰落走向堕落的速度快了点]," *Global Times* [环球时报], May 23, 2020.

²⁹ Amitai Etzioni, "Accommodating China," *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 2, 2013.

The desire to restructure Asia's political economy to better accord with the changing balance of global power and serve China's needs as a strong trading power underpins the intensifying competition for influence in Asia, as well as at the global level. Chinese officials have argued that changes to the political and security order are necessary to accommodate the changing economic reality of Chinese power. In explaining China's proposal for a new security architecture for Asia ostensibly led by China rather than the United States, for example, Xi Jinping stated in 2014 that "development is the foundation of security, and security is the necessary condition for development."³⁰

Similarly, Chinese leaders have stepped up calls to revise elements of the global order to better accord with China's needs as a rising power. In 2014, Wang Yi stated that the "main obstacles to the promotion of international rule of law" rested with countries that practiced "hegemonism, power politics and all forms of 'new interventionism'"—a thinly veiled reference to the United States. He sharply criticized the "double standard approach to international law" in which the same unnamed countries "use whatever suits their interests and abandons whatever does not."³¹ Niu Xinchun, a scholar at CICIR, similarly argued that the "greatest obstacle to the further integration of emerging countries such as China into the international system comes from the United States."³²

Chinese officials have emphasized economics as a key dimension of competition. Commentators also tend to view the competition as a fundamentally economic one. A 2016 typical commentary in *China Daily*, China's official English language newspaper, concluded that bilateral competition would be "primarily economic" in nature.³³ Other sources have highlighted both the economic and the diplomatic

³⁰ Xi Jinping, 2014a.

³¹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Wang Yi: China, a Staunch Defender and Builder of International Rule of Law," webpage, October 24, 2014a.

³² Niu Xinchun [牛新春], "US-China Relations: Collision and Competition of Ideologies [中美关系思想竞争]," *Research in International Problems* [国际问题研究], March 13, 2012.

³³ Zheng Yu, "Competition Between China and US Primarily Economic," *China Daily*, February 23, 2016.

dimension of competition.³⁴ U.S.-Chinese arguments over telecommunications and electronics company Huawei have highlighted the salience of technological competition, which Chinese experts have also noted. Indeed, Chinese leaders have outlined an ambition for the country to become an “international leader” in advanced technologies, as Xi Jinping stated in the 19th Party Congress report. In comments to PLA personnel, Xi Jinping also called for “intensified work to make breakthroughs in core and key technologies so China could take the initiative in international competition.”³⁵

By contrast, Chinese officials and commentators tend to regard the military competition with the United States as supplementary to the diplomatic, economic, and technological domains. As noted in the section on the historic missions, the shift in official directives has emphasized the role of “strategic support” to the whole of government efforts to secure China’s revitalization. According to Chinese sources, the competition is sharpest in the Asia-Pacific. A powerful and lethal military is accordingly deemed necessary to deter the United States from internal interference and military intervention in a contingency. A strong military can also backstop the effective civilian-led efforts to incrementally change the status quo in the maritime regions. A robust nonwar military capability is also essential to providing support to the central leadership’s effort to bolster Chinese leadership and influence at the regional and global levels through such missions as humanitarian assistance, disaster relief, peacekeeping, and counterterrorism.³⁶

Analysts See Low Risk of War

Despite the harsh criticisms, Chinese scholars generally regard the competition as having a low risk of war. A common theme in Chinese academic writings is the search for new terms and labels to describe a

³⁴ Zhang Wenjing [张文静], “An Analysis of the China-U.S. Asia ‘Competitive Co-Existence’ Model [中美亚太竞争性共处模式探析],” *Modern International Relations* [现代国际关系], October 30, 2019.

³⁵ “China’s Xi Stresses Military Modernization in Pre-New Year Visit,” Reuters, February 12, 2018.

³⁶ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

competition with the United States that they regard as distinctly different from the more dangerous variants typified by the early Cold War. Most Chinese scholars dismiss analogies with the competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. The experts point out that, unlike the Soviet Union, China participates in many of the same international institutions and mechanisms as the United States. They also note the far higher degree of economic integration between the United States and China than was the case between the United States and the Soviet Union. A typical scholarly analysis noted the relatively “low level” of “ideological competition” and the “shared major concerns” of climate change, nuclear proliferation, and other nontraditional threats that helped moderate the U.S.-China competition.³⁷

A representative sample of the mainstream Chinese scholarly view of the U.S.-China competition may be seen in a 2019 article in *Modern International Relations*, published by CICIR, which offered the term *competitive coexistence*, or *competition plus cooperation*, to describe the U.S.-China relationship. The authors observed that disputes over issues of “regional governance” had grown in importance, because of the “changing economic and trade patterns” in the Asia-Pacific. The article stated, for example, that the U.S. and China have different preferences regarding trade rules and diplomacy in the region. The competition extends into the security domain as well, the authors noted, with both sides offering contrasting visions for the region’s security. However, the conclusion was that, despite the competitive impulses, the two countries maintain a “competitive relationship that leaves space for cooperation.” The authors noted that the economic interconnectedness of countries in the Asia-Pacific adds another source of restraint on U.S.-China competition. The article concluded with recommendations for the strengthening of crisis management mechanisms and security dialogues to ensure the competition “does not spiral out of control” and “expanding cooperation” where possible.³⁸ These scholars acknowledge

³⁷ She Lan [社兰], “How to Regard the Essence and Symptoms of U.S.-China Competition [如何认识中美竞争的本质和特征],” webpage, China Institute for International Studies, August 9, 2019.

³⁸ Zhang Wenjing, 2019.

a growing military buildup in both China and the United States but describe such activity as primarily deterrent in nature. They argue that the potential catastrophe of great-power war between nuclear-armed nations leaves little incentive for war. However, they worry that misjudgments related to such flashpoints as Taiwan and the South and East China Seas could result in unwanted military crises.³⁹ Although this is the majority view, a minority has described the U.S. policy toward China under President Donald Trump as a turn toward “containment” and argue that Washington seeks to prevent China’s rise.⁴⁰

Given the economic and diplomatic restraints and the restraining influence of nuclear weapons, Chinese officials and commentators generally argue that the risk of war will continue to remain low for the foreseeable future. Xu Jian, a researcher at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs–affiliated China Institute of International Studies, reflected the views of many Chinese commentators when he dismissed as unlikely the possibility of war between the United States and China. He argued that, despite “many differences and contradictions between China and the United States, there has been no force to date that would drive the two countries into conflict.” He judged as “unlikely” strategic confrontation arising from “regional and international competition,” because of the powerful influences of interdependence, trade, shared support for the international system, nuclear arms, and other factors.⁴¹ Chinese interest in a “new type major power relationship” aims, in part, to stabilize the relationship and provide a regular venue to manage ten-

³⁹ Ten Jianqun [滕建群], “Analysis of the U.S. ‘Strategic Competition’ with China [美国对华战略竞争探析],” *Modern World* [当代世界], December 21, 2018.

⁴⁰ Sun Genhong [孙根红], “U.S. Strategy Toward China Has Already Shifted in a Fundamentally New Direction [美国对华战略已发生根本性改变],” *Outlook* [瞭望], May 8, 2018.

⁴¹ Xu Jian, “Building Toward a New Type U.S.-China Relationship,” China Institute of International Studies, April 26, 2013.

sions.⁴² Chinese officials acknowledge serious differences between the two countries but urge an increase in cooperation to manage disputes.⁴³

Conclusion

In sum, Chinese officials, scholars, and commentators regard an intensifying competition with the United States as unavoidable, owing to its origins in largely structural developments, most notably the changing balance of power between the West and non-West and pressures stemming from the changing development needs of China's economy. In particular, China's effort to restructure Asia's political and security order to better accord with a regional economy increasingly centered in Asia underpins the intensifying competition for influence and leadership in that region. Moreover, China's pursuit of greater influence over the global economic order has also fueled its pursuit of greater influence over the international political order. A competition for supporting and partner countries both reflects and has exacerbated the competition at the regional and global levels as well.

Despite consensus on the reality of an intensifying competition, and despite sharp criticism of U.S. international leadership, Chinese experts generally assess a low possibility of war. The principal factors cited for this belief include the restraining influences of economic interdependence, the involvement by both countries in a shared international order, a low level of hostility, and a belief that the irritants in the bilateral relationship are not severe enough to warrant the risks and hazards of great-power war. The commonly encountered recommendations by Chinese officials and commentators to establish various government-to-government mechanisms to stabilize the bilateral relationship and manage their differences are informed by such convictions. These views seem to imply that if push comes to shove, the United States will choose to peacefully accept its supersession by China

⁴² Xinhua, "Xi Urges Breaking New Ground in Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," June 24, 2018e.

⁴³ Xinhua, "China-U.S. Ties Should Not Be Defined by Disputes, Differences, Says Ambassador," September 19, 2019j.

rather than risk great-power war. This possibility also provides Beijing a compelling incentive to develop competitive strategies and policies that leave U.S. decisionmakers without a viable alternative to accepting such an outcome.

China's Desired End States for U.S. Competition

The preceding chapters provide important background for our analysis. To recap, our posited Chinese strategy for U.S. competition should proceed from the same general process that characterizes the CCP's approach to developing strategy and policy. It should respond, for example, to the same sorts of trends and countertrends identified by CCP thinkers and serve the same overarching goal of realizing the China Dream. The international dimension of a competitive strategy should nest within, or at least not contradict, the CCP's broader international strategy, and the defense component of the same strategy for U.S. competition should similarly be compatible with the broader defense strategy. In our survey of authoritative documents and Chinese commentary, we noted that officials regard competition as inevitable and fundamentally driven by long-term historical trends and the increasing importance of international influence for economic growth. We also noted common Chinese criticisms that suggested U.S. hegemony has outlived its usefulness and that China's prospects depend, in part, on its ability to exercise greater international leadership. This contextual information provides the intellectual material from which we will construct a Chinese strategy for U.S. competition.

A first step in articulating the competitive strategy is to define the *end state*, or the condition of successful competition, from the Chinese perspective. This end state provides the aim point for subsequent international and defense competitive strategies. In this chapter, we define the "victory" conditions for Chinese competition with the United States and consider end states for the foreign policy and defense aspects of the

competition. For each of the end states, we present *ideal* outcomes from Beijing's perspective. Achievement of the end states provides the best hopes for achieving an international and security situation supportive of the China Dream. Failure to realize these end states diminishes prospects for national revitalization, although they do not discount them entirely. This provides a strong incentive for Beijing to organize and carry out relevant policies. It may also incentivize more risk-taking behavior if prospects for achieving the international and defense strategy end states begin to dim.

We have tried to keep assumptions to a minimum, but three deserve mention. First, the trends outlined in Chapter Two remain in place. These broad trends provide the intellectual foundation for the strategies and goals presented in the preceding chapters, and these, in turn, also inform the construction of an end state for U.S. competition. In particular, the continued relative decline in U.S. power and growth in Chinese power would make the prospect of China surpassing America plausible to Chinese decisionmakers. Similarly, the belief that competition will continue to intensify but that the general trends favor peace and development provides a strong incentive to develop competitive strategies that avoid war if at all possible.

A second, related assumption is that China and the United States tacitly agree to carry out the competition without resort to war. Given the inventories of nuclear weapons possessed by both countries and the industrial capabilities at their disposal, a decision to resolve the competition through war would be nothing short of catastrophic.¹ So long as all parties continue to adhere to a tacit rejection of war, the competitive strategy proposed in the following chapters could be pursued. This assumption does not mean that the two sides avoid all conflict, however. Given the deepening tensions and persistent flashpoints, the risk of standoffs, militarized crises, and even limited-scale clashes, e.g., via proxy forces, cannot be discounted. So long as these did not escalate into large-scale war and both sides sought to deescalate from

¹ David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1140-A, 2019.

the more serious situations, such conflicts could be accommodated in the strategies presented. That said, even the smallest-scale lethal clash would drastically increase the probability that tensions might eventually escalate to large-scale war. This reality provides a strong incentive for Beijing to avoid violent clashes between PLA and U.S. troops if at all possible.

A third assumption is that China has made reasonable progress on the domestic goals that make up the heart of the China Dream, especially those related to economic growth. Analysis of China's domestic agenda lies beyond the scope of this research, but its importance deserves emphasis. Progress toward its domestic agenda would leave Beijing in a much stronger position to contend with the United States. Progress also provides Beijing a compelling incentive to pursue a strategy that has as its goal the overtaking of the United States as a global leader. Conversely, a failure to realize the domestic agenda would leave China too weak to have any hope of surpassing the United States. In such a case, Beijing may find competition futile and instead find itself compelled to formulate a different national vision.

Bilateral End State: China as the Superior Power

The first end state centers on the standing of China and the United States relative to each other. Currently, by virtually any metric, the United States is the superior power—a point Chinese analysts concede. The United States has the larger and more productive economy, a more powerful military, a higher level of technological innovation, and far greater international influence.²

A Chinese competitive strategy would seek to place Beijing in the superior position. This need not entail superiority in all measures of national power. Experts have debated the qualities most essential to

² Michael Wills, Ashley J. Tellis, and Alison Szalwinski, eds., *Strategic Asia 2015–16: Foundations of National Power*, Washington, D.C.: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2016.

global power.³ Many aspects involve issues of domestic policy and thus lie beyond the scope of this analysis. But at the very least, China would likely need to have surpassed the United States with a more dynamic, technologically innovative economy. It would also need some sort of military edge, although not necessarily one that resembled the globally distributed U.S. military.

In terms of influence and leadership, the end state envisions a Beijing that has successfully assumed a position of primacy at the Asia-Pacific level and achieved a greater degree of international leadership and influence than the United States. However, this does not mean that the two countries simply swap positions. Rather, China's ascent to regional primacy and global leadership would likely look very different from the historical U.S. approach. The 2019 foreign policy white paper offered a glimpse of China's vision of international leadership when it stated that major countries should fulfill their responsibilities "commensurate with their status." It explained that the "international status" of a country is "measured by its openness of mind, breadth of vision, and sense of responsibility rather than its size, strength or power." This formulation suggests that a country with inferior strength, such as China, deserves more responsibility than more-powerful but ostensibly irresponsible countries, such as the United States. Sharpening the contrast between China's ambitions and a thinly disguised criticism of U.S. leadership, the paper continued, "Major countries should direct their primary efforts to the future of humanity and assume greater responsibilities for world peace and development, rather than wielding their power to seek hegemony in international and regional affairs."⁴

To characterize the proposed bilateral end state more clearly, we posit the following conditions: (1) War with the United States is avoided, although this does not exclude the possibility of militarized crises or conflicts of a limited scope (e.g., proxy wars); (2) the United States respects China's authority as the global leader, even

³ Jacob L. Heim and Benjamin M. Miller, *Measuring Power, Power Cycles, and the Risk of Great-Power War in the 21st Century*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2989-RC, 2020.

⁴ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

as the United States remains a powerful but clearly inferior nation; (3) the United States largely refrains from harming Chinese interests; (4) China has established primacy across much of Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa, principally through collaboration with a network of client states; (5) U.S. primacy has been reduced to the Americas, although it may still maintain a military, economic, and diplomatic presence worldwide; (6) the United States and China manage their differences according to norms upheld by China; and (7) the two cooperate on shared concerns on terms defined largely by the Chinese. These “victory” conditions are summarized in Table 6.1 and detailed in the following paragraphs.

U.S. and China avoid war. Aware of the potential catastrophe that could ensue, China has stated that it seeks to avoid war with the United States if possible. Chinese officials consistently disparage the idea of a *Thucydides trap*, in which the rising and status quo powers fight to determine the next system leader. Expressing a standard position of the government, Wang Yi rejected the notion that the two countries would fall into such a trap.⁵ Chinese commentators explain that the country’s lack of interest in pursuing colonial expansion and support for the existing order provide little incentive for Beijing to risk transition warfare.⁶ The 2019 foreign policy white paper warned against the U.S. resorting to arms to fight China or other great powers, claiming “any serious strategic miscalculation between major countries risks turning conflict and confrontation into a self-fulfilling prophecy.”⁷ Other experts have noted that the risks of nuclear exchanges make the hazards of great-power war unthinkable.⁸

However, the aversion to great-power war does not mean that the two sides avoid conflict altogether. The two sides have already skir-

⁵ Xinhua, “FM: China, U.S. Can Avoid Thucydides Trap, Kindleberger Trap,” March 20, 2017b.

⁶ Xinhua, “Commentary: A Stronger China Not Destined to Seek Hegemony,” June 25, 2019f.

⁷ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

⁸ Robert A. Manning, “Time for Dialogue to Manage New Risks to Nuclear Stability,” *Global Times*, August 6, 2019.

mished in cyberspace and in trade wars, and it is possible to envision a crisis or even a clash—perhaps involving proxy forces, such as maritime militia—in hotspots related to the South China Sea and Taiwan. Although it is difficult to envision such a scenario today, it is possible that the two might fight with proxy forces in other countries with opposing host-nation militaries or nonstate actors, such as insurgencies. In an apparent acknowledgment of such risks, Chinese authorities have expressed a strong interest in strengthening cooperation to reduce risks and developing crisis management mechanisms to ensure any crisis situations do not spiral out of control.⁹ Militarized crises or limited clashes, such as those involving proxy forces, are still compatible with the end state. However, such incidents would undoubtedly represent an ominous trend that could eventually lead to a destructive larger-scale war.

Another possibility is that the United States could be “dragged” into a war between China and a U.S. ally or partner, such as Taiwan or Japan. Whether China might be willing to risk major war with a U.S. ally would depend, in large part, on Beijing’s assessment about the overall inevitability of conflict with the United States and the risks of escalation. It is theoretically possible for Beijing to engage in conflict with a neighbor—without intending to fight the United States—only to find that the situation escalates into a broader war. However, the idea that Beijing would wage war with a U.S. ally or partner without preparing for the possibility of U.S. intervention is implausible. Chinese military writings show a strong awareness of the risks of U.S. involvement in any conflict with an ally, and official opposition to U.S. alliances is informed, in part, by anxiety over the possibility of escalation to war with the United States.¹⁰ Given the difficulty of controlling escalation between two nuclear-armed great powers and the potential devastation that war would entail for the global economy, Beijing’s caution about armed conflict appears prudent. So long as Chinese leaders believe cooperation with the United States to be a viable means of

⁹ Xinhua, 2019e.

¹⁰ Timothy R. Heath and Andrew S. Erickson, “Is China Pursuing Counter-Intervention?” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 38, No. 3, Fall 2015.

managing a crisis involving a U.S. ally, there is little incentive to risk war with the United States in almost any situation. Beijing's calculus could change, however. Difficulties in China's domestic situation, for example, could put a radicalized leader in charge who favors aggressive war, or the onset of bitterly hostile relations with Washington and deepening pessimism about China's prospects could increase the appeal of military conflict to Beijing. However, such changes would represent a dramatic shift from the assumptions outlined earlier in this report and likely result in a different approach to China-U.S. competition than that presented here.

U.S. respects China's authority as global leader. In this end state, the United States adopts a deferential position regarding Chinese leadership globally. This does not mean that Washington must enthusiastically back Beijing as a system leader. It may be the case that the United States chafes at Chinese leadership or that the United States withdraws from most global institutions, perhaps in protest of Chinese influence in those venues. However, in either case, the United States recognizes the reality of its substantially weakened position and behaves in a manner that is consistent with a de facto acceptance of a position of inferiority. In practical terms, this could mean that the United States participates in global trade and investment according to rules, norms, and standards set by China, that it would modify its alliances and security policies to avoid threatening Chinese interests in Asia and elsewhere, and that it would manage differences with other countries primarily through dialogue and negotiation in a manner that generally avoids antagonizing Beijing. The 2019 foreign policy white paper provides a vision of international order that appears very much like a desired situation featuring Chinese leadership and U.S. deference. The paper stated the United States should "adapt to the development and prosperity of other countries and live in harmony with the rest of the world," which may be interpreted to mean that the United States should accommodate itself to the reality of Chinese power. It added, almost as a prescription to the United States, that this was the "principle major countries should always follow."¹¹

¹¹ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

The United States refrains from harming China's interests. Chinese authorities have long demanded that the United States show greater respect for China's interests regarding Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, Hong Kong, and other core interests. In a typical formulation, the 2019 foreign policy white paper stated, "Major countries should respect each other's core interests and major concerns."¹² Chinese success in its competition with the United States could entail the United States agreeing formally or tacitly to cease its military support to Taiwan, ending efforts to promote democracy within China, and refraining from providing substantial military support to any U.S. Asian ally involved in a major confrontation or clash with China. The United States might also be expected to avoid policies that might harm any of China's overseas interests, such as BRI infrastructure and investments. In the Americas, the United States would avoid policies that harmed Chinese citizens and their assets and avoid harming the interests of Chinese client states.

China has established primacy across much of Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. As scholars have noted, past global leaders, such as the United States and Great Britain, based their supremacy on primacy in certain geographic regions.¹³ China appears to have focused on the Eurasian continent, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Latin America as the geographic basis of its global power. Accordingly, China has cultivated client states in these regions and sought to erode the appeal of the United States as a competitor patron. If successful, China's securing of primacy along the BRI routes could entail a marginalization of the United States from the center of the global economy. Some Chinese scholars have explicitly advocated just such a goal. Wang Yiwei, a professor of the Center for China and Globalization at People's University, explained, "If Eurasia forms an interoperable whole, then there will not be much left for the United States."¹⁴ In such a situation, the United

¹² State Council Information Office, 2019b.

¹³ Julian Go, *Patterns of Empire: The British and American Empires 1688 to Present*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁴ Liang Hui [梁辉], "Wang Yiwei: China's Starting Point for Proposing One Belt, One Road Lies in Market Expansion [王义危:中国提出 '一带一路' 出发点是拓展市场]," *Inter-*

States would undoubtedly resent its subordination and might aim to reverse its fortunes but could find itself with little ability to significantly alter its position.

U.S. primacy narrowed to the Americas. Chinese leaders reject the idea of *global hegemony*, by which they mean, in part, the implausible idea of exercising direct administrative control over distant parts of the world. The concept of *major power relations* proposed by China as a way to better organize international relations includes the idea that major powers maintain a sort of *sphere of influence*, although Chinese officials reject a term loaded with such historical baggage. In this end state, U.S. primacy has been reduced to the Americas. Although the United States may retain a military, commercial, and diplomatic presence in Europe, Africa, the Asia-Pacific, and elsewhere, it would lack the ability to decisively shape events in those regions. Moreover, China advocates the idea that partnerships between great and smaller powers need not be geographically confined. This means China may have substantial interests in the Americas, which the United States would be expected to respect. Similarly, China would likely offer to avoid actions that endanger the lives of American citizens and their assets along BRI routes, although this would not preclude policies that disadvantage the United States. As an example, China might not demand that countries in the Asia-Pacific end their commitments with the United States. Rather, Beijing could insist that the alliances be weakened to the point that they no longer pose a threat to China, perhaps by insisting that U.S. allies establish security partnerships with China of comparable importance to those with the United States.

The United States and China resolve differences in accordance with Chinese norms. Chinese officials and analysts regard differences and disputes as to be expected between two great powers. However, as described in explanations of *new-type major power relations* upheld by Chinese officials as a template for major-power interactions, all differences and disputes should be handled via consultations and dialogues in accordance with Chinese norms. This might entail dialogues and summits or meetings in multilateral organizations, the spirit of

which would be governed by norms such as those embodied in the *five principles of peaceful coexistence*, which Chinese officials have upheld as guides for diplomacy. The principles call for a mode of interaction

Table 6.1
Assessed Chinese “Victory” Condition in U.S.-China Relations

Condition	Explanation
United States and China avoid war	China and the United States maintain peaceful, stable relations despite the persistence of friction points and disputes. This does not preclude crises, proxy conflicts, and confrontations of a more limited scope, however, so long as these are deescalated effectively.
United States accepts Chinese international leadership	The United States defers to Chinese international leadership and behaves in a manner consistent with a position of inferiority. The United States agrees to support the norms and values upheld by China as the informal basis for international relations. The United States largely accepts China’s leadership role in multilateral organizations.
United States refrains from harming Chinese interests	The United States agrees to revise policies to accommodate Chinese preferences on Taiwan and other core interests. The United States refrains from interfering in China’s internal affairs. U.S. involvement in confrontations between China and U.S. allies and partners in Asia is limited at most to symbolic gestures. The United States respects the interests of China’s client states and generally refrains from policies that antagonize Beijing.
China has gained primacy in Eurasia, Middle East, and Africa	China’s network of client states predominates in Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. The United States participates in the economic and political life of those areas on terms acceptable to China. Chinese success in leading integration along BRI routes leaves the United States in a position of disadvantage, which Washington has little ability to reverse.
U.S. primacy reduced to Americas	China defers to the United States in its leadership in the Americas, although it expects the United States to respect Chinese interests and authority and avoid harming the interests of Chinese client states in that region.
Differences managed according to Chinese norms	The United States and China manage their differences in bilateral and multilateral institutions and venues in accordance with norms of diplomatic relations upheld by China.
Cooperation on shared concerns	Despite differences and disagreements, the two countries cooperate on shared concerns and coordinate with one another in bilateral and multilateral institutions and venues approved by China.

characterized by mutual nonaggression, mutual noninterference in the internal affairs of one another, and a commitment to peaceful methods of resolving disagreements.¹⁵ Chinese officials accordingly envision a series of coordination mechanisms between major powers to resolve differences and address common concerns, which presumably would apply to U.S.-China relations. In the words of the 2019 foreign policy white paper, “Coordination and cooperation should be strengthened to build a stable and balanced framework of relations among major countries, which underpins world peace and stability.”¹⁶

Cooperation on shared concerns. In this posited end state, bilateral relations remain peaceful despite the persistence of friction points and disputes. The United States maintains a cooperative relationship with China on shared concerns and threats, such as the need to maintain global growth, control transnational threats, and promote international stability. The call for cooperative relations amid competition is a common theme in statements by Chinese officials on U.S. relations. This cooperation could appear in both bilateral and multilateral form, but as with other areas, the spirit of such interactions would be governed by Chinese norms.¹⁷

Chinese Foreign Policy End State for Successful U.S. Competition

The second end state concerns the international dimension of the Chinese competition with the United States (Table 6.2). In this end state, China has surpassed the United States as the undisputed leader of the Asia-Pacific. At the global level, it has also surpassed the United States as the world's most “indispensable power.”

¹⁵ Yang Sheng, “Sino-U.S. Cooperation Correct Option: Xi,” *Global Times*, March 20, 2017.

¹⁶ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

¹⁷ Xinhua, “Xi Says China, U.S. Benefit from Cooperation, Lose from Confrontation,” June 29, 2019i.

Table 6.2
Assessed Chinese Foreign Policy End State for U.S. Competition

Domain	China's Desired End State for U.S. Competition
Major powers	China exercises global primacy as the "first among equals" in a porous, malleable spheres-of-influence-type arrangement with U.S. primacy narrowed to the Americas. The European Union maintains primary influence across western Europe and maintains friendly relations with the United States but lacks the close partnership of past decades. Russia has primacy in Eastern Europe and has become a close strategic partner to China.
Periphery	The United States defers to Chinese leadership in organizing and leading Asia's economic and security order. U.S. alliances no longer pose a threat to China. China's preferences prevail over those of the United States in resolving disputes in Asia. China's preferences on its core interests prevail over those of the United States. China's network of client states serves as the organizing foundation for the region's economic and political order.
Developing world	Developing countries prioritize China's over U.S. preferences for trade and investment, especially across Eurasia, the Middle East, and Africa. China leads a larger and more effective global network of client developing countries than the United States.
Multilateral	China presides over a mix of new and old institutions with the United States acting as a generally deferential partner. Chinese norms prevail over all global and most regional multilateral organizations.
Domains/global governance	Chinese norms, values, and principles predominate in global discourse. Chinese-led technology and leadership are more essential to global economy than those of the United States. Chinese norms of space, international law, and maritime rights are globally preferred to those of United States. Human rights and democracy are relativized as values relevant to Western countries only.

In terms of major powers, the posited end state envisions China as the most influential of the major powers. The United States maintains a position of primacy in the Americas, and the European Union maintains a dominant role in western Europe. However, European countries maintain friendly relations with both the United States and China, and the days of a close alignment between the United States and the European Union have long passed. Russia maintains primacy in Eastern Europe, and Moscow has become an essential junior partner to China.

In terms of the periphery, the end state depicts China as the paramount power. China has become the most important economic, political, cultural, and technological partner across the Asia-Pacific. It maintains a strong network of client states in Central and Southeast Asia, as well as some countries in South Asia. China has set the standards, rules, and norms by which much of the global economy operates. The United States, by contrast, defers to China on its core interests related to Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, and in relation to BRI projects. The U.S. government has modified its policies to minimize criticism of China's domestic governance and politics. The United States participates in the economic and political life of the region on terms acceptable to China. U.S. alliances and partnerships, for example, may persist in name but no longer pose much of a threat to China.

Across the developing world, countries prioritize relations with China those with the United States, especially along the BRI routes. China maintains influence throughout Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Latin America through a network of client states nominally tied to the BRI. Most of the developing world favors, accordingly, Chinese terms for trade and investment over those preferred by the United States. China's discourse, values, and culture remain more influential and popular in these countries than those of the United States.

In both global venues and a variety of regional multilateral venues in Africa and Eurasia, China exerts more influence over the most important institutions than the United States. Chinese leaders have prevailed in setting norms, rules, and standards in international venues to favor Chinese companies, ensure that China gains a major share of economic growth, and privilege Chinese interests over those of the United States. Despite the reality of persistent friction and competi-

tion, China's preferred end state also envisions cooperation with the United States in multilateral settings, principally those led by China, against shared threats, such as transnational terror, pandemics, natural disasters, and the effects of climate change.

The end state also envisions China playing a leading role in global governance. While enjoying primacy in the Asia-Pacific, China's leadership role outside that region consists primarily in being a coordinator and facilitator for other regional leaders and their partners to resolve problems and manage global affairs. In global domains, such as cyberspace, space, and international law, Chinese preferences prevail over those of the United States. China's view of maritime navigation, for example, has become the accepted international law. Similarly, China has succeeded in redefining human rights and democracy as relative values appropriate perhaps for Western countries but not the rest of the world.

China's U.S. Competition Strategy: Defense End States

China's end states for the defense-related aspect of its competition with the United States center primarily on the quality of its military and the contribution of the military to foreign policy. There is no evidence that China intends to initiate military aggression against the U.S. military to achieve its broader domestic and foreign policy objectives. Nor is there any incentive for China to do so, given the risks of war. Table 6.3 summarizes the end state for defense-related matters.

The defense policy end state for China's competition with the United States consists primarily of a PLA that has achieved superiority in the Asia-Pacific as well, but not necessarily beyond that region. The end state also envisions deterrence of the United States across a variety of issues and core interests. In terms of the core interests of CCP rule and the socialist political system, the PLA and security services have successfully deterred the United States from cyber, information ops, and other challenges to CCP rule. The United States is also deterred from interfering in China's internal affairs through secret efforts to

Table 6.3**Assessed Chinese-U.S. Competition Defense Strategy End State**

Historic Mission	U.S. Role in Defense End State
Strategic support for consolidating the CCP and the socialist system	U.S. military is deterred from cyber and information operations that challenge CCP rule
Strategic support for safeguarding sovereignty, national unity, and territory	U.S. military is deterred from intervening in any conflict along China's periphery
Strategic support for protecting overseas interests	U.S. military is deterred from harming Chinese overseas interests
Strategic support for the promotion of world peace, common development	China is the preferred security partner for most countries, especially in the developing world; U.S. military cooperates or does not interfere with Chinese-led efforts to promote international stability and counter transnational threats
Force development	U.S. credibility as a military power severely weakened, especially in Asia; PLA modernization efforts result in a military technologically superior to that of the United States, characterized by integrated joint operations, intelligent warfare technologies, and a "system of systems" doctrine
Force employment	PLA can coerce or fight countries in Asia with little fear of U.S. military intervention. The PLA controls escalation for all crises and conflicts involving the United States. The PLA proves a more effective security partner than the United States for most countries, especially with client states in Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

foment unrest and opposition to CCP rule. China's cyber capability is equal to or superior to that of the United States.

For the core interests of sovereignty, territory, and national unity, the PLA has become strong enough that it has successfully deterred the United States from intervening in any contingency along China's periphery. The credibility of U.S. military power in Asia has also been so seriously weakened that the PLA feels it can coerce and, if necessary, fight regional powers with little fear of a U.S. military response. In terms of overseas interests, the United States has acquiesced to an

expanded Chinese presence around the Indian Ocean and in Africa. It may monitor PLA activity in relevant bases and facilities but makes no effort to disturb them. The PLA cooperates with the United States occasionally to defeat transnational threats that imperil both U.S. and Chinese individuals and assets. An example might be cooperation to control maritime piracy or combat radical groups in unstable parts of Africa or the Middle East.

For the mission to “promote world peace and common development,” an end state might be one in which countries along the BRI route prioritize security partnerships with China over those with the United States. In the Asia-Pacific, China has become the regional security leader through leadership in multilateral initiatives such as the SCO, CICA, and others. Chinese military leaders might also collaborate occasionally with Western European countries to combat transnational threats. Beyond Eurasia, China would welcome U.S. cooperation in UN missions to promote stability and peace, especially in areas featuring Chinese interests. In regional security–related multilateral organizations around the world, such as Africa, Chinese leadership and resources could help local governments control threats and build stronger relations with China. Chinese military diplomacy would thus reinforce diplomacy efforts aimed at bolstering Chinese leadership globally and regionally.

In terms of force development, China’s desired end state by mid-century would result in a military that is qualitatively superior to that of the United States. It would operate using the most advanced technologies and warfighting concepts, an ideal alluded to by the Chinese concept of *informatized warfare*. However, the PLA need not replicate the U.S. distribution of military forces globally. Instead, it can aim to be a more effective security provider than the United States, especially to client states across Asia and Africa, and in other developing countries around the world. The PLA would rely primarily on arms sales, military assistance, and special forces operations to help client regimes control threats to Chinese interests. In terms of force employment, the PLA would have successfully deterred the United States or, in the event of a crisis or clash, managed escalation and practiced effective control to preserve prospects of achieving the China Dream.

The judgment that China seeks to ascend to the position of global leader unavoidably implies that the same end state requires a downgrading in U.S. status. Washington is unlikely to voluntarily submit to such an outcome unless it concludes it lacks another option. The United States might even be willing to risk war to defend its position if it judged China's demands to be unreasonable and unjust. Indeed, scholarship on past power transitions has noted a desultory pattern in which incumbent powers risk war rather than submit to a rising power. The Chinese are well aware of this possibility, which is why officials and commentators incessantly denounce the idea of a *Thucydides trap*. Chinese officials generally hold that such a trap is not an "inevitability," although they insist that the United States carries the responsibility for avoiding such a disaster by adopting policies of accommodation.

Although Chinese officials and scholars seek to avoid an open challenge to U.S. leadership, leaders seem to believe in a growing possibility that China could eclipse the United States as a global power someday. Statements by top leaders evince uncertainty and some anxiety about how the United States may respond to this possibility. In a startling acknowledgment of this sensitive issue, Xi directed greater efforts to study power transitions at the recent foreign affairs work conference, calling for "in-depth analysis of the law of how the international situation changes when the world comes into its transitional period." Xi indirectly referred to potential disruptions and uncertainties in the U.S.-China relationship, stating that in light of the "accelerated development of multi-polarization," it had become necessary to "attach great importance to *the tendency of extensive adjustments in major-country relations*" (emphasis added).¹⁸

How China aims to manage a power transition with the United States is not clear. War is a real risk, but then again, not all historical rivalries ended in large-scale violence. The Cold War ended when the Soviet Union concluded that it had failed to keep up with the West

¹⁸ Xinhua, "Xi Jinping at the Central Foreign Affairs Work Conference Emphasizes Holding Firm the Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for the New Era Foreign Relations Concepts as Guidance [习近平在中央外事工作会议上强调坚持以新时代中国特色社会主义思想为指导]," June 23, 2018d.

amid mounting domestic woes. China may similarly hope that the United States concludes that accommodation to Chinese leadership serves its needs better than waging a war of potential mutual annihilation to forestall such a possibility. The following chapters explore possible international and defense strategies that could place the United States in such a position of disadvantage.

China's International Strategy for U.S. Competition

This chapter explores a possible strategy that China could employ in coming years to achieve the international desired end state for U.S. competition presented in Table 6.2. Following the foreign policy template introduced in Chapter Three, we deduce potential objectives for the 2035 time frame. These objectives serve as benchmarks for assessing progress toward the international end state. In constructing the objectives, we strove to adhere to the frameworks and goals presented in the preceding chapters, as well as in the reporting on Chinese policies. In most cases, sufficient information exists to permit the formulation of reasonable directives with some degree of sourcing. In other cases, the goals are speculative. In either case, we reiterate the caveat that the international strategy presented in this chapter should be regarded as an analytically derived strategy proposed by the authors and based on our reading of Chinese sources rather than a direct representation of any official Chinese competitive strategy.

For each of the sections, we have provided an overview of how China views its interests in the region, and how these affect its prospects for competition with the United States. We then posit potential policy objectives in a supporting table. To help analysts and planners evaluate how China might regard progress toward its goals, we have proposed subobjectives in the appendix. We also offer some suggestions for how China might pursue its objectives, although these represent mere conjecture offered as food for thought. The suggestions represent methods consistent with what we know about Chinese approaches, but they are by no means definitive predictions of how China will behave.

Major Powers

The 2019 foreign policy white paper listed the United States, Russia, and the European Union as the principal “major powers,” and this section will use that list of countries accordingly (Table 6.2). The other main contender for this category is obviously Japan, the country with the third-largest economy after the United States and China. However, as noted previously, the trend under Xi Jinping has been for officials to group Japan in the category of “periphery” countries.

China's objectives regarding major powers in the competition with the United States center on the pursuit of a *multipolar* order in which China plays a more important role than the United States. As noted in the previous section, we argue that China's desired end state for major power relations is to establish itself as the “first among equals,” in which the United States, Russia, and the European Union oversee permeable, *de facto* spheres of influence. Of the major powers, Beijing clearly regards Russia as a critical junior partner and the United States as a formidable competitor with whom relations must be handled with care. China regards the European Union, by contrast, as an important collaborator with whom Beijing hopes to nurture relations as an independent “pole” at odds with American power.

However, in this ideal arrangement, China has gained a measure of deference from the other major powers. Each of the major powers respects China's authority and interests in its respective “sphere.” This might mean, for example, that official statements and documents by the other major powers tacitly accept China's position regarding the South China Sea or Taiwan. It might also mean that within their respective “spheres,” the other major powers would cooperate with Chinese authorities to control individuals and organizations Beijing regarded as threatening, or at least avoid openly demonstrating official support for them. The major powers might also tacitly agree to refrain from harming the interests of Chinese client countries in their “back yards.” China, in turn, would probably offer to similarly abstain from harming the citizens and their assets of other major powers in the Asia-Pacific region, although this would not preclude diplomatic efforts to minimize the influence of major-power competitors. Such objectives

would, in some ways, represent an extension of current PRC policies. Chinese officials have demanded that countries demonstrate “mutual respect” by refraining from criticism of Chinese domestic politics and have for years wielded economic coercion and other diplomatic punishments against other countries that offended Beijing’s sensitivities on such issues as Tibet, Xinjiang, human rights, and Taiwan.¹ Officials have also pledged to respect the interests of other countries in Asia as a condition for the same countries agreeing to “respect” China’s core interests. China’s strategy also seeks to socialize major powers to coordinate on shared concerns and resolve differences through dialogues and in accordance with norms upheld by China, such as the five principles of peaceful coexistence (Chapter Six). This, too, is an idea drawn from current policies that advocate reordering how major powers interact to conform with China’s template of “new type major power relations.”²

United States

The United States plays a significant role in China’s pursuit of its national development goals. Authorities continue to emphasize the importance of the U.S. relationship. The 2019 foreign policy white paper, for example, described it as “one of the most important bilateral relationships in the world.” It called on Washington to adopt “cooperation” as the “only correct choice”—betraying an anxiety about potential U.S. responses to China’s rise. For similar reasons, the paper insisted that China has “no intention of challenging the United States,” even though, as noted in Chapter Five, officials and commentators have made clear an intent to curb U.S. power and assert greater Chinese international leadership at the expense of the United States. Consistent with long-standing policy, the paper called on the United States to “abandon the Cold War mentality.” It recommended that the United States develop a “proper understanding of itself, China, and the world.”³ This language implies that Washington should modify poli-

¹ Ketian Vivian Zhang, “China’s Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale,” Brookings Institution, Washington, D.C., January 22, 2019.

² State Council Information Office, 2019b.

³ State Council Information Office, 2019b

cies in a manner recommended by Beijing to accommodate the reality of a declining West and rising non-West.

On some issues, China may seek cooperation and collaboration with the United States, such as against transnational threats in which the U.S. ability to project military power around the world might be useful. On the other hand, China will have a strong and growing incentive to erode the credibility and appeal of U.S. international leadership. Beijing's efforts to contrast the effectiveness of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic with that of the United States is but one example of the competition for influence already shaping international politics.⁴

A review of China's policy goals for national development shows that as a broad characterization, the United States serves primarily as a competitor in security and political affairs, although Beijing regards some cooperation as possible. In the realm of economics, by contrast, China is likely to view the United States as both a potential cooperative partner and a competitor. China hopes to maintain high levels of trade to sustain growth, for example, even as the two compete for some markets around the world. The combination of both cooperative and competitive goals provides the most essential rationale for China's pursuit of some sort of institutionalized "new type major power" relationship with the United States.

In the next few decades, China's interests would be best served if it maintained a stable, cooperative relationship with the United States even as it stepped up efforts to erode U.S. power and undercut America's international standing. China would also benefit if the United States remained divided on whether to adopt a primarily competitive approach or to adopt a more cooperative, deferential approach to growing Chinese power. This is an admittedly contradictory set of directives, and Beijing would require considerable skill to manage this balance. But too much drive in either direction, of excessive cooperation or competition, could hamper the pursuit of the China Dream. Accommodation to U.S. demands would mean accepting limitations

⁴ Don Weinland, "China Goes on the Offensive to Control Global Coronavirus Narrative," *Financial Times*, March 13, 2020.

on China's ability to sustain economic growth and a status quo regarding Taiwan and the South and East China Seas that Beijing regards as intolerable. But excessive confrontation risks destabilizing relations to the point of hostility and conflict, which, if left uncontrolled, could lead to a broader war that derails the China Dream.

China may, in the long term, seek to surpass the United States as a global leader, but this is not a feasible goal for at least the next decade or two. Thus, China's more proximate goal should be to build its comprehensive national power, avoid confrontational policies, and encourage a weakening of U.S. power. Domestically, resolving key economic and governance challenges should be a top priority in coming years if Beijing is to position itself more effectively against the United States. China's U.S. strategy in coming years should show considerable continuity with current efforts to balance cooperative elements with those of delegitimization. Beijing might seek a reduction in tariffs and an increase in trade and investment opportunities, as well as offers to cooperate on such shared concerns as humanitarian disaster and maritime piracy. At the same time, Beijing might compete more aggressively for international influence and to step up criticism of the United States. At the very least, China might abstain from helping the United States overcome any of its own difficulties and may, in some cases, carry out provocative policies aimed at eroding U.S. authority and credibility. A disturbing glimpse of such policies could be seen in the campaign of disinformation spread by Chinese authorities that blamed the spread of COVID-19 on the U.S. military.⁵ U.S. officials have also warned that China, as well as Russia, may seek to interfere in U.S. elections, perhaps to encourage the sort of divisive politics and polarization that has weakened America's international standing and domestic focus.⁶ Actions that target U.S. domestic politics or economic competitiveness pose serious risks of inflaming tensions and inviting retaliation, of course. Such actions could backfire and heighten percep-

⁵ Jennifer Rankin, "EU Says China Behind a 'Huge Wave' of Covid-19 Disinformation," *The Guardian*, June 10, 2020.

⁶ Ken Dilanian, "U.S. Intel Agencies: Russia and China Plotting to Interfere in 2020 Election," NBC News, January 29, 2019.

tions of threat in other countries, as happened in Europe in response to China's COVID-19 disinformation campaign.⁷ Chinese leaders, accordingly, may pursue such options with caution and under cover of secrecy.

Given its current inferiority to U.S. power, it would behoove China to delegitimize the status of the United States as the sole superpower and instead cast the United States as merely one, albeit the strongest, of several major powers. Consistent with this logic is the Chinese demand for treatment as an "equal" to the United States, a condition that Chinese leaders have insisted upon regularly in recent years. A typical formulation of this demand is Xi Jinping's statement that the United States and China should resolve their trade differences "on the basis of equality and mutual respect."⁸ Similarly, China's call for the United States and China to manage relations along the lines of a "new type major power" relationship modeled on China-Russia relations implies a reduction in the status of the United States from the global leader to one of many major powers.⁹ Another step China could take to advance its aims is to ramp up the cultivation of client partner organizations, universities, businesses, and individuals in the United States. The elevation in the status and work of the CCP's United Front Department has drawn widespread media attention for just this sort of activity. Chinese authorities have used the threat of withholding market access and trade deals, for example, to coerce U.S. organizations and entities into avoiding actions and statements that might contradict Beijing's policy preferences regarding Hong Kong, Taiwan, Xinjiang, and other topics.¹⁰

⁷ Luke Baker and Robin Emmott, "As China Pushes Back on Virus, Europe Wakes to 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy," Reuters, May 14, 2020.

⁸ Xinhua, "Xi Says Phase-One China-U.S. Trade Deal Benefits Both Sides, World," December 24, 2019n.

⁹ Xinhua, "Commentary: Respecting China's Core Interests Is the 'Bottom Line' for Business," January 12, 2018a.

¹⁰ Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping," Wilson Center, Washington, D.C., September 18, 2017.

Europe

Regarding Europe, China views the European Union as a potentially important partner for strategic and economic reasons. In strategic terms, Europe could become an advocate for a multilateralism featuring a diminished United States. In economic terms, Europe appeals to Beijing as a lucrative market and a source of key technologies and investment. The 2019 foreign policy white paper described the European Union as an “important pillar in the world today” and hailed a “comprehensive strategic partnership” with it. The white paper called for both sides to extend cooperation and “make joint efforts to uphold multilateralism.” The white paper did not address individual countries, but Beijing would benefit most if the European Union remained largely politically divided and unable to agree on a common strategy regarding China.¹¹ As previously noted, Chinese analysts believe a weakening and fragmenting West opens opportunities for China, and, thus, evidence that the United States and Europe have built a close and tight partnership could pose a formidable obstacle to Beijing's efforts to renovate the international order.

If the European Union remained divided over core issues of whether to support U.S. or Chinese technology, trade, and other economic standards, this would also facilitate China's ambitions. China need not build close partnerships with all European countries, just enough to ensure that the European Union remains politically divided and that Chinese firms gain a foothold in that lucrative market. A European Union that provided little more than token support to U.S. security activities in Asia would reassure China as well. To promote division and impede a unified approach, China could rely on the threat of economic sanctions, such as the cancellation of trade deals, restricting access to its market, and the curbing of investment. Beijing has notably wielded these threats in recent years to strong-arm various European countries on an array of issues.¹² China might rely on multilateral organizations that divide Europe to promote BRI-related

¹¹ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

¹² Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosen, and Edoardo Saravalle, *China's Use of Coercive Economic Measures*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2018.

projects, as it has done with the *17 Plus 1* organization that focuses on building client states in central and eastern Europe. A European policy paper, published in 2020, described the 17 Plus 1 program as a “hub and spokes logic of cooperation with China taking the lead in ‘multilateral bilateralism.’”¹³ United Front tactics to build a network of compliant advocates in various European countries could also help promote disunity and a policy stance favorable to Beijing by cultivating clients among businesses, political parties, universities, and individual leaders.¹⁴

Russia

Chinese sources regard Russia as an important partner in the competition with the United States. The 2019 foreign policy white paper stated that Beijing has “prioritized its relations with Russia in its diplomatic agenda.” It described the strategic partnership between the two as “enjoying the highest level of mutual trust and coordination and the highest strategic value.” Hinting more directly at the role that the partnership could play in competing with the United States, the white paper stated that the China-Russia relationship will serve as “both a ballast and a propeller” in a “complex and volatile” international relationship. This language suggests that China regards Russia as an important partner for pushing through changes that shape the international order in terms amenable to Chinese leadership. Indeed, the white paper added that a close partnership between the two countries is imperative for “world peace, security, and stability.”¹⁵

Other statements by Chinese leaders and white papers underscore the importance China places on its partnership with Russia. In June 2018, President Xi awarded China’s first “friendship medal” to Russian

¹³ Ivana Karásková, Alicja Bachulska, Ágnes Szunomár, Stefan Vladislavljev, Una Aleksandra Bērziņa-Čerenkova, Konstantinas Andrijauskas, Liisi Karindi, Andreea Leonte, Nina Pejić, and Filip Šebok, “Empty Shell No More: China’s Growing Footprint in Central and Eastern Europe,” China Observers in Central and Eastern Europe, policy paper, April 2020.

¹⁴ Jens Kastner, “United Front Gains Ground in Germany,” *Asia Sentinel*, October 11, 2019.

¹⁵ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

President Vladimir Putin and described the Russian leader as “my best, most intimate friend.”¹⁶

A close partnership with Russia provides China a useful geopolitical ally in its efforts to fracture Western power and revise the international order. However, Beijing must be sensitive to the risk that Russia may grow anxious about China's power. To that end, it is in China's interest to ensure that Moscow remains at odds with the United States and the European Union because this will incentivize Moscow to maintain close ties with China. At the same time, China has little to gain by being dragged into conflicts between Russia and the West. Consistent with this logic, China has, on the one hand, participated in exercises with Russian military forces and authored policy statements expressing ambitions to revise aspects of the international order, as well as solidarity with Russia and other antagonists of the West, such as Iran.¹⁷ On the other hand, China has largely refrained from supporting Russia in its standoff with the West over the Crimea and Ukraine. China would also like to continue to acquire energy supplies from Russia—but at a favorable rate—while maintaining Russia's compliance with the BRI projects.

In short, China would benefit most from an asymmetric relationship in which it had greater influence over Russia's behavior in exchange for providing various goods and benefits. This would be less of a true partnership between equals than the relationship of a partner and “junior partner,” or perhaps that of a patron and client. A patron-client relationship would grant China more influence over Moscow's sale of arms to countries with relations antagonistic to Beijing, such as Vietnam and India. A more compliant Russia would allow China to more closely coordinate with Russia for key BRI projects, especially through Central Asian countries. Closer China-Russia coordination could more effectively erode Western power. Russia's declining prospects make the risk of deepening dependence on China already a real-

¹⁶ “China's Xi Awards ‘Best Friend’ Putin Friendship Medal, Promises Support,” Reuters, June 8, 2018.

¹⁷ Agence France-Presse, “China Hosts Russia, Iran for Summit as US Tensions Rise,” *Business Times*, June 9, 2018.

ity. In 2019, Russia had the 11th-largest economy, trailing countries such as Canada and Brazil.¹⁸ China could rely on diplomacy, energy deals, trade, and investment to extend its influence over Russia, as it has already done. Some experts judge that Beijing's skillful exploitation of Russian weakness has already rendered Moscow a "junior partner."¹⁹

In sum, China's competition with the United States would be greatly aided if Western nations lacked unity and China maintained solidarity and cooperative relations with Russia (see Table 7.1). Although Beijing's ability to affect relations between the United States

Table 7.1
Assessed Chinese Objectives for Major-Power Aspect of U.S. Competition

Category	U.S. Competition–Related Objectives for 2035
United States	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. United States has modified policies to accommodate China's demands regarding its core interests.2. U.S. government and public lack consensus on whether China poses a threat.3. U.S.-China governments cooperate on shared concerns on equal terms per "new type major power" framework.4. United States upholds cooperation to facilitate China's development.5. U.S. policies to constrain China generally ineffective.
Europe	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. European Union has modified policies to accommodate China's demands regarding its core interests, despite U.S. objections.2. European Union cooperates with China as a partner equal in importance to United States.3. European Union divided in support for China over U.S. international leadership.4. European nations provide token to no support for U.S. strategies to counter China
Russia	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Russia maintains strong solidarity and coordinates closely on U.S.-related policies as junior partner.2. United States and European Union maintain antagonistic relations with Russia but avoid conflict.

¹⁸ World Bank, "GDP," data set, undated.

¹⁹ Grzegorz Kuczyński, "Russia—China's Junior Partner," Warsaw Institute, November 2, 2019.

and either Russia or the European Union may be limited, Beijing can take actions to encourage trends that it regards as favorable, or at least avoid impeding the same trends.

China's Periphery

Chinese authorities regard the Asia-Pacific region as the geostrategic foundation of China's rise and have accorded the region a high diplomatic priority. The 2019 foreign policy white paper called the region the "foundation of China's development and prosperity." It stated that Beijing had assigned "top priority" to diplomacy to the region. The white paper also stated that China intends to "lead regional cooperation and safeguard regional peace and development."²⁰

Underscoring the importance of the region, in 2013, China held its first central work forum on diplomacy to the Asia-Pacific region, at which Xi Jinping outlined a strategy to consolidate Chinese influence over a span of years.²¹ The document was followed by Xi's statement in 2014 that "it is for the people of Asia to uphold the security of Asia."²² These policies build on directives issued by Xi Jinping in 2013, when he called for policies to bolster China's attractiveness as a regional economic and political leader.²³ The push to minimize the U.S. security presence coincided with a firmer line on China's core interests. As Xi has stated, "China will never give up its legitimate rights," and "no one should expect [China] to swallow anything that undermines [its] interests."²⁴ This suggests that Beijing regards a weakening U.S. security presence in Asia as opening opportunities for China to consolidate control over long-disputed territories.

²⁰ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

²¹ Timothy R. Heath, "Diplomacy Work Forum: Xi Steps Up Efforts to Shape a China-Centered Regional Order," *China Brief*, Vol. 13, No. 22, November 7, 2013.

²² Xi Jinping, 2014a.

²³ Xinhua, "Xi Jinping: China to Further Friendly Relations with Neighboring Countries," October 26, 2013c.

²⁴ Xinhua, 2017d.

China's objectives for the United States in the Asia-Pacific are likely to be the most contentious and difficult of all its foreign policies, and yet this area is critical to the success of China's global ambitions. The region holds the greatest risks to China's security, as well as the greatest opportunity to enhance its economic development. To achieve a position of international superiority, China would benefit enormously if it could establish its primacy in this region. However, even if successful, China is unlikely to enjoy the sort of unchallenged primacy that the United States has in the Americas. Beijing will continue to face powerful neighbors, such as Japan, India, and strong middle powers, such as Australia and Korea, which will likely resist Chinese efforts to assert greater dominance. With these competing powers, China could perhaps hope to achieve a working relationship based on mutual interest. These competitors might grudgingly accept Chinese leadership and prioritize Chinese-led norms and rules regarding trade, investment, and infrastructure as perhaps the most workable of available options. These larger powers might agree to refrain from policies that offend Chinese sensibilities on domestic concerns and participate in Chinese-led multilateral organizations to manage the region's affairs. However, they do not necessarily defer consistently to Beijing and may resist many demands that they regard as unreasonable.

A plausible form of Chinese primacy might be one in which all Asian countries manage their own affairs, but they also generally, though perhaps not consistently, prioritize Beijing's preferences in matters of regional trade, infrastructure, investment, and security. This means that Chinese standards, rules, and norms prevail over those of other countries in the region's economic and political architecture. Chinese-led multilateral organizations would play the most essential role in governing the region, and Chinese-led security initiatives would play the most essential role in controlling transnational threats, managing crises, and maintaining regional order. At the same time, all countries would respect China's sensitivities regarding its core interests and modify their policies accordingly. The United States would not be excluded from the region, but its participation would be on terms acceptable to Beijing. This could mean U.S. companies participate in regional trade at a disadvantage and that U.S. officials are routinely

excluded from the multilateral networks most essential to the regional order. In such a situation, the U.S. military would remain in the region, but it would operate in a nonthreatening manner. For example, U.S. allies and partners would generally prioritize relations with China over those with the United States in a condition of Chinese primacy. Thus, the alliances remain in name only and generally lack any real substance in terms of countering Chinese power.

In terms of objectives for U.S. competition by 2035, we posit that China should seek to both avoid provoking a conflict while gradually marginalizing its competitors and keep major Asian powers from forming an anti-China alliance. Consistent with these objectives would be a public statement welcoming U.S. involvement in the region that coincides with diligent efforts to undermine U.S. power and lay the foundations for a Chinese-led economic and political order. In fact, many Chinese policies toward the region are consistent with such an approach. Chinese officials insist that they have no intent to “exclude” the United States—nor is exclusion of the world’s largest economy possible. At the same time, Beijing is building alternative institutions, such as the SCO, AIIB, and other multilateral institutions and mechanisms that aim to address the region’s need without involving the United States. The following sections explore potential goals regarding specific countries and subregions and suggest some possible methods that could be used to achieve those goals; Table 7.2 summarizes.

Japan

Tokyo undoubtedly poses one of the most vexing and difficult challenges to Chinese efforts to consolidate its leadership in Asia. Historical animosities and Japan’s traditional role as a competitor mean that Tokyo is unlikely to subordinate itself to China. Beijing’s challenge is compounded by the fact that Japan remains one of Asia’s most stalwart supporters of an alliance with the United States. The U.S. government also regards its alliance with Japan as critical. A State Department fact sheet called the U.S. alliance with Japan the “cornerstone of U.S. security interests in Asia” and “fundamental to regional stability and

prosperity.”²⁵ The combined might of the Japanese and the U.S. militaries also poses a formidable force. The two have been staunch partners in promoting a competing vision of Asia's integration and development through the Free and Open Indo-Pacific initiative. China would be well served if it could find ways of limiting the appeal and effectiveness of U.S. and Japanese cooperation in support of that effort.

China's interests could best be served by finding ways to divide the two allies in a manner that leaves Japan reassured. This is also admittedly a complex and contradictory requirement that will remain challenging for even the most skilled Chinese diplomats. Beijing could perhaps focus on bolstering practical cooperation, building goodwill, and promoting trust with Japan while promoting messages about the weaknesses and unreliability of the United States as an ally. China is unlikely to displace the United States as Japan's most important partner, but Beijing could perhaps hope to be treated as a country of equal importance to the United States in economic and political terms, if only for pragmatic reasons. Pragmatic cooperation could be centered on the pressing needs to build Asia's infrastructure, trade, and investment potential. If Japan could be persuaded to prioritize cooperation with China over the development of a competing array of initiatives led by the United States, this could be a significant achievement by 2035. It is also plausible that Japan concludes that working with China offers a better path to achieving its own economic goals than constructing an alternative. Indeed, many Western scholars have already characterized Japan's approach to China as featuring a mix of cooperation and competition aimed at enhancing its own strategic autonomy relative to both the United States and China.²⁶

Yet although Beijing might welcome a Japan that had loosened its ties to the United States, China would also benefit most if the United States remained involved enough to reassure Japan and restrain it from aggressively countering China's military buildup. A Japan that felt

²⁵ U.S. Department of State, “U.S. Relations with Japan,” fact sheet, January 21, 2020.

²⁶ Chisako Masuo, “Competitive Cooperation for Regional Development: Japan's New Strategy Toward Rising China,” *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 65, No. 3, September 2019.

abandoned could turn to rapid military expansion and even possibly the acquisition of nuclear weapons—a potential nightmare scenario for Beijing.²⁷ This is especially the case in regard to the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands flashpoint. Beijing's position regarding the United States would improve if all countries avoided conflict near the islands. China faces a strong incentive to maintain patience and avoid military aggression to resolve the islands' status. Aggression would drive Japan into the arms of the United States, undermining the broader strategic imperative of separating the two. Moreover, Chinese aggression would strengthen the U.S. strategic position by reinforcing the U.S. narrative about the "China threat."

This does not mean that China needs to compromise on its interests, however. Beijing could continue to bolster its control of the Senkakus by relying on the gray-zone tactics that have confounded Tokyo and Washington. These tactics carry the cost of alienating Tokyo and hardening anti-China sentiments. Yet there are also compelling reasons for Beijing to maintain the gray-zone pressure, some of which are tied to the U.S.-China competition. Because the islands are a highly visible symbol of the competition for leadership between two traditional Asian giants, yielding to Japan on the issue could deal a major blow to perceptions of Chinese power. Rather, the islands provide a useful means of demonstrating Beijing's superior power over a declining Japan. Tokyo may never accept Chinese sovereignty over the islands, but it has little ability to resist China's growing presence and exploitation of resources near the islands. Observers have noted that the dispute over the islands has provided Beijing useful leverage to demand concessions from Japan on other issues, such as security arrangements with the United States, economic aid and sanctions, and other issues. Given that China's advantage near the islands will likely grow in the future, it has a strong incentive to maintain the dispute as a means of extracting even more concessions through coercion.²⁸ To manage the risk that a crisis could erupt, Chinese leaders might focus on crisis

²⁷ Mark Fitzpatrick, "How Japan Could Go Nuclear," *Foreign Affairs*, October 3, 2019.

²⁸ Krista E. Wiegand, "China's Strategy in the Senkaku/Diaoyutai Dispute: Issue Linkage and Coercive Diplomacy," *Asian Security*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 2009.

management, deterrence, and diplomatic methods of restoring the situation. Maintaining the Senkaku dispute might bolster Japan's relationship with the United States, but it might also underscore the limits of the relationship. The United States has done little to counter China's air and maritime presence near the islands, because it officially takes no stand on the issue of ownership (although Washington has stated that it recognizes Japan's administration of the Senkakus). Should U.S. power ever atrophy to the point of severe weakness in the Indo-Pacific, China might regard a clash over the Senkaku Islands as an opportune way to underscore the hollowness of U.S. security assurances. If Beijing judged that Washington would not get involved in a clash between its most important Asian ally and China, the damage from inaction to the credibility of U.S. alliances could prove irreparable.

In short, China's goals through 2035 regarding Japan could focus on building good relations, easing Tokyo's anxiety, and encouraging Japan to develop its autonomy from the United States, which might open the way to a peaceful coexistence in a Chinese-led order. China could maintain the dispute over the Senkakus as a way of demonstrating its growing edge over Japan to the entire region and of extracting concessions on other issues. However, Beijing would have little incentive to provoke a military conflict before a time when China could be relatively sure that the United States would not intervene on behalf of its ally.

South Korea

China already has developed a strong economic and diplomatic relationship with South Korea. In recent years, the Republic of Korea (ROK) showed considerable deference to Beijing on such issues as how to approach North Korea.²⁹ Many observers have already noted South Korea's warming relationship with China and Seoul's determination to establish a new role for itself in Asia. China could encourage these trends by offering itself as a more effective partner for managing North Korea. Beijing could encourage Seoul to develop a more autonomous

²⁹ Laura Zhou, "South Korea and China Relations Warming but Chilly Restrictions Remain," *South China Morning Post*, October 18, 2018.

role in Asia independent of the United States, thereby opening opportunities to forge a closer, warmer China-ROK partnership.

Managing South Korea's relationship with the United States is likely to remain challenging. Although the South Korean public may have ambivalent feelings about the U.S. military presence, distrust of China has also grown. Beijing's efforts to coerce Seoul into rejecting the deployment of a U.S. theater missile defense system severely damaged bilateral relations.³⁰ According to polls, only 14 percent of South Koreans regard China as a reliable future partner, and 95 percent have a favorable view of the U.S. alliance.³¹ Despite the damaged relationship, Chinese pressure has persuaded South Korea to pursue greater autonomy from both the United States and China. Beijing may conclude that economic coercion and arm-twisting may yield a further softening of South Korea's alliance with the United States, viewed by some experts as a "weak link" in the U.S. alliance system in Asia owing to Korea's traditional deferential position toward China.³² In short, China's goal for South Korea should be to encourage autonomy from Washington even if that means distancing from China as well. China could also incentivize a closer relationship over the long term through steady engagement and pressure on Seoul to limit support for U.S. strategies to constrain China.

North Korea

China remains an official ally, but Beijing has distanced itself from the Cold War obligation in recent decades. Tensions remain over Chinese pressure on Pyongyang regarding its nuclear weapon program. The persistence of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) regime provides Washington a strong rationale for stationing substan-

³⁰ Christine Kim and Ben Blanchard, "China, South Korea Agree to Mend Ties After THAAD Standoff," Reuters, October 30, 2017.

³¹ Karl Friedhoff, Dina Smeltz, J. James Kim, Kang Chungku, Scott A. Snyder, and Ellen Swicord, "Cooperation and Hedging: Comparing US and South Korean Views of China," Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Chicago, Ill., October 2019.

³² Jung H. Pak, "Trying to Loosen the Linchpin: China's Approach to South Korea," Brookings Institution, July 2020.

tial military forces on the Korean peninsula. Although Beijing would benefit if Pyongyang reconciled with Seoul and reduced tensions, this is obviously not something China can determine. Beijing can maintain outreach with the United States to manage the North Korea challenge while aiming to reduce overall tensions through the Six Party Talks (6PT) and other Chinese-led initiatives. China's interest in stability and peace on the peninsula also provides a compelling incentive to deter the United States from taking provocative military actions against the DPRK and its nuclear weapon program. China's DPRK goals might thus entail the provision of diplomatic and military cover to maintain stability and ward off U.S. efforts to adopt more aggressive military actions against Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Taiwan

The failure to realize unification remains a persistent sign of the humiliation suffered by China in the "century of humiliation." Chinese officials have consistently affirmed the view that the island remains a "part of China" and vowed to pay any price to defeat "separatists" who might seek to establish an independent Taiwan.³³ The PLA continues to prepare for contingencies, and defense white papers affirm that Taiwan remains a main strategic direction in terms of military threats.³⁴

However, the prospects for peaceful unification continue to dim. Polls show that popular support for unification has dwindled to around 10 percent.³⁵ The United States has stepped up efforts to strengthen ties with Taiwan in recent years and continues to sell arms to the island. Despite the unfavorable developments, China has little reason to risk war over unification, especially given competing strategic imperatives, such as the need to overhaul a slowing economy, control corruption, stabilize fraying relations with the United States, and manage such geoeconomic initiatives as the BRI. Although Taiwan is important for China, military options to compel unification risk a

³³ Xinhua, "Taiwan Separatist Attempts Doomed to Fail: Spokesman," June 26, 2019h.

³⁴ Xinhua, 2019a.

³⁵ Miu Tsung-Han and Frances Huang, "Over 27% of Taiwan People Support Independence: MAC Poll," *Focus Taiwan*, October 26, 2019.

Table 7.2
Assessed Chinese Objectives for Periphery Aspect of U.S. Competition

Category	Objectives for 2035
Japan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Japan cooperates with China as a partner of near-equal importance to that of the United States. 2. Japan's cooperation to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific proves generally ineffective. 3. The United States continues to restrain Japan from provocations. 4. U.S. alliance with Japan declines in effectiveness over time.
Koreas	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. ROK prioritizes its relationship with China over that with the United States for all issues except DPRK. 2. ROK provides token to no support for U.S. strategies to counter China. 3. China, ROK, DPRK, and United States cooperate to promote stability on the peninsula. 4. The United States is deterred from exercising provocative military options against DPRK and its nuclear program.
Taiwan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. United States reduces military and political support to Taiwan. 2. United States restrains Taiwan from pursuing de jure independence. 3. Taiwan provides little to no support to U.S. efforts to constrain China.
Southeast Asia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thailand and the Philippines prioritize security partnership with China over U.S. alliance obligations. 2. Vietnam refrains from upgrading its security relationship with the United States. 3. Southeast Asian nations prioritize economic and diplomatic relations with China over those with the United States. 4. Southeast Asian nations support Chinese over U.S. international leadership. 5. Southeast Asian nations provide little to no support to U.S. efforts to constrain China, including Free and Open Indo-Pacific.
South Asia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. South Asian countries prioritize China over U.S. relations in diplomacy, trade, and investment. 2. Most South Asian countries support Chinese over U.S. international leadership. 3. India, other South Asia states provide token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China, including Free and Open Indo-Pacific.
Central Asia	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Central Asian nations prioritize relations with China over United States. 2. Central Asian nations support Chinese over U.S. international leadership. 3. Central Asian nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China, or efforts are ineffective.

Table 7.2—Continued

Category	Objectives for 2035
Oceania	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Oceania prioritizes its relationship with China over that with the United States. 2. Australia is divided in support for China over U.S. international leadership. 3. Australia provides token to no support for U.S. strategies to counter China.
Regional multilateral groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chinese-led multilateral initiatives play a greater role in managing regional security and economy than U.S.-led efforts. 2. Regional organizations accommodate Chinese preferences.

catastrophic war with the United States, which could in turn destroy any hope of achieving the China Dream.

For the near term, China might hope to persuade U.S. officials to minimize their political and military support to the island. At the same time, Beijing might press Washington to restrain Taiwan from pursuing *de jure* independence, which would result in a serious military crisis and possibly war. However, deepening competition with the United States has incentivized Taiwan to pursue a closer relationship with the United States and eroded Washington's willingness to comply with Chinese demands regarding the island.³⁶ At this point, Beijing has little reason to hope it can either win over the people of Taiwan with friendly diplomacy or persuade the United States to support Beijing against Taiwan. A more plausible strategy going forward may be for China to rely on the veiled threat of war if Taiwan drifts further toward independence while Beijing focuses on weakening the strategic position of the United States in the Asia-Pacific. A continued robust buildup of PLA capabilities aimed at defeating any U.S. military intervention on Taiwan's behalf could both hammer home the futility of Taipei's reliance on U.S. security assurances and elevate doubts and skepticism in the United States about the wisdom of promising too much. Continued efforts to isolate Taiwan diplomatically and weaken its appeal globally could mitigate U.S. support to the island in

³⁶ Paul McCleary, "Esper Stands by Korea, Taiwan—but Offers Olive Branch to China," *Breaking Defense*, July 21, 2020.

the competition. Ultimately, however, China's best prospect for securing Taiwan through military attack would be to delay resolution until China had gained the geopolitical and military upper hand against the United States. If China succeeds in outcompeting the United States, a weakened United States might concede that its position had become untenable and tacitly withdraw its support for the island.

Southeast Asia

The countries of ASEAN play an important role in China's vision for its revitalization. China's Maritime Silk Road consists of a series of collaborative infrastructure initiatives designed to further trade and investment primarily through seaborne trade. The route passes through Southeast Asia and along the Indian Ocean before terminating in Africa and Europe. It is designed to realize the economic potential of the Southeast Asian region, widely regarded to be a key driver of future global growth.³⁷ U.S. officials also recognize the importance of this area and have stepped up engagement as well, making Southeast Asia a prime area for regional competition.

Given its economic importance and proximity to China, Southeast Asia may be a region that features a more military aspect to the competition. The importance of BRI projects to the region's economic prospects provides China a convenient justification for seeking both greater access for its military and a higher degree of security cooperation between ASEAN countries and the PLA.

We posit competition-related goals for the region to include the strengthening of a network of client states and weakening of U.S. security relationships. In particular, Beijing might hope, by 2035, to turn some of the poorer countries, such as Cambodia, Laos, and/or Bangladesh, into client states. The client states might permit Chinese air and naval forces to operate on a temporary basis from their territory in exchange for Chinese protection and economic benefits. These assets might carry out patrols or lead multilateral operations to counter

³⁷ Nicholas Szechenyi, ed., *China's Maritime Silk Road: Strategic and Economic Implications for the Indo-Pacific Region*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, March 2018.

shared threats to BRI investments in the region. However, such access would also allow Beijing to send an unmistakable political message of growing Chinese power and waning U.S. influence.

As countries become more involved in BRI-related collaboration, China could exploit its economic leverage to demand that countries curb their relations with the United States. Beijing might, for example, press Thailand to prohibit the U.S. military from staging any military forces that could be used in an offensive manner against China, rendering the alliance mostly hollow.³⁸ Beijing could further erode the alliance by forging a stronger military partnership with Thailand through arms sales, collaborative training, and military advisory and assistance missions.³⁹ As the patron-client relationship develops, Beijing could build on existing agreements to seek greater access for PLA forces in the country, perhaps through temporary basing.⁴⁰ Deployed PLA units could advise Thai forces to counter domestic threats under the pretense of protecting BRI investments.

In the Philippines, China might seek to consolidate the economic partnership developed under Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte to request greater PLA access to the country in exchange for more security assistance to address the archipelago's domestic security needs.⁴¹ As it cultivated Manila as a client, China could request greater port access for passing Chinese Coast Guard and PLA Navy ships patrolling through the South China Sea. In return, China might offer arms, military assistance to counter domestic threats, and maritime cooperation against shared threats. Philippine political and military leaders might resent China's demands in light of its control of disputed features in the South China Sea but judge that the benefits of clientelism outweigh the costs, especially if a compelling alternative appeared lacking.

³⁸ Joshua Kurlantzick, "Thailand: Shifting Ground Between the U.S. and a Rising China: A Review," Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., February 27, 2018.

³⁹ Araya Poejar and Nintarat Phaicharoen, "Thailand Gets More Tanks, Armored Vehicles from China," *Benar News*, December 5, 2019.

⁴⁰ Xinhua, "China, Thailand Agree to Enhance Military Cooperation," November 17, 2019l.

⁴¹ Xinhua, "China, Philippines to Further Develop Bilateral Relations," October 24, 2019k.

China could also wield economic incentives and the threat of punishment to dissuade such countries as Vietnam from expanding security ties with the United States. Even countries further removed from the mainland, such as Malaysia and Indonesia, might conclude that it is in their best interests to avoid measures that antagonize Beijing, such as drawing close to the United States. To underscore its primacy, China might even request more-regular port access for patrolling vessels in the South China Sea and promote regular multilateral collaboration and military exercises with ASEAN nations.

The disputes in the South China Sea would likely continue to irritate various ASEAN countries in contention with China. To manage the friction, China could avoid militarily aggressive acts to seize territory and instead continue to incrementally consolidate its position, bolster military defenses, and step up administrative efforts to exercise *de facto* control. Wearing down the rival claimants through a steady application of pressure, Beijing could also incentivize compliance through the manipulation of BRI-related economic benefits and the development of overwhelming military superiority against any ASEAN nation. Persuading Southeast Asian nations to accommodate themselves to the reality of Chinese primacy could be greatly aided by clear evidence that the PLA had surpassed the United States Armed Forces as the leading military in the region.

In sum, China's goals for Southeast Asia are to shape the emerging economic, political, and security architecture in a manner favorable to the exercise of Chinese leadership, while undermining U.S. influence in the region. China could leverage the BRI to build clients across Southeast Asia through economic, political, and military patronage. This could, in turn, permit China to exert greater influence and coercion across vital shipping lanes in Asia and the region as a whole.

South Asia

South Asia is important to Beijing for at least three reasons. First, Chinese leaders seek to prevent the center of gravity in the region, India, from aligning with the United States against China. If this were to happen, then it could open up a new front on China's western flank that might distract attention from Beijing's priority theater in the Asia-

Pacific, where it seeks to effectively handle several maritime and territorial disputes. To reduce the possibility of closer U.S.-India relations and a potential security alliance, China has turned to high-level engagement with India to build trust. Notably, Beijing in 2018 hosted an informal summit between Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi at Wuhan, and Modi reciprocated by hosting Xi at Chennai in 2019.⁴² However, the trust-building measures have faltered in the wake of the 2020 bloody brawl near Galwan Valley that left 20 Indian troops dead.⁴³

Second, China wants to blunt India's regional hegemony. For decades, China has successfully accomplished this by supporting its "all-weather" friend and Indian archrival, Pakistan. In a U.S. context, Beijing has sought to entice New Delhi to join a Chinese-led order. Most significantly, China has tried for years to get India to participate in the BRI, but New Delhi has vocally resisted.⁴⁴ Beijing probably worries that a U.S.-India free trade agreement would further solidify bilateral ties, to China's detriment. In the absence of Indian participation in BRI, China has continued to leverage BRI in nearly all of India's neighbors—including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—causing deep concerns in New Delhi of Chinese geopolitical encirclement.⁴⁵ Indeed, BRI's flagship project—the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor—resides in Pakistan and across disputed territory.

Third, and finally, Beijing seeks to reduce the possibility that, with American security assistance over time, India might be able to project formidable military power into the Indian Ocean and even one day out to the Asia-Pacific region to make good on its "Act East" poli-

⁴² Sudha Ramachandran, "India-China Relations: From the 'Wuhan Spirit' to 'Chennai Connect,'" *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 19, November 1, 2019.

⁴³ Jin Wu and Steven Lee Meyers, "Battle in the Himalayas," *New York Times*, July 18, 2020.

⁴⁴ "India Refuses to Endorse China's Belt and Road Initiative," *The Hindu*, June 10, 2018.

⁴⁵ Faisal Pervaiz, "Why the Belt and Road Fuels India's Fears of Encirclement," *Stratfor*, April 19, 2019.

cy.⁴⁶ Although Beijing is unlikely to persuade India to steer clear of American arms and expertise, it could work with New Delhi's long-standing partner since the Cold War, Russia, to find ways of keeping India's military power contained.

Chinese shipping and energy routes also skirt South Asia, providing a strong incentive for Beijing to explore ways of bolstering security along the sea route without exacerbating tensions with India. One possibility may be for China to expand its access to military logistics bases in client states, such as Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, and Myanmar. In many locations, this might entail dual-use port facilities capable of providing logistics support to passing PLA Navy vessels. These dual-use facilities would probably be operated by Chinese civilian state employees. Over time, China might even turn some of these locations into PLA Navy bases, as it is reportedly considering in Gwadar, Pakistan.⁴⁷ By strengthening China's ability to protect key shipping lanes, these facilities could boost Beijing's credibility as a provider of some public goods, especially for those countries involved with the BRI networks. This could allow China and its partners to depend less on the United States, thereby bolstering China's international influence at the expense of the United States.

Central Asia

Central Asia has been a priority region for China since 1991, when Beijing first engaged with the independent post-Soviet republics. The Central Asian countries sit astride China's overland Silk Road route to Europe and thus occupy an important place in the strategy to integrate the Eurasian landmass under Chinese leadership. They also play an important role in China's domestic stability in Tibet and Xinjiang through cooperation to address potential transnational threats.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Dhruva Jaishankar, *Acting East: India in the Indo-Pacific*, New Delhi: Brookings Institution India Center, October 2019.

⁴⁷ Gurmeet Kanwal, "Pakistan's Gwadar Port: A New Naval Base in China's String of Pearls in the Indo-Pacific," webpage, Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 4, 2018.

⁴⁸ Andrew Scobell, Ely Ratner, and Michael Beckley, *China's Strategy Toward South and Central Asia: An Empty Fortress*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-525-AF, 2014.

To complement the deepening economic relationship, China has also increased diplomatic outreach through the SCO and through United Front tactics aimed at building elite connections. China's objectives for this region's role in the U.S. competition center primarily on limiting involvement in U.S. efforts to constrain China. One way to do this would be for Beijing to complement its economic and diplomatic collaboration with stronger military cooperation via the SCO. To help control nonstate actors who threaten Chinese security, Beijing might seek to temporarily deploy People's Armed Police or other counterinsurgency special forces for joint patrols or other counterinsurgency missions. Reports have already surfaced about possible joint patrols in Afghanistan. A more comprehensive collaboration may incentivize countries to resist U.S. requests for access.⁴⁹ Russia has a stronger influence in the region than the United States and regards increasing Chinese influence with suspicion. Beijing would need to continue managing its relationship with Moscow carefully.

Oceania

Chinese strategists envision a strategic space that eventually encompasses the second island chain. China has already sought to expand diplomatic and economic ties with many Pacific island states through loans and investments. In terms of competition with the United States, China might seek to expand its ability to monitor passing U.S. military forces and subtly coerce countries in Oceania by increasing the PLA's presence through the construction of dual-use facilities or military bases.⁵⁰ China should also seek to constrain Australia's and New Zealand's support for U.S. efforts to constrain China through diplomatic and economic incentives and coercion.⁵¹ Although Canberra is unlikely to prioritize China over the United States, Beijing could

⁴⁹ Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops," *Washington Post*, February 17, 2019.

⁵⁰ Damien Cave, "China Is Leasing an Entire Pacific Island. Its Residents Are Shocked," *New York Times*, October 19, 2019.

⁵¹ Kristy Needham, "Australia Asks China to Explain 'Economic Coercion' Threat in Coronavirus Row," *Reuters*, April 28, 2020.

encourage the continent to scale back its support to mostly token gestures as a better alternative to antagonizing China. It could also rely on United Front operations to promote division and a lack of unity in Australia and New Zealand regarding China policy.⁵²

In sum, the Asia-Pacific region remains a critical zone of competition with the United States. Chinese success in outcompeting the United States could position it favorably for efforts to compete with the United States at the global-systemic level. Its approach could rely heavily on economic incentives, diplomatic outreach, military assistance and presence, and United Front tactics to shape a regional order backed by client states across South, Southeast, and Central Asia, as well as parts of Oceania. If successful, China may be able to shape the terms of trade, investment, and security in a manner that disadvantages the United States and weakens Washington's ability to determine regional affairs. Chinese primacy would be a considerably looser one than that enjoyed by the United States in the Americas, however. Powerful states, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, and others, will still retain considerable autonomy and could resist Beijing's leadership on key issues. China would likely promote cooperation under Chinese aegis primarily on pragmatic grounds of furthering regional growth, as it has done in recent years. But a strong military posture capable of exerting coercion around the region could augment its "pragmatic" economic-focused message and gradually persuade countries to accommodate themselves to the reality of a Sinocentric regional order.

Developing World

In keeping with its assessment of historical trends regarding the decline of the West and rise of the non-West, China regards the developing world as an important potential constituency. The 2019 foreign policy white paper presented a typical statement of Chinese policy when it emphasized the shared agenda, sense of solidarity, and possibilities for collaboration with the developing world, which it defined in terms pri-

⁵² Scobell et al., 2018.

marily of countries in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. It stated, "China strengthens solidarity and cooperation with other developing countries in a spirit of sincerity, affinity, and good faith." Similarly, Xi Jinping stated that China should "speak for other developing countries" and directed officials to more actively advocate on behalf of developing world nations.⁵³ At the foreign policy central work conference held in 2018, Xi Jinping stated that "great efforts should be made to deepen unity and cooperation with developing countries." He described the "broad masses of developing countries" as "our natural allies" in the international community.⁵⁴ Although it should be emphasized that the use of *allies* does not denote anything resembling traditional military alliances, the mention was still notable as perhaps the first time a Chinese leader had discussed in public the formation of political coalitions to advance Chinese foreign policy goals and international leadership since the Cold War.

In the developing world, Chinese officials and commentators regard Africa and the Middle East as the most important regions, second only to the developing countries in Asia, because of the potential for investment, sources of energy, markets, and commodities, as well as potential receptivity to Chinese influence. Latin America and the Caribbean are less important to China owing to distance and small volume of trade. However, China has sought to boost trade, influence, and political cooperation in those regions as well.⁵⁵

Regarding the competition with the United States, our posited strategy envisions China seeking to build a network of client states in all these regions through economic, diplomatic, and military collaboration. Successful patronage could also yield practical benefits in the form of profits from trade and investment, greater international political support, and protection for Chinese citizens and their assets from harm in the more volatile locations. As the network matures, Beijing may be able to more aggressively pursue its economic and security

⁵³ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

⁵⁴ "Xi Jinping Urges Breaking New Ground in Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," Xinhua, June 23, 2018.

⁵⁵ Scobell et al., 2018.

interests over U.S. objections. If successful, this approach could grant China a stronger hand in shaping world affairs and building its credibility as an alternative international leader.

Africa

Africa presents a unique strategic opportunity for China. Unlike the regions of Latin America, South Asia, or Central Asia, no major power asserts dominance. China's current engagement in Africa is experiencing several favorable trends, including increased tourism, media engagement, high-level government exchanges, multilateral engagement, and booming trade and investment. Despite these positive trends, Africa suffers from instability and various threats. Piracy, terrorism, and corruption continue to run rampant. Through both its foreign and security policy objectives, China's efforts have begun to bear fruit in Africa in terms of increased trade volume and influence as a norms-maker.⁵⁶ In Africa, China made progress shaping the media environment, shaping institutions, and expanding partnerships.⁵⁷ Authorities in Beijing frequently argue that China and Africa have experienced a similar colonial and postcolonial history.⁵⁸ According to the CCP, China and Africa also share perspectives on realizing common development through an approach "based on equality and mutual respect," which Chinese officials contrast with the "paternalistic" approach favored by Western powers.⁵⁹

China's objectives for 2035 in the U.S. competition center on establishing Beijing as the preferred political and economic partner over the United States. Politically, this would mean persuading the

⁵⁶ Chris Alden and Daniel Large, "On Becoming a Norms Maker: Chinese Foreign Policy, Norms Evolution and the Challenges of Security in Africa," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 221, March 2015.

⁵⁷ Alden and Large, 2015.

⁵⁸ Wang Muke [王慕课], "New Concepts and Focal Points in China's Diplomacy [中国外交新概念和重点]," *Outlook* [瞭望], March 2013.

⁵⁹ Tong Wei, *A Comparative Analysis of Chinese, Western and African Media Discourse in the Representation of China's Expansion of Economic Engagements in Africa*, dissertation, London School of Economics, Department of Media and Communications, 2015.

continent to adopt Chinese norms and cooperate with China as a preferred partner in multilateral venues. Economically, this would mean that the continent prioritizes integration into the BRI over U.S.-led alternatives. In terms of security topics, China seeks to become a preferred partner to address threats to its interests. Although the PLA has established one military base in Djibouti, in future years, China might seek additional military outposts. These would focus primarily on providing support to PLA operations and security forces aimed at securing key shipping lanes and BRI-related projects but could also support espionage against U.S. forces in theater and, perhaps someday, proxy conflicts against parties backed by the United States. However, China's limited power-projection capability provides an incentive for Beijing to seek cooperation with the United States, preferably under UN authority, to promote stability and peace on the continent and to counter transnational threats.⁶⁰ Tensions with the United States could result in a refusal by Washington to cooperate on UN missions. China would, in that case, likely seek to manipulate UN missions to support its security needs without U.S. involvement.

Middle East

China is experiencing many favorable trends in its competition with the United States in the Middle East, including enhanced political cooperation, booming investment and trade relations, and improved peace and security collaboration.⁶¹ However, the Middle East remains riddled with conflict and contentious relationships between such countries as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Faced with the potential to anger its domestic Muslim population, Beijing has a strong incentive to maintain cautious policy objectives in the Middle East regarding the U.S. competition.

China seeks to foster individual relationships with key countries in the region to further its foreign policy goals, rather than focus on the

⁶⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC, "Forum on China-Africa Cooperation Beijing Action Plan (2019–2021)," webpage, September 2018.

⁶¹ Ariel Cohen, "Will China Replace the U.S. as the Middle East Hegemon?" *Forbes*, February 14, 2019.

broader Middle East region as a whole.⁶² The most important of the relationships are with the following entities:

1. Saudi Arabia, which has a large supply of oil and the United States as a declining consumer. China views this country as an important area of opportunity. Beijing has cultivated ties with Saudi Arabia by providing assistance to its nuclear energy program and continuing to purchase large volumes of energy supplies.⁶³ As U.S. criticism of its authoritarian political style has increased, Saudi Arabia has welcomed warmer ties with China.
2. The United Arab Emirates, which trades a large volume and works in partnership with China to further develop its BRI initiatives from its pivotal geographic location.⁶⁴ As U.S.-China trade tensions escalate, the United Arab Emirates is becoming an important export market.⁶⁵
3. Egypt, which has trade and BRI significance, as well as geographic proximity to the Suez Canal.
4. Israel, which remains an important ally for the United States. China's primary interests in Israel include advanced technology and its geographic location as part of the BRI.⁶⁶ Israel has welcomed a closer relationship with China, in part to diversify its investment markets from the United States and Europe.⁶⁷

⁶² Jon B. Alterman, "China's Middle East Model," Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., May 23, 2019.

⁶³ Warren P. Strobel, Michael R. Gordon, and Felicia Schwartz, "Saudi Arabia, with China's Help, Expands Its Nuclear Program," *Wall Street Journal*, August 4, 2020.

⁶⁴ "A New Era in UAE-China Relations," *Gulf News*, July 23, 2019.

⁶⁵ "China-US Trade War Hits UAE Construction and Retail Supply Chains," *Logistics Middle East*, August 26, 2019.

⁶⁶ Shira Efron, Howard J. Shatz, Arthur Chan, Emily Haskel, Lyle J. Morris, and Andrew Scobell, *The Evolving Israel-China Relationship*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2641-RC, 2019.

⁶⁷ Efron et al., 2019.

5. Iran, which China regards as an important energy producer and fellow antagonist of Washington.⁶⁸ Indeed, China recently concluded a major \$400 billion investment and military partnership deal, despite U.S. warnings.⁶⁹ The new agreement also potentially opens Chinese access to several ports along the Persian Gulf and opens new possibilities for China to counter the United States and its allies.⁷⁰

Though China seeks to maintain a strategic advantage in all five of its major partnerships, Chinese leadership is very much aware of its potential to antagonize the United States in the region, especially in its dealings with Iran. China must walk the tightrope between involving itself in the affairs of the Middle East and getting sucked into unwanted conflicts, potentially with U.S. allies. Although China has strengthened its patronage of Iran, Beijing prefers a stable region and does not benefit from a war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries. Nor does Beijing benefit if Iran enters into a war with the United States. Accordingly, Beijing could play a more active role in mediating tensions among Iran, Sunni countries led by Saudi Arabia, and Israel. China could step up United Front tactics to bolster its influence in all of these countries.

China's deepening involvement in the Middle East raises the possibility that it may assert leadership in an area that continues to provide vital energy supplies to the world economy and through which much of global seaborne trade passes. A stronger Chinese presence here could carry implications beyond the Middle East. A stronger partnership with Iran could significantly weaken India's strategic position, for example, perhaps rendering it even less willing to challenge China despite New

⁶⁸ John Calabrese, "Intersections: China and the US in the Middle East," Middle East Institute, Washington, D.C., June 2019.

⁶⁹ Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *New York Times*, July 22, 2020.

⁷⁰ Fassihi and Myers, 2020.

Delhi's warming ties with Washington.⁷¹ Japan might find itself more vulnerable as well. Observers note that these developments may position China to serve as a more important arbiter of Middle East affairs than the United States.⁷² Even so, Beijing is unlikely to field the naval force that the United States has available in the theater for the next decade or longer. This reality provides an incentive for China to cooperate with the United States to promote security and stability in the Middle East. Over the longer term, if China successfully replaces the United States as an arbiter of Middle East affairs and protector of key shipping lanes and energy supplies from the region, Washington's credibility as an international leader could wane further.

Latin America

China values its relationship with Latin America because of its potential contribution to economic growth. Latin America has considerable natural resources, as well as an export market. Its historic experience as a victim of colonialism also makes at least some of the region's countries, such as Venezuela, potential political allies. China and Cuba have maintained a long-standing friendship as two of the world's last governments run by communist parties. Beijing recognizes the considerable U.S. influence in the region and thus holds more-modest expectations of how much the region might lean toward Chinese leadership in a global competition. Nevertheless, Beijing has stepped up efforts to cultivate clients in the Americas.

In 2015, China and Latin America established the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, a regionwide multilateral organization that excludes Canada and the United States. At the forum, China and various Latin American countries agreed to a five-year cooperation plan that covered a broad variety of topics, including trade, agriculture, people-to-people exchanges, infrastructure, and science and technology. China also invited Latin American countries

⁷¹ Abdul Basit, "What the New Iran-China Partnership Means for the Region," *Al Jazeera*, August 6, 2020.

⁷² Dov S. Zakheim, "A China-Iran Partnership Would Make China the Middle East Arbiter," *The Hill*, July 26, 2020.

to take part in the BRI.⁷³ China has increased its patronage of Cuba in recent years as Venezuela's ability to support the island plummeted along with its economy.⁷⁴ As in other regions, China has complemented economic and diplomatic outreach with military engagement. Chinese arms sales have reportedly increased from 2000 to 2016 as its economic relations have grown. Since 2000, Chinese arms exports to the region have mainly gone to Venezuela, Ecuador, and Bolivia.⁷⁵

China's goals in the U.S. competition could be to keep the region divided in its approach to China and protect client states from U.S. pressure. Although such a move is difficult to imagine today, Beijing could seek access for its military forces in Cuba, Venezuela, or other countries. PLA advisors could help provide training and assistance to cope with domestic threats that might also imperil BRI projects. Port access in Cuba or other Latin American states could also allow Chinese reconnaissance ships and aircraft to operate closer to U.S. shores. Despite the competition, Beijing could also be open to collaboration on shared challenges in the region, such as humanitarian aid in response to devastating hurricanes and other natural disasters.

In sum, the developing world offers China the potential of a broad constituency and access to the markets and resources that could help sustain its rise. Success in building clients along the BRI routes could pay off by enhancing China's global influence and strengthening its hand against the United States and its allies in the Indo-Pacific (see Table 7.3).

⁷³ Mark P. Sullican and Thomas Lum, "China's Engagement with Latin America and the Caribbean," Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, IF110982, June 1, 2020.

⁷⁴ Dave Makichuk, "Cuba Building on 'New Era' of China Ties," *Asia Times*, November 27, 2019.

⁷⁵ George Gurrola, "China–Latin America Arms Sales," *Military Review*, July–August 2018.

Table 7.3
Assessed Chinese Objectives for the Developing World Aspect of U.S. Competition

Category	Objectives
Africa	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. African nations prioritize diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China over those with the United States. 2. African nations favor Chinese over U.S. international leadership. 3. African nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.
Middle East	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Middle East nations prioritize diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China over those with the United States. 2. China becomes the arbiter of regional affairs and protector of shipping lanes. 3. Middle Eastern nations favor Chinese over U.S. international leadership. 4. Middle Eastern nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.
Latin America	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Latin American nations are divided in diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China versus the United States. 2. Latin American nations are divided on Chinese versus U.S. international leadership. 3. Latin American nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.

Multilateral Organizations

China regards multilateral organizations as an important venue for exercising international leadership, as they offer a means of exerting influence in a less politically provocative manner. In the competition with the United States, China seeks to position itself as the leader of key multilateral organizations while delegitimizing the United States as a competitor. China also regards participation in multilateralism as a way to restrain the United States. Chinese official statements and commentary routinely contrast China's support and contributions with criticism of U.S. conduct, often disparaged as "unilateral" and irresponsible. The 2019 foreign policy white paper stated, for example, that China aimed to support "multilateralism" while opposing "unilateralism," a reference to U.S. policies.

Beijing's approach to the international institutions may be characterized as one of "conditional support."⁷⁶ It enthusiastically backs those entities that feature Chinese leadership, such as the United Nations. It also promotes bilateral approaches to resolving disputes where it judges existing multilateral groups, such as ASEAN, are insufficiently responsive to Chinese demands. It also supports the multilateral trading system, which provides substantial benefits to the export-dependent China. As the foreign policy white paper stated, "China will remain committed to the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core."⁷⁷ Within these existing institutions, Chinese leaders have directed efforts to increase the country's influence. Where existing institutions prove insufficiently responsive, authorities have set up rival versions—such as the AIIB, which serves as an alternative to the Asian Development Bank. In all cases, Chinese officials and media routinely contrast U.S.-led organizations, which they disparage as ineffective, with Chinese-led ones. For example, a 2017 *People's Daily* commentary noted a "decreasing efficiency" in "international economic mechanisms with the Group of Seven as the center." It hailed instead Chinese involvement in the G-20 and the emerging-economies association of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, which it depicted as more responsive and effective.⁷⁸

Within each institution, Chinese officials have directed more efforts toward setting norms, agendas, and rules. In a 2017 interview with *People's Daily*, Foreign Minister Wang Yi described how Chinese officials at a 2014 Asia-Pacific Economic Conference meeting put forward "more than half of all proposals" for action as an example of how the country's "agenda-setting power has been strengthened." The same article also noted that at a meeting of the G-20, countries "with guidance from Xi Jinping" formulated "guiding principles" and mechanisms to cope with issues such as economic growth, multilateral

⁷⁶ Mazarr, Heath, and Cevallos, 2018, p. 1.

⁷⁷ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

⁷⁸ Guo Jiping [国际平], "People's Daily Commentator: Welcome a More Energetic Golden Decade [人民日报评论员: 迎来更富活力的金色十年]," *People's Daily* [人民日报], September 4, 2017.

investment, and climate change. The article cited this formulation of principles as an example of China's focus on "rule setting." Wang Yi also hailed Chinese efforts in international organizations to set rules and agendas regarding space, cyberspace, and polar regions.⁷⁹ Regarding collective security organizations, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), China would benefit most if these remained fragmented and divided in their approach to China.

In sum, competition for influence and status in multilateral organizations is likely to intensify within global institutions and many regional ones as well. Beijing intends to renovate existing institutions to better serve its purposes and create new ones where the changes appear inadequate (see Table 7.4). Within each organization, China can be expected to mobilize its coalition of supporting clients to advance its agenda while seeking to weaken and delegitimize opposing positions upheld by the United States. Despite the struggle for institutional influence, possibilities for cooperation may persist and offer a means of stabilizing the competition.

Table 7.4
Assessed Chinese Objectives for the Multilateral Aspect of U.S. Competition

Category	Objectives
Worldwide multilateral groups	China surpasses U.S. leadership role in setting norms, rules, and agendas in existing political and economic multilateral organizations.
Regional multilateral groups	China's leadership is more effective than that of the United States in regional multilateral organizations. Chinese-led multilateral groups play a more critical role in organizing the world economy than U.S.-led ones.
Collective security	NATO lacks consensus on countering China.

⁷⁹ Wang Yi, 2017.

Domains of Global Governance

Issues of global governance have risen significantly in importance in recent years. The Politburo has held two study sessions on the topic, on October 12, 2015, and September 12, 2016. At the latter event, Xi hinted at the erosion of Western power and the concomitant rise in Chinese national strength, stating that the “structure of global governance depends on the international balance of power.” He declared that China “must make the international order more reasonable and just to protect the common interests of China and other developing countries.”⁸⁰

Chinese officials have outlined an ambition to reform the system of global governance to favor Chinese values and norms. The 2019 white paper stated, “We must pursue the transformation of the global governance system by following the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution and shared benefits.” Answering its own rhetorical question—“What kind of international order and governance system best suits the world, and best suits the peoples of all countries?”—the white paper’s response was that China advocates that governance should be “decided by all countries through consultation, and not by a single country or a small minority of countries,”⁸¹ a clear disparaging reference to the United States and the West. China’s government has also sought to back up its claims to morally superior leadership through actions. In the midst of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, for example, Beijing aggressively moved to offer aid and support to countries grappling with the disease, which originated from China.⁸² In the following sections, we review in more detail specific domains related to global governance.

⁸⁰ Xinhua, “Xi Stresses Urgency of Reforming Global Governance,” *China Daily*, October 14, 2015d.

⁸¹ State Council Information Office, 2019b.

⁸² Lily Kuo, “China Sends Doctors and Masks Overseas as Infections Drop,” *The Guardian*, March 18, 2020.

Cyber

China has embarked on a major exercise to reshape the world in accordance with its own interests, and its cyber and technology goals are important lines of these efforts. Strategically, China views its capabilities as a means of competition with the United States, as well as an opportunity to bolster its economic and technological abilities domestically.

China has garnered a plethora of data from the United States, including defense and military technology, patents, and trade secrets, through its offensive cyber activities. It remains actively engaged in improving its cyber and technology competencies as a means of national security. To date, effective cyber norms have not been established. Previous diplomatic agreements lack teeth for the CCP and have done little to curb its strategic desires.⁸³

Instead, the CCP seeks its own norms and wishes to craft the governance of cyberspace in line with its own efforts. This lies at the crux of China's foreign and security strategy regarding the United States in cyberspace. In each of its policies, China aims to build a strong cyber defense system, give itself a greater voice in internet governance, and lead the globe in world-class companies and advanced technologies.⁸⁴

Space

Although espousing a policy of the peaceful use of outer space, China nevertheless is actively developing a diverse set of military capabilities in this domain. Through the establishment of the PLA Strategic Support Force, China aims to enable more-effective military operations by leveraging space-based assets to disrupt or cripple the ability of U.S. forces to use assets in space. Chinese military theorists are fond of saying that “whoever controls space will control the Earth”—a view that is almost certainly driven by their observations of heavy U.S.

⁸³ Previous diplomatic agreements have included Presidential Policy Directive 20, signed by both President Barack Obama and President Xi during the Obama administration. This agreement stemmed offensive cyber activity for a matter of months before China's activity resumed.

⁸⁴ Adam Segal, “When China Rules the Web: Technology in Service of the State,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 97, No. 5, September/October 2018.

reliance on space-based assets for enabling high-intensity joint combat operations.⁸⁵ In recognition of the importance of outer space, China's 2015 defense white paper specifically referred to space as "a commanding height in international and strategic competition" and stated that "threats from . . . outer space . . . will be dealt with."⁸⁶ The 2019 defense white paper further stated that "Outer space is a critical domain in international strategic competition. Outer space security provides strategic assurance for national and social development."⁸⁷ Thus, China has focused not only on achieving space supremacy through enhancements to its space-based command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance architecture, but also by developing counterspace capabilities to deny an adversary's ability to use outer space against Chinese forces in a conflict.

Within the context of great-power competition with the United States, Beijing seeks to control the terms of international behavior in outer space. For example, in conjunction with Russia, Beijing has, on several occasions, put forward the "Treaty on the Prevention of Placement of Weapons in Outer Space, the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects"—commonly referred to as the PPWT.⁸⁸ On the surface, PPWT sounds like something any country would want to, and should, sign up for. However, upon closer inspection, Washington has determined that, while the treaty would indeed put limits on the weaponization of outer space, it does not allow for an inspection regime to enforce arms control in this domain. Furthermore, PPWT does not address terrestrial space arms build-up, allowing for breakout capabilities if the treaty is broken. PPWT also does not limit antisatellite (ASAT) weapons, and the PLA has demonstrated recently, through ASAT tests, that it has been honing this capability for targeting objects in space. Regardless of the outcome of PPWT, China is very likely to

⁸⁵ As cited in Kevin Pollpeter, "Space, the New Domain: Space Operations and Chinese Military Reforms," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 5–6, August 2016, p. 712.

⁸⁶ State Council Information Office, 2015.

⁸⁷ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

⁸⁸ For more on PPWT, see, for example, Mary Chesnut, "The 21st Century Space Race Is Here," *National Interest*, October 17, 2019.

continue putting forward measures in international fora and unilaterally building up its space warfare capabilities at the expense of U.S. national security activities and interests there.

Discourse and International Law

Fundamental to China's concept of global governance is the establishment of new norms to guide international behavior. As Xi put it, "China must lead the reform of the global governance system with the concept of fairness and justice."⁸⁹ In a December 2017 *People's Daily* article, Wang Yi explained the meanings of the terms *fairness* [gongping] and *justice* [zhengyi], which, Wang stated, should become *norms* [yuanze] for the international community. Wang described *fairness* in terms of expanding rights and influence on the part of developing countries, declaring, "We will support the expansion of the representativeness and the right of speech of developing countries." He added that China will also "speak in defense of justice for developing countries" and "push forward the international order toward a fairer and more rational direction." In the same article, Wang defined *justice* in terms of the upholding of international laws and principles centered on a UN that itself upholds the interests and values of China and other developing countries. "Justice," Wang explained, requires "opposing the interference in the internal affairs of other countries and opposing the act of imposing one's will on others." Justice also requires China to "support the United Nations in playing a core role in international affairs." As a norm, China seeks a "just" order in which all countries "abide by the charter, purpose, and principle of the United Nations, and follow international law as well as generally-accepted principles of international relations."⁹⁰

Chinese theorists consider influence over the language, vocabulary, ideas, and concepts used to discuss international issues—known as *discourse power* [huayu quan]—to be an important attribute of global power. "Only when Chinese diplomatic discourse is generally prevalent

⁸⁹ "Xi Jinping Urges Breaking New Ground in Major Country Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics," 2018.

⁹⁰ Wang Yi, 2017.

internationally,” noted Yang Jiemian, a prominent scholar at the Shanghai Institute of International Studies, “will China exert the influence and play the role of a great power.” Chinese scholars argue that the country’s discourse power remains weak but assess that it will grow as China’s strength waxes and Western power wanes. As Yang stated, “The core value of China’s diplomatic discourse is presently still relatively weak, but it will ultimately become part of the mainstream.”⁹¹ Officials agree on the importance of this dimension of international influence. In the 2017 *People’s Daily* article, Wang Yi cited Xi’s speech praising globalization and criticizing protectionism as examples of the country’s discourse power, noting that the speech earned “praise by the international community.” Wang also noted how UN documents have begun to incorporate Chinese-proposed concepts, such as the “community of common destiny,” as evidence of growing international receptiveness to Chinese ideas, concepts, and proposals.⁹²

Chinese officials also regard international law as an area of competition. The PRC government has stepped up efforts to publish legal arguments and counter those of Western countries on contentious issues, such as maritime law. Officials also combined diplomatic pressure to advance China’s interpretation of international laws, as in the wake of the 2016 International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea ruling on the South China Sea.⁹³

In sum, China’s pursuit of a larger role in global governance complements its efforts to extend leadership at the regional and global levels. Beijing views progress in the domains of cyber, space, international law, and public discourse, in part, as symptomatic of its comprehensive national power, and its efforts to outcompete the United States (see Table 7.5). China is also carrying out policies and actions to com-

⁹¹ Yang Jiemian, “Great Power Diplomacy with Chinese Characteristics and Discourse Power: Purpose and Challenges [中国特色大国外交和话语权的使命与挑战],” *International Problems Research* [国际问题研究], May 13, 2017.

⁹² Wang Yi, 2017.

⁹³ “South China Sea: Tribunal Backs Case Against China Brought by Philippines,” BBC News, July 12, 2016.

Table 7.5
Assessed Chinese Objectives for the Domains of Global Governance Aspect of U.S. Competition

Category	Objectives
Cyber	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. China has a stronger international coalition in support of its leadership in cyber policy than the United States. 2. Most countries favor Chinese norms and technology standards for cyber. 3. China maintains secure cyber defense against the U.S. military. 4. The PLA is capable of launching offensive operations against U.S. networks.
Space	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. China has a stronger international coalition in support of its leadership in space policy than the United States. 2. Most space-faring countries favor Chinese norms and technology standards for space. 3. China maintains secure defense of space assets against the U.S. military. 4. The PLA is capable of launching offensive operations against U.S. space assets.
Public discourse and international law	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Chinese discourse prevails over that of United States in global media and international venues and organizations. 2. Key global governance entities adopt and operate under the Chinese vision instead of the U.S. vision. 3. Global media, commerce, and academic discourse regularly favor Chinese over U.S. discourse. 4. Chinese interpretations of international law prevail over those of the United States on key issues.

pete with the United States in these domains, in part by mobilizing its coalition of supporters, primarily in the developing world.

China's Defense Strategy for U.S. Competition

In this chapter, we review the defense aspect of a posited Chinese strategy for U.S. competition. The chapter proposes potential objectives for 2035, principally centered on military missions to support China's strategy to wrest regional primacy and international leadership from the United States. The defense strategy also considers imperatives to build a superior military and operate military forces in a way that secures national goals at an acceptable level of risk.

Because China's competitive effort with the United States presented here is premised on the persistence of trends introduced in Chapter Two, the defense strategy posited here similarly upholds generally peaceful methods. China's security priority in the competition is to support the nation's development as a great power, protect core interests, secure overseas interests, erode the credibility of U.S. military power in Asia, shape the regional security architecture, and enhance China's international influence—all without engaging in a general war with the United States. The logic of the Chinese competitive strategy presented here is that a successful economic and diplomatic contest would leave the United States in such a weakened strategic posture that China could more easily resolve any dispute with its neighbors at far lower risk than if it rushed prematurely into such a confrontation while the U.S. military remained formidable.

The posited competitive defense strategy seeks to avoid a general war with the United States, but this does not mean that the PLA should shy away from all confrontations with the United States. Chinese cyber forces may be directed to consider operations to probe weaknesses in

the U.S. defense posture and extract valuable industrial and national security secrets. PLA forces, working in conjunction with proxy militaries, such as those of client states, may risk provoking a crisis with the forces of the United States and its allies. If tensions increase, or if Beijing judges that U.S. power has weakened to the point that Chinese leaders confidently believe that the PLA could easily prevail in a test of strength, Beijing might even be willing to pursue brinksmanship tactics that risk a direct clash between U.S. and PLA forces. In all of these circumstances, finding ways to manage escalation will remain imperative if Beijing is to avoid a spiral toward general war. The Chinese military's interest in concepts related to crisis management, conflict prevention, war control, effective control, and war containment all reflect an awareness of the imperative to balance the challenge of protecting an expanding array of national interests with the imperative to avoid unwanted war.¹

PLA Missions in the U.S. Competition

Given the risks of war, the PLA's primary responsibility is building a qualitatively superior military and carrying out an array of tasks to build up China's national power and leadership and weaken those of the United States. First and foremost, the PLA in this strategy would build and modernize a technologically and qualitatively superior force capable of major combat operations in the Asia-Pacific region. Such a military could also bolster China's reputation as a rising power and erode the credibility of a potential U.S. military intervention to a contingency. Such a development would greatly facilitate China's efforts to strengthen its influence throughout Asia; coerce concessions from neighbors, such as Taiwan; and perhaps persuade the United States to eventually reconsider its commitments in Asia. Global perceptions of the United States as a marginalized actor in Asia could, in turn, compound U.S. difficulties in maintaining its position as a global leader.

¹ Heath, 2018b.

Military operations against allies of the United States carry high risks that incentivize caution for China. To protect its interests at lower risk, the PLA could continue to backstop civil-led efforts to incrementally consolidate Chinese control over disputed regions and extend Beijing's influence. The PLA could support maritime law enforcement in its efforts to incrementally coerce U.S. allies into concessions that damage the credibility of U.S. security assurances without crossing a threshold of armed conflict.² If a rival state threatened a Chinese-held island, or if Taiwan's leaders took a bold step toward *de jure* independence, Chinese leaders could direct the PLA to carry out a range of potential military responses. In all cases, however, Beijing would likely calibrate the military response to maximize security for its interests while minimizing the risk of general war (Tables 8.1 and 8.2). The following sections discuss in more detail how the PLA's strategic missions could be adapted to support the U.S. competition.

Deterrence is thus an important responsibility for the PLA in competition with the United States, but the military has other important duties as well. A substantial focus of the PLA's work in the competition could consist of military diplomacy to build the security capabilities of client states and thereby extend the range and geographic reach of PLA forces. This could eventually lead China to rethink its willingness to take on greater security obligations for clients, perhaps someday resulting in the forging of alliance-like arrangements with client states around the world.

Some of the PLA's work may focus on diplomatic activity to erode U.S. alliances. One approach might be for Beijing to expand its own security relationships with host nations to compete with those of the United States. For example, the PLA might organize routine bilateral and multilateral exercises involving U.S. allies in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines, as a condition for receiving continued BRI-related investments. The PLA might also offer military assis-

² Lyle J. Morris, Michael 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.

Table 8.1
Assessed Chinese Objectives for the U.S. Competition Defense Strategy:
Missions (1)

Tasks	Objectives
U.S. military deterred from operations that threaten CCP rule	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• U.S. military forces avoid cyber operations that threaten to destabilize society and undermine CCP rule.• PLA develops cyber capability to retaliate by disrupting U.S. political system and economy as a means of deterrence.
U.S. military deterred from fomenting separatism and antiregime activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• U.S. military and intelligence deterred from fomenting antiregime activity and separatism in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, Tibet.• U.S. military and intelligence refrain from materially aiding any separatist or antiregime activities within China.
U.S. military deterred from intervening in any contingency in first island chain (the first chain of archipelagos out from the East Asian mainland coast)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• PLA fields capabilities that impose unacceptable costs and risks to U.S. naval and air intervention.• PLA develops the operational capability to decisively defeat U.S. military intervention in a Taiwan contingency.• PLA develops the capability to decisively defeat U.S. naval and air forces operating in the East and South China Seas.• Potential U.S. military intervention delegitimized in media, legal, and public opinion domains.
U.S. military deterred from escalating in nuclear, space, and cyber domains	PLA develops credible deterrence capabilities in nuclear, space, and cyber.

tance and arms sales to countries facing internal challenges to offset the influence gained through U.S. military aid.

Among client states, China may, in coming years, step up efforts to expand access for visiting military ships, aircraft, and troops, especially in developing countries along the BRI routes. While Beijing might cite the need to protect BRI investments to justify such deployments, a broader and more persistent PLA presence could also exert a strong influence on the region. PLA ships and aircraft could step up “gunboat

Table 8.2**Assessed Chinese Objectives for the U.S. Competition Defense Strategy: Missions (2)**

Tasks	Objectives
United States is deterred from attacking PLA overseas basing and operations.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S. and allied forces near PLA bases along BRI routes refrain from military attack.
PLA supports client states to control threats, including those from the United States and its allies and partners.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chinese security forces assist client states along BRI routes in controlling threats to Chinese interests.
The United States and PLA cooperate on nonwar missions to promote international stability and peace in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The United States cooperates with PLA or does not impede UN peacekeeping, counterpiracy patrols, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, noncombatant evacuation operations, and other nonwar missions to promote stability in Africa. • In Asia, U.S. allies and partners regularly participate in Chinese-led initiatives to promote regional stability. • U.S.-backed clients refrain from threatening the stability and security of Chinese interests along BRI routes. • China shapes the terms of stability and peace through greater use of military coercion, as well as incentives.

diplomacy”—style pressure to warn Asian countries against taking measures that offend China’s sensibilities or otherwise regard too lightly Beijing’s preferences. Even powerful states like Japan and India may become more reluctant to antagonize China in such a situation.

Other missions might aim to stabilize the competition through proposed collaborative efforts. Although Washington might not accept the offer, Beijing could seek cooperation with the United States to counter shared threats, such as natural disasters or terrorism.

Mission to protect CCP rule. The principal threat to CCP rule from the United States comes from potential cyber or information operations. The PLA could carry out its own cyber operations to root out suspected Western efforts to imperil the authority of the CCP. PLA psychological and information warfare experts may also support civil-

ian efforts to combat perceived Western efforts to erode the credibility of CCP rule. If tensions intensified, Beijing could direct the PLA to go on the offensive by interfering in U.S. domestic politics. Some analysts have reported evidence that China has already attempted to interfere in U.S. elections.³

Mission to protect sovereignty and territory. According to the 2019 defense white paper, the second mission to protect national unity, sovereignty, and territory includes tasks to “oppose and contain ‘Taiwan independence,’” and “crack down on proponents of separatist movements such as ‘Tibet independence’ and the creation of ‘East Turkestan’” (in Xinjiang). Another task is to “safeguard China’s maritime rights and interests.”⁴ Each of these tasks carries implications for the competitive strategy with the United States.

Operations to deter separatism in China’s western provinces could consist of coordination with the SCO to control transnational threats and diplomatic pressure, aided by military intelligence, to isolate and weaken U.S. supporters of separatist movements. The establishment of PLA bases in select SCO countries could provide China a more effective means to counter transnational threats and collect intelligence on any potential U.S. activity to foment trouble in western China.

The flashpoints of Taiwan and the disputed maritime domains continue to pose a risk of a crisis or conflict involving U.S. forces. Through 2035, the PLA could prioritize efforts to build a powerful counterintervention capability. The military remains in the midst of a complex and difficult reorganization and modernization effort that will likely last for many years. War with the United States in a period of the PLA’s transformation seems unacceptably risky, given the impossibility of predicting how the conflict could escalate. To protect China’s interests and control risk, Beijing would be better served if it relied on the combination of the Chinese Coast Guard, maritime militia, and

³ “China, Caught Meddling in Past Two U.S. Elections, Claims ‘Not Interested’ in 2020 Vote,” Voice of America, April 30, 2020.

⁴ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

PLA Navy for gray-zone operations.⁵ If a crisis should break out in any flashpoint, the PLA could stand by with a range of punitive options to drive Taiwan or other neighbors to the bargaining table while Beijing reached out to Washington to help de-escalate the situation. The mission to defend the nation's sovereignty and security also involves nuclear deterrence. Through 2035, Chinese leaders have little incentive to abandon the "No First Use" doctrine regarding nuclear weapons, although the military may further loosen its interpretation of the doctrine.⁶ As part of its "integrated strategic deterrence" concept, China may enhance deterrence in the space and cyber domains as well.⁷

Mission to protect overseas interests. The third mission to "safeguard China's overseas interests" includes supporting China's "sustainable development."⁸ China's focus on consolidating its influence across Eurasia, the Middle East, Africa, and parts of Latin America suggests that this mission could involve greater opportunities for indirect conflict with U.S. military forces. China may seek to demonstrate the credibility and power of its military and influence by backing client states, for example, against relevant enemies.

If the U.S.-China competition turned hostile, Beijing might even support operations by client militaries against governments or organizations backed by the United States. Assisting client states against adversaries, possibly including those aligned with the United States, need not involve PLA troops. Invoking tactics and methods honed by previous great powers, including the United States and Great Britain, China could employ a mix of host-nation military forces, civilian contractors, intelligence operatives, and private military companies. In later

⁵ Conor M. Kennedy and Andrew Erickson, *China Maritime Report No. 1: China's Third Sea Force, The People's Armed Police Maritime Militia Force: Tethered to the PLA*, Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College China Maritime Studies Institute, March 2017.

⁶ Eric Heginbotham, Michael S. Chase, Jacob L. Heim, Bonny Lin, Mark R. Cozad, Lyle J. Morris, Christopher P. Twomey, Forrest E. Morgan, Michael Nixon, Cristina L. Garafola, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Evolving Nuclear Deterrent: Major Drivers and Issues for the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1628-AF, 2017.

⁷ Michael S. Chase and Arthur Chan, *China's Evolving Approach to "Integrated Strategic Deterrence,"* Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1366-TI, 2016.

⁸ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

years, the PLA could, in some instances, adopt alliance-like arrangements, even if Beijing continued to resist the label *alliance* for political reasons. The result could be a range of proxy military conflicts and low-intensity struggles *between* states and *within* states. China and the United States could find themselves carrying out a multifront struggle for primacy in the Asia-Pacific and along BRI routes through hostilities involving competing countries, organizations, and factions.

Mission to promote world peace and common development. According to the 2019 defense white paper, the fourth mission includes tasks to “deepen bilateral and multilateral security cooperation,” promote a “coordinated, inclusive, and complementary cooperation among security mechanisms,” and contribute to a “security architecture featuring equality, mutual trust, fairness, justice, joint contribution and shared benefits.”⁹ In terms of competition with the United States, the PLA can contribute by stepping up efforts to build client states across the developing world that could facilitate a greater variety of PLA operations. The PLA could increase participation in bilateral and multilateral exercises with U.S. allies and other countries as a way of eroding those alliances. Along the BRI routes, China’s pursuit of stability and security for its BRI investments could lead it to back efforts on behalf of client states to control key threats to stability, even if China judged that the source of the threat was groups or countries aligned with the United States. In a hostile competition, this struggle over the terms of stability could reinforce China’s willingness to engage the United States through proxy conflicts.

In addition to offering “carrots” of cooperation in multilateral security initiatives and arms sales, China may also resort to gunboat diplomacy-style coercion to shape the terms of peace and stability. Deploying warships and fighter aircraft could warn weaker countries enacting policies against China’s interests or preferences. Such situations would carry their own risks of miscalculation and potential escalation to conflict.

Although the competition for influence among militaries is a major part of this mission, some of the tasks also open opportunities

⁹ State Council Information Office, 2019a.

for cooperation with the U.S. military. Given its limited expeditionary capabilities, the PLA might seek collaboration with the United States to promote peacekeeping, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, and stability in areas featuring Chinese interests. Of course, given the tensions arising from competition, the United States may decline such cooperation. The lack of cooperation and persistent proxy skirmishing may result in a fragmented international system featuring a higher degree of disorder and instability than exists today. Alternatively, under terms of a hostile competition, China may seek to encourage the United States to abandon its involvement in the UN, thereby providing Beijing a freer hand to manipulate UN missions to protect its interests.

China's approach to all potential contingencies and its willingness to risk conflict depend on the political leadership's judgment about the broader competition and the strategic trends that underpin that competition. In the event that the broader trends discussed in Chapter Two should change in a dramatic fashion, especially via the onset of hostile and conflict-filled relations with the United States, the defense strategy could change significantly.

Chinese Directives Regarding Force Development and Employment in the U.S. Competition

The PLA's execution of its missions and tasks in the U.S. competition depends on the type of military force used and guidance on how to employ that force in the execution of all missions. These topics are covered by the central and military leadership's directives regarding force deployment and employment (Table 8.3).

Force development. Beijing's ambition to build a "world-class" military provides a major imperative for the PLA to complete organizational reforms designed to facilitate integrated joint operations. Acquisitions and the fielding of new weapon systems and platforms, along with the introduction of advanced technologies, such as artificial intelligence, could enable the PLA to build a military that is, in qualitative terms, a peer in some ways of that of the United States. Military thinkers have expressed the view that the PLA should develop a force that

Table 8.3
Assessed Chinese Objectives for the U.S. Competition Defense Strategy:
Force Development and Employment

Assessed Objectives	Subobjectives
Develop military weapons and equipment superior to those of the U.S. military.	The PLA develops a military qualitatively superior to that of the United States after completing reorganization, doctrinal improvements, and acquisition of the most advanced technologies.
Adhere to active defense and controlled use of force.	In all crisis situations and contingencies involving the militaries of the United States and its allies, the PLA coordinates closely and strictly adheres to central directives to achieve objectives and control risk.
Fully prepare to execute combat operations against U.S. military forces and against U.S. proxies.	Operational units, fully capable of carrying out a full range of operations and activities to bolster the interests of China and its clients, weaken those of the United States and its allies in a manner that minimizes risk of escalation.

surpasses in quality that of the United States, rather than merely follow its lead as in years past. This does not mean, however, that China has any ambition to build a force that replicates that of the United States in its distribution around the globe. Under most plausible scenarios, China will continue to prioritize the development of military advantage in the Asia-Pacific theater. It could develop a blend of military, law enforcement, and defense contractors and collaborate with client state militaries to provide security along BRI routes beyond Asia.¹⁰

Force employment. Given the stakes and risks of miscalculation, the central leadership will want to continue closely controlling the use of military force in any crisis or contingency situation involving U.S. forces. Thus, through 2035, it will remain imperative for the PLA to adhere to the military strategy of active defense, in which the military remains on the strategic defensive but retains operational and tactical flexibility. The PLA should have carried out the training, recruitment, exercises, and other preparations so that it is able to confidently and effectively carry out the full range of operations and tasks entrusted to it by the central leadership to support the U.S. competition.

¹⁰ Rolland, 2017.

New doctrines, concepts, and tactics would be required to carry out more-risky operations involving conflict with proxies of the United States and its allies and partners. These might draw inspiration from U.S. counterinsurgency doctrines and special forces operations. The conduct of proxy conflict might also incorporate unorthodox troop types, including defense contractors, host nation militias, and other nonuniformed personnel. Finding ways of achieving military objectives and managing the risks of escalation while leading diverse troop types in locations far from China's shores would pose challenges unprecedented to the PLA.

The defense strategy presented here is premised on the notion that the Chinese leadership views the competition with the United States as a long-term one, whose center of gravity rests in the economic, technological, and diplomatic domains. From the Chinese perspective, the military plays an ancillary role in supporting the international strategy and deterring the United States from rash actions, but success or failure in the competition will ultimately depend on how well Beijing manages the nonmilitary dimensions of the competition. Of course, this strategic approach is based on the assumptions of a generally stable competition featuring some level of cooperation. A significant shift in the international strategy, most likely in response to the onset of a hostile, antagonistic relationship with the United States, would result in a change in the defense strategy as well.

Vulnerabilities in China's Approach to U.S. Strategic Competition

China's ability to outcompete the United States is far from determined. The outcome of the contest between the two great powers is likely to be affected by many factors, some of which lie beyond the scope of foreign policy and defense strategy. The most important factors that could determine the trajectory of the contest are likely to be those related to the domestic situations of each country. Whether China and the United States can overcome their respective economic and political challenges and build comprehensive national power superior to that of the competitor could prove decisive.

The vulnerabilities and strengths of each country could play significant roles as well. This chapter considers some of the potential vulnerabilities in the Chinese international and defense strategies reviewed in previous chapters. As used in this study, a *vulnerability* is a set of weaknesses that have the potential to otherwise undermine or significantly impair China's ability to prevail in competition with the United States. Our concern here is with vulnerabilities in the strategy as might be viewed from the Chinese perspective. For source materials, we consider the documents issued by government officials and writings by Chinese analysts and commentators. The official sources rarely discuss possible weaknesses in China's competition with the United States directly, but they do discuss liabilities in national, international, and defense strategies that could bear directly on the U.S. competition. Chinese commentators and scholars are more likely to discuss possible vulnerabilities in the competition with the United States, but such writings carry far less weight in terms of authoritativeness. Because

both of these categories of sources may be reluctant to discuss sensitive topics related to domestic politics or other issues, we supplement analysis of the Chinese materials with our own observations about the posited Chinese competitive strategies.

By a large margin, Chinese official sources regard issues related to domestic development as the most pressing and urgent set of vulnerabilities. Weaknesses in the mode of growth and governance, problems of corruption and malfeasance, and the challenge of meeting the rising expectations of the people all pose formidable challenges to CCP rule. Should the central leadership fail to resolve these domestic difficulties, China's ability to compete with the United States could be severely impaired. However, Chinese official documents and commentary also recognize major potential vulnerabilities in the international and defense strategies to achieve the China Dream. Failure to perform adequately in these domains could also limit the country's ability to compete.

Domestic Vulnerabilities

The imperative to achieve the China Dream serves as a major source of domestic political legitimacy for the CCP. Most polls and scholarly studies suggest that the CCP enjoys strong domestic support, in part resulting from the party's deliverance of sustained growth and emphasis on nationalism.¹ Official documents and scholarly writings suggest that Chinese leaders perceive a real possibility that the country could become the world's greatest power by midcentury. Given the deep roots of this vision in Chinese intellectual and political circles stretching back to the past century, the dream of national revitalization certainly carries a strong appeal to many Chinese political leaders and intellectuals, and very likely to a significant part of the public as well. The care with which Chinese leaders have outlined the desired end state, objectives, and subobjectives across all elements of state power and the elaborateness with which they have articulated foreign policy goals, precepts,

¹ "The Critical Masses," *The Economist*, April 11, 2015.

and directives underscore the importance of this vision for the CCP and its authority. The more that Chinese leaders emphasize the importance of the China Dream, the more they stake the party's legitimacy on its realization. For the CCP, the ability to ensure the nation's revitalization is becoming the foundation upon which popular support rests.

Although Chinese leaders perceive a variety of possibly favorable trends that raise the prospect of achieving the China Dream, they also regard the outcome as far from certain. Chinese officials and academics have identified a slew of vulnerabilities that they worry could derail the country's revitalization if not properly managed. The most threatening vulnerabilities stem from the country's domestic situation and are generally economic and development-related in nature. The 19th Party Congress report warned that the people have evolved "higher demands" for "material and cultural life," as well as for "rule of law, fairness, justice, safety, and the environment."² Failure by the party to meet these expectations poses a serious risk to the CCP's credibility. The slowing of the Chinese economy and inadequate efforts to carry out necessary reforms to improve the nation's economic performance, exacerbated by the economic headwinds from the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, threaten to reduce the availability of resources needed to achieve national development.³

When President Xi listed the "difficulties and challenges" facing the nation at the 19th Party Congress, he focused almost exclusively on such domestic challenges. He acknowledged the "inadequacy of the party's work" in addressing prominent issues such as the "unresolved" problems related to an "unbalanced and inadequate development." Among issues, he criticized as "insufficient" the nation's ability to innovate; the low quality and inefficiency of economic growth; the gap in urban-rural development; income disparity; issues of ecological protection; and "many problems" in employment, education, health care, and other areas. Xi also noted "many weak links" in the "area of party building," referring to the issues of corruption and malfeasance

² Xinhua, 2017d.

³ Don Weinland and Xinning Liu, "Chinese Economy Suffers Record Blow from Coronavirus," *Financial Times*, March 16, 2020.

in CCP rule. Xi hinted obliquely at “new situations” regarding national security as another major challenge but did not elaborate.⁴

China also faces ongoing struggles and setbacks in the efforts to manage the unrest in Hong Kong, pacify Tibet and Xinjiang, and win over a Taiwan populace that is overwhelmingly opposed to unification. Other political weaknesses, such as the potential fragility of the political system, or structural weaknesses, most notably the country's looming demographic challenges, pose additional well-known vulnerabilities that could impair the country's pursuit of national revitalization.⁵

In sum, China's ability to outcompete the United States depends, to a large degree, on the domestic foundations of national power. The country faces serious economic challenges, inadequate innovation, and persistent weaknesses in its mode of governance. China's ability to compete for international leadership will be determined, to a considerable degree, by its handling of these domestic issues. If China fails to rebalance its economy, secure its status as a world-class innovator, and manage its severe domestic challenges, Beijing will be poorly positioned to compete with the United States.

Vulnerabilities in International Strategy

China's international strategy for U.S. competition carries several vulnerabilities related to its efforts to shape a favorable international environment and put the United States at a disadvantage. These may be grouped according to the “foreign policy framework” introduced in Chapter Three. Authoritative sources also discuss international threats to China's development, which may be interpreted as a type of vulnerability. If China fails to control these threats, the damage to the nation's interests could be considerable. This, in turn, could impact the nation's ability to compete with the United States. Several of the more

⁴ Xinhua, 2017d.

⁵ Steven Lee Myers, Jin Wu, and Claire Fu, “China's Looming Crisis: A Shrinking Population,” *New York Times*, January 17, 2020.

prominent vulnerabilities mentioned in the Chinese sources include the following:

Major powers. The strong emphasis placed on the strategic value of China's relationship with Russia suggests that Beijing regards collaboration with Moscow as critical to its international strategy. China's dependence on Russia as the only collaborator among major powers means that Beijing's international position would weaken significantly if its partnership with Russia were to be ruptured. Chinese officials have accordingly shown considerable sensitivity to efforts by the U.S. government to improve relations with Russia. When U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in 2019, Wang Yi anxiously warned the United States against trying to weaken China-Russia ties.⁶ A second important goal for China is to encourage, or not impede, the breakdown in solidarity between the United States and Europe. If China should fail to keep the two Western major powers at odds, then Beijing would face the unwelcome prospect of stronger Western resistance to its power. China's situation would be even more perilous if it failed to maintain a strong relationship with Russia.

Periphery. A major vulnerability in Beijing's strategy for the Asia-Pacific region, from the view of Chinese leaders, lies in the resistance of countries in the region to Chinese leadership. In his 2013 work forum on diplomacy to the periphery, Xi Jinping acknowledged the country's lack of appeal. He accordingly called on officials to do more to "warm the hearts of others so that neighboring countries will become even friendlier." He hoped that outreach would lead the region to "identify more with us" and "render more support."⁷ Such comments reveal the recognition that failure to consolidate the Asia-Pacific as China's geographic base of support would dramatically undercut its ability to compete for global leadership. A variety of polls suggest that the

⁶ Zhenhua Lu, "China Russia Relations Are Unrivalled, Beijing Warns Before US' Mike Pompeo Meets Vladimir Putin," *South China Morning Post*, May 14, 2019.

⁷ Xinhua, 2013a.

United States still retains considerable appeal as a partner in the region, although the support is hardly uniform and China's appeal has grown.⁸

Developing world. China's cultivation of support in the developing world underscores a major vulnerability in the country's pursuit of international leadership: a lack of a constituency. Chinese commentators and analysts have cited the lack of a supporting network of countries as a serious weakness. A typical commentary, found in *Global Times*, warned that a failure to cultivate international supporters might allow China to "grow rich but weak."⁹ Recognizing that the United States retains a strong influence among the developed nations, Chinese leaders have placed their hopes on building a coalition of supporters among developing countries, as noted in Chapter Four. However, decisions by countries in the developing world to withhold support for Beijing in favor of other countries, such as the United States but also potentially other large countries like India or Russia, could leave China in a weaker position to challenge the United States and its allies and partners.

Multilateral. The principal vulnerabilities related to the pursuit of leadership in multilateral organizations lies in the possibility that Chinese-led initiatives prove no more effective than U.S.-led ones. As noted in Chapter Six, Chinese officials and commentators have criticized U.S. leadership for its many failings and trumpeted the supposed superiority of Beijing-led efforts. In its desire to contrast the tendency of the United States and a "small group of countries" to dominate multilateral organizations, Beijing has claimed that its advocacy of a more "democratic" form of international politics is "more just" and more effective. However, Chinese-led organizations have come under criticism for many failings. In the SCO, for example, the inclusion of India and other skeptics of Chinese power has complicated Beijing's ability to dominate the organization and raised questions about the effectiveness

⁸ Laura Silver, Kat Devlin, and Christine Huang, "International Views of China Are Mixed," Pew Research Center, December 5, 2019.

⁹ Li Daguang [李大光], "Li Daguang: China's 'No Alliances' Principle Doesn't Mean We Shouldn't Make Friends [李大光:中国不结盟并不意味着不结交朋友]," *Global Times* [环球时报], February 27, 2012.

of a group so divided.¹⁰ Western analysts have generally judged China's leadership in multilateral organizations as disappointing and of limited effectiveness. Chinese leaders have responded by issuing documents, such as the 2019 foreign policy white paper, to highlight China's activities in multilateral venues.¹¹ However, if global audiences judge that Chinese leadership in multilateral venues provides little advantage, its appeal as an alternative to the United States may weaken.

Global governance domains. As a rising power, China faces the same vulnerability that other rising powers have faced: It labors under the shadow of the incumbent power, in this case the United States. In terms of global discourse, Chinese scholars have bemoaned the world's tendency to promote Western values, terms, and norms. A perceived backlash to China's authoritarian behavior and relentless propaganda in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic underscores the severe challenges China continues to face in shaping global discourse and norms.¹² The lack of appeal of Chinese ideals and values further impairs Beijing's effort to promote a compelling alternative to U.S. power. Yet Chinese efforts to challenge the discourse too aggressively risk provoking alarm and accusations of "revisionism." Beijing has accordingly sought to shape global discourse through more-secretive United Front efforts that target media, academia, businesses, and political elites. However, strong-arm efforts to compel corporations, universities, and media organs to adopt Chinese terminology and political preferences has sparked harsh criticism, especially in Western countries. The creation of competing international institutions more amenable to Beijing's perspective represents an additional method for increasing the country's "discourse power."¹³

¹⁰ William Piekos and Elizabeth C. Economy, "The Risks and Reward of SCO Expansion," Council on Foreign Relations, Washington, D.C., July 7, 2015.

¹¹ David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.

¹² Steven Erlanger, "Global Backlash Builds Against China over Coronavirus," *New York Times*, August 19, 2020.

¹³ Brady, 2017.

The unproven benefits and weaknesses of major geoeconomic initiatives designed, in part, to demonstrate the superiority of China's global governance also remain vulnerabilities. China's flagship project, the BRI, has endured numerous criticisms about its sustainability, profitability, and the perils of "debt traps."¹⁴ Western analysts have also noted that, despite Chinese propaganda, BRI investments appear to have peaked in 2016 and have declined since.¹⁵ If China cannot demonstrate that its global leadership is superior to that of the United States, Beijing will struggle to gain traction as an alternative leader. At least some Chinese scholars have urged Beijing to make greater efforts to improve its attractiveness as an international leader by improving the quality of its domestic governance. Yan Xuetong, a professor at Tsinghua University, commented that "in a strategic competition between rising and status quo countries, the lagging ability to carry out reform and demonstrate superior governance can lead to failure in the strategic competition."¹⁶

Defense Strategy Vulnerabilities

In terms of the defense component of the posited Chinese strategy for U.S. competition, major vulnerabilities lie in the missions related to protection of sovereignty and overseas interests. The military's mission related to shaping a favorable security environment has weaknesses that could hamper the nation's China Dream prospects if mishandled.

China's security interests remain vulnerable to U.S. power in two principal ways. First, there is a risk that U.S. involvement in any contingency along China's periphery could escalate into a broader war with the United States that Beijing has understandably been reluctant

¹⁴ Nathaniel Taplin, "One Belt, One Road, and a Lot of Debt," *Wall Street Journal*, May 2, 2019.

¹⁵ Don Weinland, "China's Belt and Road Property Boom Cools Off," *Financial Times*, March 31, 2019.

¹⁶ Yan Xuegong [阎学通], "U.S.-China Strategic Competition Isn't a Contest of Models; Still Less It Is a Contest of Systems [阎学通: 中美战略竞争不是模式之争, 更不是制度之争]," *China News Weekly* [中国新闻周刊], May 20, 2019.

to engage in. Second, China's antagonists could exploit this fear of Beijing's by engaging in provocative behavior that results in setbacks in China's effort to consolidate control of its interests. A common refrain in Chinese commentary on the U.S.-China competition concerns the risk of a turn toward a contest featuring high levels of hostility or even conflict. As researcher Wu Xinbo observed, the "major challenge facing both sides is how to manage and guide the competition" so that it avoids becoming a "destructive competition."¹⁷

Taiwan remains a particularly difficult problem for Beijing. The deepening U.S.-China competition has resulted in a warming relationship between Taipei and Washington. Many Chinese commentators regard the steps taken under President Trump to strengthen ties with Taipei with considerable trepidation.¹⁸ Although difficult to envision today, it is not impossible to imagine a future situation in which Taiwan leaders decide to exploit the polarizing security environment by taking provocative steps toward independence. In such a situation, Beijing would face an agonizing decision over whether to assert its dominance through military action or cede independence to the island. The stakes would be further elevated by the great-power competition, as the resolution of any crisis would likely be interpreted by global audiences as symptomatic of the relative power and status of either side.

In the maritime domain, China similarly faces vulnerabilities in its ability to control disputed regions in the East and South China Seas. Growing tensions with the United States raise the risk that the two nations could find themselves in a crisis started by incidents in the first island chain. If such a situation occurred, Beijing would find itself with a difficult decision. As with Taiwan, the context of the great-power competition raises the stakes in any stand-off. Beijing might find itself under pressure to take aggressive steps in a crisis, raising the possibility of a disastrous miscalculation.

¹⁷ Wu Xinbo [吴心伯], "The Trump Administration and the Next Stage in U.S. Policy Toward China [特朗普执政与美国对华政策的新阶段]," *Research in International Relations Problems* [国际问题研究], No. 2, 2018.

¹⁸ Wu Xinbo, 2018.

Overseas interests are less likely to become a liability in the U.S.-China competition, so long as the contest remains peaceful. The United States has little incentive to harm China's overseas citizens or their assets. However, the lack of PLA assets abroad and the vulnerability of Chinese people and their assets remain vexing security challenges for Beijing. China has benefited in the past from "free riding" on U.S. willingness to provide security for global commerce, but Washington need not continue this. If the United States opted not to help China provide security and stability in areas featuring its assets, then Beijing would have no choice but to step up investments and resource commitments to better protect its overseas interests. A withholding of U.S. cooperation on some shared threats, especially in the Middle East and Africa, would leave China considerably more exposed to different transnational threats. Similarly, closer partnership between the United States and India would leave China's shipping lanes along the Indian Ocean vulnerable to Indian pressure.

Should China turn more aggressive in the competition and opt to back client states in proxy conflicts with the United States and its allies, China would face another set of liabilities. The inexperience and weak power projection of the PLA could lead to disastrous performances and disappointment with Chinese military assistance. This could, in turn, weaken the appeal of Chinese patronage and its influence more generally.

Beyond its strategic missions, China's competitive strategy in the defense domain also suffers from the fact that the PLA remains unproven. The ambition to develop the world's premier force will not persuade anyone until the Chinese military can demonstrate its superiority in a decisive manner. The combat inexperience, persistent corruption, and incomplete nature of its reorganization all provide ample reasons to doubt the PLA's ability to achieve its vaunted goals.¹⁹ The problem is compounded by the extraordinary ambitions of the PLA to

¹⁹ Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015.

incorporate artificial intelligence and other advanced technologies into unproven combat methods. Until the PLA can persuasively demonstrate its superiority, the world will have ample justification for doubting the military's modernization goals.

In sum, China's ability to compete with the United States faces numerous challenges, only some of which Beijing has the power to influence directly. Ultimately, the prospects for China's ability to out-compete the United States will depend on how well both countries manage their considerable domestic challenges. Beijing appears to face the more formidable obstacles, given the structural weaknesses of its political system, economy, and demographics. However, even if Beijing can overcome these, it faces serious liabilities in its international and domestic strategies. Most notably, Beijing's ability to compete with the United States would weaken considerably if Chinese-Russian relations turned antagonistic and if the United States and European Union formed a stronger partnership. Suspicion of Chinese power in the Asia-Pacific and the as-yet-unproven quality of Chinese international leadership also underscore the disadvantages that China has as the rising power. In the security domain, a polarizing competition will exacerbate the difficulty and risks of Chinese efforts to consolidate control over Taiwan and disputed maritime territories. The contest heightens the stakes for China to demonstrate its power and superiority in any showdown with the United States, which could incentivize disastrous and reckless behavior in a crisis. Growing tension with the United States also could disincentivize it to help China address security problems in regions featuring many PRC citizens and their assets, exposing China to greater threat abroad. And the unproven nature of the PLA raises questions about its ambition to build an untested world-class military.

Conclusions and Implications

For the first time in centuries, China appears poised to realize the vision of national revitalization that has captivated its political leaders and thinkers for so long. From one of the world's poorest countries in the 1970s to the second-largest economy in the world, China has experienced astounding growth. The country's population has experienced an unprecedented degree of prosperity, and the nation's military stands as one of the world's most powerful. Yet, according to the statements of Chinese leaders, national rejuvenation is not yet complete. Incomes have certainly increased, but overall per capita income remains low, and the environmental and social costs of older industries render the current mode of growth unsustainable. Recovery of lost territories, most notably that of Taiwan, remains elusive. And the pressures of economic deceleration, rising expectations, a fragmenting international order, and intensifying international competition threaten the nation's fragile gains.

China's prospects depend, in part, on its ability to arrange the economic and political order of Asia to ensure steady growth, stability, and security for its interests. Prospects could improve further still if the world's second-largest economy had a stronger ability than its competitors to shape the terms of global finance, trade, and investment. But ascending to the position of regional primacy and international leadership needed to exercise such influence presents a significant obstacle: an incumbent power eager to maintain the same privileges and influences—the United States. As we have shown, Chinese thinkers and national leaders recognized competition with the United States to

be inevitable and necessary for the country to realize its vision of the China Dream. They have formulated strategies and policies to improve the nation's ability to achieve the China Dream. But the government has not issued any specific document outlining a strategy for U.S. competition. Nevertheless, we have argued in this report that the competition is foremost on the minds of strategists and policymakers who contemplate the nation's foreign policy and defense strategies. Drawing from authoritative sources and supplemental scholarly writings, we have posited an explicit strategy that might illuminate how Beijing approaches the competition.

While a comprehensive consideration of a Chinese approach to U.S. competition would include domestic development strategies, we have confined our research to the international and defense dimensions. In Chapter Two, we underscored the importance of overarching positive and negative trends for all Chinese strategies and policies, including those to manage U.S. relations. We also emphasized the importance of the China Dream as an end point for all strategy and policy. Any posited strategy for U.S. competition, we argued, should be nested within the broader strategy to achieve national rejuvenation. In Chapter Three, we reviewed China's international strategy and the reasons China seeks both a position of primacy at the regional level and greater international leadership at the global level. We surveyed the current foreign policy directives aimed at shaping a favorable international order for China's ascent. In Chapter Four, we similarly provided essential context by examining the country's defense strategy. We reviewed the central leadership's directives to the military to provide greater strategic support to the diplomatic and other tasks of laying the foundations for Chinese international leadership.

In Chapter Five, we explored how Chinese officials and analysts regard the competition with the United States. Chinese sources have tended to highlight structural drivers, most importantly the relative decline in Western power and rise of power in the non-West, as well as the country's changing needs as a large, maturing economy. Chinese leaders and commentators have also articulated a number of grievances about U.S. international leadership. Despite the criticisms, however, Chinese sources appear to regard great-power war as having

a low likelihood, owing to the primarily economic nature of the contest, higher levels of interdependence, the risks of nuclear warfare, and a shared involvement in the international order. Chapters Seven and Eight described a posited Chinese international and defense strategy for competition with the United States. In these chapters, we proposed possible goals and objectives for China in 2035 that, if achieved, could enable the country to overcome U.S. resistance without conflict and position itself to achieve national revitalization. As was pointed out in Chapter Nine, however, China faces formidable domestic, international, and defense vulnerabilities. Failure to achieve key goals could leave the country in a weaker position, and severe setbacks could render unlikely China's ability to surpass U.S. power.

As proposed in this analysis, a major challenge for China is moving from a position of the second-most powerful nation to that of the world's most powerful. Often referred to as the problem of power transition, this has historically proven to be a perilous process. In the past, contenders for systemic leadership often depended on the crude and destructive process of large-scale warfare to shatter the power of the incumbent and clear the way for an ascending power. But not all power transitions occurred violently.¹ Available evidence suggests that China recognizes the risks and, not surprisingly, prefers to achieve its goals peacefully.

The strategy that we have constructed accordingly adheres to a "peaceful" strategy consistent with policies outlined in official documents. But this leaves the problem unresolved: How does China surpass and subordinate the United States without conflict? Past examples of peaceful power transition have tended to feature one country that clearly and decisively outperformed its rival in economic, technological, and military terms. For example, the United States had surpassed Great Britain as early as the 1870s in per capita income and productivity before overtaking it as a global leader after World War I. Similarly, the Soviet Union abandoned the Cold War, in part, because Moscow

¹ A. F. K. Organski, *World Politics*, New York: Knopf Publishing, 1958.

had concluded that it had fallen hopelessly behind the United States.² China's ability to overtake the United States by a decisive margin is doubtful. Despite enjoying faster growth than the United States in past decades, China is well into an economic deceleration. Problems of bad debt, low productivity, and mounting costs from externalities raise serious questions about the country's long-term economic performance. Even for its premier geoeconomic initiative, the BRI, Beijing has allocated diminishing amounts of resources since 2017.³ In addition, China lacks some of the advantages, such as access to cheap energy, that powered the rise of past global leaders, such as Great Britain and the United States.⁴

Neither the Chinese-language documents surveyed nor the international and defense strategies posited in this research provide a clear answer to the conundrum of power transition. Short of the unlikely prospect that one country or the other achieves a decisive advantage, Beijing may find its most viable path is to engage in a protracted, grim struggle for the upper hand. In a battle for incremental gain, there are two ways of getting ahead: build up one's own strength or erode that of the competitor. A consistent theme in the posited international and defense strategy is a balanced effort to do both. Carefully managed, this approach may succeed in averting war, but it also appears to be a recipe for a bitter and potentially volatile contest. A principal risk is that a Beijing desperate to gain an edge by weakening the United States in some manner may drive relations into open hostility, dramatically increasing the prospect of conflict. To control risks, both sides may find it imperative to seek out ways of stabilizing the competition, perhaps in part through senior-level engagements and other cooperative endeavors.

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

³ Derek Scissors, *China's Global Business Footprint Shrinks*, Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, July 10, 2019.

⁴ William R. Thompson and Leila Zakhirova, *Racing to the Top: How Energy Fuels System Leadership*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Implications

In this last section, we would like to explore some of the implications of this report for the U.S. government and DoD. First, we argue that this analysis has underscored the enduring importance of U.S. alliances and partnerships. Second, the research has emphasized the importance of strengthening the U.S. leadership role in the Asia-Pacific. Third, the report has noted the importance of building U.S. partnerships with countries in the developing world. Fourth, reinvigorated leadership in multilateral venues can help shape Chinese choices and mute Beijing's efforts to shape those organizations in a direction detrimental to U.S. interests. Fourth, the analysis has raised questions about how the broader competition might change the dynamics of crises or confrontations that involve Chinese and U.S. military forces. More attention may need to be paid to the many creative ways in which Beijing could direct military action to gain positional advantages in a long-term competition. The research also raises the importance of finding ways to stabilize the security competition. America's interests may be best served with a balance of competitive and cooperative activities with China.

The research has reaffirmed the importance of America's network of alliances and partnerships. China recognizes this network to be a tremendous strategic advantage for the United States, one that Beijing has struggled to match. To improve its own prospects, China will be best served if it can facilitate or at least not impede the weakening of U.S. alliances and partnerships worldwide. A world order based on networks of partners, as Beijing has proposed, is one that would put the United States at a growing disadvantage compared with China. The United States has a compelling incentive to bolster its international influence and leadership by nurturing its alliances.

This report has drawn attention to the importance of initiatives undertaken by the past two U.S. presidential administrations to shore up U.S. influence and leadership in the Asia-Pacific region. This remains a critical domain of U.S.-China competition. Should Washington scale down its commitment to the region, China is likely to find

that a consolidation of regional leadership would accelerate its ability to contest U.S. leadership at the global level.

The importance of areas outside the Indo-Pacific and of developing countries as a constituency for international leadership deserves emphasis as well. China's cultivation of client states and influence in the Middle East, Africa, and Latin America could directly affect the ability of the United States to compete in the Indo-Pacific and at the global level. As one example, Chinese success in consolidating influence in the Middle East could affect the ability and willingness of such countries as Japan and India to support measures that constrain Chinese power. There may be hard limits to how much the United States can afford to divert resources from the Middle East. At the very least, closer coordination between competitive strategies, both within and outside the Indo-Pacific, will be essential. In terms of developing countries, China's lack of allies leaves it in a weak position to challenge the United States. Washington could strengthen its hand further by bolstering its relationships with those states that have only recently experienced substantial growth in GDP. Given the long-term trends favoring the rise of the non-West, cultivation of support in the developing world appears prudent.

While multilateral organizations and institutions for global governance have endured considerable criticism for their many failings and inefficiencies, this analysis has concluded that engagement with those venues will remain an important component of regional and global leadership. Greater U.S. investments in shaping and reinvigorating international institutions and multilateral venues can help consolidate U.S. influence. The goal here, as in other areas, is to weaken the force of Chinese criticisms by demonstrating responsive, effective international U.S. leadership, thereby reducing the incentive for other countries to back Chinese over U.S. leadership.

In terms of defense strategy, the posited approach has emphasized the importance of deterrence, crisis management, and military diplomacy in the competition. As presented here, China's defense strategy could expand the geographic range of potential crisis situations and contingencies. Along the BRI routes and as part of the effort to expand a network of client states worldwide, China faces a strong incentive to

offer arms sales, military training, and other forms of assistance. Such transactions have already been increasing in recent years. In coming years, China may take on even more security responsibilities to protect its BRI investments. An imperative to demonstrate China's credibility as a patron to client nations could incentivize PLA forces to carry out more-frequent acts of military diplomacy that coerce U.S. allies or partners, or even to contemplate the development of alliance-like obligations.

These possibilities suggest that the U.S. military faces a compelling need to bolster conventional deterrence and invest in the capabilities to ensure the superiority of the armed forces in the future. A focus on traditional deterrence through conventional military superiority remains the bedrock of any security strategy to counter China. A robust U.S. military capability to defend the interests of the United States and those of its allies and partners provides a critical source of U.S. credibility as a leader in the Indo-Pacific. A strong conventional military capability is also essential for incentivizing regional powers, such as Japan, Vietnam, and others, to resist Chinese coercion and demands. By contrast, clear evidence that the United States had lost the military advantage could persuade other countries to either adopt a position of tacit submission and accommodation to Chinese demands or step up a potentially destabilizing arms race to shore up their defense.

Ensuring the capability to deter China in the short term will remain critical, but investment to ensure long-term advantage will be critical as well. Sustaining investment in the future capabilities of the U.S. military will be essential, not just for ensuring the long-term credibility of U.S. deterrence, but also for bolstering the nation's position in the broader competition. Finding ways to better protect U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific and in the cyber, space, and other domains can backstop broader competitive efforts. DoD may need to invest in maintaining a significant presence in the Middle East and Africa to complement the competition in the Indo-Pacific.

Strengthening U.S. conventional capabilities and investing in a technologically advanced future force remain critical tasks. But military diplomacy could take greater importance as well. The diplomatic struggle for influence and leadership suggests that the U.S.

military could play an important role in incentivizing cooperation with the United States and helping countries resist unreasonable Chinese demands. U.S. experience in military advisory missions and assistance can help strengthen diplomatic partnerships and counter Chinese influence efforts. The provision of public goods, such as security for key shipping lanes and humanitarian aid in the face of disaster, can help maintain the appeal of the United States as the global leader.

As the competition intensifies, U.S. military planners may need to expand the portfolio of possible contingencies involving China. The flashpoints between the United States and China at the time of this writing may not be the same in the future, or they may coexist alongside new ones. Scenarios involving Taiwan, the East and South China Seas, and cyberspace tend to occupy military planners, but these issues may be augmented by new ones that arise from China's efforts to exert greater leadership, especially along its BRI routes and with client states on other continents. As just one illustration, China's willingness to court Iran despite U.S. sanctions raises the possibility, over time, of proxy conflicts between forces backed by China and those backed by the United States in the Middle East. The more that China assumes the role of patron for client states, the higher the likelihood that at some point, PLA forces or Chinese-backed host nation forces could engage in hostile acts against parties aligned with the United States.

The appeal and feasibility of Chinese military efforts to resolve longstanding issues, such as Taiwan, may need to be reexamined through the lens of the broader competition as well. From Beijing's perspective, the potential cost and risk of escalation in war increases the more that the competition with the United States intensifies. Thus, China may opt to delay the resolution of Taiwan's status and that of other disputed regions until it has prevailed in its competition with the United States. This might mean that Beijing tolerates a stable cross-strait relationship premised on Taiwan's rejection of formal independence so long as the United States retains the international upper hand and a credible military intervention option. However, the calculus could change should China succeed in gaining a decisive competitive advantage in international and regional leadership and in its military posture near Taiwan. Similarly, China may regard as satisfactory a

continued reliance on gray-zone tactics that incrementally change the status quo within the first island chain in a low-risk manner while it prioritizes efforts to weaken the U.S. position in Asia and elsewhere. To maximize deterrence and the protection of U.S. interests, the defense and foreign policy dimensions of any U.S. competitive strategy may need to be even more closely coordinated.

Any Chinese deliberation on how to tailor the controlled use of force in any confrontation involving U.S.-backed forces would carry serious risks, of course. The dangers of escalation and miscalculation paradoxically underscore the importance of finding ways for both countries to cooperate and ease tensions as a component of successful competition. The development of a strategy that includes some degree of reassurance and cooperation could help stabilize the competition and reduce risks of miscalculation and dangerous incidents. Moreover, as the international security environment experiences more fragmentation and breakdown, collaboration between the world's two largest powers could prove nearly unavoidable in any case.

The return of great-power competition after decades of unchallenged U.S. global primacy has introduced new challenges and risks. Washington enters the contest burdened by fiscal strains, domestic political polarization, and competing international and domestic priorities. These constraints raise the imperative of developing effective strategies that allocate resources efficiently and effectively. The derivation of a Chinese strategy can, hopefully, provide a useful tool for that important task.

Sample Subobjectives for the International Dimension of China’s Strategy for U.S. Competition

In this appendix, we offer some sample objectives and subobjectives for the international dimension of the derived U.S. competition strategy, using the Chinese framework. The subobjectives provide a sense of the more specific types of goals that China might pursue. These are not meant to be exhaustive or definitive. They merely provide a starting point for analysts who may want to develop more specific indicators for evaluation and assessment.

Major Power Objectives and Subobjectives for 2035

Table A.1
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding U.S.-China Relations

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
The United States has modified policies to accommodate China's demands regarding its core interests.	<div><div>1.</div><div>U.S. government reduces security commitments to allies in Asia.</div></div> <div><div>2.</div><div>U.S. government reduces or ends public support for Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and human-rights activists.</div></div> <div><div>3.</div><div>U.S. government refrains from any policies or actions that harm Chinese overseas interests.</div></div> <div><div>4.</div><div>U.S. government ends programs to promote democratic change within China.</div></div>

Table A.1—Continued

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
The U.S. government and public lack consensus on whether China poses a threat.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. U.S. government is divided on feasibility or necessity for competitive strategies with China.2. U.S. public is divided, with a minority or small majority viewing China as a threat.3. U.S. academic, media, and cultural elites are divided on perception of China as threat.
The U.S. and Chinese governments cooperate on shared concerns on equal terms per the “new type great power” framework	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. U.S. government treats China diplomatically as an equal and as a partner, not an adversary.2. U.S. government and officials maintain regular mechanisms for cooperation on climate, proliferation, trade, and other shared concerns.3. The United States cooperates with China to promote stability through the UN and other multilateral organizations worldwide.
The United States upholds cooperation that facilitates China’s development.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. The United States is ineffective in restraining Chinese extraction of needed technology or agrees to provide needed technology.2. The United States and China minimize tariffs and other barriers to trade and investment.3. The United States and China restore cooperation on media that enables pro-China messaging.4. The United States and China increase the numbers and variety of academic and educational exchanges.5. The United States and China cooperate on ecological issues to ensure a healthy, environmentally clean China.
U.S. policies to constrain China are generally ineffective.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. U.S. competitor geoeconomic initiatives are underfunded and lack appeal compared with BRI.2. Modest military buildup in Asia does not significantly reverse China’s advantages.3. U.S. diplomatic efforts generally fail to shore up alliances and partnerships against China.

Russia

Table A.2
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Russia in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Russia maintains strong solidarity and coordinates closely on U.S.-related policies as junior partner.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. China and Russia coordinate efforts to weaken U.S. international leadership and credibility. 2. China and Russia deepen interoperability of military forces in exercises near U.S.-related flashpoints. 3. Russia supports Chinese-backed multilateral initiatives that weaken U.S. leadership. 4. China and Russia coordinate more closely on arms sales and political initiatives to weaken the security of U.S. allies and partners.
Russia supports Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In international disputes between China and the United States, Russia consistently sides with China. 2. Russia supports China as leader of regional and global multilateral groups.
United States and EU maintain antagonistic relations with Russia but avoid conflict.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Russia continues to regard the United States as a strategic threat and seeks security through security cooperation with China. 2. The United States and Russia refrain from military conflict. 3. China supports Russia diplomatically but refrains from involvement in military conflict.

European Union

Table A.3
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding the European Union in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
The European Union cooperates with China as a partner equal in importance to the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. EU officials treat China diplomatically as a partner of equal importance to the United States.
The European Union is divided in support for Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. European nations are divided in support for U.S. versus Chinese technology, trade rules, norms, and standards.2. The European Union is divided in its support for Chinese-led infrastructure investment initiatives, such as BRI and AIIB.3. The European Union is divided in support for a Chinese leadership role in intergovernmental organizations.
European nations provide token to no support for U.S. strategies to counter China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. NATO rejects hostile stance against China.2. European nations provide, at most, token military or diplomatic support to U.S. efforts to counter China in Asia and elsewhere.

Periphery Objectives and Subobjectives

Japan

Table A.4
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Japan in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Japan cooperates with China as a partner of near-equal importance to the United States.	<div><div>1.</div><div>Japan participates in and supports the BRI and other Chinese-led regional trade and infrastructure initiatives.</div><div>2.</div><div>Japan maintains regular collaboration with China on regional concerns, despite U.S. criticism.</div></div>
Japan's cooperation with the United States to promote the Free and Open Indo-Pacific proves generally ineffective.	<div><div>1.</div><div>U.S. and Japanese alternatives to BRI lack appeal and fail in comparison with Chinese-led projects.</div><div>2.</div><div>U.S. and Japanese efforts to build multi-lateral initiatives against China stall or lack substance.</div></div>
The United States continues to restrain Japan from provocations.	<div><div>1.</div><div>The United States helps restrain Japan from provocative action near Senkakus.</div><div>2.</div><div>The United States helps restrain Japan from pursuing nuclear weapons and other offensive-weapons buildups.</div></div>
The U.S. alliance with Japan declines in effectiveness over time.	<div><div>1.</div><div>Japan builds security, diplomatic, and economic ties with China in pursuit of more "autonomy" from the United States.</div></div>

Koreas

Table A.5
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding the Koreas in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
ROK prioritizes its relationship with China over that with the United States for all issues except DPRK.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. ROK agrees to strengthen economic, technological, and diplomatic coordination with China, despite U.S. criticism.2. ROK consults with China as a key partner even as it works with the United States on DPRK.
ROK provides token to no support for U.S. strategies to counter China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. ROK participation in U.S. BRI alternative is minimal at most.2. ROK avoids substantive participation in military exercises aimed at China.
China, ROK, DPRK, and United States cooperate to promote stability on the peninsula.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. ROK coordinates closely with both the United States and Beijing to ensure stability on the peninsula.2. ROK and the United States cooperate with China via 6PT to manage the DPRK challenge.3. The United States is deterred from provocative military actions against the DPRK and its nuclear program.

Taiwan

Table A.6
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Taiwan in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
The United States reduces military and political support to Taiwan.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The U.S. government at most sends low-level defense officials (Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense and below) to Taiwan. 2. The United States reduces quantity and quality of arms sales to Taiwan. 3. The United States reduces quantity and level of military cooperation with Taiwan.
The United States restrains Taiwan from pursuing de jure independence.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The United States upholds "one China" policy and criticizes provocative moves by Taiwan toward independence. 2. The United States reduces military presence near Taiwan that could embolden separatists.
Taiwan provides little to no support to U.S. efforts to constrain China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Taiwan's contributions to U.S. and Japanese BRI alternatives remain token and unsuccessful. 2. The Taiwan military remains uninvolved in U.S. exercises and activities aimed at China.

Southeast Asia

Table A.7
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Southeast Asia in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Thailand and the Philippines prioritize security partnership with China over U.S. alliance obligations.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Thailand and the Philippines refuse to permit U.S. access for combat forces. 2. The United States downplays security obligations. 3. Thailand and the Philippines expand security partnership with China and access for the PLA.
Vietnam refrains from upgrading its security relationship with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Vietnam steps up participation in PLA-led multilateral security initiatives in Southeast Asia. 2. U.S. military assistance is limited to nonlethal support. 3. Vietnam rejects authorization of U.S. military basing access.
Southeast Asian nations prioritize relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Southeast Asian nations generally favor BRI over U.S. and Japanese alternatives. 2. Southeast Asian nations favor stronger economic, technological, and diplomatic coordination over U.S. alternatives. 3. Southeast Asian states turn to China for leadership on regional issues over the United States. 4. Southeast Asian nations expand access for PLA forces.
Southeast Asian nations support Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In international disputes between China and the United States, Southeast Asian nations generally side with China. 2. Southeast Asian nations tend to support China as leader of regional and global multilateral groups.
Southeast Asian nations provide little to no support to U.S. efforts to constrain China, or efforts are ineffective.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Southeast Asian nations limit or reduce U.S. basing access and military collaboration. 2. Southeast Asian nations generally avoid participating in U.S.-led multilateral exercises that appear aimed at China. 3. Southeast Asian nations refuse support for U.S. policy statements aimed against China.

South Asia

Table A.8
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding South Asia in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
South Asian nations prioritize relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. South Asian nations generally favor BRI over U.S. and Indian alternatives.2. South Asian nations favor stronger economic, technological, and diplomatic coordination over U.S. or Indian alternatives.3. Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh expand PLA access over U.S. objections.
South Asian nations support Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In international disputes between China and the United States, South Asian nations generally side with China.2. South Asian nations tend to support China as leader of regional and global multilateral groups.
South Asian nations provide token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China, including Free and Open Indo-Pacific.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. India balances stronger ties with China and those with the United States.2. South Asian nations limit or reduce U.S. basing access and military collaboration.3. South Asian nations generally avoid participating in U.S.-led multilateral exercises that appear aimed at China.4. South Asian nations provide token or no participation in activities aimed at constraining China.

Central Asia

Table A.9
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Central Asia in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Central Asian nations prioritize relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Central Asian nations avoid support for U.S. actions and policies that might anger China regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.2. Central Asian nations prefer Chinese-led economic, security, and diplomatic initiatives over U.S. options.
Central Asian nations support Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In international disputes between China and the United States, Central Asian nations generally side with China.2. Central Asian nations tend to support China as leader of regional and global multilateral groups.
Central Asian nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China or the efforts are ineffective.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Central Asian nations refuse to grant basing or rotational presence to U.S. military.2. Central Asian nations refuse to participate in any multilateral military exercise aimed at China.3. Central Asian nations provide token or no participation in activities aimed at constraining China.

Oceania

Table A.10
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Oceania in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Oceania prioritizes its relationship with China over that with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Oceania states support Chinese regional trade initiatives over those preferred by the United States.2. Other than Australia and New Zealand, Oceania states favor Chinese-led multilateral security and diplomatic initiatives over U.S. options.3. PLA gains access to ports and facilities on some Pacific islands over U.S. objections.
Australia is divided in support for Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. In international disputes between China and the United States, Australia and New Zealand are divided in their support for the United States.2. Australia and New Zealand are divided in support for the United States versus China as leader of regional and global multilateral groups.
Australia provides token support for U.S. strategies to counter China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Australia limits or reduces U.S. basing access and military collaboration.2. Australia provides token support for U.S.-led competitor initiatives to BRI.

Asia-Pacific Multilateral Objectives

Table A.11
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Asian Multilaterals in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Chinese-led multilateral organizations play a greater role in managing regional security and the regional economy than U.S.-led efforts.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. CICA, SCO, 6PT, ARF, etc. become key venues for managing security issues in Asia.2. The ASEAN Free Trade Area, the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, AIIB, and BRI all play a greater role in organizing the region's economy than U.S.-led efforts.
Regional organizations accommodate Chinese norm-, rule-, and agenda-setting.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. PRC officials dominate agenda-, norm-, and rule-setting or frustrate U.S. efforts in the Asian Development Bank, ASEAN, and other regional multilateral organizations.2. Regional multilateral organizations consistently employ language and terminology that reflect China's preferences on core interest issues like Taiwan, Tibet, and human rights.

Developing World Objectives and Subobjectives

Africa

Table A.12
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Africa in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
African nations prioritize diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. African nations avoid support for U.S. actions and policies that might anger China regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. 2. China's bilateral interactions with African nations surpass those of the United States in frequency and level of importance. 3. Chinese technology standards and products dominate the African market, while U.S. counterparts have a modest presence at most. 4. African nations purchase more arms from China and carry out more cooperative security activities with the PLA than with the U.S. military.
African nations favor Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. African academic, media, and cultural elites generally reject U.S. claims of China as a threat. 2. China's engagement with the Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) surpasses that of the United States in substance. 3. In multilateral global and regional venues, African nations support China over the United States on contentious issues.
African nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. African nations limit or reduce U.S. basing access and military collaboration 2. African nations do not support U.S. statements or policies that undermine Chinese authority or interests. 3. U.S.-led efforts to promote BRI alternatives lack appeal and support among African countries.

Middle East

Table A.13
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding the Middle East in U.S.
Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Middle East nations prioritize diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Middle Eastern nations avoid support for U.S. actions and policies that might anger China regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc.2. China's bilateral interactions with Middle Eastern countries surpass those of the United States in frequency and level of importance.3. Chinese technology standards and products dominate the Middle Eastern market, while U.S. counterparts have a modest presence at most.4. Middle Eastern countries purchase more arms from China and carry out more cooperative security activities with the PLA than with the U.S. military.
China becomes a more crucial arbiter of regional affairs and protector of shipping lanes.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Iran, Saudi Arabia and its allies, Israel, and other nations rely more on China than on the United States to mediate disputes.2. Chinese patronage and military presence are widely regarded as more essential than those of the United States to ensuring secure shipping through the Persian Gulf.
Middle Eastern nations favor Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Middle Eastern academic, media, and cultural elites generally reject U.S. claims of China as a threat.2. China's engagement with regional multilateral organizations surpasses that of the United States in substance.3. In multilateral global and regional venues, Middle Eastern nations support China over the United States on contentious issues.
Middle Eastern nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Middle Eastern nations limit or reduce U.S. basing access and military collaboration.2. Middle Eastern nations do not support U.S. statements or policies that undermine Chinese authority or interests.3. U.S.-led efforts to promote BRI alternatives lack appeal and support among Middle Eastern countries.

Latin America

Table A.14
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Latin America in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
Latin American nations are divided on diplomatic, economic, and military relations with China over those with the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Latin American nations avoid support for U.S. actions and policies that might anger China regarding Tibet, Xinjiang, Hong Kong, Taiwan, etc. 2. China's bilateral interactions with Latin American nations equal those of the United States in frequency and level of importance. 3. The United States and China have comparable penetration in technology standards, products, and markets. 4. Latin American nations are divided in their sourcing of arms and cooperative security efforts between the United States and China.
Latin American nations are divided on Chinese over U.S. international leadership.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Latin American academic, media, and cultural elites are divided regarding U.S. claims of China as a threat. 2. China's engagement with Latin American multilateral groups are competitive with that of the United States in substance. 3. In multilateral global and regional venues, Latin American nations are divided in support for China and the United States on contentious issues.
Latin American nations offer token to no support to U.S. efforts to contain China.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Latin American nations limit U.S. basing access and military collaboration. 2. Latin American nations do not support U.S. statements or policies that undermine Chinese authority or interests. 3. U.S.-led infrastructure and investment efforts are less successful than BRI.

Multilateral Organizations Objectives and Subobjectives

China seeks to renovate the existing international order, strengthening and refining those institutions that facilitate Chinese leadership and subverting or circumventing those that limit its power. Where existing institutions fail to adequately serve China's needs, Beijing seeks to build alternative institutions. Multilateral organizations include both those at the global level and those at the regional level.

Global Multilateral Organizations

Table A.15
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Global Multilateral Organizations in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
China surpasses the U.S. leadership role in norm-, rule-, and agenda-setting in existing political and economic multilateral organizations.	<div>1. Chinese officials prevail over the United States in setting norms, rules, and the agenda in the UN, IMF, WTO, WB, G-20, and other intergovernmental organizations.</div> <div>2. In intergovernmental organizations where the United States resists Beijing's demands, China undermines the intergovernmental organizations' effectiveness.</div> <div>3. Multilateral intergovernmental organizations favor Chinese over U.S. preferences on such issues as Taiwan, Tibet, etc.</div>
Chinese-led multilateral groups play a more critical role in organizing the world economy than U.S.-led ones.	<div>1. BRI, New Development Bank, CICA, SCO, AIIB, and other Chinese-led multilateral organizations are widely perceived as more effective in managing and resolving problems than U.S.-led counterparts.</div> <div>2. China maintains norm-, rule-, and agenda-setting in these groups, and the United States is mainly a passive observer.</div>
NATO lacks consensus on countering China.	<div>1. NATO members do not agree on a unified approach to countering China beyond token gestures.</div>

Domains and Global Governance

Cyber

Table A.16
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Cyber in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
China has a stronger international coalition in support of its leadership in cyber than the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. More countries support China's leadership on cyber issues than support the United States.2. Chinese-led 5G and telecommunication networks surpass U.S.-led versions in size and value.
Most countries favor Chinese norms and technology standards for cyber.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. China increases digital technologies and equipment exports to BRI partners, while U.S. companies are largely marginalized.2. Chinese norms, rules, and standards predominate in BRI countries as part of the "digital Silk Road."
China maintains secure cyber defense against U.S. military.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Civilian and military cyber defense units are capable of defending critical infrastructure from U.S. cyber attack.2. Critical PLA command and communication nodes are resilient and capable of defense against U.S. cyber attack.
PLA is capable of launching offensive operations against U.S. networks.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. PLA units develop a robust inventory of cyber weapons that can target U.S. military command, communications, logistics, and civilian infrastructure networks.

Space

Table A.17
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Space in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Sample Subobjectives
China has a stronger international coalition in support of its leadership in space than the United States.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. More countries support China's leadership on space issues than support the United States.2. China is more successful than the United States in norm-, rule-, and agenda-setting in space-related intergovernmental organizations.
Most countries favor Chinese norms and technology standards for space.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Chinese Beidou and satellite systems have more users than the U.S. GPS system.2. Chinese technology standards for space systems enjoy more international support than those set by the United States.
China maintains secure defense of space assets.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Civilian and military space defense units are capable of defending critical infrastructure from U.S. attack.
PLA capable of launching offensive operations against U.S. space assets.	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. PLA units develop a robust inventory of space weapons that can target U.S. military command, communications, logistics, and civilian infrastructure networks.

Global Discourse and International Law

As part of its effort to renovate the international order, China seeks to gradually displace the United States as the most globally influential power.

Table A.18
Sample Chinese Subobjectives Regarding Global Discourse and International Law in U.S. Competition Strategy

Objective	Subobjectives
Key global governance entities adopt and operate under Chinese vision instead of U.S. vision.	1. The UN and related intergovernmental organizations adopt Chinese terms and concepts into plans, policies, and other documents.
Global media, commerce, and academic discourse regularly favor Chinese over U.S. discourse.	1. Global media generally favor Chinese over U.S. discourse on Chinese core interest issues. 2. The Chinese government persuades global companies to adopt Chinese over U.S. discourse on core interest issues. 3. The Chinese government persuades Western academics and think tanks to divide over use of Chinese versus U.S. discourse on Chinese core interest issues.
Chinese interpretations of international law prevail over that of the U.S. on key issues	1. UN Convention on the Law of the Sea adopts norms and legal interpretations that favor China over the United States. 2. In other international law bodies, Chinese preferences prevail over those of the United States.

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Focusing on the international and defense dimensions of U.S.-China competition, the authors of this report make three contributions. First, they intend this report to serve as a planning tool by positing international and defense strategies that could allow China to outcompete the United States. Second, they mean to educate readers on Chinese strategy and policy processes. Third, the authors seek to encourage greater public debate about the nature and stakes of the competition.

As presented by the authors, China's international strategy aims to establish the country's primacy in the Asia-Pacific region and leadership of the international order. The international strategy presented seeks to achieve this end state through peaceful methods, although it does not rule out the possibilities of militarized crises or even conflicts of a limited scope, such as proxy wars. The core of the proposed international strategy is a reliance on China's economic prowess and diplomatic maneuver to put Beijing into a position of advantage from which it cannot be dislodged by the United States. A complementary defense strategy would aim to constrain Washington's ability to forestall or prevent its own eclipse by building a superior Chinese military that renders the risks of military conflict intolerably high. A major Chinese military responsibility would be to support diplomatic efforts to shape a favorable international environment by building strong security ties with client states and discrediting or weakening the appeal of the United States as an alternative.

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