

GREAT-POWER COMPETITION AND CONFLICT IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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About This Report

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

- Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Kristen Gunness, Khrystyna Holynska, Marta Kepe, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-1, 2023
- Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming
- Irina A. Chindea, Elina Treyger, Raphael S. Cohen, Christian Curriden, Kurt Klein, Carlos Sanchez, Holly Gramkow, and Khrystyna Holynska, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-4, forthcoming.

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

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

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Summary

Issue

For centuries, the Middle East has served as a theater of competition between the world's great powers. Today's most prominent competitors—the United States, China, and Russia—also view the Middle East as a critical region of the world where they can cultivate access and influence. Although the United States' competition with China is most evident in the Indo-Pacific and its competition with Russia is most evident in Europe, the Middle East has emerged as one of the most important arenas of competition beyond the competitors' respective backyards. This report—part of a four-volume series—explores the focal points of competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East, concentrating on areas—both geographical and functional—that have the potential to serve as flashpoints for a proxy conflict or limited war.¹ In addition to identifying paths to potential conflict, the authors examine the specific forms that U.S., Chinese, or Russian involvement may take, which actors they may choose to support in various scenarios, and which capabilities they would bring to bear. Using that analysis, the authors identify what implications the findings have for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.

Approach

The project team employed a multi-method approach. First, it developed a unique data set of 16 variables to measure diplomatic, informational, military, and economic potential for great-power competition in secondary theaters. Second, it combined the assessment of competition potential with measures of conflict potential to identify cases with the greatest theoretical chances for future great-power involvement in conflicts in the Middle East. Finally, it used qualitative methods—including interviews with subject-matter experts and analysis of primary and secondary source materials—to explore what conflict in the Middle East might look like and what the implications might be for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.

Key Findings

The analysis yielded the following findings:

- Potential for great-power competition in the Middle East converges on regional centers of economic and political power and states with historical relationships to the United States, Russia, or China.

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

- The United States remains dominant in the military domain in the Middle East, but Russia and China are gaining ground.
- Great-power involvement in potential future Middle Eastern conflicts is unlikely to be driven primarily by concerns over competitors' expanding influence.
- Counterterrorism and great-power competition are interconnected in the Middle East.
- Shifts in the level of U.S. engagement in the Middle East might contribute to conditions that lead to great-power involvement in proxy conflict.
- The United States, China, and Russia have limited willingness for direct military engagement in the region unless there are direct threats to their core interests.
- Conflicts in the Middle East involving great powers may not resemble those of the Cold War.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

- Recognize that U.S. interests in the Middle East require a long-term vision for the region.
- Maintain or cultivate ties to friendly governments and non-state actors.
- Rethink arms sales to the Middle East through the lens of great-power competition.

Recommendations for the Joint Force

- Maintain counterterrorism capabilities while cultivating capabilities relevant to other aspects of great-power competition.
- Consider maintaining force presence in the Middle East to maintain stability and protect U.S. interests.
- Maintain access agreements in the region, especially for overflight rights.

Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

- Prepare for continued demand for U.S. Air Force assets in the theater and invest accordingly.
- Prepare for multifaceted deconfliction challenges in future conflicts that may involve China and Russia.

Contents

About This Report	iii
Summary	v
Figures and Tables	ix
CHAPTER ONE	
Introduction	1
Overview of the United States', China's, and Russia's Interests in the Middle East.....	2
The Past, Present, and Future of Great-Power Involvement in Conflicts in the Middle East: An Overview.....	7
Definitions of Key Concepts.....	12
Methodology.....	14
Overview of Report Structure	20
CHAPTER TWO	
Identifying Regional Competition Flashpoints	23
Regional Competition Landscape	23
Regional Potential for Internal Conflict.....	38
Identifying Competition Flashpoints	40
CHAPTER THREE	
Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement: Afghanistan and Pakistan	43
Overview of Local Political Dynamics.....	44
Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities	49
How Might a Conflict Unfold?.....	67
Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved, and Whom Might Each Support?	67
What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?	73
CHAPTER FOUR	
Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement: Iraq	79
Overview of Local Political Dynamics.....	80
Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities.....	84
How Might a Conflict Unfold?.....	103
What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?	112

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion 119
 Findings 119
 Recommendations 125
 Final Thoughts 131

APPENDIX

Details on the Competition-Potential and Conflict-Potential Indices..... 133

Abbreviations..... 147
References 149

Figures and Tables

Figures

2.1.	Diplomatic Competition Potential in the Middle East	24
2.2.	Informational Competition Potential in the Middle East.....	26
2.3.	Military Competition Potential in the Middle East.....	28
2.4.	Economic Competition Potential in the Middle East.....	32
2.5.	Overall Competition Potential in the Middle East.....	34
2.6.	U.S.-China Competition Potential in the Middle East	36
2.7.	U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in the Middle East	38
2.8.	Conflict Potential in the Middle East.....	39

Tables

1.1.	Measuring Influence-Seeking and Potential for Competition: Variables.....	15
2.1.	The 15 Middle Eastern Countries Ranked by Highest Competition Potential Overall and by Bilateral Competition Potential	35
2.2.	Middle East Case Selection	40
3.1.	Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Afghanistan and Pakistan	74
4.1.	Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Iraq	113
A.1.	Measuring Influence-Seeking and Potential for Competition: Summary of Variables	134
A.2.	Diplomatic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East	141
A.3.	Informational Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East	142
A.4.	Military Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East	143
A.5.	Economic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East ...	144
A.6.	Conflict Potential.....	146

Introduction

For centuries, the Middle East has served as a theater of competition between the world’s great powers. Its geostrategic location and ample natural resources—particularly oil and natural gas—have driven several empires to view the Middle East as a prize to be won. Today’s most prominent competitors—the United States, China, and Russia—have similarly set their sights on the Middle East as a critical region of the world where they can cultivate access and influence. Although the United States’ competition with China is most evident in the Indo-Pacific and its competition with Russia is most evident in Europe, the Middle East has emerged as perhaps one of the most important arenas of competition beyond the great powers’ respective backyards. It is the one region of the world—beyond Asia and Europe—in which all three powers have compelling strategic and security interests. In this report—part of a four-volume series examining the potential for competition and conflict among the great powers in secondary theaters (sometimes referred to as *regions* in this report)—we investigate the prospects that competition will transform into conflict in the broader Middle East region.¹

For the purposes of this report, we define the Middle East as including Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Yemen, as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Although the latter two are not usually considered part of the Middle East, our selection of countries is motivated by the boundaries of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility. We departed from the CENTCOM area of responsibility in two respects: We excluded the former Soviet Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) from this secondary Middle East theater because Russia considers them to be part of its near abroad, and we excluded Israel because it still fell under the auspices of U.S. European Command when research for this project commenced.

¹ Note that these closely related volumes share some material, including descriptions, figures, and tables. See Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Irina A. Chindea, Christian Curriden, Kristen Gunness, Khrystyna Holynska, Marta Kepe, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the 21st Century Outside the Indo-Pacific and Europe*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-1, 2023; Marta Kepe, Elina Treyger, Christian Curriden, Raphael S. Cohen, Kurt Klein, Ashley L. Rhoades, Erik Schuh, and Nathan Vest, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Africa*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-2, forthcoming; and Irina A. Chindea, Elina Treyger, Raphael S. Cohen, Christian Curriden, Kurt Klein, Carlos Sanchez, Holly Gramkow, and Khrystyna Holynska, *Great-Power Competition and Conflict in Latin America*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A969-4, forthcoming.

In this report, we explore the focal points of competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East, concentrating on areas that have the potential to serve as flashpoints for great-power involvement in internal conflicts in the region. In addition to identifying paths to potential conflict, we examine the specific forms that U.S., Chinese, or Russian involvement may take, which actors the powers may choose to support in various scenarios, and which capabilities they would need to bring to bear. Considering our analysis of potential conflict scenarios, we identify implications for the U.S. government, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force.

Overview of the United States', China's, and Russia's Interests in the Middle East

Although U.S. interest in the Middle East may appear to be dwindling as attention and resources shift to the Indo-Pacific and Europe, the United States has numerous enduring interests in the region.² Among its key interests are countering terrorist organizations, ensuring the free flow of and access to natural resources (notably, energy), promoting regional stability and mitigating threats to partners and allies, and maintaining long-standing U.S. relationships in the region.³ The United States has sought to promote peace processes and conflict resolution in intra- and inter-state conflicts in the region, deter Iran, counter violent extremist organizations, and maintain freedom of navigation in key waterways across the Middle East, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab El-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal.⁴ Although U.S. military presence in the Middle East has consistently declined over the past decade,

² Our overview of U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests in the Middle East provided in this volume largely follows the treatment of these issues in another RAND report; see Elina Treyger, Ashley L. Rhoades, Nathan Vest, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Raphael S. Cohen, and Asha Clark, *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A597-3, 2023.

³ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, Washington, D.C., December 2017, pp. 48–49.

⁴ Joseph L. Votel, general, U.S. Central Command, “Great-Power Competition: The Current and Future Challenges of the Middle East,” statement before the U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, Washington, D.C., February 5, 2019; and White House, 2017, pp. 48–50. U.S. efforts to promote peace processes have focused on fostering peaceful Israeli-Arab relations, particularly through seeking a resolution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, easing tensions between the Arab Gulf states, and participating in international efforts to resolve the Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. Of note, from 2017 to 2021, under the Donald Trump administration, U.S. efforts to promote peace focused on Israeli-Arab normalization. The United States played a major role in forging the September 2020 Abraham Accords, which form the basis for normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE (followed by Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan). For more information on the implications of the Abraham Accords, see Daniel Egel, Shira Efron, and Linda Robinson, *Peace Dividend: Widening the Economic Growth and Development Benefits of the Abraham Accords*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-A1149-1, 2021, p. 1.

owing largely to troop reductions in Iraq and Afghanistan,⁵ the United States still has thousands of troops stationed across the region, making the maintenance of regional stability all the more important.

From a threat perspective, countering Iran and terrorist organizations is the key U.S. interest in the Middle East.⁶ Iran's growing regional influence, its cultivation and support of proxy militant groups, its missile programs, and its dogged pursuit of nuclear weapons threaten regional stability and the security of close U.S. allies, such as Israel. Although they have diminished in capacity, terrorist groups—such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—remain threats to U.S. and coalition personnel in the region, as well as to regional allies and partners. Historically, these groups have demonstrated a capability to regenerate quickly; thus, sustaining the U.S. counterterrorism mission is important to preventing a resurgence of terrorist organizations that could become global threats potentially capable of striking the U.S. homeland again.

More broadly, U.S. strategic documents have identified the importance of ensuring that the Middle East is “not dominated by any power hostile to the United States.”⁷ In the context of strategic competition with China and Russia, this translates into seeking to minimize Chinese and Russian influence throughout the region, particularly in countries where the United States has deep ties or interests.

Past iterations of the National Defense Strategy highlighted the importance of partnerships in the Middle East to preserving U.S. interests in the region.⁸ As reflected in their status as major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies, key U.S. partners in the region include Afghanistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, and Pakistan.⁹ Historically, other major partners include the UAE and Saudi Arabia.¹⁰ These partnerships have provided the United States with access, basing, and overflight rights, which are crucial to the U.S. objectives of countering terrorist organizations, deterring Iran, ensuring freedom of navigation for the flow of natural resources, and maintaining regional influence.¹¹

⁵ For precise numbers of troops in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2007 to 2018 and an illustration of the downward trend in numbers, see Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007–2018*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R44116, May 10, 2019.

⁶ U.S. Department of Defense (DoD), *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018a, p. 2; and White House, 2017, p. 49.

⁷ White House, 2017, p. 48.

⁸ DoD, 2018a.

⁹ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “Major Non-NATO Ally Status: Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2021a.

¹⁰ Votel, 2019, p. 28.

¹¹ See, for example, Votel, 2019, p. 32; Matthew Wallin, “U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East: Fact Sheet,” American Security Project, June 2018, p. 10; and Justine Barden, “The Strait of Hormuz Is the World's Most Important Oil Transit Chokepoint,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, June 20, 2019.

China's interests in the Middle East partly mirror those of the United States. China's motivation for engaging more deeply in the Middle East in recent years is largely to gain access to energy resources and markets and to pursue other economic interests. China's approach is heavily shaped by its desire to protect its energy and economic interests and avoid antagonizing any of the major players in the region. Like the United States, China seeks to preserve the free flow of oil and other energy resources. Most of China's top oil suppliers are Middle Eastern countries (apart from Russia, which became China's second-largest supplier of oil in 2018). Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE, and Iran together accounted for 43 percent of China's overall oil imports in 2020.¹² China's dependence on Middle Eastern oil is likely to increase in the coming years: In 2016, the International Energy Agency predicted that Chinese imports from the region would double by 2035.¹³

In view of this, China has some interest in promoting stability in the Middle East. Moreover, China is concerned about its citizens, particularly its Muslim Uighur population, becoming radicalized by Islamist extremist ideologies.¹⁴ China also fears that radicalized Chinese citizens could take up arms in ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and then return to China to potentially launch terrorist attacks at home.¹⁵ Yet China has not assumed a very active role on the security front and has thus far avoided participating in any ongoing conflicts—beyond contributing forces to the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon.¹⁶

China has partnerships with many countries in the Middle East, some of which are enemies of each other (such as Israel and Iran). In seeking to balance its complicated relationships in the region, China has created a strategic dialogue mechanism with the Gulf Cooperation Council, supported the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and refused to label Hamas as a terrorist organization, all while lending support to Israel and seeking to improve its own economy by investing in Israel's technology sector.¹⁷ Meanwhile, China has entered into agreements with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. The Iran deal provides China with the ability

¹² Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments: Involving the People's Republic of China 2020: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C., 2020; and Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments: Involving the People's Republic of China 2019: Annual Report to Congress*, Washington, D.C., 2019.

¹³ China Power Team, "How Is China's Energy Footprint Changing?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 15, 2016.

¹⁴ Daniel L. Byman and Israa Saber, "Is China Prepared for Global Terrorism?" Brookings Institution, September 2019; and Siegfried O. Wolf, *The China-Pakistan Economic Corridor of the Belt and Road Initiative*, Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2020, pp. 267–268.

¹⁵ Mathieu Duchâtel, "China's Foreign Fighters Problem," *War on the Rocks*, January 25, 2019.

¹⁶ Yannis Stivachtis, ed., *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries*, Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018, p. 82.

¹⁷ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, *China's Arab Policy Paper*, Beijing, January 2016; and Shira Efron, Karen Schwindt, and Emily Haskel, *Chinese Investment in Israeli Technology and Infrastructure: Security Implications for Israel and the United States*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3176-OSD, 2020.

to obtain discounted oil for 25 years in exchange for strengthened military cooperation and Chinese investment across a variety of Iranian industries.¹⁸ China's activities in Saudi Arabia include helping expand Riyadh's civilian nuclear program, conducting initiatives related to 5G network technology and so-called smart cities, and involving Saudi Arabia as a partner in the joint Russia-China Investment Fund.¹⁹

Russia's motives for involvement in the Middle East consist of strategic and political factors, security concerns, and economic interests. Strategically, Russia has sought opportunities to make itself an indispensable power to countries in the region, with the aim of undermining U.S. relationships there. Moreover, Russia has sought to increase its strategic access in the region—to natural resources, strategic waterways, and bases—by cultivating these relationships. Indeed, Russia's approach to cultivating relationships in the Middle East is often predicated on U.S. disengagement, which creates a vacuum for Russia to fill and exploit.²⁰ For instance, the Gulf states increased their engagement with Russia following their disappointment over the U.S. response to the Arab Spring—during which mass protests called for regime change—and Egypt turned to Russia for arms sales after the United States suspended several of its own sales amid a downturn in relations. Like China and the United States, Russia has sought to build ties with multiple regional powers while balancing these complex relationships. Russia has hedged its bets by establishing relationships with parties on both sides of regional conflicts and rivalries across the Persian Gulf, the Levant, and North Africa. Moscow has endeavored to present itself as a responsible outside entity that can serve as a mediator in regional conflicts.²¹

Russia's strategic interests in the Middle East led to its military intervention in Syria's civil war in 2015, cementing Russia's place as a key player in the region. The Middle East's proximity to Russia gives Moscow a compelling interest in the security situation in the region as well, particularly on the terrorism front. Russia has a large Muslim population and has experienced two bloody uprisings by Islamic Chechen separatists; in addition, neighboring states in Central Asia are majority Muslim, as is Azerbaijan. Thus, the proliferation of global terrorist networks in the Middle East, including their potential to spread extremist movements, poses a threat to Russia.²² The Eastern Mediterranean Sea is also an area of strategic concern

¹⁸ Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *New York Times*, September 4, 2021.

¹⁹ 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; and Russian Direct Investment Fund, "RDIF Attracts Saudi Partner to Expand the Russia-China Investment Fund," press release, October 25, 2018.

²⁰ Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 31, 2019; and Becca Wasser, *The Limits of Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-340-RC, 2019.

²¹ Wasser, 2019; and James Sladden, Becca Wasser, Ben Connable, and Sarah Grand-Clement, *Russian Strategy in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-236-RC, 2017.

²² See, for example, Aleksei Malashenko and Akhmed Yarlykapov, *Radicalisation of Russia's Muslim Community*, MICROCON Policy Working Paper 9, May 2009, p. 30.

to Russia's interests—both in the Middle East and beyond. Russia has used the Eastern Mediterranean as a hub for its military operations in Syria, Libya, and Ukraine, and Russian access to and presence in the sea enables Russian power projection in the region. Furthermore, the sea has served as a site of competition between Moscow and Washington, as well as between Moscow and Ankara. In the first case, the Eastern Mediterranean is the gateway for U.S. naval vessels to reach the Black Sea and thus poses a threat to Russia's southern flank. In the latter case, Russia and Turkey have been competing for control over oil and gas sources off the coast of Cyprus.

Although Russia is involved in counterterrorism missions in Syria and has expressed concern that terrorist networks might spill over into Russia, it has also tolerated and even partnered transactionally with groups that the United States considers terrorist organizations (such as Lebanese Hezbollah) when these groups serve Russian ends. Russian and U.S. views of what constitutes a terrorist threat clearly differ; thus, even when Russia and the United States are notionally aligned on the same side of a conflict—against ISIS, for example—they may elect to work with different partners in the fight and still seek to compete rather than work with each other. Although Russia wishes to gain access and influence in the Middle East, particularly at the expense of the United States, it also wishes to avoid direct conflict with the United States (especially outside neighboring Europe). As a result, Russia's pursuit of proxy conflict with the United States in the Middle East could present a desirable alternative to direct conflict, enabling Russia to strengthen its position in the region while undercutting that of the United States.

Economic interests also play a role in driving Russia's involvement in the Middle East, revolving primarily around arms and energy. Moscow has, for example, already displayed its willingness to offer security support in exchange for access to natural resources. Russia has been heavily engaged in the arms trade in the region: Although the Middle East is not the largest destination for Russian arms exports, it collectively has been the fastest-growing buyer of Russian arms since 2014.²³ As a leading energy producer, Russia has a crucial stake in the future of the hydrocarbon market, so the actions of Middle Eastern energy producers have a direct bearing on Russia's economic fortunes. Accordingly, Russia's Foreign Policy Concept calls for "enhance[d] cooperation with the leading energy producers," and its National Security Strategy includes a need to increase energy security.²⁴ Finally, Russia has sought investments in its economy from wealthy Gulf nations, which could help mitigate some of its issues with attracting U.S. and European investors amid sanctions.²⁵

²³ Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Diego Lopes Da Silva, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019*, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2020, p. 4.

²⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation," Moscow, December 1, 2016; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation," Moscow, December 31, 2015.

²⁵ See, for example, Henry Foy, "Russia Looks to Translate Gulf's Warm Welcome to Cold Cash," *Financial Times*, October 23, 2019.

With these overlapping U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests, competition among the three powers has increasingly been a feature across the Middle East. Although there are some areas of alignment, such as in reducing regional tensions and countering violent extremist organizations, there are few prospects for meaningful cooperation among the three competitors and myriad flashpoints for competition. Russia has sought to push the United States out of Syria, and it has seized opportunities to secure or deepen partnerships with Middle Eastern states overlooked or alienated by the United States. China, for its part, often tussles with the United States when Washington seeks to undertake military action without United Nations Security Council approval or when Washington tries to get local states to criticize China's human rights record or stop local states from buying Chinese products. Although China does not want the United States to exit the Middle East—given the United States' important role in providing free security services and guaranteeing the flow of oil²⁶—both China and Russia have courted anti-U.S. actors across the region, including the Taliban in Afghanistan.²⁷ Because the great powers have few shared objectives and many clashing aims, great-power competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East likely will persist and expand over the coming decades.

The Past, Present, and Future of Great-Power Involvement in Conflicts in the Middle East: An Overview

Throughout the modern, post-World War II era, the Middle East—which, for our purposes, includes Afghanistan and Pakistan—has experienced external interference in local conflicts. Some conflicts were primarily intra-regional proxy conflicts involving regional powers supporting their own local partners. For instance, the North Yemen civil war provided an arena for Nasserist Egypt to support anti-monarchist forces and overthrow royalists backed by Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Yemen has once again become the site of an intra-regional proxy conflict in which Saudi Arabia and the UAE, among others, have backed the internationally recognized Yemeni government against Iran-backed Houthi rebels.²⁸ Other Middle Eastern conflicts also became internationalized as great powers used regional conflicts as a means of competing for influence. Indeed, in two of the region's most-notable modern conflicts—the Arab-Israeli conflict in the years after World War II, which consisted primarily of skirmishes

²⁶ Karl P. Mueller, Becca Wasser, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephen Watts, *U.S. Strategic Interests in the Middle East and Implications for the Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-265-A, 2017.

²⁷ Of course, the United States under the Trump administration courted the Taliban as well, seeking to negotiate a framework for a peaceful Afghanistan that would enable U.S. forces to exit the country (Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, February 29, 2020).

²⁸ For more detail on the Yemen conflict and possible solutions, see Daniel Egel, Trevor Johnston, Ashley L. Rhoades, and Eric Robinson, *Building an Enduring Peace in Yemen: Lessons from Five Years of RAND Research*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A733-1, 2021.

and battles between Israel and Egypt, and the Afghanistan conflict in the 1980s—the United States and the Soviet Union backed belligerents on opposite sides.²⁹

External, geopolitical forces have contributed to proxy wars and military interventions in the region, as great powers sought to balance against each other's influence. Notably, during the Cold War, the United States supported pro-U.S. regimes in Saudi Arabia and Iran under the Shah as the so-called twin pillars upholding U.S. influence in the Middle East against Soviet-aligned Egypt, Syria, and North Yemen.³⁰ Throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, Israel was also an unofficial pillar of U.S. policy in the region and served as an effective partner in combating the Soviet Union's regional partners. During that period, the United States backed its ally Israel, while the Soviet Union supported Egypt and its Arab allies, including Iraq and Syria. As the two powers vied for dominance in the Middle East—a fight mirrored in other theaters throughout the world—they also capitalized on their backing of proxies to test U.S. and Soviet equipment.³¹ This aspect of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry came to a head in the 1973 October War, also known as the Yom Kippur War. Although the rival powers were ultimately able to restrain their proxies from engaging in all-out war, this conflict brought the United States and the Soviet Union to a point of great risk of direct conflict with each other in support of their respective allies.³² The Soviet Union grew more aggressive in its backing of regional proxies following the Yom Kippur War—for instance, supporting both Iran and Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s before opting to back Iraq. The United States, in turn, sought to balance against Soviet influence in the region. Maintaining friendly relations with

²⁹ Although the United States generally backed Israel throughout the Arab-Israeli conflict, it did sometimes side with Egypt. For instance, it supported Egypt against Israel, the United Kingdom, and France during the Suez Crisis of 1956 (a conflict in which Israel, the United Kingdom, and France fought to regain control of the Suez Canal after then-Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the Suez Canal Company and sought to restrict access to the canal). See Guy Laron, *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle over Third World Industrialization, 1945–1956*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013; and “An Affair to Remember,” *The Economist*, July 29, 2006.

³⁰ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini, Nathan Vest, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A958-1, 2021, p. 19.

³¹ Guy Laron, “When the U.S. Used Israel to Test Out a Weapon—and Dragged It into War,” *Haaretz*, September 7, 2019; and Uri Bar-Noi, “The Soviet Union and the Six-Day War: Revelations from the Polish Archives,” Cold War International History Project, Wilson Center, 2011.

³² Coral Bell, “The October Middle East War: A Case Study in Crisis Management During Détente,” *International Affairs*, Vol. 50, No. 4, October 1974; Peter Mangold, *Superpower Intervention in the Middle East*, Routledge, 2014; and William Burr, ed., “The October War and U.S. Policy,” National Security Archive, October 7, 2003. The conflict had other important consequences for the Cold War; for example, the United States used the lessons of the conflict to inform its development of the AirLand Battle doctrine, which in turn dictated how the United States would fight against the Soviets in Europe (John L. Romjue, “From Active Defense to AirLand Battle: The Development of Army Doctrine 1973–1982,” Fort Monroe, Va.: U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, Historical Monograph Series, June 1984).

Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the smaller Gulf states also facilitated the free flow of oil to world markets—and especially U.S. allies, a major U.S. strategic concern.³³

Beyond the Middle East proper, Afghanistan furnishes one of the sharpest examples of Cold War–era rivalry playing out in a conflict. The Soviet decision to deploy troops to Afghanistan in 1979 was a bid to maintain a friendly socialist government close to the Soviet border. The decision was driven by the Soviet view of the clash between socialism and capitalism and Soviet fears that Afghanistan would reorient toward the United States.³⁴ In turn, the United States chose to support the *mujahedeen*—the Afghan militants who fought against the Soviet Union following its 1979 invasion of Afghanistan—as a countermeasure to Soviet aggression, and that support was intended to exploit the conflict to impose costs on Washington’s rival.³⁵

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

international conflict between two foreign powers . . . [was] fought out in the soil of a third country[,] disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country; and using some of that country’s manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies.³⁶

U.S. and Soviet involvement in third countries was largely driven by the imperative to prevail in the all-encompassing geopolitical and ideological struggle, as the two rivals sought to balance each other’s influence across much of the world.³⁷ Because of the global and zero-sum nature of this struggle—that is, a communist government anywhere was viewed as a loss to the United States, just as a capitalist nation was viewed as a loss to the Soviets—great-power

³³ This concern over the free flow of oil was appearing even in President Jimmy Carter’s speeches (Jimmy Carter, “State of the Union Address 1980,” Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, January 23, 1980). See also Leonardo Maugeri, *The Age of Oil: The Mythology, History, and Future of the World’s Most Controversial Resource*, London: Praeger, 2006.

³⁴ The Soviet military intervention was motivated in no small part by the suspicion that the Afghan leader, Hafizullah Amin (who was previously receiving Soviet support), was reorienting to the West and that not intervening would hand political control of the country to the Americans. See Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 316–326.

³⁵ See, for example, Westad, 2005, pp. 327–333; and George Crile, *Charlie Wilson’s War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*, New York: Grove Press, 2007.

³⁶ Karl W. Deutsch, “External Involvement in Internal Wars,” in Harry Eckstein, ed., *Internal War: Problems and Approaches*, New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964, p. 102.

³⁷ The causes and drivers of the U.S. and Soviet involvement in the multitude of conflicts globally between the end of World War II and the end of the Cold War remain subject to debate among historians; however, there is little doubt that ideological and geopolitical aspects of the Cold War rivalries and the contest over newly independent countries were paramount. For a seminal historical treatment of the U.S. and Soviet interventions of the late Cold War, see Westad, 2005.

entanglement in conflicts all over the world was rather frequent.³⁸ As a result, the political fates of countries and regions that should have been secondary to the great powers' core national security concerns acquired greater importance.

Some of the same factors that made the Middle East fertile ground for foreign involvement during the Cold War and since the 2011 Arab Spring persist today. Political factors that produce conflicts of the sort that draw in external powers were historically, and remain, manifold. Middle Eastern conflicts that have drawn external involvement have often manifested in institutionally weak countries that experienced sudden changes in governance or popular uprisings. As regimes or institutions fracture, competing external powers perceive opportunities to exploit turbulent conditions to increase their influence. For instance, in North Yemen in 1962, army officers deposed the country's monarch and sought to establish a military-led government akin to Nasser's Egypt, and Egypt eventually deployed troops in support of the Yemeni putschists.³⁹ And in the more recent era, the Arab Spring fomented instability that led to external involvement in Syria, Yemen, and Libya,⁴⁰ which in turn instigated civil wars in these countries.⁴¹ As we discuss later, weak institutions and state fragility remain pressing concerns in the region and portend continued instability. Moreover, fractured identity politics in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and several of the Gulf states create vectors for foreign penetration and exploitation, which further exacerbates instability. Future waves of instability and social upheavals could again lead to popular revolutions, regime change, or civil war, which present opportunities for foreign meddling, whether through supporting proxies or intervening directly in a conflict.

In addition to having such opportunities, competing powers may have motivations to continue the history of entanglement in regional conflicts. The three powers have interests in the region (as noted earlier), and competition among the United States, China, and Russia is intensifying and could again motivate support to parties in conflicts. Indeed, the Middle East hosts what is probably the most serious current conflict in which numerous external powers back local actors: the Syrian civil war. After the civil war began following Syrian strongman Bashar al-Assad's brutal crackdown on protests during the Arab Spring in 2011,

³⁸ We are indebted to our colleagues for tabulating the incidence of proxy wars over time; see Stephen Watts, Bryan Frederick, Nathan Chandler, Mark Toukan, Christian Curriden, Erik Mueller, Edward Geist, Ariane Tabatabai, Sara Plana, Brandon Corbin, and Jeffrey Martini, *Proxy Warfare in Strategic Competition: Overarching Findings and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A307-1, 2023.

³⁹ Adam Baron, "Yemen's Forgotten War: How Europe Can Lay the Foundations for Peace," European Council on Foreign Relations, December 2016.

⁴⁰ Analysis of Libya is outside the geographic scope of this study, but see Kepe et al., forthcoming (a companion report in this series).

⁴¹ For example, in 2015, after Yemen's revolutionary transition stalled and protests resumed, the Houthis seized Yemen's capital of Sana'a and ousted the country's president. The Houthis' coup then prompted a Saudi and Emirati military intervention, which led to Iran providing military and financial support to the Houthis.

the United States—along with its allies—backed what it considered “moderate” opposition forces.⁴² Russia, on the other hand, backed the Assad government, and its support escalated into a direct military intervention in 2015. Ten years in, the conflict had left 387,000 dead and some 205,000 missing.⁴³

In some contrast with the Cold War–era conflicts noted earlier, U.S. and Russian involvement in Syria is not driven by an overriding zero-sum logic of competition. For the United States, although limiting Russian influence over these conflict-torn nations and their neighborhoods may be a goal, it is by no means the dominant goal driving involvement. Russia was indeed motivated by preventing what it viewed as another U.S.-sponsored regime change in Syria and helping a Russia-friendly regime maintain power. But Moscow also had other reasons for involvement, and its effort to fortify influence was intended as much to compel the United States and its allies to retrench from their post-2014 diplomatic isolation of Russia as it was to prevent the United States from having any influence over the country.⁴⁴

Another notable aspect of this conflict (as well as of the conflict in Libya) is that the United States and Russia have generally been cautious with regard to each other’s presence. Apart from a handful of incidents—such as the attack by Russian Wagner mercenaries on U.S. special operations forces in Deir al-Zour, which provoked a decisive response of U.S. firepower—there have been few direct clashes between the two sides.⁴⁵ There have been a handful of well-publicized incidents in which U.S. and Russian forces have accused each other of trying to run the other off the road, including one incident that injured four U.S. soldiers.⁴⁶ However, neither side has viewed the conflict as primarily a way to impose costs on its competitor. Indeed, although some U.S. officials have suggested that the United States seeks to make Syria a “quagmire” for Russia, the United States has not taken every opportunity to do so, choosing instead to pursue deconfliction efforts aimed at minimizing mutual harms, with mixed success.⁴⁷ Russia, though certainly interested in undermining U.S. influence, has not demonstrated much desire to impose direct costs on the United States—and evidence suggests that its decision to intervene militarily in Syria in the first place was based

⁴² “Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?” BBC News, last updated March 12, 2021.

⁴³ “Why Has the Syrian War Lasted 10 Years?” 2021.

⁴⁴ Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, and Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019.

⁴⁵ Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “How a 4-Hour Battle Between Russian Mercenaries and U.S. Commandos Unfolded in Syria,” *New York Times*, May 24, 2018.

⁴⁶ Lolita C. Baldor and Robert Burns, “Vehicle Collision with Russians Injures 4 US Troops in Syria,” *Military Times*, August 26, 2020.

⁴⁷ David Brennan, “U.S. Syria Representative Says His Job Is to Make the War a ‘Quagmire’ for Russia,” *Newsweek*, May 13, 2020. On the history of U.S.-Russia deconfliction efforts, see Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019.

on a belief that a clash with the United States there would be unlikely.⁴⁸ Moreover, although the United States was more active in earlier phases of the conflict, its participation has since been half-hearted at best. The United States tacitly retrenched from its goal of ousting the Assad regime and focused on destroying the Islamic State. Rather than doubling down on the conflict to try to undercut Russia's hold on Syria, the United States ended its train-and-equip mission to vetted Syrian opposition and tried—though later reversed the decision—to withdraw its troops from Syria entirely in 2019; however, its future commitment is uncertain.⁴⁹ The shared U.S. and Russian goals of defeating ISIS, in other words, largely eclipsed the competition over influence.⁵⁰

The Syrian civil war demonstrates that, just as in the past, conflicts that draw in great-power competitors often can erupt outside the primary theaters of competition, including in the Middle East. Yet the nature of great-power involvement in Syria raises questions about how future conflicts of this kind will unfold. Will they resemble the proxy wars and military interventions of the Cold War, when rival powers supported parties on opposite sides of conflicts, driven predominantly by geopolitical and ideological goals rooted in competition? Or will future conflicts more closely resemble Syria and Libya, where rival great powers may be backing different parties, but not primarily for reasons related to competition or intended to impose costs on their competitors? With this report, we seek to shed light on these questions.

Definitions of Key Concepts

To explore these questions, we begin by defining the concepts that are key to this research. First, we adopt the definition of *competition* proposed by Michael Mazarr and colleagues in a 2018 RAND study:

Competition in the international realm involves the attempt to gain advantage, often relative to others believed to pose a challenge or threat, through the self-interested pursuit of contested goods such as power, security, wealth, influence, and status.⁵¹

Second, we define the set of relevant conflicts. Cold War era—conflicts noted earlier are often described as *proxy wars*. What precisely makes external powers' involvement in a for-

⁴⁸ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

⁴⁹ See, for instance, Louisa Loveluck, "As U.S. Completes Afghan Withdrawal, American Allies in Syria Watch Warily," *Washington Post*, August 31, 2021.

⁵⁰ For U.S. priorities, see Carla E. Humud and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33487, July 27, 2020.

⁵¹ Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018, p. 5.

eign conflict a proxy war is a matter of some debate.⁵² For instance, some definitions of proxy wars limit them to cases in which external powers support non-state actors but not states.⁵³ However, most discussions of proxy wars distinguish this form of involvement from direct military interventions: In proxy warfare, the external power intervenes through only indirect support—such as with arms and other resources—and delegates the fighting to a local actor.⁵⁴

In practice, the line between indirect and direct or military support may not be a firm one, as indirect support to proxies can subtly escalate to military action. Moreover, one power may intervene in a conflict solely through indirect support of a proxy actor, whereas its rival power might intervene more directly. For example, in Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Soviet intervention entailed a substantial deployment of Soviet troops, whereas the U.S. involvement was largely confined to supporting the mujahedeen.⁵⁵ Then too, the risks that attend the spillover of competition into foreign conflicts—risks of escalation into direct conflict and mounting costs of involvement—may exist whether rival powers become involved directly or indirectly. Thus, in this series of reports, we investigate the prospects for great-power involvement in conflicts in secondary theaters, whatever form this involvement takes.

More specifically, we consider *whether and under what conditions the United States could expect to become involved in a secondary-theater conflict in which at least one of its two main competitors is also involved*. Great-power involvement in conflicts might take the shape of proxy warfare—that is, support for a state or a non-state actor by means short of direct military intervention. This might include covert or overt action. In particular, it might include purely indirect aid, such as training, equipping, advising, selling arms, and providing financial assistance, but it might also involve combat or military action—so long as that action is carried out by non-state groups, such as private military and security companies (PMSCs), affiliated with and operating on behalf of the external power.⁵⁶ Great-power involvement in conflicts might also take the shape of direct military interventions—although we deemphasize the prospects of major military interventions.

Importantly, we do not limit our investigation to the potential involvement in third-party conflicts for “foreign goals,” as per Deutsch’s description of Cold War proxy wars noted earlier. In the future, great powers may become embroiled in conflicts in pursuit of a variety of different goals, and we do not want to exclude any possibilities from consideration. Similarly,

⁵² See, for example, Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, Cambridge, United Kingdom: John Wiley & Sons, 2013, p. 1.

⁵³ See, for example, Dominic Tierney, “The Future of Sino-US Proxy War,” *Texas National Security Review*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Spring 2021a; and Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Tierney, 2021a; Mumford, 2013, p. 1.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Mumford, 2013, p. 14.

⁵⁶ Some definitions of *proxy warfare* treat PMSCs and similar actors as the proxies that are being supported by the external powers, on par with local actors (see, for example, Mumford, 2013). We think that this lens is not helpful for the present context and consider such actors as Russia’s PMSCs to be a potential instrument of support to local actors rather than a party to the conflict in their own right.

emphasizing the degree to which the proxy, or local actor, must be an agent that wholly does the external principal's bidding, rather than pursuing its own agenda, would unduly narrow the scope on the basis of factors that are difficult to parse even in historical cases—and much more so in hypothetical future conflicts.⁵⁷

Methodology

To study great-power competition and potential conflict in the Middle East (and the other two secondary theaters studied in this series), we devised a three-stage methodology. First, we relied on publicly available data to measure the relative potential for great-power competition across all the countries in the region; second, we relied on conflict risk assessments to measure the relative risk of internal conflict across all the countries in the region; and third, we combined the two measures to identify *competition flashpoints*—that is, places where more than one of the three powers (the United States, China, or Russia) would most plausibly become involved in conflicts. We address the first stage here and the latter two in the subsequent subsection.

Measuring the Potential for Competition

In the first stage, we sought to measure the relative *potential for competition* among the United States, China, and Russia, across multiple domains, for all the countries in the Middle East. Because great-power competition takes place across multiple domains, measuring the potential for competition is a data-intensive task. Moreover, measuring competition itself is a difficult proposition; whether one state is in competition with another is as much a function of perceptions of a zero-sum game as it is of concrete, measurable factors. Our approach was therefore to rely on data that enabled us to measure the degree of great-power involvement in each state, relative to other states in the region. That is, we identified states in the region in which the United States, China, and Russia have been most involved, using each of the four main tools of national power—diplomacy, information, military, and economics (often known by the acronym DIME). States that attract the greatest degree of involvement from all three powers are thus the sites of potentially acute great-power competition. Potential, of course, need not mean actual; it is possible that the objectives that underlie each great power's involvement do not clash. However, there is more opportunity for competition where great powers are most extensively involved.

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

⁵⁷ For an example of such an emphasis, see Douglas A. Ollivant and Erica Gaston, “The Problem with the Narrative of ‘Proxy War’ in Iraq,” *War on the Rocks*, May 31, 2019.

In the appendix to this report, we provide more-detailed information about the definitions, sources, and data used to capture influence-seeking. Table 1.1 identifies the variables used to measure involvement or influence-seeking across the four domains of national power, as well as the time frame of the data used.

To measure diplomatic involvement, we relied on some traditional indicators, such as the amount of foreign aid each great power directed toward countries in the region.⁵⁸ We also captured whether states had an embassy in each country and reciprocal visa-free travel, on the assumption that the presence of such agreements indicates more people-to-people ties. In addition, we captured the number of high-level diplomatic visits by heads of state, top foreign policy officials, and (for the United States) top military officials, because one of the most valuable diplomatic commodities is senior leader time.⁵⁹

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

Domain	Variable	Time Frame of Data
Diplomacy	Foreign aid and assistance	Most recent year available
	High-level diplomatic visits	Between 2000 and 2020
	Presence of embassy	As of 2020
	Visa-free travel	As of 2020
Information	State-sponsored media	As of 2020
Military	Involvement in post-Cold War conflicts	Since 1991 (binary)
	Arms exports	2014–most recent year available
	Presence of military forces and bases	2014–2020
	Military agreements	As of 2020
	Military exercises	2014–2020
	PMSCs	Recent years
	Military access	As of 2020
Economics	Trade volume	2018
	Investment	Most recent year available
	Critical infrastructure	Russia only, as of 2020

⁵⁸ Although we sought data for the most recent year, the most recent data for China’s foreign aid assistance were from 2014. Thus, our measures of China’s diplomatic influence-seeking may be somewhat distorted, if the relative prioritization of its foreign aid recipients in the region shifted considerably since then.

⁵⁹ As noted earlier, see the appendix for sources and definitions for all the variables discussed in this section.

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

We collected multiple indicators for the potential for military competition. Given the military focus of this work and the aim of exploring the possibilities for conflict in the Middle East, we relied on a larger number of metrics than for other domains of national power. Most of the indicators—notably, military agreements, arms exports, military access, military exercises, and the presence of military forces and bases—bear a direct relationship to the state of military-to-military ties. We also included a variable for prior or ongoing great-power involvement in a conflict in each country after the Cold War. Lastly, given the importance of gray-zone tactics, we included the reported presence of U.S., Chinese, and Russian PMSCs.

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

A few caveats about these data and our approach are in order. First, given the geographic scope and differences between what data the United States, China, and Russia make public, not every variable was available for each of the three great powers, and not all the data were of equal quality or completeness.⁶¹ Second, even when the data were available and complete,

⁶⁰ As analysis from a Russian expert shows, Russian direct investment data are distorted by the magnitude of capital kept offshore, which inflates the significance of such places as Cyprus; this analysis also indicates that foreign investments by Russia's largest companies, such as Gazprom, Lukoil, and Rosneft, are underestimated, sometimes vastly (Alexey V. Kuznetsov, "Перспективы диверсификации российских прямых инвестиций за рубежом" ["Perspectives for Diversifying Russian Direct Investment Abroad"], *Проблемы прогнозирования* [Problems in Forecasting], No. 1, 2017).

⁶¹ For example, both the United States and Russia decline to publicly report foreign investments for certain countries because of confidentiality concerns.

many of the variables are not directly comparable across the competing powers. Unlike the trade volume metric, for instance, the presence of PMSCs does not represent the same kind of influence-seeking for each great power; whereas the United States and Russia might both have PMSCs in a given country, the former's may be performing a relatively benign task, such as embassy security, while the latter's may be doing something more offensive, such as training local military factions or participating in combat. Third, not all variables proved of equal utility by region. For example, if the United States has an embassy in every country in the Middle East, the variable does not help identify where the United States focuses its efforts there.

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

In constructing the influence-seeking and competition-potential indices, we accorded each variable equal weight. Military access, for example, counts as much as the presence of PMSCs in the military influence-seeking index and the military competition-potential index, and direct investment counts as much as arms exports in the overall competition-potential index. The appendix describes our approach in greater detail.

To be sure, how much each activity should matter in determining a country's importance to competing powers is an open question. In the absence of a strong theoretical reason to value any one factor as significantly more important than others, we opted for equal weights. The resulting indices are just one way, and certainly not the only way, of capturing influence-seeking and potential for competition. Thus, our approach does not pursue a nuanced weighting of different activities. However, it does provide a succinct measure of where the three competitors are focusing their efforts, which accounts for different ways in which states build influence and relations. That is, we can identify the most likely competition flashpoints (i.e., the countries where all three powers have a relatively high level of involvement).

Measuring the Potential for Conflict

A high potential for competition among two or more great powers in a given country does not necessarily make that country a very likely location for a proxy war or military intervention. Great-power support for local actors in power struggles in secondary theaters requires both motive *and* opportunity. Opportunity, in this case, would stem from a high risk of conflict. External powers' support for proxies or more-direct interventions are predicated on an underlying internal conflict or civil war, or at least conditions where such

a conflict might be plausibly catalyzed by external powers.⁶² External powers, then, can exploit these dynamics to their advantage; they might choose to back a party whose victory might confer benefits on the external power or a party that is in a position to inflict costs on a rival great power.⁶³

Thus, in the second stage of our methodology, we assessed the *potential for conflict* erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the region, particularly where that might invite external intervention or produce proxy wars. To do so for countries in the Middle East, we relied on a combination of two complementary sources. The first is the Janes qualitative, intelligence-driven *internal conflict risk* measure, which is an assessment of the “likelihood . . . of intra-state military conflict (in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict or full-blown civil war where rebels/insurgents are attempting to overthrow the government, achieve regional independence or at least heavily influence major government policies).”⁶⁴ The advantages of the Janes assessment are that it (1) takes into account expert judgment and qualitative factors that are difficult to quantify and (2) provides an up-to-date assessment of each country in each region. Real-time expert rankings, however, depend on subjective judgment and may be unduly influenced by recent events that may turn out to be fleeting.

To balance these potential biases, we combined the Janes rankings with ratings from the State Fragility Index, an older measure produced by the Center for Systemic Peace.⁶⁵ This index does not produce real-time estimates of conflict risk but instead assesses state fragility based on durable factors that have been demonstrably related to conflict and do not change easily—such as history of prior conflict, discrimination against particular ethnic groups, and the Human Development Index.⁶⁶ Because we are mainly interested in identifying which countries are at *relatively greater risk* of conflict than others—rather than by *how much* one country’s risk is greater than another’s—we converted the numeric ratings into ordinal rankings and combined the two (the Janes internal conflict risk ranking and the state fragility ratings) for a single ranking of countries from most to least potential for conflict. The appendix describes our approach and the results in greater detail.

⁶² In theory, an inter-state war can also have elements of a proxy war; here, however, we focus largely on internal conflicts, although we do consider inter-state or cross-border dynamics in some of the scenarios examined.

⁶³ For example, see Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, “Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups,” *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Fall 2011.

⁶⁴ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, “Global Country Risk Ratings,” IHS Markit, April 6, 2020.

⁶⁵ Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, “State Fragility Index and Matrix 2018,” Center for Systemic Peace, undated.

⁶⁶ For full detail, see Monty G. Marshall and Gabrielle Elzinga-Marshall, *Global Report 2017: Conflict, Governance and State Fragility*, Vienna, Va.: Center for Systemic Peace, August 27, 2017.

Choosing and Analyzing Countries and Conflict Scenarios

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

We then ranked this set of most-conflict-prone states in the region by competition potential, from highest to lowest. This enabled us to also identify which states have been the sites of the most extensive great-power influence-seeking and are therefore theoretically more likely to attract great-power attention if a conflict breaks out. A high potential for competition does not *ensure* that any of the three powers has sufficient motivation to become involved, but it should make it more likely on average.⁶⁷

Rather than simply picking the states with the greatest competition potential among the most-conflict-prone states, we adopted a somewhat more qualitative approach. We consulted with regional subject-matter experts and our analyses of China's and Russia's approaches to supporting proxy actors (see the summary volume of this series⁶⁸) to select countries (1) where the likelihood of significant conflict, especially with some transborder or broader regional implications, is indeed present and (2) that present at least theoretically plausible contexts for great-power involvement in conflicts. From among countries that met those general criteria, we further sought to select cases that were sufficiently different from each other to stress the Department of the Air Force in different ways.⁶⁹

After selecting the countries for analysis of potential great-power involvement in internal conflicts, we drew on a variety of sources to develop plausible scenarios for what these conflicts might look like. First, we explored local political dynamics and identified which local actors have ties to which great power, if any. We relied on expert analyses of each country's political dynamics and assessments of conflict risks. Our conflict scenarios are based

⁶⁷ To be sure, in an atmosphere of acute rivalry resembling periods of the Cold War, it is possible that a great power would support local actors purely for competitive reasons in countries where it lacks any other interests. Where this might occur, however, is essentially unpredictable. Thus, we focus on identifying the more plausible cases based on factors (i.e., influence-seeking) that we can observe.

⁶⁸ Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendixes B and C.

⁶⁹ In this report, we focus on the three countries with the highest rankings after combining the competition potential and conflict potential. However, in the companion volumes in this series that examine other regions—Africa and Latin America—these more qualitative considerations led us to select some candidate countries that did not have the highest scores.

on causes of conflict identified as salient or most likely in such analyses.⁷⁰ Sparks that start armed conflicts are not always predictable; for example, the outbreak of a series of uprisings of the Arab Spring in 2011 was largely unexpected to most analysts, including intelligence analysts.⁷¹ Thus, we do not claim to predict precisely how conflicts will unfold or to cover the full spectrum of possible scenarios that might come to pass. Instead, we focus on the dynamics of discord that are evident at present and identified by regional experts as the most-plausible sources of substantial violent conflict in the foreseeable future.

Second, we assessed each great power's overarching interests in the country, which help inform what objectives, if any, each might have in a hypothetical conflict. We then explored what type of posture and access each great power might have and what types of capabilities it might be able to bring to bear on the given scenario. Next, we explored how such a conflict might unfold and what factors might affect its ultimate outcome. To focus analysis here, we accorded more attention to scenarios that we assessed were more likely to draw in the United States and at least one of its two key competitors. That is, even where multiple, equally plausible conflict scenarios existed, we focused on the scenario where the great powers were more likely to have sufficient motivation for involvement. To empirically ground these assessments, we drew on a variety of sources to better understand how China and Russia—as well as the United States—have approached conflicts in secondary theaters in the past. These analyses included research into how Chinese and Russian experts—as well as Western ones—write about the subject today, which is included in the summary volume in this series.⁷²

Because of the global coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, our research team was not able to travel to the Middle East to carry out field research there. However, we carried out interviews with U.S.-based experts on the countries selected for study and on Chinese and Russian influence in the region, and those experts represented both academia and former U.S. government and military officials. Finally, we assessed the implications of each conflict scenario for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force, and particularly what the scenarios might mean for future military posture, capabilities, and capacity.

Overview of Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured as follows. In Chapter Two, we provide our assessment of the regional flashpoints for competition, drawing on our analysis of the United

⁷⁰ In this, we drew on our interviews with regional experts, scholarly and policy research on each country, and the research that produced the assessments of political risk on which we relied to rank countries in each region.

⁷¹ Jeff Goodwin, “Why We Were Surprised (Again) by the Arab Spring,” *Swiss Political Science Review*, Vol. 17, No. 4, 2011.

⁷² Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

States', China's, and Russia's interests in the Middle East across the four primary domains of influence-seeking (diplomacy, information, military, and economics), review the potential for conflict across the Middle East, and identify scenarios for more in-depth study: (1) Afghanistan and Pakistan, which we consider jointly, and (2) Iraq.

In Chapters Three and Four, we explore these two scenarios in depth, discussing key internal actors and local power dynamics; U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests in these countries; and the most likely paths to conflict that might lead to the involvement of more than one great power. We also discuss the likely forms of engagement and reactions of these three countries in each conflict scenario.

Finally, in Chapter Five, we summarize Chapters Two through Four and offer recommendations on how the U.S. government, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force could better prepare for potential future competition and conflict in the Middle East.

We argue that, although the United States, China, and Russia likely will continue to compete for influence in the Middle East and may even end up becoming involved in conflicts there, these conflicts are unlikely to closely resemble those of the Cold War. Absent a return to a zero-sum mentality, where any gain in influence in a secondary theater by a rival great power is seen as directly threatening to the other's national security, competition alone is unlikely to be a dominant driver of great-power involvement in foreign conflicts. As a result, the three powers might have little reason and relatively few occasions to back opposing parties in conflicts in secondary theaters and thus a relatively low risk of head-to-head engagement. Many of the more plausible scenarios in which the United States, China, and Russia would intervene in the Middle East and elsewhere center on counterterrorism, and the powers notionally align on the same side in those scenarios. Instead of leading to the great powers directly opposing one another, crises in secondary theaters may pose predominantly deconfliction challenges—similar to what the United States encountered in Syria, where Russian and U.S. forces operated in close proximity to one another.

Identifying Regional Competition Flashpoints

Competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East traditionally has been focused on large countries, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, that have sizable militaries, strong economies, or cultural and religious influence that allow them to serve as regional centers of power. Conflict can break out in such countries; Iraq and Syria, for example, were influential in the region throughout the 20th century and face conflict today. However, conflict tends to plague less-prosperous countries, such as Yemen, which have attracted less interest from great powers in the recent era.¹ Therefore, to identify countries where great powers may be most likely to become drawn into conflicts, it is necessary to consider the overlap between countries with the highest competition potential among the three powers and countries that are prone to instability and conflict.

In this chapter, we begin with an overview of the competition landscape across the Middle East—identifying the countries of greatest focus in each of the four domains of influence (diplomacy, information, military, economics), as well as overall in the region. Then, we identify countries that present the highest risk of experiencing an internal conflict. Finally, we look at the overlap among those countries to identify those with significant potential of great-power competition spilling over into conflict.

Regional Competition Landscape

To understand the competition landscape in the Middle East, we examined trends in U.S., Chinese, and Russian efforts in the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains and across all four domains. For each domain, we present a map that depicts the competition-potential index (or score) for each country, identify the main characteristics of the three great powers' influence-seeking activities, and describe key trends. As noted in Chapter One, the data-based approach that we relied on for these assessments has its limitations; however, it does help identify which countries are likely to be sites of the most-intense competition among the three powers.

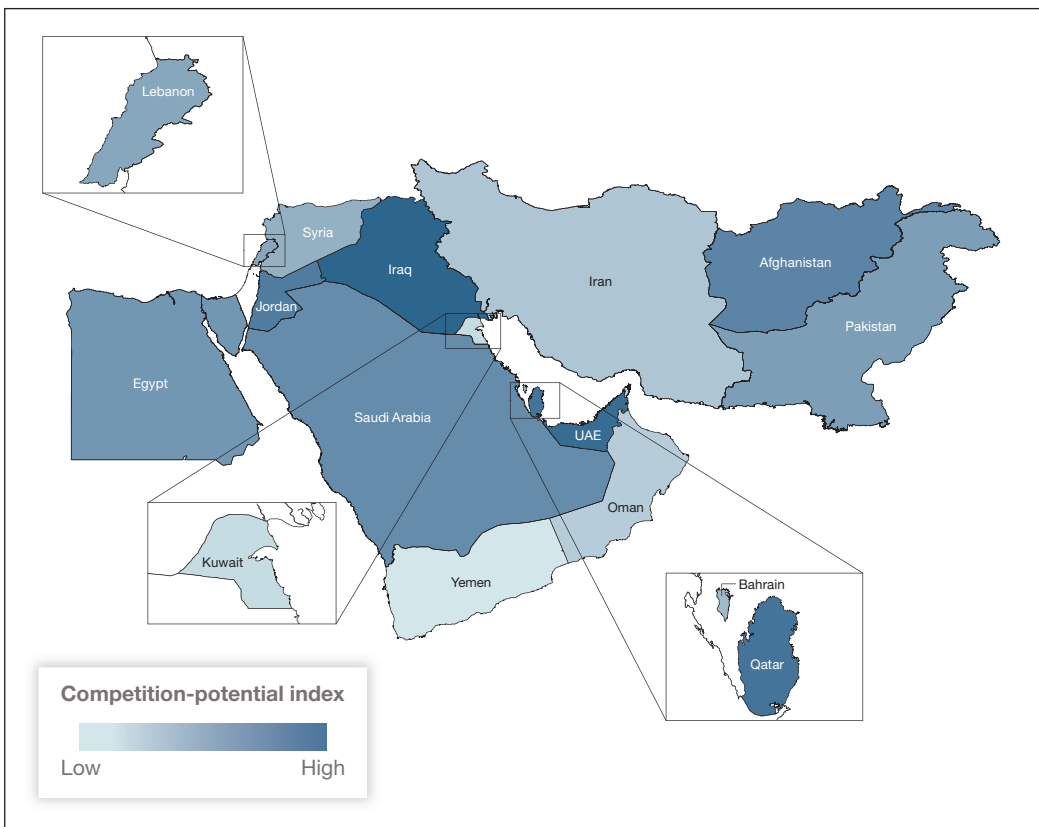
¹ Historically, however, this has not always been the case. For example, Yemen attracted interest from the United Kingdom in the 19th and 20th centuries and from the Soviet Union during the Cold War years, when South Yemen became a socialist state in the Soviets' sphere of influence.

Diplomacy

Figure 2.1 illustrates the potential for competition in the diplomatic domain for the United States, China, and Russia collectively across the Middle East; darker shades represent a higher potential for competition. Table A.2 in the appendix provides the underlying data used to create the map.

As Figure 2.1 demonstrates, in the diplomatic domain, influence-seeking efforts by all three powers converge most markedly in Iraq, followed by the UAE and Qatar. The focus of diplomatic efforts on Iraq is unsurprising. Since its intervention in Iraq in 2003, the United States has been highly engaged diplomatically there. High-ranking U.S. officials—including the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense—visited Iraq more frequently than they did most of the rest of the region between 2000 and 2020, topped only by

FIGURE 2.1
Diplomatic Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

Jordan and Egypt.² Iraq is also one of the top U.S. foreign aid recipients. China and Russia, for their part, have also engaged diplomatically with Iraq. The country has been the most trafficked destination in the region for high-ranking officials from both China and Russia.³ Washington and Beijing both have high-level diplomatic agreements with Baghdad—the Strategic Framework Agreement for a Relationship of Friendship and Cooperation and a strategic partnership agreement, respectively. Iraq is the only country that ranks in the top three in diplomatic involvement for all three great powers.

Beyond Iraq, diplomatic engagement appears more intense in countries with larger populations or larger oil wealth or that have been embroiled in long-term conflicts. The emergence of the UAE and Qatar toward the top of the rankings is driven by their importance to China and Russia rather than their importance to the United States, for which the two countries ranked roughly in the middle in terms of diplomatic effort. The level of diplomatic attention accorded by China and Russia to the UAE and Qatar is largely due to their economic significance: Along with Saudi Arabia, these are some of the largest producers of energy resources in the world and are vital to the global economy—and especially to China’s economy. For Russia, energy interests dictate the need to cooperate with other leading energy producers, and Russia has sought investments in its own economy from the wealthy Gulf states. By contrast, states at the bottom of the ranking include conflict-torn Syria and Yemen, as well as Iran, where both China and Russia maintain robust diplomatic ties but the United States—given its fraught relations with Tehran—has minimal diplomatic involvement.

Although the map in Figure 2.1 offers a snapshot of where diplomatic influence-seeking activities converge most for all three powers, the data that we collected (as well as other sources) suggest that China’s and Russia’s diplomatic engagement appears to be increasing, in contrast with U.S. diplomatic engagement. However, in absolute terms, the United States likely remains more active than either of its competitors. Both China and Russia started from lower levels of engagement than the United States did—averaging 4.0 and 2.9 visits by high-ranking officials to the region per year between 2000 and 2009, respectively, compared with 30.6 visits by the United States.⁴ Between 2010 and 2019, however, China and Russia aver-

² Throughout this chapter, we describe results from our analyses of the measures that constitute the competition-potential index; for the variables and data sources, see Table A.1 in the appendix to this report. Note that, unless otherwise indicated, data are current as of the time frames outlined in Table 1.1 (e.g., whether a great power had military access in a given country was current as of 2020).

³ Between 2000 and 2020, high-ranking U.S. officials visited Iraq 87 times, compared with 115 and 101 trips to Jordan and Egypt, respectively. We recorded 15 visits to Iraq by high-ranking Chinese officials and 18 visits to Iraq by high-ranking Russian officials over that period. By this metric, U.S. engagement in Iraq dwarfs that of China’s and Russia’s engagement there. However, we were able to account for U.S. visits to the region with a greater level of fidelity due to a higher quality of U.S.-specific data.

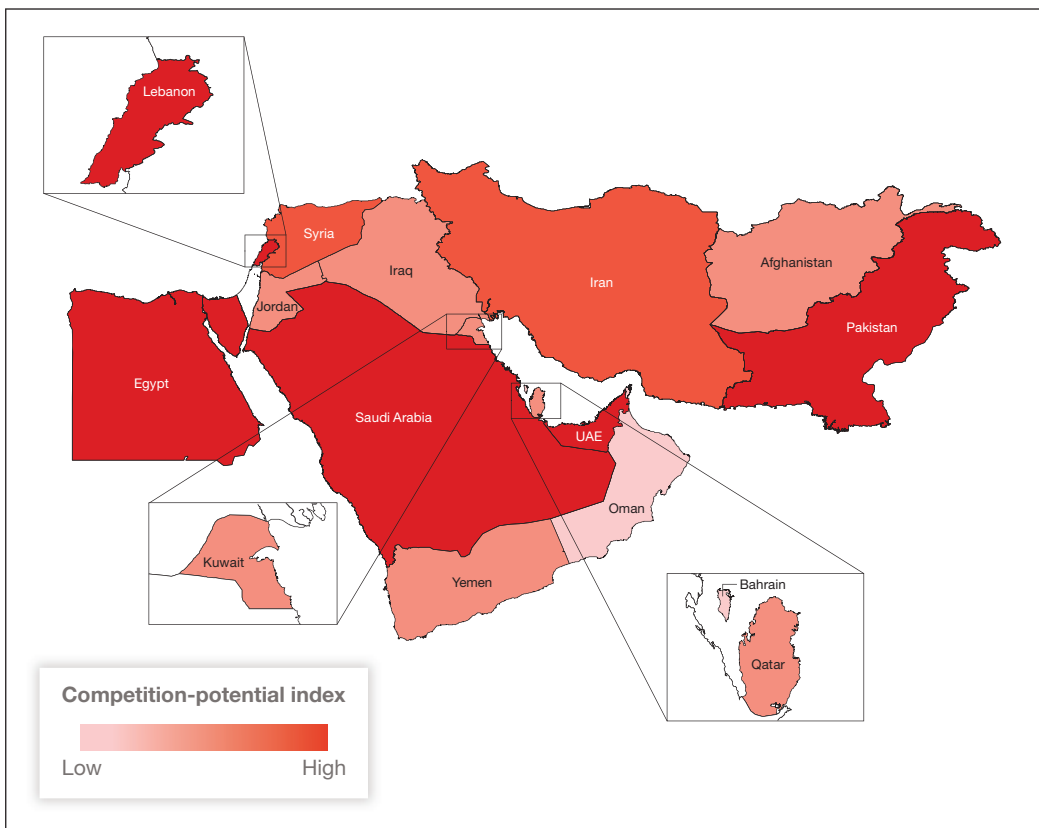
⁴ For the United States, we considered high-ranking officials to be the President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense. For China and Russia, high-ranking officials were the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The official positions are not directly comparable and serve only as a rough, but still useful, metric in gauging diplomatic engagement.

aged 8.7 and 6.1 visits per year, respectively, compared with 27.2 by the United States. Indeed, China's engagement appears to have increased steadily over that period, and Russia's engagement increased markedly beginning in 2015, with its intervention in the Syrian conflict.⁵

Information

Figure 2.2 illustrates the potential for competition in the information domain for the United States, China, and Russia collectively across the Middle East. Table A.3 in the appendix provides the underlying data used to create the map.

FIGURE 2.2
Informational Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

⁵ Between 2010 and 2019, the United States outpaced China in total and average number of high-level visits to the Middle East. However, in 2018 and 2019 combined, both countries conducted 35 high-level visits—an all-time two-year low for the United States but an all-time high for China.

As noted in Chapter One, our metric for informational competition (presence of state-sponsored media) is very limited and cannot convey every aspect of competition in the informational domain. Nonetheless, even this limited data point is informative. As Figure 2.2 shows, potential for informational competition among the United States, China, and Russia is most pronounced in Egypt, Lebanon, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. These are the countries where all three powers focused on investment in broadcasting contracts or other arrangements to transmit their state-sponsored information sources. At the same time, the effects of these investments largely transcend borders, given that audiences for most media activity are usually broader than the information's country of origin. This may be the case with China, for example: Although there is an extensive presence of China Global Television Network and Xinhua bureaus throughout the region, China has established radio presence in only Egypt and Qatar. But these investments likely are viewed as radio hubs to broadcast throughout the region.

Russia's major broadcasting agreements are with such major players in the region as Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Syria, the UAE, and Lebanon. Russia's informational activities also include different modes of political interference, including using state-sponsored media stations (such as RT), manipulating information, and spreading disinformation on social media by employing bots or by gaining control over social media personas.

Neither Afghanistan nor Iraq ranked near the top of the list for intersecting U.S., Chinese, and Russian informational influence-seeking, but the United States has concentrated much of its informational efforts there. This focus on Afghanistan and Iraq is unsurprising, given the U.S. military campaigns in each country. U.S. informational efforts in these countries were likely intended to support efforts to win "hearts and minds" or to sway popular sentiment in an effort to improve the U.S. position in both countries during the conflicts; for example, the United States has leveraged programming through Voice of America to attempt to influence public opinion—an approach that stems from the information and media activities stipulated in a 2006 draft of the U.S. military's counterinsurgency doctrine.⁶ China's informational efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq are also considerable, but Russia's lack of agreements in either country means that the cumulative potential for competition in these countries did not rise to the top of the overall informational domain rankings.

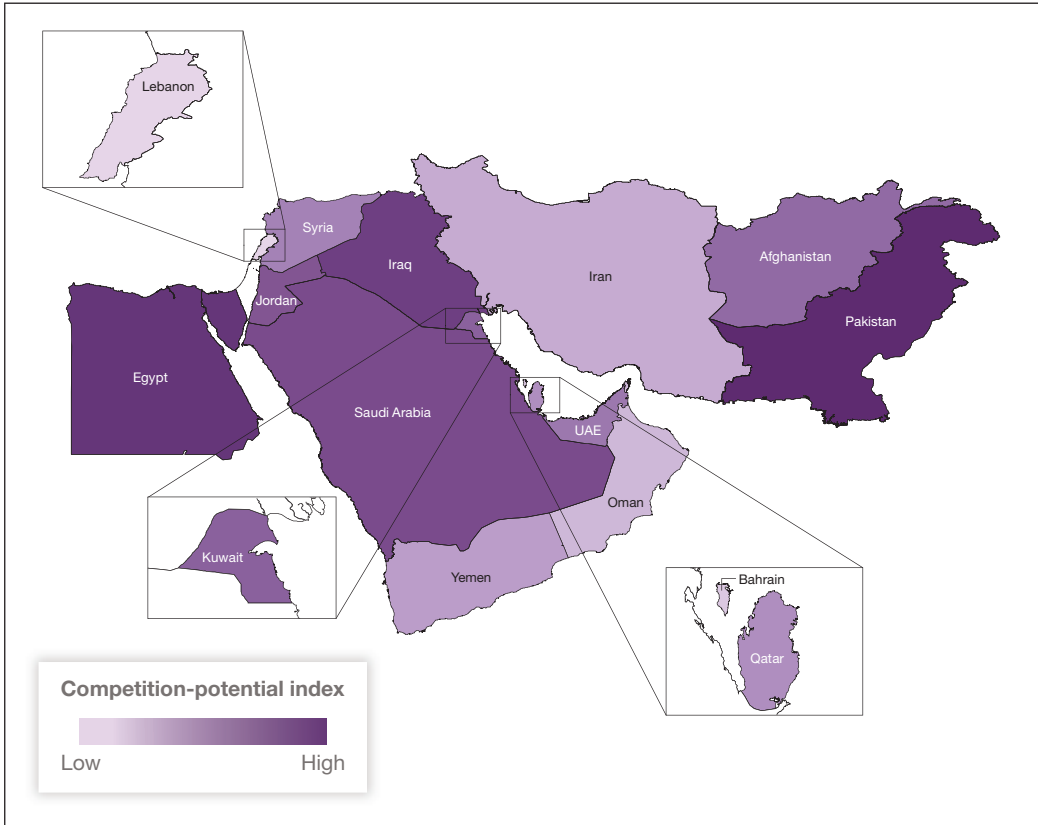
Military

Figure 2.3 illustrates the potential for competition in the military domain for the United States, China, and Russia collectively across the Middle East. Table A.4 in the appendix provides the underlying data used to create the map.

As Figure 2.3 shows, the potential for military competition among the United States, China, and Russia is most intense in Pakistan and Egypt. Pakistan's top-tier spot is driven

⁶ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *Counterinsurgency*, Field Manual 3-24/Fleet Marine Force Manual 3-24, Washington, D.C., June 16, 2006, p. 3-14.

FIGURE 2.3
Military Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

by its outsized importance to China and relatively high ranking for Russia more than by U.S. military involvement there. For China, Pakistan is the most important country in the region from a security perspective.⁷ China hopes that Islamabad will keep the areas bordering China's restive Xinjiang province from becoming breeding grounds for extremism, that trade routes through Pakistani territory will bring economic prosperity to China's western provinces while bypassing the Strait of Malacca, and that Pakistan can provide a counterweight to China's regional rival India.⁸ China and Pakistan already have budding military ties. In addition to their military agreement, Pakistan was one of the first countries to purchase the

⁷ "China-India Border Dispute: The Row Explained in 400 Words," BBC News, September 10, 2020.

⁸ Maria Abi-Habib, "China's 'Belt and Road' Plan in Pakistan Takes a Military Turn," *New York Times*, December 19, 2018.

Chinese BeiDou satellite system in 2013, which now is being used by the Pakistani military.⁹ Between 2014 and 2019, Pakistan was the largest recipient of Chinese arms transfers worldwide; furthermore, China has engaged in military exercises with Pakistan and has reportedly eyed it as the potential site for a future military base.¹⁰ For the United States, Pakistan was key in the 20-year war in Afghanistan; in exchange for military and economic aid, Pakistan provided the access and overflight rights necessary for U.S. forces to conduct their operations in Afghanistan. Although the United States conducts military exercises with an array of regional actors—including Pakistan—Russia and China have focused more narrowly on Pakistan, Egypt, and Iran for their military exercises.

Egypt's high ranking in the military domain reflects its Cold War-era historical ties to both Russia and the United States, the growing relationship between Egypt and Russia in recent years, and growing Chinese involvement. The United States has maintained a bilateral partnership with Egypt for more than 40 years based on Egypt's ability to provide access and stability in the Middle East. This relationship has led Egypt to become a primary recipient of aid through the U.S. Foreign Military Financing program; specifically, Egypt has received \$1.3 billion in aid each year since 2007.¹¹ Following the military coup in 2013 that brought President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to power, relations between the United States and Egypt have grown further strained because of the United States' concerns about human rights violations in Egypt and Egypt's concerns about the reliability of U.S. aid after the United States briefly suspended arms deliveries and restricted the type of weapons that can be purchased through the Foreign Military Financing program.¹² The downturn in U.S.-Egypt relations in the aftermath of the Arab Spring created an opening that Russia exploited to pursue a closer relationship. For Russia's military influence-seeking activities, Egypt ranked second only to Syria, reflecting Egypt's importance as a market for Russian arms. Between 2014 and 2018, Egypt was the second-largest destination for Russian weapons—as well as for Chinese weapons, though at lower levels than Russia's. Egypt has also been important to Russia's broader military involvement in the Middle East and North Africa. The two countries cooperated to provide support to General Khalifa Haftar in Libya's civil war, and Russia is interested in the strategic access and power projection that Egypt provides; indeed, there are rumors that

⁹ "Pakistan Military to Use Chinese Navigation System BeiDou to Improve Interoperability," *Economic Times*, August 21, 2020.

¹⁰ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "A New China Military Base in Pakistan?" *The Diplomat*, February 9, 2018.

¹¹ Jeremy M. Sharp, *Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, RL33003, September 30, 2021.

¹² Note that U.S.-Egypt ties began deteriorating in earnest when the United States encouraged long-time Egyptian leader Hosni Mubarak to step down in 2011 (Scott Shane and Ron Nixon, "Charges Against U.S.-Aided Groups Come with History of Distrust in Egypt," *New York Times*, February 6, 2012).

Russia is interested in a military base there.¹³ All three great powers conduct military exercises with Egypt, and all three have a PMSC presence in the country.

Iraq and Saudi Arabia ranked just below Pakistan and Egypt, largely reflecting extensive U.S. military activities in Iraq and the strategic importance of Saudi Arabia to the United States. The level of influence-seeking across all powers likely reflects how important Iraq and Saudi Arabia are to the global energy market.

Lebanon, Bahrain, Oman, and Iran, by contrast, ranked at the bottom for overall competition potential in the military domain. Lebanon's lowest score among all Middle Eastern countries is likely explained by the strong U.S. relationship with and influence over the Lebanese Armed Forces, which Washington has used to impede Iran's significant influence in the country through its proxy Hezbollah; that strong U.S. relationship also served to limit Russian inroads with the Lebanese Armed Forces.¹⁴ Likewise, Bahrain has seen a fair amount of attention from the United States but ranked relatively low for both China and Russia. Because of its energy resources and strategic location, Oman is a site of relatively high levels of involvement by China but not for Russia or even the United States. Washington does have a strong defense relationship with Oman—it hosts air force prepositioning sites and has a military agreement with the United States—but military involvement in much of the rest of the region, especially as captured by past conflict involvement, troop presence, and arms sales, has been even greater.¹⁵ By contrast, Iran's hostile relations with the United States ensure that only U.S. competitors have engaged in military influence-seeking there.

What Figure 2.3 does not depict is the comparisons in the degree of involvement by the great powers in the military domain or the trends in that involvement. Here, although Russia and, to a lesser extent, China have become more involved in military and security matters, the United States remains clearly dominant. Over the course of its intervention in the Syrian civil war, Russia has built a visible military presence in the region. But even at the height of approximately 4,000–6,000 troops, Russian military presence in Syria remained considerably less than the United States' overall presence in the Middle East (ranging between 40,000 and 60,000 troops) from 2014 to 2020 but considerably more than China's (limited to between 218 and 419 peacekeepers in Lebanon) during that same period.¹⁶ Russia has military coopera-

¹³ Jalel Harchaoui, "The Pendulum: How Russia Sways Its Way to More Influence in Libya," *War on the Rocks*, January 7, 2021; and Frederic Wehrey and Andrew S. Weiss, *Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 31, 2021.

¹⁴ Nicholas Blanford, "The US Military Assistance Program to the Lebanese Armed Forces Must Endure," Atlantic Council, April 30, 2020; and Trevor Johnston, Matthew Lane, Abigail Casey, Heather J. Williams, Ashley L. Rhoades, James Sladden, Nathan Vest, Jordan R. Reimer, and Ryan Haberman, *Could the Houthis Be the Next Hizballah? Iranian Proxy Development in Yemen and the Future of the Houthi Movement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2551-OSD, 2020.

¹⁵ Chris Zambelis, "China and the Quiet Kingdom: An Assessment of China-Oman Relations," *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 22, November 16, 2015.

¹⁶ Troop totals compiled from International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, London, Vols. 114–120, 2014–2020. For numbers of U.S. troops in specific countries as of 2020, see Kaye et al., 2021, Table 5.2, p. 107.

tion agreements with ten Middle Eastern countries, which is three fewer than the number of countries with which the United States has agreements. Until recently, China had such agreements with only Pakistan, and Beijing added a strategic partnership agreement with Iran in 2021, which had military cooperation components.¹⁷ Official military agreements aside, the United States has dramatically more access, basing, and overflight rights in the region than either Russia or China does. Furthermore, from 2014 to 2020, the United States had the most military exercises (24) conducted in the region. Russia doubled its arms sales since intervening in Syria, from \$542 million in 2015 to an average of \$1.17 billion per year from 2016 to 2020. Conversely, U.S. arms sales steadily decreased, from \$4.97 billion in 2015 to \$2.92 billion in 2020, while China's arms sales remained relatively constant between 2015 and 2020.¹⁸ However, the United States still surpasses Russia and China in absolute terms: Although they exceed China's \$10.2 billion of arms exports to the region between 2014 and 2020, Russia's roughly \$39.5 billion of arms exports are still well short of the United States' \$71.5 billion.¹⁹

Economics

Figure 2.4 illustrates the potential for competition in the economic domain for the United States, China, and Russia collectively across the Middle East. Table A.5 provides the underlying data used to create the map.

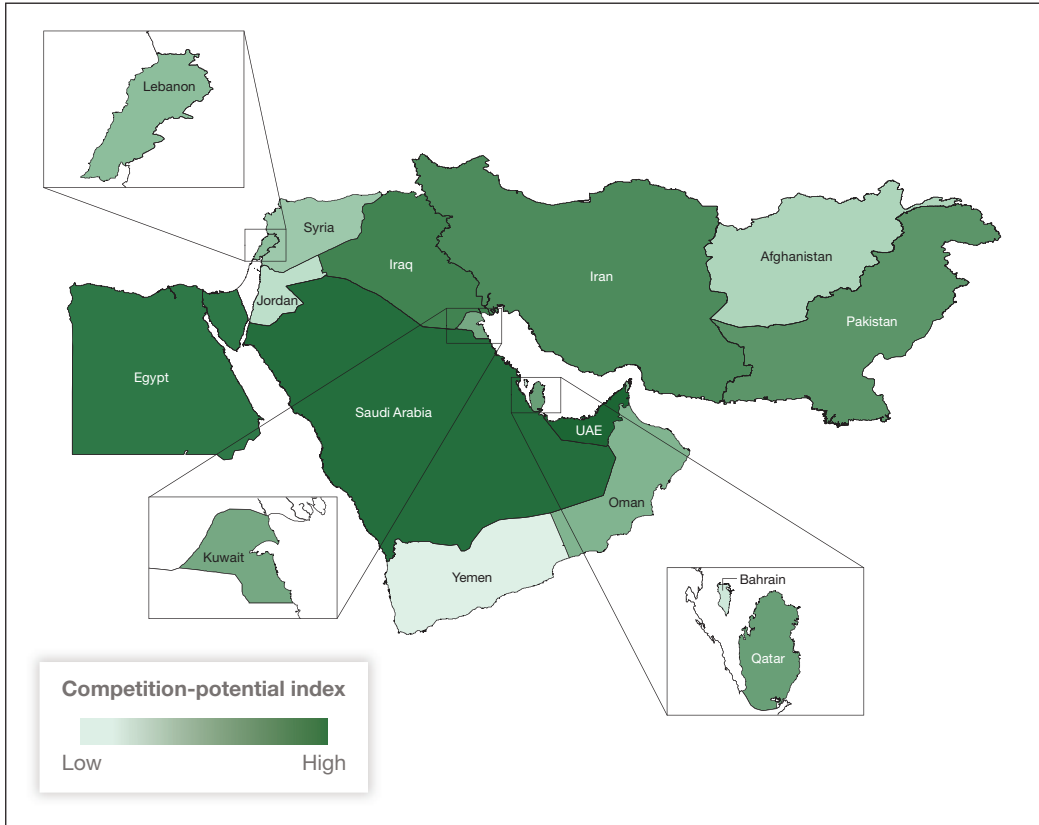
In the economic domain, the potential for competition among the three powers is the greatest in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. This is perhaps unsurprising: Saudi Arabia is the largest economy in the region (based on gross domestic product), and the UAE and Egypt are among the top regional economies, which makes them more valuable regional partners for many external powers. Moreover, as of 2020, Saudi Arabia was the world's second-largest oil producer—only recently ceding the top spot to the United States—and the UAE ranked

¹⁷ U.S. Department of State, "2019 Treaties and Agreements," webpage, undated-a; Brandon J. Kinne, "The Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 64, No. 4, 2020; and Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia Is Stepping Up Its Military Cooperation in Africa," Swedish Defence Research Agency, December 2018.

¹⁸ Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Arms Transfers Database, web tool, undated-a, data files on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales in the Middle East, in trade-indicator values, 2015–2020. Even though the United States is the largest arms seller to Middle Eastern countries, arms sales in dollar amounts do not adequately capture the scope of U.S. security assistance. In addition to arms sales—through the Foreign Military Sales and the Direct Commercial Sales programs—the United States annually provides billions of dollars in security assistance through such programs as Foreign Military Financing, Section 333 of the U.S. Code, the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, and the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund. Through these programs, partner nations receive U.S. security assistance, including arms and training, without having to expend their own national funds. China's and Russia's willingness and capacity to provide such security assistance are limited.

¹⁹ SIPRI, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to the Middle East, in trade-indicator values, 2014–2020.

FIGURE 2.4
Economic Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

12th on the list of the world's largest oil producers.²⁰ As a result, it makes sense that both countries would be a focus of U.S., Chinese, and Russian economic activity and generate intense competition over the control of energy resources and access to large markets.

When it comes to merchandise or goods trade, China emerges ahead of the United States and Russia (by comparison, a large share of U.S. trade is in services).²¹ China has become the largest trade partner of every country in the region except Afghanistan and Bahrain. Chinese trade volume in the Middle East had steadily gained market share from the United States

²⁰ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "What Countries Are the Top Producers and Consumers of Oil?" webpage, 2020.

²¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Trade in Goods and Services by Selected Countries and Areas, 1999–Present," Excel spreadsheet, last updated September 3, 2020. The European Union accounted for 23.8 percent of U.S. trade in goods and services in 2019.

before overtaking the country as the region's primary trading partner in 2008. By 2019, Chinese merchandise trade flows were almost triple those of the United States—some \$278 billion to \$103 billion.²² Russia also has economic stakes in the region, increasing its trade there from \$1.9 billion in 2000 to \$15.2 billion in 2019, but its trade levels lag far behind China and the United States. Total Russian trade flows in the Middle East in 2019 were only one-seventh of U.S. trade and one-eighteenth of Chinese trade for the same year.²³

China's top trading partners in the Middle East—Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Iraq, Oman, and Pakistan—include several of the region's wealthiest countries. The United States conducts most of its trade with a similar set of partners; the notable differences are that Egypt is among the top U.S. trading partners, and Iran is the United States' second-smallest trading partner in the region after Syria. The top U.S. trading partners are Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar, and Pakistan. Russia also seems to trade with partners that it has long historical ties with and political interest in; its top trading partners in the region are Egypt, Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

Russia and China have chosen to focus investment in similar sets of countries. The top recipients of Russian investment are Egypt, Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq. China has the most investment in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran, Iraq, and Oman. Of note, Russia's investment in Egypt far outpaces that of its second-largest investment destination (Iran), yet Egypt did not rank among China's top five recipients. The United States, meanwhile, invests most heavily in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, Egypt, and Pakistan. The overlap in target countries for investment reflects a similar logic behind the selection of trade partners: These are among the wealthiest countries in the region.

Overall Competition Potential in the Middle East

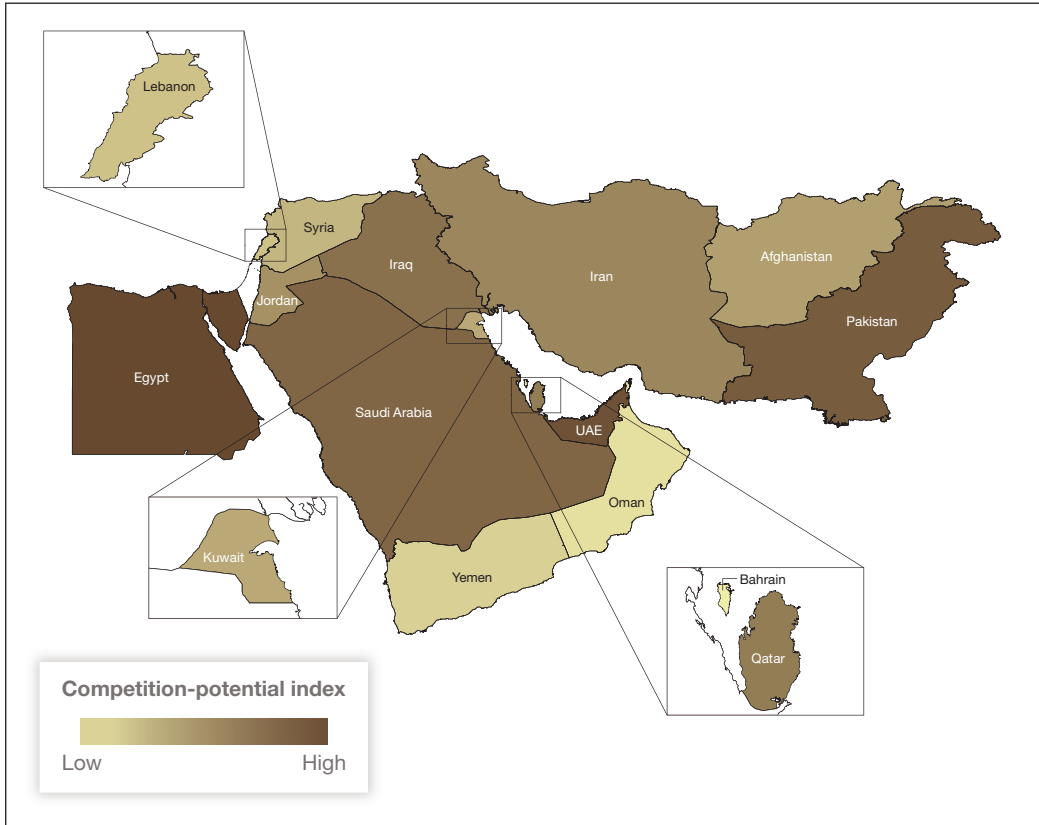
In this section, we present the overall potential for competition—that is, across the four domains (diplomacy, information, military, and economics). First, we examine the potential for competition for the three great powers collectively. Then, we break down the potential for competition separately for (1) the United States and China and (2) the United States and Russia.

Figure 2.5 illustrates the potential for competition overall, across all four domains, among the United States, China, and Russia. Table 2.1 presents the rankings for competition potential overall and shows how each country ranked for the U.S.-China competition and the U.S.-Russia competition specifically. The most striking aspect of the competition landscape is

²² In some of the region's largest economies—such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Iraq—Chinese trade was 2.7, 1.9, and 3.9 times greater than U.S. trade, respectively. Furthermore, since 2008, U.S. trade in the Middle East has remained steady—albeit with slight declines—averaging \$118.7 billion per year. Conversely, China's trade in the Middle East has continued to generally trend upward, climbing from \$114.9 billion in 2009 to \$278 billion in 2019 (World Integrated Trade Solution, web tool, undated, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2000–2019).

²³ World Integrated Trade Solution, undated, data file on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2000–2019.

FIGURE 2.5
Overall Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

that the competition potential overall (across all three great powers) and in the United States' bilateral competition with China and with Russia is highest in the same five countries—Egypt, the UAE, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq—although the order of the five countries differs. Thus, the United States is most likely to be competing with both of its rival powers in the *same* countries. This is not necessarily the case in other secondary theaters where great-power competition is playing out.²⁴

The countries with the highest competition potential overall suggest the convergence of interest in countries where one or more of the great powers have historically rooted relationships—such as Egypt for both Russia and the United States, Pakistan for China, and Saudi Arabia for the United States. And Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt represent centers of economic wealth, military power, and regional influence. Iraq's high ranking is explained

²⁴ See, for example, Kepe et al., forthcoming.

TABLE 2.1
The 15 Middle Eastern Countries Ranked by Highest Competition Potential Overall and by Bilateral Competition Potential

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

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

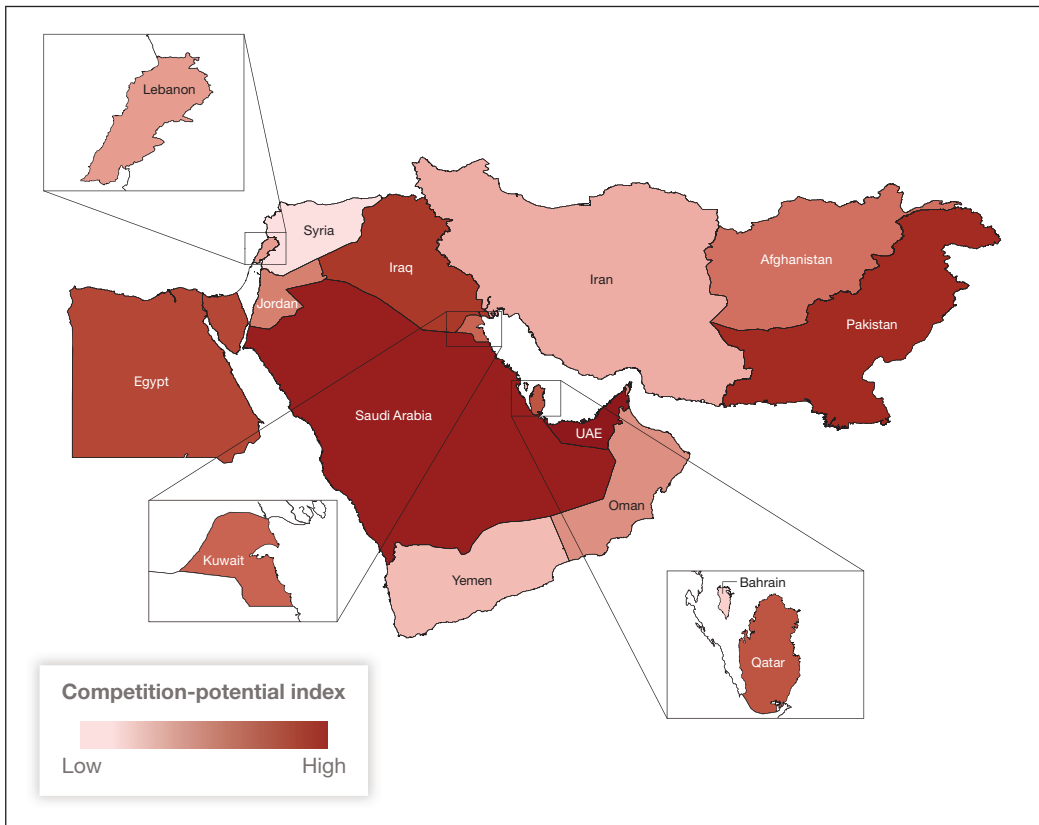
less by its economic or military power—although it is among the top oil producers in the region—and more by the lengthy U.S. military involvement there. Because of the United States’ very limited engagement with Iran, it ranked just seventh overall. However, Russian and Chinese levels of influence-seeking in Iran are concerning to the United States.

The countries lower in the list, by contrast, are a combination of the economically least well-off states (Yemen, Lebanon) and conflict-torn countries (Yemen, Syria). Some of the countries with the lowest competition-potential indices do in fact attract a fair amount of involvement but either from only one or two of the powers or in only some domains. For example, Afghanistan was a locus of extensive U.S. involvement diplomatically and militarily (before U.S. forces’ withdrawal in 2021) and indeed has attracted the most U.S. diplomatic attention (largely a function of aid); however, Afghanistan ranked much lower for both Russia and China across domains and even for the United States in the economic domain. Similarly, Syria is, in some sense, an area of active competition between Russia and the United States and

is the country attracting the most Russian diplomatic and military influence-seeking; however, Syria ranked lower for the United States and even lower for China across all domains.²⁵ Oman, meanwhile, ranked in the middle of the group for China but very low for Russia and the United States.

Figure 2.6 shows the competition potential across domains for the United States and China. The scores are highest in the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan. The UAE and Saudi Arabia, in contrast with Pakistan, are of roughly equal and relatively high importance to both China and the United States, even if the underlying interests that have driven the two powers to these locations differ. For China, the dominant drivers are economic (energy-based), while, for the United States, relations with these countries are also driven by military

FIGURE 2.6
U.S.-China Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

²⁵ This, in part, reflects the choice of influence-seeking activities that we included in the indices; arguably, sanctions are a means of influence-seeking, alternative to building trade or diplomatic ties. Accounting for sanctions might have raised the potential for competition in Syria and Iran in the rankings.

and regional security concerns. Because China's approach to the Middle East is heavily fueled by its economic interests, it is unsurprising that it has prioritized the two Gulf countries that are top producers of oil, have large economies, and purchase large amounts of arms. The United States, for its part, certainly has globally systemic interests (dominated by the stability of world oil markets) but also close security cooperation relationships with both the UAE and Saudi Arabia focused on promoting peace and stability in the Middle East. Both countries also have served as an important bulwark against Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia is the largest recipient of U.S. arms sales, and the UAE is the largest export market for U.S. goods in the Middle East and North Africa—although much of this is likely because of the UAE's status as an *entrepôt*, meaning goods go through the UAE before being re-exported to other places.²⁶ Moreover, both countries' militaries have engaged in expeditionary operations in the past several years (such as in Yemen), which reflects both their ambitions and that they are among the strongest militaries in the region. This makes the UAE and Saudi Arabia appealing focus areas for security cooperation efforts, given their relatively sophisticated capabilities and higher absorptive capacity compared with other regional militaries. As a result, they present prime opportunities for both military and economic competition.

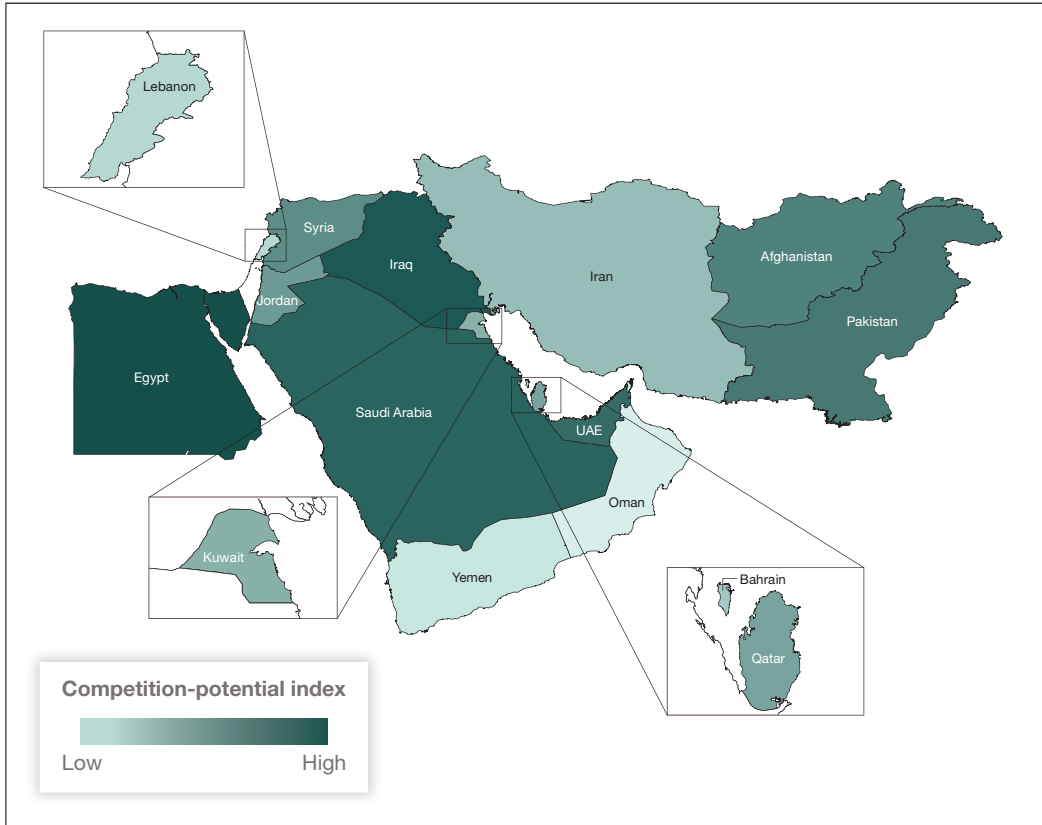
As noted earlier, Pakistan's strategic value in the context of China's rivalry with India and Pakistan's geographic proximity to China ensure that its importance is second to none in the region, and China's influence-seeking effort reflects this across the board. And although Pakistan is not the site of the greatest U.S. involvement in the region, its nuclear status, rivalry with India, and crucial role in the fate of Afghanistan have attracted a robust level of influence-seeking from the United States, especially in the diplomatic and economic domains.

Potential for U.S.-Russia competition is the highest in Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia (see Figure 2.7 and Table 2.1). Egypt and Iraq are major targets of both powers' influence-seeking efforts. As noted earlier, both Russia and the United States have deep historical ties with Egypt, and Russia seeks to win more influence in the wake of cooling U.S.-Egypt relations. Russia's ties to Iraq also date back to the Soviet era; the two developed strong relations throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and the Soviet Union supported Iraq with substantial military equipment during the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s.²⁷ In comparison, U.S. interest in Iraq is more recent, but the United States has been deeply involved in Iraq since the U.S.-led invasion of the country in 2003. Saudi Arabia's inclusion in the top three countries for U.S.-Russia competition potential reflects more the United States' involvement there than Russia's—for the security-related and economic reasons noted earlier—but Saudi Arabia has attracted a decent amount of attention from Russia as well, and Russia likely would welcome opportunities for strengthening ties.

²⁶ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Saudi Arabia: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, December 15, 2020c; Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations with United Arab Emirates: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, December 9, 2020a; and "UAE's Re-Export Trade Tops \$127 Billion in 2020," Trade Arabia, June 29, 2021.

²⁷ Rachel Schmidt, *Global Arms Exports to Iraq, 1960–1990*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, N-3248-USDP, 1991, p. 65.

FIGURE 2.7
U.S.-Russia Competition Potential in the Middle East



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

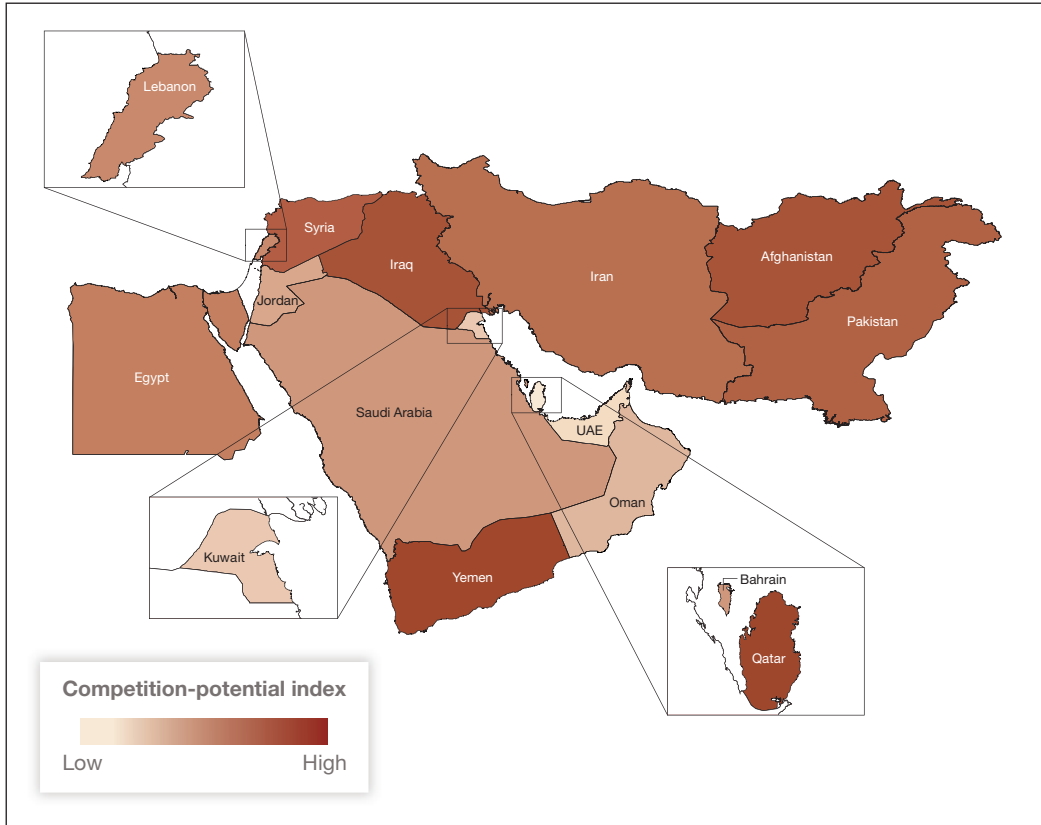
Regional Potential for Internal Conflict

As we observed in Chapter One, conflicts that draw in external powers require both motive *and* opportunity. To approximate the relative opportunity for great-power involvement in Middle Eastern conflict, we assessed the potential for internal conflict erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the region.

Figure 2.8 depicts this potential for internal conflict based on the two sources we employed to assess the potential for conflict—the Janes internal conflict risk rating (as of early 2021) and the Center for Systemic Peace's State Fragility Index. Table A.6 in the appendix presents the underlying data for each country.

According to our assessment, the countries most prone to conflict over the forecasted years are Yemen, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, and Pakistan trails closely behind. This finding is entirely unsurprising, given that all these countries, except for Pakistan, either are

FIGURE 2.8
Conflict Potential in the Middle East



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

experiencing or have recently experienced wide-scale conflict. Yemen and Syria have both been embroiled in civil wars since 2014 and 2011, respectively. Afghanistan and Iraq, meanwhile, were the most prominent theaters for U.S. counterterrorism operations—Afghanistan from 2001 through the U.S. withdrawal in 2021 and Iraq from 2003 until the time of writing (although there were lesser levels of effort from 2011 to 2013).

Pakistan, though not currently a site of internal conflict, has been entangled in a dispute with India over the Jammu and Kashmir region and has fought several wars against India. Additionally, Pakistan is only a few years removed from a potent and destabilizing insurgency. Iran, Egypt, Bahrain, and Lebanon follow Pakistan in the overall ranking, placing them in the second tier of conflict-prone countries. Iran's strategy has long been to employ proxies to destabilize or engage in fighting in other parts of the Middle East; as a result, Iran itself is a less likely site for conflict. Egypt, Bahrain, and Lebanon have all experienced political unrest in recent years but have not been party to direct conflict for some time. Finally,

the countries least likely to experience internal conflict in the foreseeable future are Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar. These Gulf countries have all faced their fair share of political conflicts and regional rivalries but, for the most part, are stable countries with strong internal security.

Identifying Competition Flashpoints

To identify countries that have the most potential to host a proxy conflict and thus warrant deeper examination for the purposes of our study, we combined the results of our competition analysis with the assessment of conflict potential. Specifically, we first limited the potential set of countries to the one-third of countries with the highest conflict potential in the Middle East—because having a conflict plausibly erupt in the foreseeable future is a threshold requirement for the possibility of external involvement in a conflict—and then ranked these more-conflict-prone states by competition potential, from highest to lowest. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 2.2.

As illustrated in the table, Pakistan, Iraq, and Afghanistan emerged as the countries in the set of those with the highest risk of conflict that also present the greatest potential for great-power competition. We emphasize that this does not mean that these states are very likely to become sites of great-power involvement; rather, it means that they theoretically are among the most plausible candidates for such, even if such conflicts remain not very likely in absolute terms. We recognize too that, although much of our analysis focuses on the United States, China, and Russia, local actors in each country also can shape how each great power behaves during a conflict.

TABLE 2.2
Middle East Case Selection

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

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

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

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

We combined Afghanistan and Pakistan into a joint case study because cross-border dynamics would play a role in a conflict centered in either country and because there are common drivers of potential escalation of conflicts across the two. We considered Iraq separately as its own case study. In the next two chapters, we explore the potential paths to conflict in each case and how the conflicts might unfold.

Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement: Afghanistan and Pakistan

Developments in Afghanistan and Pakistan have long been intertwined. In modern history, conflicts in Afghanistan have spilled over into Pakistan, while policymakers in Islamabad have sought to shape the course of Afghan conflicts and influence internal Afghan politics. From the U.S. perspective, the most-vivid examples of the two countries' interdependence are the U.S. support to the anti-Soviet Afghan mujahedeen in the 1980s, which was channeled through Islamabad, and the 20-year U.S. war in Afghanistan, during which Pakistan supported the Afghan Taliban against the United States. Since invading Afghanistan in 2001 in response to al-Qaeda's terrorist attacks on September 11, the United States has heavily invested in Afghanistan, spending much in blood and treasure. Washington also directed considerable economic and military aid to Pakistan in exchange for Islamabad providing the access and overflight rights necessary for U.S. forces to conduct their operations in Afghanistan.

After 20 years of military involvement in Afghanistan, the United States withdrew its forces from Afghanistan, and although terrorist threats from the region remain a U.S. concern, the United States has reduced its presence there and likely lost much of its influence after the Taliban's 2021 seizure of Kabul. Simultaneously, China and Russia have been increasing their activities in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Similar to the United States, both China and Russia are concerned about terrorist threats emanating from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Additionally, China in particular has significant economic interests in the region: Chinese investments in Pakistan are a cornerstone of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) efforts in South Asia. Moscow's economic ties are comparatively modest, but instability in Afghanistan could affect Russian interests in the neighboring Central Asian states. As a result, both Beijing and Moscow have substantial interests in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests in Afghanistan and—possibly to a lesser extent—Pakistan are not necessarily at odds with each other. Rather, promoting security, stability, and economic development in both countries may be a net positive for all three powers. Thus, although instability and intensified conflict in both Afghanistan and Pakistan are acute possibilities, the United States is not very likely to find itself on the side opposing China or Russia in a proxy conflict in Afghanistan or Pakistan.

In this chapter, we examine what a conflict arising out of turmoil on either side of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border might look like and the prospects for great-power involvement

in such a conflict. We begin with an overview of local political dynamics to identify the key actors in each country and the likely causes of internal conflict. We then examine the interests and objectives of the three great powers in these countries, the powers' relative postures and access, and the capabilities they might bring to bear on such a conflict. Next, we assess how each power might choose to become involved in the conflict, if at all, and consider the factors that might influence the outcome of the conflict—especially the factors that could affect the United States' ability to achieve its aims. We drew on a variety of sources to better understand how the United States, China, and Russia have approached conflicts in secondary theaters in the past. This research included interviews with experts and an exploration of how Chinese and Russian experts—as well as Western ones—write about the subject today; those discussions are included in the summary volume of this series.¹

Overview of Local Political Dynamics

The internal political dynamics of Afghanistan and Pakistan are complex, and there have been significant political changes in both countries since 2010. In particular, the Taliban's seizure of Afghanistan and the collapse of the Kabul government in August 2021 shook the country's political landscape and made its future highly uncertain. Pakistan has not endured political upheavals on the same scale as Afghanistan's most recent experience; however, myriad transitions between military and civilian rule in Pakistan's history highlight the potential for dramatic, rapid political change in the country. In this section, we provide an overview of the major influences and actors that could shape and affect U.S., Chinese, and Russian approaches to Afghanistan and Pakistan. (We note that research for this project was completed just as the Taliban took over Kabul; inevitably, therefore, the discussion does not reflect later developments.)

Afghanistan

The Afghan political landscape is dynamic, fractured, and complex. Prior to the Taliban's seizure of the country in August 2021, at the highest level, Afghan political dynamics were dominated by two major camps—the Afghan government in Kabul and the Afghan Taliban. These two primary camps violently competed for control of the country since the Taliban began its insurgency against U.S. and allied forces around 2006.² With the Taliban's takeover of the country, Afghanistan's internal dynamics may become increasingly unipolar, but they are also likely to remain fluid, uncertain, and prone to fracturing.

¹ See the appendixes in Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

² Hannah Bloch, "A Look at Afghanistan's 40 Years of Crisis—from the Soviet War to Taliban Recapture," NPR, August 31, 2021.

Until fleeing the country in the wake of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021, Ashraf Ghani led the Kabul government and served as President of Afghanistan since 2014, when he narrowly defeated Abdullah Abdullah in a contentious election that resulted in a compromise unity government between the two leaders. In 2019, following another contentious presidential contest between Ghani and Abdullah, the latter became head of Afghanistan's High Council of National Reconciliation, and, as such, led negotiations between the Kabul government and the Afghan Taliban. After the Afghan national government collapsed in August 2021, Abdullah continued interfacing with the Taliban, reportedly discussing security in the capital and issues relating to national transition and reconciliation.³ As of late 2021, former Vice President Amrullah Saleh also remained in Afghanistan as part of a resistance movement against the Taliban.⁴ In addition to these actors, former President Hamid Karzai continues to be a prominent feature of Afghanistan's political landscape and is among the country's most influential political figures. Since leaving office in 2014, Karzai has served as a power broker and intermediary between domestic and international actors. For instance, Karzai has mediated disputes between Afghan elites and served as an intermediary for both Beijing and Moscow to engage with local Afghan actors, despite soured relations with Kabul government officials—especially with former President Ghani.⁵

The Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) served as the Kabul government's formal military and security service, prior to its capitulation to the Taliban in 2021. The ANDSF included both Ministry of Defense and Ministry of Interior forces and had an authorized end strength of 352,000 service members. However, in early 2021, the ANDSF may have fielded a battle-ready force of only around 180,000 personnel.⁶ The vast majority of the ANDSF surrendered to the Taliban as it consolidated control over the country. However, several hundred Afghan soldiers remained active even after the fall of Kabul, assisting U.S.

³ When incumbent President Ghani declared victory in 2019, Abdullah again accused Ghani of electoral fraud, which led to a second political stalemate and crisis. After substantial pressure from the United States, which included Washington threatening to cut off \$1 billion in aid to Kabul, Ghani and Abdullah signed a second power-sharing agreement that maintained Abdullah's influence over ministerial and provincial gubernatorial appointments ("Afghanistan: Ghani and Abdullah Sign Power-Sharing Deal," *Al Jazeera*, May 17, 2020; and Ayaz Gul, "Taliban, Consolidating Power, Meet with Former Rivals," *Voice of America*, August 19, 2021).

⁴ Nazarali Pirnazarov and Tom Balmforth, "Resistance Leaders Massoud, Saleh Still in Afghanistan, Diplomat Says," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 8, 2021.

⁵ Vanda Felbab-Brown, *A BRI(dge) Too Far: The Unfulfilled Promise and Limitations of China's Involvement in Afghanistan*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, June 2020, p. 5; and Nurlan Aliyev, "How Russia Views Afghanistan Today," *War on the Rocks*, October 19, 2020.

⁶ Jonathan Schroden, "Afghanistan's Security Forces Versus the Taliban: A Net Assessment," *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 14, No. 1, January 2021, p. 21.

and allied forces in securing the capital's airport, and ANDSF personnel reportedly joined anti-Taliban elements that emerged days after the group seized control of the country.⁷

Opposing the Kabul government and the ANDSF was the Afghan Taliban, which—prior to the United States toppling its regime—ruled much of Afghanistan from 1996 to 2001. However, it proceeded to regain much of its territory—especially over the course of 2020 and 2021—culminating in the conquest of the country in August 2021. An extremely conservative Sunni Islamist organization, the Afghan Taliban institutes draconian measures in its areas of control, and the organization—especially the semi-autonomous, extremist Haqqani Network—reportedly maintains close ties with al-Qaeda.⁸ As of early 2021, the Taliban fielded approximately 60,000 core frontline fighters, and upward of 90,000 Taliban-aligned militia members served as local hold forces.⁹ The Taliban reportedly receives various forms of support from external state actors. Russia and Iran, for instance, provide the group with military equipment and financial support; however, Pakistan continues to be the Taliban's primary state sponsor, providing arms, training, assistance with recruitment, and—arguably most importantly—safe haven for fighters and leadership.¹⁰

The Islamic State – Khorasan Province (ISKP) also operates in Afghanistan and has been a significant security concern since Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan (TTP) members pledged *bay'a* (loyalty) to the then-leader of ISIS, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. According to the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Counterterrorism, ISKP's strength in 2019 was around 1,000 fighters; however, its strength in 2021 was difficult to estimate, given significant losses throughout 2019 and 2020.¹¹ During this period, ISKP suffered a string of defeats at the hands of both the ANDSF and the Taliban, which reduced the group's forces and operational capacity. Nevertheless, demonstrating its continued threat, ISKP conducted a suicide bombing targeting U.S. forces at Kabul's international airport who were facilitating the evacuation of U.S. citizens and Afghans from the country; the attack killed 13 U.S. service members and 169 Afghans.¹² Prior to the August 2021 airport attack, ISKP's most significant high-profile attacks dated

⁷ Ezzatullah Mehrdad and Sudarsan Raghavan, "Anti-Taliban Fighters Claim Victories as First Stirrings of Armed Resistance Emerge," *Washington Post*, August 20, 2021.

⁸ United Nations Security Council, *Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019) Concerning the Taliban and Other Associated Individuals and Entities Constituting a Threat to the Peace, Stability and Security of Afghanistan*, New York, S/2020/415, May 27, 2020, p. 3.

⁹ Schroden, 2021, pp. 20–21.

¹⁰ Schroden, 2021, p. 22.

¹¹ Bureau of Counterterrorism, *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State, June 24, 2020, p. 271. ISKP regrouped over the course of 2020, increasing its rate of attacks and growing its strength, and by mid-2021, it may have had about 2,200 fighters (Richard Atwood and Naz Modirzadeh, "Afghanistan: The Islamic State, Still No Taliban Government and a Looming Humanitarian Catastrophe," *Hold Your Fire* podcast, Season 2, Ep. 1, September 3, 2021).

¹² Scott Neuman, Deepa Shivaram, and Vanessa Romo, "The Final U.S. Military Plane Has Left Afghanistan as America's Longest War Ends," NPR, August 30, 2021.

back to September and November 2020, but it steadily raised its rates of low-level attacks in 2021, conducting some 200 attacks by August of that year.¹³

Pakistan

Pakistan's political landscape is also relatively fractured and fragile, though not to the same extent as Afghanistan's. The country has flirted with democratic governance since its founding in 1947, but military-backed regimes repeatedly stalled and reversed Pakistan's process of democratization. Since Pervez Musharraf—a retired four-star general who came to power amid a bloodless coup in 1999—resigned from the presidency in 2008 to avoid impeachment, Pakistan has maintained a nominally inclusive parliamentary democracy. However, civil-military relations remain tense, and Pakistan struggles with Islamist insurgent and ethnic separatist groups—primarily, the TTP and Baluch separatists.

Even under successive civilian governments since 2008, the Pakistani military has filled important—typically civilian—governmental positions with active or retired military leaders. For instance, Prime Minister Imran Khan's communications adviser and the coordinator of Pakistan's COVID-19 response both came from military backgrounds.¹⁴ Furthermore, the Pakistani populace reportedly holds the country's military in high regard.¹⁵ As a result, the Pakistani military has been able to use its governmental positions and popular support to pursue policies suited to its own agenda, such as attempts to reverse constitutional reforms that diluted the power of military regimes and the sponsorship of armed groups operating in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India.¹⁶

Successive Pakistani governments have attempted to balance the country's relationships with regional and neighboring powers (primarily China) and Western powers (primarily the United States). China is arguably Pakistan's closest ally, and some analysts refer to China as Pakistan's "all-weather" and most consistent partner.¹⁷ Over the past several decades, China and Pakistan have remained close and collaborating economic and security partners, driven

¹³ Office of the Inspector General of the U.S. Department of Defense, U.S. Department of State, and U.S. Agency for International Development, *Operation Freedom's Sentinel: Lead Inspector General Report to the United States Congress, January 1, 2021–March 31, 2021*, Washington, D.C., May 18, 2021, p. 22; and ExTrac, *ISKP: A Threat Assessment*, August 2021, p. 12.

¹⁴ Ashik KC, "Rising Organized Political Violence in Balochistan: A Resurgence of Baloch Separatism?" Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project, September 4, 2020; and Zuha Siddiqui, "In Pakistan, the Army Tightens Its Grip," *Foreign Policy*, July 8, 2020.

¹⁵ Think tank researcher with expertise on Pakistani military issues, telephone interview with the authors, July 26, 2021. See also Declan Walsh, *The Nine Lives of Pakistan: Dispatches from a Precarious State*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, pp. 105–136.

¹⁶ KC, 2020.

¹⁷ Jonah Blank, Richard S. Girven, Arzan Tarapore, Julia A. Thompson, and Arthur Chan, *Vector Check: Prospects for U.S. and Pakistan Air Power Engagement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2107-AF, 2018, p. 36.

particularly by their historical and contemporary strategic rivalries with India.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the Pakistani government has attempted to signal its openness to the United States and other Western actors, balancing between maintaining its strong relations with Beijing and attempting to maintain relations with Washington at the same time.¹⁹ Islamabad is particularly keen to balance between the two powers to attract further investment and resuscitate a flagging economy. Indeed, as Shamila N. Chaudhary and Vali Nasr posit, shifts in the geo-strategic environment affecting foreign aid and remittance flows threaten Pakistan's economic viability and may lead to a financial crisis in the country.²⁰

The Pakistani military and Islamabad government also have to contend with non-state armed groups—some of which the Pakistani military and intelligence services have supported over the years but over whom they have inconsistent command and control.²¹ TTP, which has fought the Pakistani government since 2007, is arguably the most prominent armed group active in the country. The Islamist insurgent group operates primarily along the Pakistan-Afghanistan border and is concentrated in the regions formerly known as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, incorporated into Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in 2018. Similar to the Afghan Taliban, TTP has ties to al-Qaeda, and some of its more extreme members broke from the group to form ISKP. TTP conducted deadly terrorist attacks against military and civilian targets for years, but the Pakistani military's major 2014–2015 Operation Zarb-e-Azb greatly degraded TTP's operational capabilities.²² Nevertheless, the group continues to field between 3,000 and 5,000 fighters and may be resurgent, having conducted increasingly sophisticated attacks at an increased tempo in 2021.²³ Of note, a TTP attack using a suicide vehicle-borne improvised explosive device in April 2021 targeting a high-end hotel in Balochistan province underscores the group's growing capabilities. China's ambassador happened to be staying at the targeted hotel at the time. TTP has targeted Chinese nationals or Chinese interests in Pakistan in the past and has maintained close ties to the ethnic Uighur East Turkestan Islamic Movement, a group that Beijing considers a major security

¹⁸ Blank et al., 2018, p. 36.

¹⁹ Madiha Afzal, "Under Biden, Pakistan and the US Face a Dilemma About the Breadth of Their Relationship," Brookings Institution, April 12, 2021b.

²⁰ Shamila N. Chaudhary and Vali Nasr, "Biden Needs a New Pakistan Policy. This Is What It Should Look Like," Atlantic Council, February 10, 2021.

²¹ See Husain Haqqani, *Pakistan: Between Mosque and Military*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2005.

²² Madiha Afzal, "Terrorism in Pakistan Has Declined, but the Underlying Roots of Extremism Remain," Brookings Institution, January 15, 2021a.

²³ Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2020, p. 301; and Amira Jadoon, *The Evolution and Potential Resurgence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute for Peace, Special Report No. 494, May 2021.

threat.²⁴ Additionally, TTP's activity in Balochistan province portends possible cooperation between it and Baluch separatists, who have also targeted Chinese equities in Pakistan and are reportedly training at TTP camps.²⁵

Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities

In this section, we provide an overview of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the United States, China, and Russia in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Interests and Objectives

U.S., Chinese, and Russian objectives in Afghanistan and Pakistan fall under three main interrelated categories: strategic and geopolitical, security, and economic. The objectives of all three powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan stem from their interests across the Middle East, centering foremost on counterterrorism and security, as well as commercial equities—although these revolve less around energy security. All three powers are also concerned about the impact that instability in Afghanistan and Pakistan would have on their security and economic interests in those countries and throughout the region.

United States' Interests and Objectives

In the 2021 CENTCOM posture statement, Gen Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., articulated the United States' objectives in Afghanistan. Testifying before the U.S. Senate, he stated that “the U.S. strategic objective in Afghanistan . . . is to ensure Afghanistan does not again become a safe haven for terrorist attacks against the U.S. and our allies and partners.”²⁶ Indeed, the U.S. strategic objective in Afghanistan has remained consistent since 2001, even if the approach to achieving the objective has varied significantly. In the latter stages of the intervention, the United States supported and sought to strengthen the Kabul government and the ANDSF against the Taliban and promote Afghan reconciliation and stability so that al-Qaeda, ISIS, or other terror groups cannot use Afghanistan as a base of operations. The U.S. priority of preventing al-Qaeda from reconstituting in Afghanistan is likely to remain constant, even with the Taliban controlling the country. However, the group's conquest of Afghanistan greatly complicates how Washington will pursue that objective. Moreover, the U.S. withdrawal and

²⁴ Frud Bezhan and Daud Khattak, “The Rise of the New Pakistani Taliban,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, May 18, 2021.

²⁵ Bureau of Counterterrorism, 2020, p. 166; Bezhan and Khattak, 2021.

²⁶ Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Commander, United States Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee,” U.S. Central Command, April 22, 2021, p. 8.

the Taliban's takeover also raise significant obstacles to secondary objectives that Washington has promoted in Afghanistan since 2011—such as promoting women's rights, strengthening democratic institutions, and providing humanitarian assistance.

In Pakistan, two long-standing U.S. objectives relate to Pakistan's nuclear power. First, the United States is concerned about avoiding nuclear proliferation beyond Pakistan. Second, the United States is concerned about the possibility of an escalatory spiral in an intensified conflict between Pakistan and India, two nuclear-armed regional powers. Accordingly, the United States has sought to promote Pakistan's stability in order to increase the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal and decrease the likelihood of a Pakistan-India conflagration. Indeed, since 1998, when Pakistan conducted a series of successful nuclear tests, Washington has promoted stability in Pakistan to prevent state collapse, which could lead to non-state groups or other state actors in the region obtaining nuclear materials. Additionally, given the threat of nuclear exchange, the United States has sought to restrain the Pakistan-India rivalry and avert a crisis that puts the two regional powers on an escalatory spiral.²⁷

The threat du jour has also long shaped the United States' relationship with and objectives in Pakistan. Beginning in 1954, when the United States and Pakistan signed the Mutual Defense Agreement, Washington sought to build a partnership with Islamabad as a counterweight to Soviet influence in the region. In addition to seeking bilateral cooperation, Washington sought to embed Pakistan in regional security structures, most notably the Central Treaty Organization, designed to contain Soviet expansion. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Pakistan became an essential U.S. partner in efforts to support the Afghan mujahedeen against Soviet forces. Finally, since 2001, Pakistan again played a key role in facilitating U.S. operations to combat al-Qaeda and the Taliban, opening ground lines of communication and allowing overflight rights for U.S. forces.²⁸

As has often been the case since 1979, U.S. objectives in Afghanistan continue to shape U.S. objectives in Pakistan. Amid U.S. and allied forces' withdrawal from Afghanistan, Washington seeks to work through Islamabad to foster a negotiated settlement to the conflict between the Taliban and the Afghan national government. However, given the United States' withdrawal from Afghanistan, U.S. forces are now less dependent on Pakistan for access to Afghanistan, although U.S. forces will now need to operate from bases farther from Afghanistan to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and future strikes against militants, such as ISKP. Washington is also exploring opportunities to diversify its approach

²⁷ Walsh, 2020; think tank researcher with expertise on Pakistani military issues, telephone interview with the authors, July 26, 2021.

²⁸ Of course, simultaneously to enabling U.S. operations against the Afghan Taliban, Pakistan supported the group and provided its leadership and members with safe haven, arguably making outright U.S. victory against the Taliban unachievable. For an in-depth discussion of the three main phases of U.S.-Pakistan relations, see Blank et al., 2018, pp. 13–24.

to peace in Afghanistan, increasingly engaging India—and potentially Iran—to pursue regional stability, diminishing the centrality of traditional U.S. objectives in Pakistan.²⁹

Furthermore, if U.S. objectives in Afghanistan change or simply become less important to U.S. policymakers, the United States' approach to its policies in Pakistan may also change. In particular, U.S. policymakers may cease forming and pursuing policy objectives through the lens of U.S. priorities in Afghanistan and combating violent extremist groups. Rather, U.S. policymakers may increasingly view Pakistan through a great-power competition lens—given Islamabad's close ties to Beijing and expanding U.S. ties with New Delhi. Such a shift could have profound impacts on U.S.-Pakistan relations. Nevertheless, Pakistan's stability and peace with India will almost certainly remain concerns for U.S. policymakers, given the nuclear stakes of a failed Pakistani state or high-intensity conflict between Pakistan and India.

China's Interests and Objectives

Some of China's objectives are common across both Afghanistan and Pakistan. One of China's key objectives is ensuring the security of its restive Xinjiang province. And both Afghanistan and Pakistan are key in China's fight against the “three evils” of extremism, terrorism, and separatism.³⁰ Since the 2010s, the Xinjiang area has seen an increase in inter-ethnic violence, which Chinese officials blame on cross-border terror organizations and foreign extremist ideologies.³¹ Beijing recognizes both Pakistan and Afghanistan as current or potential havens for extremist groups, where China claims Uighur terrorists receive training.³² Preventing instability or extremism from spreading to Xinjiang is China's primary interest in Afghanistan and one of its primary interests in Pakistan; under new counterterrorism laws, Xi Jinping is legally authorized to declare war on terror, and People's Liberation Army (PLA) units are legally authorized to operate outside of China's borders to fight terrorist groups.³³

Unlike in Pakistan, China has few significant economic interests in Afghanistan. Beijing has expressed some interest in resource extraction there, and Afghanistan does have large

²⁹ Afzal, 2021b.

³⁰ Wolf, 2020, p. 68; and Bai Lianlei, “The Shanghai Cooperation Organization Expands Its Membership: New Opportunities and Challenges” [“上海合作组织扩员: 新发展机遇与挑战”], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], November 24, 2017.

³¹ Blaming unrest on foreign interference instead of domestic policy failures may be a cynical excuse by Beijing, and violence in Xinjiang may have as much to do with China's heavy-handed assimilationist or migratory policies as with any international extremist group. That being said, the Chinese have repeatedly blamed inter-ethnic violence on international extremists, and their actions show that they take this so-called threat seriously (Aysha Khan, “Uighurs Reflect on 2009 Violence That Set Off Chinese Crackdown,” *Washington Post*, July 10, 2020; and Wolf, 2020, p. 70).

³² Azeta Hafez and Luwei Rose Luqiu, “Where Does Afghanistan Fit in China's Grand Project? A Content Analysis of Afghan and Chinese News Coverage of the One Belt, One Road Initiative,” *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 80, No. 6, 2018, p. 564; Bai, 2017; and Lin Wang, “Opportunities and Challenges of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor and Implications for U.S. Policy and Pakistan,” East-West Center, September 6, 2017.

³³ Hafez and Luqiu, 2018, p. 553; Wolf, 2020, p. 65.

deposits of copper and other minerals in high demand by China's manufacturing industry.³⁴ Afghanistan's geographic location between South Asia, Central Asia, and China also makes it of potential interest for BRI transportation or information infrastructure projects, but instability in the country has thus far precluded large-scale investment, with some notable exceptions.³⁵ Any Chinese investments or opportunities in Afghanistan pale in comparison with Beijing's economic (and strategic) interests in Pakistan.

Since the start of U.S. and allied operations in Afghanistan in 2001 under the banner of the global war on terrorism, China's goals there have been limited in scope, as has Beijing's willingness to intervene in domestic politics. Although China would love to integrate the country more fully into its larger BRI project, it has often proven willing to settle for "controlled instability" and has not moved to interfere in Afghanistan unless events there threaten its economic and strategic interests in Pakistan or the security of China's western provinces.³⁶ Beijing is highly suspicious of the Taliban's past connections with Uighur militants, but it seems to have made its peace with a Taliban takeover of the country, provided that the Taliban keeps its commitment not to let Uighur militants use its territory to attack China.³⁷ Even if it did want to act against the Taliban, China could be constrained by its desire to maintain close relations with Islamabad.³⁸ Increased diplomatic activity since 2014 suggests that China may be preparing to take a somewhat more active role in Afghanistan than in the past, but Beijing seems currently unwilling to become engaged in any proxy conflict there that does not directly threaten its western provinces or interests in Pakistan.³⁹

China's interests in Pakistan are considerably more significant than its interests in Afghanistan. As our examination of China's influence-seeking activities in the region shows, Pakistan is second to none in the region in this regard. Western scholars have described China's security concerns as a set of concentric rings expanding outward from Beijing: The first ring involves territories that China perceives should be under its control and that are in its immediate neighborhood, and the second ring includes countries that significantly affect China's regional interests because of geographic proximity, security concerns, and investment flows. Pakistan is in this latter circle.⁴⁰ In addition to its counterterrorism objectives in Pakistan, China is committed to ensuring that its China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) is a suc-

³⁴ Hatef and Luqiu, 2018, p. 554.

³⁵ Shubhangi Pandey, "BRI and Afghanistan: Systemic Challenges Impede Integration," in Harsh V. Pant and Premesha Saha, eds., *Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative: Reach, Implications, Consequences*, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, February 2021; Bai, 2017; and Hatef and Luqiu, 2018, pp. 553–554.

³⁶ Hatef and Luqiu, 2018, pp. 559–560; Wolf, 2020, pp. 70–71, 268.

³⁷ Felbab-Brown, 2020, p. 5.

³⁸ Wolf, 2020, pp. 264–271.

³⁹ Wolf, 2020, pp. 70–71, 261.

⁴⁰ For a discussion of how China views regional security concerns and the concentric ring model, see Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, "How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing's Fears," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 5, September/October 2012. See also Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix B.

cess. This series of roads, pipelines, power plants, factories, and other infrastructure runs the length of Pakistan, connecting Xinjiang province (which borders Pakistan to the north) to the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean.⁴¹ It was one of the earliest components of the BRI connecting Eurasia, and it has been described as the BRI's "flagship" project.⁴² For decades, China has tried and failed to enable its landlocked western hinterland to catch up economically to its thriving east, and it has hoped that CPEC will finally bring both economic development and greater stability to the western provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet.⁴³ China also hopes that CPEC will encourage growth in Pakistan and perhaps even Afghanistan, building new markets for Chinese goods, creating targets for Chinese investment, and encouraging greater stability.⁴⁴

CPEC's geographic location not only encourages Chinese hopes that it can bring greater economic development (and therefore greater stability) to China's western provinces and neighbors but also enables Beijing to build logistical corridors that bypass strategic chokepoints that could be held against it. In particular, Chinese leaders have long feared that the United States or other rivals could cut off Chinese energy and other imports through the Strait of Malacca, around the tip of the Malay Peninsula.⁴⁵ The sea lanes connecting China with important markets in Europe, South Asia, and Africa run through this narrow channel, and as much as 80 percent of Chinese energy imports must pass through the strait.⁴⁶ To bypass its reliance on the Strait of Malacca, China is reported to have plans for a potential naval base in Gwadar.⁴⁷

CPEC is a massive endeavor, including as much as \$62 billion in planned investment by 2021.⁴⁸ Much of this massive financial investment is tied up in vulnerable infrastructure projects that run through unstable regions.⁴⁹ Such investment has brought an influx of Chinese citizens into Pakistan; from 2016 to 2018, there were between 30,000 and 70,000 Chinese nationals in Pakistan.⁵⁰ Because of the projects' locations, many of these people live or

⁴¹ Kriti M. Shah, "CPEC: Building a Path for Pakistan's Financial Ruin," in Harsh V. Pant and Premesha Saha, eds., *Mapping the Belt and Road Initiative: Reach, Implications, Consequences*, New Delhi: Observer Research Foundation, February 2021, pp. 9–10; and China Power Team, "Does China Dominate Global Investment?" Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 1, 2020.

⁴² Shah, 2021; Wang, 2017.

⁴³ Wolf, 2020, pp. 52–56, 58–59.

⁴⁴ Wolf, 2020, p. 51; Bai, 2017.

⁴⁵ Wolf, 2020, p. 67.

⁴⁶ Wolf, 2020, p. 67.

⁴⁷ Chad Peltier, Tate Nurkin, and Sean O'Connor, *China's Logistics Capabilities for Expeditionary Operations*, Coulsdon, United Kingdom: Janes, 2020, p. 30.

⁴⁸ Shah, 2021, pp. 9–10; China Power Team, 2020.

⁴⁹ Shah, 2021, pp. 9–10; China Power Team, 2020.

⁵⁰ Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, "Guardians of the Belt and Road: The Internationalization of China's Private Security Companies," Mercator Institute for China Studies, August 16, 2018; Afshan Subohi,

work in especially unstable parts of Pakistan, and protecting the large Chinese investments and population in Pakistan is a top priority for Beijing.

Pakistan is important to China strategically, from the perspective of its relations with India. Beijing likely will seek to undermine Indian influence throughout South Asia, and many Chinese analysts seem to view India's more assertive foreign policy under Prime Minister Narendra Modi with a certain degree of trepidation.⁵¹ With the rise in China-India tensions along the disputed border areas (e.g., in October 2020), if it wanted to punish or harass India, China could leverage Pakistani militant proxy groups to increase the threat that Pakistan poses to India.⁵² Beijing and New Delhi thus have opposing positions on Pakistani influence in Afghanistan, which Beijing would welcome and New Delhi views with considerable alarm.⁵³

Russia's Interests and Objectives

Russia's objectives in Afghanistan are grounded in its strategic and geopolitical interests; its economic interests in the country are modest.

Russia's 2016 Foreign Policy Concept singles out instability in Afghanistan as presenting a security threat to Russia and other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States.⁵⁴ Afghanistan has been an increasingly prominent concern: Russia's 2016 National Security Strategy and its 2014 Military Doctrine cite terrorism and drug-trafficking as central threats, although they do not directly mention Afghanistan.⁵⁵ In the 2021 National Security Strategy, however, Afghanistan appears explicitly alongside other regions where intensifying conflict is relevant to Russia's defense.⁵⁶ Russia's declared policy interests in Afghanistan stem from security concerns related to terrorism, the spread of radical ideologies, and the flow of narcotics—as well as a spillover of instability in Afghanistan into the former Soviet Central Asian countries. Three of the Central Asian countries are Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies, and all are considered by Russia to be within its sphere of influence. Russian leaders remember well the turmoil that reigned after the Soviet

"Chinese Influence Outpaces Influx," *Dawn*, January 22, 2018; and F. M. Shakil, "Meet the Militants Chasing China Out of Pakistan," *Asia Times*, January 11, 2021.

⁵¹ Hatef and Luqiu, 2018, pp. 551–569; Wolf, 2020, p. 65; Rong Ying [荣鹰], "'Modi-Ism' and the Future of Sino-Indian Relations" ["'莫迪主义'与中印关系的未来"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], November 24, 2017; and Wang, 2017.

⁵² "China-India Border Dispute: The Row Explained in 400 Words," 2020.

⁵³ Derek Grossman, "China and Pakistan See Eye to Eye on the Taliban—Almost," *Foreign Policy*, September 20, 2021.

⁵⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016.

⁵⁵ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2015; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation," Moscow, December 25, 2014.

⁵⁶ President of Russia, "Президент утвердил Стратегию национальной безопасности" ["President Approved the National Security Strategy"], July 2, 2021, point 37.

withdrawal of forces in 1988 and seek to avoid a repeat of that experience; thus, Russia has consistently identified addressing instability and supporting conflict resolution in Afghanistan as two of its objectives.

Of the violent groups operating in Afghanistan, Moscow views ISKP and al-Qaeda as the most significant threats, largely because these groups are focused on spreading their influence across national borders and attracting foreign fighters, including from Russia and the Central Asian countries.⁵⁷ There are reported links between al-Qaeda and Chechen militants who had waged two separatist wars in Russia, and al-Qaeda has links to the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, a terrorist group, which Russia has previously faced during a conflict in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁸ Although the Islamic State threat in Afghanistan has been diminished, Russian analysts have seen its resurgence as a real possibility.⁵⁹ Some Russian sources claim that the foreign fighters who fought against Russia in Syria are forming connections with ISKP.⁶⁰

By contrast, the perceived magnitude of the threat emanating from the Taliban has receded in recent years—at least prior to the Taliban’s takeover in summer 2021. Although the Taliban was banned in Russia as a terrorist organization in 2003, since 2014—and officially, since 2018—Moscow has approached the Taliban as a viable partner for conflict resolution.⁶¹ Russia’s rapprochement with the Taliban was motivated in considerable part by the ISKP threat, as well as the possibility of the Afghan conflict spilling over into Central Asia. Russia continued its diplomatic engagement with the Taliban as it seized control of Afghanistan, helping legitimize the group—largely because of the Taliban’s reassurances that it will combat ISKP and harbors no designs to attack or destabilize Central Asia.⁶² Russia’s assessment of the security threat posed by the Taliban takeover is bound to evolve in the near future and will depend on the Taliban’s treatment of the Islamic State and other, more internationally ori-

⁵⁷ See, for example, RIA Novosti, “Замир Кабулов: не стоит преувеличивать возможности РФ по влиянию на талибов” [“Zamir Kabulov: We Should Not Exaggerate the Ability of the Russian Federation to Influence the Taliban”], December 23, 2017; and Yuriy Lyamin, “Война и мирный процесс в Афганистане на фоне вывода иностранных войск” [“The War and the Peace Process in Afghanistan Amidst the Withdrawal of the Foreign Troops”], *Экспорт Вооружений [Arms Export]*, Vol. 157, 2021, p. 53.

⁵⁸ Andrew Kazantsev, “Afghanistan Crisis: Security Problems for Russia and Central Asian States,” Russian International Affairs Council, August 16, 2021; and Preeti Bhattacharji, “Chechen Terrorism (Russia, Chechnya, Separatist),” Council on Foreign Relations, Background, April 8, 2010.

⁵⁹ Lyamin, 2021, p. 53.

⁶⁰ Kazantsev, 2021.

⁶¹ Dmitriy Kuznets, “Статья, которой нам всем так не хватало: стыдные (на самом деле вовсе нет) вопросы о ‘Талибане’: США правда ‘сдали’ Афганистан талибам? И зачем Россия дружит с террористами?” [“The Article That We All Needed So Much: Embarrassing (In Fact, Not at All) Questions About the Taliban: Did the U.S. Really ‘Surrender’ Afghanistan to the Taliban? And Why Is Russia Friends with Terrorists?”], Meduza, August 19, 2021; and TASS, “МИД РФ: участники консультаций по Афганистану продолжат встречаться в московском формате” [“RF MFA: The Participants of the Consultations on Afghanistan Will Continue to Meet in Moscow Format”], November 9, 2018.

⁶² RIA Novosti, “Лавров назвал представителей талибов ‘вменяемыми людьми’” [“Lavrov Called the Representatives of the Taliban ‘the Sane People’”], July 23, 2021.

ented jihadist groups (e.g., Jamaat Ansarullah and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan); any boost to Russia's North Caucasus separatism from the Taliban victory and potential returning fighters from Afghanistan; and the extent of destabilization of Central Asian states.⁶³

Russia's strategic interests in Afghanistan are at times in tension with its strictly security-based concerns. Since 2014, however, Russia's policies have been increasingly motivated by ambitions to secure influence over conflict management and Afghanistan's future, as well as to limit U.S. influence.⁶⁴ In this light, Russia's engagement of the Taliban is also motivated by the belief that it would have to be part of any viable political settlement—and because it was fighting against the U.S.-supported Ghani government.⁶⁵ Russian officials have accused the United States of manipulating the Afghanistan conflict to exert influence on neighboring countries and undermine Russia, as well as China and Iran.⁶⁶ Russia's peacemaking efforts, engagement with the Taliban, and support for the U.S.-Taliban peace deal in February 2020 that provided for the withdrawal of NATO troops all suggest that Russia welcomed U.S. disengagement—particularly to prevent Washington from reestablishing a military presence in or close to Central Asia.⁶⁷ Even amid concerns about the destabilization of the Central Asian region as a result of the Taliban's broad offensive, Russia issued warnings to the United States against deploying troops in the former Soviet Central Asian states.⁶⁸ Though less of a pressing concern, China's expanding influence in Central Asia likely also influences Russia's geopolitical interests in the region in the longer term.⁶⁹

⁶³ Opinion in Russia on these implications of the Taliban victory is split. For an overview, see Paul Goble, "Taliban Triumph in Afghanistan Echoes in Russia's North Caucasus," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 133, August 19, 2021.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Arkady Dubnov, "What Game Is Russia Playing in Afghanistan?" *Al Jazeera*, November 14, 2018.

⁶⁵ Some Western experts conclude that the security rationale for supporting the Taliban is pretextual and that "Moscow is de facto using the Taliban and Afghanistan as a theatre for an anti-American proxy war" (Jakob Hedenskog, *Russia and International Cooperation on Counter-Terrorism: From the Chechen Wars to the Syria Campaign*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R--4916--SE, March 2020). For a Russian expert's view, see Ekaterina Stepanova, "Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts," Institut Français des Relations Internationales, Russie.NEI.Reports, No. 23, May 2018, pp. 16, 27–32.

⁶⁶ "US in Afghanistan to Influence Russia, Iran, China—Russian Foreign Ministry," *Sputnik*, March 14, 2018. For an analysis by a leading Russian expert, see Stepanova, 2018, p. 35.

⁶⁷ See, for example, Samuel Ramani, "Russia Is Winning the Information War in Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy*, August 5, 2020. Even prior to the downturn in Russia's relations with the United States in 2014, Russia had pressured Kyrgyzstan to expel U.S. forces from the base at Manas International Airport (Jeffrey Mankoff and Cyrus Newlin, "Don't Base U.S. Forces in Central Asia," *War on the Rocks*, June 23, 2021).

⁶⁸ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia Against US Troops in Central Asia Near Afghanistan," *Associated Press*, July 13, 2021.

⁶⁹ As China's role in Central Asia expands to the military domain, expert assessments suggest that Russia is becoming less sanguine about the coexistence with its strategic partner in the region in the longer term. See, for example, Gerry Shih, "In Central Asia's Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops,"

Overall, Russia's interests in Afghanistan are conflicted. On the one hand, Russia seeks to diminish the U.S. role. On the other hand, Russia has sought to use its own influence as leverage to engage the United States in the peacemaking effort.⁷⁰ Its interests in stability, moreover, are increasingly in tension with its interests in undermining the United States. As the U.S. withdrawal unfolded and set off a more rapid deterioration in the situation, Russia seized the opportunity to blame the United States for destabilizing the country and cast the intervention as a failure. At the same time, Moscow is concerned by the consequences of U.S. withdrawal and has reportedly raised the possibility of coordinating with the United States on Afghan security threats, even offering the use of its military bases in Central Asia for information-gathering.⁷¹ Prior to the U.S. withdrawal in late spring and summer 2021, there were distinct signs that Russia viewed Afghanistan primarily as a site of great-power competition rather than primarily through the lens of terrorism or instability. This view, however, appears to have shifted, and Russia's security concerns are likely to dominate in the near future, even as it reaps the benefits of increased influence in the wake of the U.S. departure.⁷²

In Pakistan, Russian involvement has historically been limited, but Russia's relationship with Pakistan has strengthened markedly since about 2010.⁷³ Russia's interests in Pakistan arise from the country's significance to the balance of power in the region and the future of Afghanistan, as well as a more pragmatic interest in growing another arms market and growing economic interests. The cooling of U.S.-Pakistan relations created an opening for Russia to build influence in South Asia; the warming of the U.S. relationship with India, a long-time Russian ally, created additional incentive for Russia to seek a rapprochement with Pakistan. The importance of strengthening ties with Pakistan magnified also with Pakistan's inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which Russia views as an important multilateral mechanism to determine the future of the region.

Pakistan is also viewed as crucial for dealing with the security threats and instability emanating from Afghanistan; it is seen as a vital source of influence and constraint on the

Washington Post, February 18, 2019; Rachel Zhang, "China May Send Peacekeepers to Afghanistan When US Troops Leave: Experts," *South China Morning Post*, April 16, 2021; and "Military Drills in Tajikistan Expose Kremlin's Worry over Waning Influence," *Caravanserai*, July 20, 2018.

⁷⁰ See Dubnov, 2018. Another such indication is the appointment in 2020 of a new ambassador to Afghanistan with a background in the United States and China rather than in Afghanistan (Andrey Serenko, "Москва меняет свое отношение к правительству Афганистана" ["Moscow Changes Its Attitude Towards the Afghan Government"], *Независимая [The Independent]*, January 9, 2020).

⁷¹ Alexander Marrow, "Russia Offered U.S. Use of Central Asia Bases for Afghan Intel—Paper," *Reuters*, July 17, 2021.

⁷² Andrew E. Kramer and Anton Troianovski, "With Afghan Collapse, Moscow Takes Charge in Central Asia," *New York Times*, August 19, 2021.

⁷³ Since 2010, "relations between Pakistan and Russia improved markedly as illustrated by high-level visits, arms sales, and increased cooperation; at the same time, US-Pakistan relations grew strained" (Feroz Hassan Khan, "Russia-Pakistan Strategic Relations," *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 1, January 2021, p. 48).

Taliban, especially after the U.S. withdrawal.⁷⁴ Russia is therefore boosting military cooperation and engagement with Pakistan in its diplomatic initiatives on Afghanistan, at times at the cost of India's displeasure.⁷⁵

On the economic front, Russia and Pakistan are cooperating on building the Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline, which will deliver natural gas from liquefied natural gas terminals in Karachi and Gwadar to Lahore; at the cost of \$2.5 billion, it is the largest economic initiative between the two countries since the mid-1970s.⁷⁶ This endeavor may pave the path toward greater collaboration in other sectors or domains—such as in nuclear energy, according to Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov.⁷⁷

Posture and Access

Given their proximity to Afghanistan and Pakistan, China and Russia have a major posture and access advantage over the United States—especially following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and the collapse of the U.S.-backed Kabul government. China shares a border with both Afghanistan and Pakistan and maintains a robust security presence in its western provinces. Russia does not immediately border either Afghanistan or Pakistan but does maintain bases in neighboring Central Asian states. In contrast, the United States likely will have limited access in the region and potentially would have to stage operations from the Persian Gulf.

United States' Posture and Access

After two decades of major U.S. troop presence in Afghanistan, the Biden administration determined to withdraw all U.S. forces from the country by September 11, 2021. Amid the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. posture and access in the region are highly uncertain. Washington has explored options for basing troops and aircraft in countries neighboring Afghanistan to continue conducting counterterrorism operations. However, finding a suitable location and a willing host has proven difficult. Initially, U.S. policymakers and DoD officials looked at establishing a base in Pakistan from which the United States could gather intelligence on and conduct operations against al-Qaeda and ISKP targets. However, Pakistan does not appear to be a basing option, after Prime Minister Khan stated in a *Washington Post* editorial that his

⁷⁴ Kommersant, “Лавров сообщил о готовности России поставлять военную технику в Пакистан” [“Lavrov Announced Russia's Readiness to Supply Military Equipment to Pakistan”], April 7, 2021b.

⁷⁵ Kommersant, “Придется сидеть без Дели” [“We'll Have to Sit Without Delhi”], March 17, 2021a.

⁷⁶ Sergey Sukhankin, “Pakistan Stream Gas Pipeline: Russia's Key to South Asia?” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 18, No. 123, August 3, 2021.

⁷⁷ Sergey Strokan, “Медовый полумесяц” [“Honey Half-Moon”], Kommersant, April 8, 2021; see also Andrey Rezchikov, “Пакистанский Поток' расширит влияние России в Азии” [“Pakistani Stream' Will Expand Russia's Influence in Asia”], *Vzгляд*, May 29, 2021.

country “cannot afford” the potential violence that terrorist groups would direct at Pakistan in retaliation for it hosting U.S. forces.⁷⁸

U.S. officials have also looked at Central Asian countries—especially Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, which all share a border with Afghanistan—as possible basing options. However, experiences with these countries (vis-à-vis U.S. efforts in Afghanistan), Russian and Chinese aversion to U.S. presence in these countries, and local political considerations also limit Central Asian states’ viability as a host for U.S. forces.⁷⁹

If unable to base forces and platforms in Afghanistan’s neighboring countries, the U.S. military and intelligence community will likely have to conduct its operations directed at Afghanistan or Pakistan from outside the region. In this case, U.S. air support and intelligence-gathering operations will likely be based out of the Persian Gulf, where the U.S. military maintains the large al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar. The U.S. 5th Fleet operating out of Bahrain provides another option for conducting operations over Afghanistan or Pakistan, and in the event of a crisis, the U.S. Navy could deploy an aircraft carrier into the Gulf of Oman or the northern Arabian Sea.⁸⁰

China’s Posture and Access

Both Afghanistan and Pakistan border China, and the PLA maintains several large combat formations in its Western Theater Command that could intervene in any conflict in either country without seriously weakening border protection units.⁸¹ The PLA Air Force also operates several large air bases in the region.⁸² PLA units engage in relatively frequent, large-scale exercises in the region with Russian and other Central Asian militaries as part of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.⁸³ Chinese troops may already conduct joint border patrols with Tajik and Afghan soldiers on Tajik and Afghan territory.⁸⁴ There have even been rumors

⁷⁸ Imran Khan, “Pakistan Is Ready to Be a Partner for Peace in Afghanistan, but We Will Not Host U.S. Bases,” *Washington Post*, June 21, 2021.

⁷⁹ Mankoff and Newlin, 2021. As the Taliban rapidly gained territory in mid-2021, Russia grew increasingly uneasy as the prospects of the Kabul government’s total collapse grew. As a result, Russia reportedly raised the idea that the United States might use Russia’s military facilities in Central Asia for intelligence-gathering and counterterrorism purposes (Arif Rafiq, “Afghanistan’s Neighbors Contend with Taliban at Their Borders,” Middle East Institute, July 29, 2021).

⁸⁰ Greg Myre, “The U.S. Looks to Support the Afghan Military from ‘Over the Horizon,’” NPR, May 17, 2021.

⁸¹ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 43, 106. China’s Western Theater Command does not have many units located immediately opposite Afghanistan, but it does have several division- and brigade-sized maneuver forces in Xinjiang and Tibet.

⁸² Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 54, 106.

⁸³ Matthew Southerland, Will Green, and Sierra Janik, *The Shanghai Cooperation Organization: A Testbed for Chinese Power Projection*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, November 12, 2020, p. 13.

⁸⁴ Shih, 2019.

of a Chinese base on Afghan territory, although these are unconfirmed, and even if a base did exist, it is not clear what its status is following the Taliban takeover.⁸⁵ The PLA does not yet have any known bases in Pakistan, but the country is considered among the likely locations of future PLA logistics centers.⁸⁶

Russia's Posture and Access

Russia has no military presence in Afghanistan or Pakistan, but it does have military bases in former Soviet Central Asia. Russia's largest military base abroad is the 201st Military Base in Tajikistan, bordering Afghanistan. That base hosts "a motor rifle division structure with three [maneuver] regiments, plus battalion-size support units"; it is reported that Russia deployed S-300 air defense units there in 2019.⁸⁷ "Estimates of its size vary from 5,000 to 7,000 men . . . The 201 [Military Base] is Russia's key asset for handling any type of military conflict in southern Central Asia" (here likely meaning post-Soviet Central Asia), including challenges stemming from spillover from Afghanistan.⁸⁸ Another major base in the region is the 999th Air Base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, which constitutes "Russia's initial ability to use Central Asian air space and a possible base for reinforcements."⁸⁹ Russia's military bases have been strengthened since about 2018,⁹⁰ and some expert analysis suggests that Russia is likely to seek to increase its military presence in Central Asia, ostensibly to counter the security threat coming from Afghanistan—but this reason is likely largely pretextual.⁹¹ In July 2021, Tajikistan requested CSTO assistance to fortify its border in view of the growing threat from Afghanistan, inviting a greater Russian presence; CSTO member states agreed to step up cooperation to reinforce the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border.⁹²

⁸⁵ Shubhangi Pandey, "China's Surreptitious Advance in Afghanistan," *The Diplomat*, September 22, 2018.

⁸⁶ Peltier, Nurkin, and O'Connor, 2020, specifically the section on Gwadar; Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020.

⁸⁷ Jakob Hedenskog, Erika Holmquist, and Johan Norberg, *Security in Central Asia: Russian Policy and Military Posture*, Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, FOI-R--4756--SE, May 2019, p. 57.

⁸⁸ Hedenskog, Holmquist, and Norberg, 2019, p. 57.

⁸⁹ Hedenskog, Holmquist, and Norberg, 2019, p. 59. Hedenskog and colleagues note that the 999th Air Base "has some ten Su-25SM ground attack aircraft and some transport helicopters. The ambition seems to be to provide some fire support to ground forces. Increased fire support from the air or significant air defence operations require reinforcements from Russia" (p. 59).

⁹⁰ "The bases were being strengthened 'in connection with threats emanating from Afghanistan,' Alexander Sternik, Russian Foreign Ministry representative to the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), told RIA Novosti in February 2018" (Kanat Altynbayev, "Kremlin Conjures Up Threats to Rationalise Military Presence in Central Asia," *Caravanserai*, February 21, 2019).

⁹¹ Dubnov, 2018; Altynbayev, 2019. This includes rumors of a second Russian military base in southern Kyrgyzstan (Altynbayev, 2019).

⁹² Kommersant, "Таджикистан запросил помощи ОДКБ в ситуации с Афганистаном" ["Tajikistan Requested CSTO Assistance for the Afghanistan Situation"], July 7, 2021c; and "CSTO Countries Agree to Reinforce Tajik-Afghan Border—Russian Security Council," TASS, September 15, 2021.

Although Russia has no formal agreement with Afghanistan that provides Russian forces with access to the country, geography facilitates access to Russian troops and supplies. The path into Afghanistan lies through Central Asia, Iran, or Pakistan, all of which—with the possible exception of Pakistan—are likely to facilitate Russia’s access.⁹³ Prior RAND research investigating preconditions for a Russian military intervention indicated that Afghanistan could present “relatively few logistical challenges” and many of the military enabling factors that were important in Russia’s intervention in Syria, including the Kyrgyz air base, the possibility of a partner on the ground (if Moscow’s relations with the Taliban were to deepen), and (in view of the U.S. withdrawal) a lower risk of coming into direct conflict with U.S. forces.⁹⁴

Capabilities

In a proxy conflict in Afghanistan or Pakistan, the United States, China, and Russia each have different capabilities that they could bring to bear, ranging from hard military to economic or informational tools. Their varying capabilities largely depend on their proximity to and experiences in both countries.

United States’ Capabilities

With the withdrawal of U.S. forces and the collapse of the U.S.-backed Kabul government, the United States has limited capabilities and tools to deploy in Afghanistan. Prior to the Kabul government’s August 2021 collapse, Washington had affirmed its intent to continue financially supporting the ANDSF and the government. The support would have included continued implementation of the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund, which provided more than \$3 billion in training and equipping assistance to the ANDSF in fiscal years (FYs) 2020 and 2021.⁹⁵ The United States also intended to provide substantial economic aid to Kabul. Between FYs 2019 and 2021, the U.S. Department of State provided Afghanistan with an average of \$266 million through the Economic Support and Development Fund, requesting \$250 million for FY 2022.⁹⁶

⁹³ Barnett Rubin, “Afghanistan and Considerations of Supply,” *War on the Rocks*, July 11, 2017.

⁹⁴ See Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 20; see also discussion in the summary report, Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

⁹⁵ Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Justification for FY 2022 Afghanistan Security Forces Fund (ASFF)*, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2021, p. 5. For multi-year trends in the Afghanistan Security Forces Fund budget and programming, see Sam Naumann, Diana Roy, and Billy Ostermeyer, “The Biden Administration’s Plans for Post-Withdrawal Security Assistance in Afghanistan,” *Security Assistance Monitor*, August 2021.

⁹⁶ U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2021*, Washington, D.C., February 10, 2020, p. 119; and U.S. Department of State, *Congressional Budget Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2022*, Washington, D.C., May 28, 2021, p. 143.

Now that the Kabul government and the ANDSF have collapsed, the United States has far fewer options of partners to support in Afghanistan. However, the United States has also left open the option of conducting kinetic actions in Afghanistan if the need arises.⁹⁷ As mentioned earlier, the United States could do so while operating “over the horizon” from Persian Gulf bases or U.S. naval assets in regional waters. Furthermore, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency may maintain a clandestine presence in the country to continue conducting counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ As has been the case in the past, the United States could work through covert, unconventional operators to partner with local anti-Taliban armed groups and develop paramilitary proxies. However, many past and potential future local partners have been implicated in egregious human rights violations, and supporting such groups may only further fracture Afghanistan’s security landscape.⁹⁹

Finally, in the information environment, the United States could potentially leverage experience and relationships developed over 20 years of conducting psychological operations, military information support operations, and activities known as operations in the information environment in Afghanistan. In particular, U.S. entities could coordinate and conduct operations in the information environment through a mechanism similar to the Information Warfare Task Force – Afghanistan, a DoD-led task force that oversaw such operations during the latter years of the U.S. war in Afghanistan. One of the task force’s major value-adds was integrating the various information-related capabilities—such as cyber, electronic warfare, space, and military information support operations—into cross-functional teams under a single task force that synchronized with maneuver units to amplify the effects of operations in the information environment.¹⁰⁰ Such a construct may be difficult to replicate exactly outside a zone of declared hostility, especially in a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan with a much less permissive operating environment. Nevertheless, the Information Warfare Task Force – Afghanistan and predecessor efforts present U.S. officials with arguably unparalleled experience in operations in the information environment in Afghanistan.

With respect to U.S. capabilities in Pakistan, Washington’s options are limited. Washington’s most effective tool to engage with Pakistan may be economic aid. As mentioned earlier, Islamabad would likely be highly receptive to U.S. aid, given its struggling economy. Compared with aid to Afghanistan, U.S. economic aid to Pakistan is low, averaging around \$52.6 million per year in Economic Support Fund aid between FYs 2019 and 2021. By comparison, Afghanistan received an annual average of \$266 million in Economic Support Fund

⁹⁷ Helene Cooper, Eric Schmitt, and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “U.S. Weighs Possibility of Airstrikes If Afghan Forces Face Crisis,” *New York Times*, June 9, 2021.

⁹⁸ Dominic Tierney, “The Future of Afghanistan Hinges on American Dollars, Not Troops,” *War on the Rocks*, June 1, 2021b.

⁹⁹ Barmak Pazhwak, Asma Ebadi, and Belquis Ahmadi, “After Afghanistan Withdrawal: A Return to ‘Warlordism?’” United States Institute for Peace, June 25, 2021.

¹⁰⁰ Stephen G. Fogarty and Bryan N. Sparling, “Enabling the Army in an Era of Information Warfare,” *Cyber Defense Review*, Summer 2020, p. 24; and DoD official, telephone interview with the authors, April 14, 2021.

aid during the same period.¹⁰¹ And because Pakistan is much more populous than Afghanistan, U.S. assistance to Pakistan per capita is even smaller. U.S. policymakers might look to increase Economic Support Fund and other forms of aid and investment in Pakistan; however, Chinese economic involvement is still likely to dwarf U.S. activity in the country. Similarly, U.S. security cooperation is unlikely to have substantial influence over Pakistani decisionmakers. Though at times robust, the U.S.-Pakistan security cooperation relationship has been inconsistent, sometimes coming to an abrupt halt. Subsequently, as argued by Jonah Blank and colleagues, “given the weight of historical distrust and overwhelming geostrategic importance of other nations (particularly India and China), the United States is unlikely ever to gain enough leverage to determine Pakistan’s security choices.”¹⁰²

Given the often-strained U.S.-Pakistan relationship and Islamabad’s reluctance to host U.S. forces in the country, U.S. capabilities in Pakistan are limited. The United States has conducted numerous covert operations and air strikes on Pakistani soil—the most famous being the 2011 raid in Abbottabad to kill Osama bin Laden. However, such operations have angered Pakistani officials and increased local resentment against the United States, and they may prove counter-productive in the long run. Nevertheless, the U.S. military could conduct special operations, gather intelligence, and conduct drone strikes in Pakistan—based out of U.S. facilities in the Persian Gulf—even if Islamabad did not grant access or overflight rights.

China’s Capabilities

Given China’s close proximity to both Afghanistan and Pakistan, the PLA could likely bring its whole complement of capabilities to bear on either nation. Although Afghanistan’s and northern Pakistan’s rough terrain may prove somewhat problematic, the PLA’s Western Theater Command has any level of force that Beijing would seek to employ, including an infantry division and a special operations brigade stationed near the border with Afghanistan and Pakistan, two group armies, several major PLA Air Force bases, and multiple combined arms brigades and aviation brigades.¹⁰³ This proximity also ensures that Beijing could likely provide any level of military support that it wished to either the Afghan or Pakistani government, especially with the new cross-border roads that it is building as part of CPEC. Islamabad and local Pakistani governments have built a 10,000-person security force dedicated specifically to protecting CPEC projects, but the degree of direct Chinese support to this unit is unknown.¹⁰⁴ Pakistan was one of the first countries to sign up to purchase the Chinese BeiDou satellite system in 2013. The system is now up and running in Pakistan, and it is the satellite system used by the Pakistani military. Chinese support to groups fighting against either Kabul or Islamabad seems unlikely, but China has some experience providing

¹⁰¹ U.S. Department of State, 2020, p. 119; U.S. Department of State, 2021, p. 143.

¹⁰² Blank et al., 2018, p. 4.

¹⁰³ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 104–107.

¹⁰⁴ Shah, 2021; Wang, 2017.

relatively sophisticated weapons to insurgents operating near its southern border, keeping them viable in the face of government assault.¹⁰⁵ China could also provide extensive financial aid, diplomatic cover, and intelligence to government or non-government proxies in either country.

Beijing also has several civil and military agencies that it could call upon for information operations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, although at present they may not be very well situated to operate in Afghanistan. Beijing's China Radio International operates in Urdu and Pashto, but the government-run China Global Television Network apparently does not produce programming in either language, even though its Arabic and English programming may reach some in Afghanistan and Pakistan.¹⁰⁶ Overall, Chinese media seems to emphasize Pakistan over Afghanistan, at least in Chinese-language online stories.¹⁰⁷ Xinhua, the official mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, provides multimedia content in Urdu but not evidently in Pashto or Dari.¹⁰⁸ In general, China is a latecomer to sophisticated information operations, and many of its activities seem focused on Chinese-language audiences and ethnic Chinese living abroad.¹⁰⁹ Overall, its influence campaigns are less aggressive and in some cases less sophisticated than those of Russia, although Chinese capabilities in this area are advancing rapidly.¹¹⁰ Unlike Russian campaigns, Chinese information operations tend to focus more on presenting a positive view of China instead of solely denigrating Beijing's enemies (although opponents are often demonized or silenced).¹¹¹ That being said, Chinese information operations in Taiwan demonstrate a growing capability to use social media and other tools in sophisticated political information campaigns.¹¹² China also has a history of

¹⁰⁵ Bertil Lintner, "Why Myanmar's Wa Always Get What They Want," Asia Times, September 18, 2019.

¹⁰⁶ China Radio International Urdu, homepage, undated; China Radio International Pashto, homepage, undated; and China Global Television Network, homepage, undated-a. A Google search for "site:CGTN.com 'ناتسکاپ'" returned no results. A search for "site:CGTN.com 'ناتسناغفا'" returned five results, all in the domain arabic.cgtn.com or newsar.cgtn.com.

¹⁰⁷ Hatef and Luqiu, 2018, pp. 556–557.

¹⁰⁸ "Xinhua Launches Multimedia Wire-Services in Five More Foreign Languages," Xinhua, August 18, 2020.

¹⁰⁹ Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Jeffrey W. Hornung, *Chinese Disinformation Efforts on Social Media*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4373/3-AF, 2021, pp. 16–17, 28.

¹¹⁰ Whereas Russian campaigns tend to focus mostly on denigrating their adversaries and exacerbating societal tensions, Chinese efforts tend to focus on improving populations' impression of China and suppressing or countering specific narratives that China finds especially threatening. In addition, whereas Russian agents often go to great lengths to build influential and convincing accounts, their Chinese counterparts tend to focus on volume over engagement. All that being said, China's capabilities are growing and may become more aggressive in the future (Renée Diresta, Carly Miller, Vanessa Molter, John Pomfret, and Glenn Tiffert, *Telling China's Story: The Chinese Communist Party's Campaign to Shape Global Narratives*, Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Internet Observatory, Hoover Institution, 2020, pp. 44–45).

¹¹¹ Diresta et al., 2020, pp. 44–45.

¹¹² Harold, Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Hornung, 2021, pp. 65–76.

using its sizable economic heft to silence critics, subvert journalists, or outright buy local media outlets.¹¹³ Chinese and Pakistani entities have already begun collaborating to counter criticism of CPEC within Pakistan.¹¹⁴

Russia's Capabilities

Russia's capabilities available for direct military support to proxies in the region in the near term are likely insufficient to project power over the entire Middle East.¹¹⁵ Russia's bases in Central Asia and the CSTO's Collective Rapid Reaction Force (with about 18,000–25,000 troops, mostly from Russia and Kazakhstan) are the main capabilities available for initial operations in a conflict.¹¹⁶ Russia's air base in Tajikistan could serve to provide air support to forces in combat. Direct involvement by Russia that requires warfighting in an inter-service operation or an escalation to a regional war would require deployments from Russia's Central Military District.¹¹⁷ One expert observes that, in such circumstances, Russia's reinforcements would face "troop mobility and deployment problems."¹¹⁸

Nonetheless, overt and direct military intervention in a new phase of conflict in Afghanistan is unlikely, absent major shifts in circumstances. This is due partly to historical memory (by both Russians and Afghan players), resource constraints, and Russia's official position denying a military solution.¹¹⁹ Russia's capabilities for proxy support short of direct military involvement consist of the full menu of such capabilities. Arming, funding, and training proxy actors; intelligence-sharing; and information warfare are the more likely tools of involvement, building on present (or suspected) activity and exploiting established networks within and outside Afghanistan. Indeed, as part of its hedging strategy in Afghanistan, Moscow has sought to revive and develop ties with semi-official Afghan ethnic and tribal leaders who command their own militias and have roots in the Northern Alliance. For instance, Moscow has regularly hosted Atta Muhammad Nur—a Northern Alliance commander and long-time

¹¹³ Sarah Cook, *China's Global Media Footprint: Democratic Responses to Expanding Authoritarian Influence*, Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for Democracy, February 2021, pp. 2–3.

¹¹⁴ Mehr Nadeem, "China Boosts Soft Power in Pakistan via Film and Social Media," Reuters, September 11, 2019.

¹¹⁵ According to Nurlan Aliyev, "The Russian military presence in the region is relatively small and the country cannot project power over the whole region. There are no reliable borders or geographical barriers between Afghanistan and Russian territory that could ultimately stop an infiltration of military groups into Russian territory" (Aliyev, 2020).

¹¹⁶ Hedenskog, Holmquist, and Norberg, 2019, pp. 56, 63; "Collective Rapid Reaction Force, the CSTO RRF, Turns 10 Years Old," Collective Security Treaty Organization, February 4, 2019; and Dmitry Gorenburg, "Russia and Collective Security: Why CSTO Is No Match for Warsaw Pact," *Russia Matters*, May 27, 2020.

¹¹⁷ Hedenskog, Holmquist, and Norberg, 2019, pp. 56, 63.

¹¹⁸ Aliyev, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Совместное заявление расширенной «тройки» по мирному урегулированию в Афганистане, Доха, 30 апреля 2021 года" ["Joint Statement by the Extended 'Troika' on Peaceful Settlement in Afghanistan, Doha, April 30, 2021"], April 30, 2021b.

opponent of the Taliban, the former governor of Afghanistan's northern Balkh province, and a prominent leader of Afghanistan's Tajik ethnic group.¹²⁰

Russia has previously transferred arms to the Afghan government,¹²¹ and U.S. analysts have long believed that Russia is rendering military assistance to the Taliban, although Moscow denies such claims.¹²² Russia has trained Afghan government forces (both armed forces and law enforcement),¹²³ and there is evidence that it has cooperated with Iran to set up training camps for the Taliban in Iran and set up supply networks to transport weapons from the camps to western and southern Afghanistan.¹²⁴ In view of Russia's strategic relationship with Iran, future cooperation with Iran on proxy support is likely. Russia has admitted to sharing intelligence with the Taliban in the past and is very likely to do so in the future, should it support the Taliban—or other armed groups—in a future conflict.¹²⁵

Russia may also be willing to support proxies through nonmilitary support. It has previously rendered limited economic assistance to the Afghan government.¹²⁶ Although Moscow's financial resources are limited, there is evidence that it has transferred resources (such as fuel tankers) to the Taliban that can be converted into profit.¹²⁷

Information warfare has been another important component of Russian involvement in the Afghan conflicts and would almost certainly play a role in any future support or interventions, especially if the United States is also involved. Russia has used a variety of disinformation and propaganda tools, including media in the local languages, to deepen the mistrust of the United States through, for example, a narrative that the United States has supported

¹²⁰ Kirill Krivosheev, "Why Russia Is Hedging Its Bets in Afghanistan," Carnegie Russia, March 15, 2021.

¹²¹ See, for example, Mirwais Harooni and Josh Smith, "Russia Gives a Gift of 10,000 Automatic Rifles to Afghanistan," Reuters, February 24, 2016.

¹²² In 2018, GEN John Nicholson, then commander of the NATO-led Resolute Support Mission in Afghanistan, testified that Russia has been actively funding the Taliban (Scott Neuman, "Top U.S. Commander in Afghanistan Accuses Russia of Aiding Taliban," NPR, March 26, 2018). He also stated that his forces discovered weapons given by the Russians to the Taliban, although Russia has denied this as well (Justin Rowlett, "Russia 'Arming the Afghan Taliban,' Says US," BBC News, March 23, 2018; and "Russia and Taliban Deny US Claims of Working Together," BBC News, March 25, 2018).

¹²³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Выступление Министра иностранных дел Российской Федерации С.В.Лаврова на министерской конференции 'Стамбульского процесса' по Афганистану, 30 марта 2021 года" ["Remarks by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey V. Lavrov at the Ministerial Conference of the 'Istanbul Process' on Afghanistan"], March 30, 2021a.

¹²⁴ Ahmad Majidiyar, "Iran Allegedly Facilitating Taliban-Russia Contacts," Middle East Institute, May 2, 2017.

¹²⁵ In 2015, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Maria Zakharova announced that Russia was sharing intelligence with the Taliban pertaining to ISKP movements (Brian Todd and Steve Almsay, "Russia, Taliban Share Intelligence in Fight Against ISIS," CNN, December 25, 2015).

¹²⁶ See World Bank, "Russia and the World Bank: International Development Assistance," webpage, undated.

¹²⁷ See, for example, Anthony Loyd, "Russia Funds Taliban in War Against NATO Forces," *The Times*, October 16, 2017.

ISKP. These narratives appear to find fertile ground, as prominent Afghan figures echo some of the claims.¹²⁸ As Samuel Ramani argues, “beyond their potential threat to U.S. forces, Russian state media outlets could also bolster Moscow’s influence over postwar Afghanistan.”¹²⁹

Although it is less thoroughly documented than in some other conflict states, Russian PMSCs are reported to have been active in Afghanistan; paramilitary groups, such as the Cossacks, have also been active there.¹³⁰ Depending on the course of a future conflict, Russian PMSCs and other paramilitary groups may be employed to carry out any of the activities described in this section and potentially become involved in direct combat.

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

Conflict is most likely to unfold in both Afghanistan and Pakistan as it has for much of the post–World War II era. Afghanistan may descend into renewed civil conflict—potentially exacerbated by outside influences. Pakistan might fall to a military coup as a result of instability and risk renewing hostilities with its long-time adversary India. However, in a proxy conflict in either Afghanistan or Pakistan, the United States would be more likely to be on the same side than on the opposing side of a China- or Russia-supported proxy. All three powers recognize and support the central government in Islamabad, and they may also choose to support—or at least begrudgingly accept—a Taliban government in Kabul. A proxy war that pits the United States against its competitors is not inconceivable but would likely require either the U.S. stance toward involvement in the region to shift or a constellation of developments that are, at present, not very likely. Moreover, competition between the United States and the other two powers likely would have to intensify and resemble more of the Cold War zero-sum environment in which any loss by one power is another’s gain.

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

Afghanistan

In the case of Afghanistan, China and Russia likely would have continued their formal support for the Kabul government if it had survived. Past instances of Chinese or Russian support to the Taliban were more geared toward undermining U.S. equities in the country and

¹²⁸ Ramani, 2020.

¹²⁹ Ramani, 2020.

¹³⁰ See, for example, Anna Maria Dyer, “Znaczenie Prywatnych Firm Wojskowych w Polityce Zagranicznej Rosji” [“The Importance of Private Military Companies in Russia’s Foreign Policy”], PISM, May 4, 2018; and Pavel Luzin, “Российские ЧВК: точки над і” [“Russian PMCs: Dotted the I’s”], RIDDLE Russia, February 20, 2019.

hedging their bets on future Afghan leadership rather than directly intending to make matters worse for Kabul. All three great powers, to varying degrees, would have preferred that the Kabul government remain in power and possibly reach a power-sharing arrangement with the Taliban, peacefully integrating into a unity government. Both China and Russia were somewhat apprehensive at the prospect of a violent Taliban takeover and institution of fundamentalist Islamist governance in Afghanistan. Had Afghanistan's prevailing internal dynamics since the U.S. invasion continued into the foreseeable future, all three powers would likely have supported the central government in ongoing intra-Afghan conflicts. Before the Taliban takeover, in other words, the possibility that the United States and its strategic competitors would back parties on opposite sides of a conflict was quite low.

With the collapse of the Kabul government and the ascendance of the Taliban, opposition to the Taliban may emerge and the country may regress into civil war; in particular, the Afghan security and political landscapes could fracture significantly, resembling the environment that prevailed in Afghanistan following the Soviet withdrawal in 1989. In August 2021, officials from the ousted Kabul government, such as Abdullah Abdullah and former President Hamid Karzai, reportedly met with Taliban officials to discuss transitional and national security issues, which might portend some inclusion of such officials in the Taliban-dominated government.¹³¹ Nevertheless, elements of Afghan society are likely to violently resist Taliban rule.

As the Taliban returned to power in Kabul, both China and Russia appeared ready to recognize and support it—albeit begrudgingly.¹³² Neither Beijing nor Moscow wishes to see a fundamentalist Islamist government installed in Kabul. However, reassurances from the Taliban that it will not allow Uighur or Russian and Central Asian militants to find safe haven in Afghanistan may mitigate Beijing's and Moscow's apprehension of Taliban rule.¹³³ For Russia's part, as long as the Taliban's assurances hold, Russia is likely to continue at least tacit support, notwithstanding the group's continuing designation as a terrorist organization under Russian law. However, the question of how Russia would act should a CSTO ally—notably, Tajikistan—request its aid to protect its border with Afghanistan against any terrorist threat is an open one.¹³⁴

¹³¹ “Abdullah Abdullah, Hamid Karzai Meet Taliban ‘Acting Kabul Governor,’ Discuss Situation in Afghan Capital,” *Times of India*, August 21, 2021.

¹³² Andrew Roth, Hannah Ellis-Petersen, and Vincent Ni, “China, Pakistan and Russia Set to Increase Afghanistan Influence,” *The Guardian*, August 16, 2021.

¹³³ Taliban diplomacy appears to be aimed at reassuring Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran that the group will no longer pose a threat to their interests (Lyamin, 2021, p. 54).

¹³⁴ Farangis Najibullah, “Tajikistan Concerned About Taliban Plots to Infiltrate from Afghanistan,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, September 25, 2021. The CSTO has stepped up military exercises on the Tajikistan-Afghanistan border since the Taliban takeover (“Russian-Led CSTO Stages More Counterterrorism Drills on Tajik-Afghan Border,” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 21, 2021).

Political recognition may pave the way for increased Chinese and Russian investment in Afghan infrastructure projects—as part of China’s BRI and as reconstruction more generally—as well as potential security cooperation, especially Chinese involvement in the Wakhan Corridor. China, Russia, or both recognizing a Taliban government and becoming more involved in the country does not necessarily threaten the United States and may not, in and of itself, invite a proxy conflict in the region. In fact, if Chinese and Russian involvement in Afghanistan—post U.S. withdrawal—contributes to stabilizing the country, that may restrict al-Qaeda and ISKP’s ability to operate in Afghanistan and would be a net positive for the United States. To the extent that the United States, like its competitors, is most concerned about the more radical, international terrorist forces, it may also tacitly acquiesce to the Taliban’s rule. Although the United States may not recognize the Taliban-controlled government in the near term, it has thus far left open the possibility of more-tactical coordination on items of mutual interest, including countering the Islamic State. During the evacuation of Afghanistan, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said that the Taliban “have shown flexibility, and they have been businesslike and professional in our dealings with them in this effort.”¹³⁵ Similarly, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Mark Milley said it is “possible” that the United States would coordinate with the Taliban on counterterrorism against the Islamic State in the future.¹³⁶

This does not mean that a proxy conflict that draws in the United States on the opposite side of China and Russia is inconceivable—and indeed, this prospect may have become likely following the Taliban’s takeover. If the Taliban reneges on its assurances in the Doha Accords that it will not provide al-Qaeda with safe haven in Afghanistan, the United States might consider again increasing its attention and its military activity in Afghanistan.¹³⁷ Additionally, if the Taliban radicalized further, contrary to its representations—if the terrorist Haqqani Network became a dominant influence in the new regime, for instance—and began committing egregious human rights violations and kidnapping and executing Westerners, à la ISIS in 2014 and 2015—U.S. policymakers may decide to take kinetic actions to punish the Taliban. If a more radical Taliban threatens mostly U.S. and allied interests and values and does not present as great of a threat to Russia and China, such a development could conceivably put Washington at odds with Beijing and Moscow.

With the Taliban once again controlling Afghanistan, the United States no longer has the access that it enjoyed between 2001 and 2021, when it operated from large bases in Afghanistan and, intermittently, from neighboring countries. Additionally, given Pakistan’s long-standing support for the Taliban, Islamabad is unlikely to grant U.S. forces overflight rights, which would greatly limit the United States’ ability to support anti-Taliban actors in a renewed

¹³⁵ “US Says Taliban ‘Businesslike and Professional’ in Afghan Evacuation,” *France 24*, September 9, 2021.

¹³⁶ Robert Burns and Lolita C. Baldor, “Milley: US Coordination with Taliban on Strikes ‘Possible,’” Associated Press, September 1, 2021.

¹³⁷ Joint Declaration Between the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and the United States of America for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan, 2020.

Afghan civil war. Following the September 11, 2001, attacks, U.S. intelligence and special operations forces began covertly working with and supporting the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. Washington could take a similar approach if it wishes to support anti-Taliban elements that may coalesce in the future. Indeed, Washington and the Kabul government sought to revive Northern Alliance networks and militias amid the Taliban's 2021 rapid offensives.¹³⁸ However, in areas controlled by former Afghan militia leaders and warlords—such as Abdul Rashid Dostum (President Ghani's former Vice President) and Atta Muhammad Nur—anti-Taliban resistance quickly crumbled, further questioning the viability of such partners in the future.¹³⁹ Moreover, U.S. policymakers may be more reticent to undertake any actions with U.S. troops in the country, given the previous deployment's 20-year commitment and conclusion. Even if U.S. policymakers were willing, the United States' NATO and other allies—which were similarly invested in Afghanistan the first time around—may also be reticent to join another operation.

Which actor(s) China and Russia are most likely to support if Afghanistan fractures into civil war depends on a host of unknowns related to how the Taliban will run Afghanistan. As we noted earlier, it is not impossible that the United States and its competitors would end up supporting opposing sides. Barring other considerations, China and Russia are most likely to support whichever actor effectively controls Kabul and cooperate with that actor to promote a semblance of security for their respective interests. This, however, is a possibility only as long as the Taliban does not abet the emergence of terrorist groups that threaten the Chinese and Russian homelands or the Central Asian states and does not itself threaten the Central Asian states.

If China, Russia, or both do continue to support the Taliban, the form their support would take would most likely be indirect. Barring the emergence of a Uighur or Central Asian Islamist insurgent group—or Uighur or Central Asian foreign fighters beginning to dominate leadership apparatuses or such groups as ISKP—neither China nor Russia is likely to overtly put boots on the ground and become physically involved in an Afghan civil war. Instead, Moscow and possibly Beijing are more likely to limit their physical security presence in Afghanistan to PMSCs that can train, equip, advise, and even accompany Taliban elements as they combat U.S.-aligned non-state armed groups. If they do become involved in a proxy conflict in Afghanistan with the United States, both China and Russia are likely

¹³⁸ As discussed earlier, many informal Afghan armed groups and warlords—some of which the United States has partnered with in the past—have poor human rights records and have extrajudicially killed, tortured, and raped civilians. If U.S. policy and defense officials seek to cultivate and support pro-U.S. proxy networks, Washington should consider the moral implications of partnering with such groups—not to mention the legal implications of possibly violating Leahy laws, which preclude the United States from providing security assistance to foreign armed groups complicit in human rights violations (Pazhwak, Ebadi, and Ahmadi, 2021; and Kate Clark and Obaid Ali, “A Quarter of Afghanistan's Districts Fall to the Taleban amid Calls for a ‘Second Resistance,’” Afghanistan Analysts Network, July 5, 2021).

¹³⁹ P. Michael McKinley, “We All Lost Afghanistan: Two Decades of Mistakes, Misjudgments, and Collective Failure,” *Foreign Affairs*, August 16, 2021.

to engage in information operations and propaganda aimed at undermining U.S. efforts in the country.

China and Russia might also increase their security involvement in Afghanistan if violent opposition to Taliban rule threatened to spill over into neighboring Central Asian states. Russia may be particularly concerned if instability from renewed Afghan civil conflict has spillover effects in such places as Tajikistan, whose government voiced alarm already.¹⁴⁰ Renewed conflict in Afghanistan could provide fertile ground for increased extremist activity and the potential to export instability to the entire region.

In sum, were the United States to get involved in a scenario in Afghanistan, it may not necessarily be opposing China- or Russia-supported proxies. China and Russia would likely continue to begrudgingly accept a Taliban government in Kabul, while the United States may be willing to cooperate with Kabul on counterterrorism specifically against the Islamic State.¹⁴¹ On the other hand, should the threat of international terrorism resurge dramatically, contrary to the Taliban's representations, not only the United States but also both its competitors would see their interest in continuing to support the Taliban government dwindle.

Pakistan

Conflict spillover is also a distinct possibility for Pakistan, which already grapples with rampant instability. In particular, intensified violence in Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover of Kabul might galvanize an already resurgent TTP insurgency and provide the organization with an external base from which it can operate against Pakistani security forces. Prime Minister Khan's reluctance to host U.S. forces in Pakistan, given the potential for engendering resentment and violent opposition against a U.S. military presence in the country, is indicative of Pakistan's fragile security landscape.¹⁴² Even without a U.S. military presence to galvanize armed insurrection, deadly insurgencies against Islamabad may reemerge. Should the security situation in Pakistan deteriorate—especially if it is concomitant with a deterioration in public services and the economic environment—the Pakistani military might decide to once again seize control of the country and conduct a coup d'état.

Beijing and Moscow generally have little aversion to supporting military regimes, and, as in Afghanistan with the Taliban taking over Kabul, both China and Russia would likely support whatever actor controls Islamabad, if that actor promises to support Chinese and Russian interests in the country. The United States has also worked with military regimes in Pakistan, and, given that maintaining the security of Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is one of the

¹⁴⁰ Najibullah, 2021; Rafiq, 2021.

¹⁴¹ Of course, if the United States were worried about terrorism from a group that the Taliban supported—or at least was not hostile to—then the chances that the United States would support an Afghan opposition would increase. If the same threat of terrorism were more concerning to the United States than it were to Russia or China, then the chances that the United States would end up on the side opposing China and Russia would increase.

¹⁴² Imran Khan, 2021.

United States' foremost concerns in the country, Washington would also likely support—or at least not oppose too strenuously—a military junta if it guaranteed the security of Pakistan's nuclear weapons and did not present a high risk of escalating a conflict with India.¹⁴³

However, certain variables could affect U.S. willingness to oppose a Pakistani military regime. If the junta were less capable or willing to control Pakistan's nuclear arsenal, more extreme in its bellicosity toward India, more repressive of democratic forces, and more steadfastly aligned with Beijing—especially in a more zero-sum strategic environment—Washington might then have compelling reasons to oppose the military regime. Although the possibility of these conditions may be remote, if such conditions existed, at the very least Washington could impose sanctions on Islamabad. Additionally, if widespread popular opposition against a putschist government emerged and the Pakistani military and the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate violently cracked down on protesters, Washington could seek to provide political or other indirect support to protesters. If the regime's crackdown then led to an armed uprising against it, Washington would have further options to support opposition actors in Pakistan. Whether and how the United States would seek to support and assist any pro-democracy, nominally secular elements depends in part on the character and extent of the opposition. The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan weakened U.S. posture, and although presumably U.S. forces could use U.S. bases in the Middle East to support their efforts, there are thus significant political and strategic reasons for avoiding direct involvement in such a conflict. Consequently, if it wanted to support a pro-U.S. (or at least an anti-China) faction, Washington may choose to do so covertly.

However, supporting an armed opposition movement could destabilize Pakistan enough to undermine its nuclear security. As a result, unless the junta posed a threat of nuclear proliferation, all three powers would still likely align in their support of the military regime.

Given China's close ties to Islamabad, a shared border, and substantial economic investments in the country, a violent revolution in Pakistan could be damaging to Chinese strategic interests. Subsequently, unlike in Afghanistan, a significant conflict in Pakistan would plausibly merit substantial Chinese military assistance and potentially even draw in PLA forces to support a military regime in Islamabad, if needed. Moreover, given the historic separatist currents in Balochistan and insurgencies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, two Pakistani provinces with significant CPEC activities, Beijing may consider it warranted to deploy PLA elements to protect CPEC projects and investments. Although Beijing would be far more likely to work through local Pakistani partners, as we noted earlier, China has the ability to intervene as a result of its large combat formations in its Western Theater Command and the PLA Air Force air bases in the region.¹⁴⁴

For its part, Moscow may be hesitant to support one side over another in a Pakistan contingency. As mentioned earlier, Moscow would almost certainly provide political and rhetori-

¹⁴³ Think tank researcher with expertise on Pakistani military issues, telephone interview with the authors, July 26, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, pp. 43, 106.

cal support to a Pakistani junta. Although it has significant presence in Central Asia, Russia is unlikely to resort to military means: Limited Russian equities and strategic objectives in Pakistan would likely preclude Moscow from becoming deeply involved in a civil conflict there, and Moscow has historically been close to New Delhi. Despite India's warming relations with Washington, Moscow may be reluctant to provide more than superficial support to a Pakistani military regime that is highly antagonistic toward India to avoid damaging Russia-India political relations.

In sum, even a military coup in Pakistan would likely be at least tacitly accepted by all three great powers, unless the military regime was so hostile to other U.S. interests that the United States would be willing to risk Pakistan losing control of its nuclear arsenal by backing an opposing, if democratic, faction—or unless the military regime itself presented a high risk of escalating conflict with India or proliferating nuclear weapons. For proxy conflict to pit great powers against each other, either conditions or U.S. views of Chinese and Russian involvement in the region would likely have to shift in the direction of a zero-sum view of competition.

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

Table 3.1 provides a summary of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the three great powers in Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this table, by *external* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of Afghanistan and Pakistan; by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within Afghanistan and Pakistan.

What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, there are several interrelated strategic, operational, and tactical obstacles that the United States would have to navigate and that could affect the outcome of a potential great-power proxy conflict.

Among the foremost factors likely to affect the United States' ability to successfully support proxies in Afghanistan or Pakistan is the United States' limited access to the theater. Specifically, the United States is at a particular disadvantage because China shares land borders with both countries, and Russia maintains a large base and troop presence in former Soviet Central Asia. Conversely, as discussed earlier, the United States may not have basing arrangements with any of the countries physically bordering Afghanistan or Pakistan and will likely have to conduct sorties and fly supplies from U.S. bases in the Persian Gulf. Fur-

TABLE 3.1

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

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

thermore, in an Afghanistan or, in particular, a Pakistan contingency, China's investment in and access to the Gwadar port may greatly enhance its power projection into the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea. Beijing could deploy the PLA Navy or the China Coast Guard from Gwadar to harass and inhibit U.S. maritime freedom of navigation in the area. Asymmetric levels of access between U.S. forces and Chinese and Russian forces would likely constrain U.S. support to proxies and partners in Afghanistan and Pakistan, whereas both China and Russia could surge support overland and with much shorter supply lines.

The Taliban's capture of Kabul has limited and will continue to limit U.S. access in Afghanistan to an even greater extent because it cuts off access to the Kabul International Airport and other major airfields. The United States has built airfields in austere environments to more efficiently supply local partners in the past.¹⁴⁵ However, an Afghan civil war pitting anti-Taliban armed groups against the Taliban would likely be highly dynamic, with no guarantee that U.S.-backed armed groups could maintain territorial control of U.S.-constructed airfields. Indeed, the United States may have to supply Afghan partners in inhospitable environments and without the logistical support from which U.S. operators have historically benefited—most notably Pakistan's facilitation of U.S.- and ally-supplied arms to the mujahedeen in the 1980s. As a result, the United States and its local partners may be at a distinct disadvantage compared with other rival factions in the region supported by China, Russia, Pakistan, and others.

Moreover, the relatively limited availability of partners in the region may also disadvantage the United States. For a U.S. intervention in the region to be politically viable, Washington would likely have to limit its support to groups that are somewhat ideologically aligned with the United States—or those that at least are more ideologically palatable to U.S. policymakers, allies, and the broader U.S. public. In Pakistan in particular, the most capable opposition armed group is arguably the TTP, designated by the Department of State as a foreign terrorist organization.¹⁴⁶ In the event of a military coup in Pakistan, the United States could seek to support local groups, but as U.S. defense and policy officials experienced in Syria, identifying, vetting, and supporting viable partners can be a huge intelligence and logistical burden.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ In 2016, to support the Syrian Democratic Forces' fight against the Islamic State, U.S. forces constructed two airfields in northeastern Syria—one near Rmeilan in the far northeast of the country and one near Kobani, further west and along the Turkish border (Suleiman Al-Khalidi, "U.S. Builds Two Air Bases in Kurdish-Controlled North Syria: Kurdish Report," Reuters, March 6, 2016).

¹⁴⁶ Bureau of Counterterrorism, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated.

¹⁴⁷ A major concern for U.S. policymakers that inhibited U.S. military support to the Syrian opposition in the early stages of the civil war was a lack of understanding of the ideological dispositions, strengths, and local support of the myriad opposition armed groups. Similar concerns and stringent vetting requirements also hindered U.S. efforts to create from whole cloth Syrian armed groups to fight the Islamic State. A year after Congress authorized DoD to begin training and equipping Syrian anti-ISIS forces, DoD and intelligence community officials had vetted only 400 individuals, with a mere 90 recruits having completed their training (Christopher M. Blanchard and Amy Belasco, *Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R43727, June 9, 2015, p. 5).

Conversely, if Beijing and Moscow opt to back military putschists in Pakistan, both powers will be able to tap into and leverage long-standing relations and networks to channel support to preferred units or other local partners. Moreover, a Pakistani military regime fighting to put down a popular uprising would automatically benefit from a major asymmetry in military capabilities relative to opposition groups. As of 2021, the Pakistani military comprised more than 650,000 active-duty personnel—approximately 560,000 army, 70,000 air force, and 21,800 navy service members.¹⁴⁸ Some Pakistani military personnel might defect to the opposition; however, hundreds of thousands would likely remain loyal to the military, allowing a putschist regime to immediately field a large and capable fighting force. Moreover, Beijing in particular would be able to support a partner that already enjoys a relatively high degree of interoperability on advanced weapon systems, such as the JF-17 fighter jet, which Pakistan and China jointly developed.¹⁴⁹

In Afghanistan, the United States would also be at comparative disadvantage—vis-à-vis local partner forces—to China and Russia, if it were to partner with northern anti-Taliban armed groups. The Northern Alliance of the 1990s comprised myriad factions led by political rivals that undermined the coalition's effectiveness in the face of a unified Taliban. Many of those political rivalries continued throughout the post-U.S. invasion period and may still affect and hinder anti-Taliban forces in a renewed civil war.¹⁵⁰ Moreover, Moscow's relations with Northern Alliance leaders and its ability to work through Central Asian partners—namely, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan—to further cultivate Afghan networks might also undermine Washington's ability to work with Northern Alliance actors and establish a cohesive anti-Taliban front.

In both the Afghanistan and Pakistan scenarios, if Beijing and Moscow opted to support the Taliban or a military regime after it seized Kabul or Islamabad, respectively, both powers would be backing partners with superior organizational cohesion and command and control compared with Afghan and Pakistani opposition groups. Additionally, Beijing and Moscow would be supporting experienced fighting forces, and in Pakistan's case, China and—to a lesser extent—Russia would be supporting a huge fighting force with high-end weapon platforms. In addition to modern fighter jet platforms, such as the JF-17 and F-16, the Pakistani military comprises advanced air defense systems, such as the medium-range LY-80 surface-

¹⁴⁸ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance*, London, Vol. 121, 2021, p. 290.

¹⁴⁹ Blank et al., 2018, p. 36. In the event of a Pakistani civil war, it is possible that India would seek to channel support to opposition actors. However, the conflict's potential to metastasize and spread into volatile regions, such as Jammu and Kashmir, as well as the risks that Pakistan's nuclear arsenal pose, may limit the extent to which policymakers would push India's involvement in the conflict.

¹⁵⁰ One of the most prominent political rivalries that has transcended the Northern Alliance's resistance to the Taliban is between Abdul Rashid Dostum and Atta Muhammad Nur, discussed earlier. See Janes, "Afghanistan: Political Leadership," *Sentinel Security Assessment—South Asia*, last updated June 22, 2021a.

to-air missile system and the FN-6 man-portable air defense system.¹⁵¹ Advanced air platforms and air defense systems would likely further restrict U.S. access in the area of conflict, limiting U.S. capabilities to conduct ISR or supply local partners by air.

Technologically, the Taliban is a significantly less capable armed actor than its adversaries, though it has historically overcome technological disadvantages. However, after capturing the capital and large swaths of Afghanistan, the Taliban has obtained large amounts of military equipment from the ANDSF, which may give the Taliban a technological edge over opposition armed groups that arise in the future.¹⁵² The Taliban would likely suffer from logistical and maintenance pitfalls, but support from Chinese and Russian PMSCs could help fill this capacity gap. If the Taliban began fielding more-advanced armored vehicles and weaponry—to say nothing of the captured ANDSF air platforms—the disadvantages of anti-Taliban forces and their potential U.S. sponsors would become even more acute.

¹⁵¹ The LY-80 is the export designation of the Chinese-manufactured HQ-16 platform. The FN-6 is also a Chinese-manufactured man-portable air defense system. The Pakistani military also fields the domestically produced Anza-MK man-portable air defense system series; however, it is a derivative of China's system provided to Pakistan in a technology transfer agreement (Sean M. Zeigler, Alexander C. Hou, Jeffrey Martini, Daniel M. Norton, Brian Phillips, Michael Schwille, Aaron Strong, and Nathan Vest, *Acquisition and Use of MANPADS Against Commercial Aviation: Risks, Proliferation, Mitigation, and Cost of an Attack*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4304-DOS, 2019; and International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2021, p. 291).

¹⁵² Robert Burns, "Billions Spent on Afghan Army Ultimately Benefited Taliban," Associated Press, August 17, 2021.

Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement: Iraq

In the approximately two decades since the United States invaded Iraq as the opening foray of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraq has faced myriad political, security, and economic challenges that have mired the country in a perpetual state of instability. Politically, Iraq is a fragile and deeply divided state subject to high levels of external influence and interference from such actors as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and the United States.¹ Since 2019, Iraq has also contended with a tumultuous domestic situation: Popular protests against the government and Iran-backed elements led to outbreaks of violence and high levels of unrest. These protests prompted the resignation of Iraq's then-Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi in 2019, and since then Iraq has struggled to form a viable government.²

The security situation in Iraq remains perilous despite the territorial defeat of the Islamic State at the hands of the U.S. military and coalition forces. ISIS remnants have continued to wage an insurgency and conduct attacks, although operationally they have largely been sidelined to rural areas and the disputed territories that lie between the Kurdistan Region in the north and the central, western, and southern areas controlled by the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF).³ The levels of internal displacement resulting from the ISIS insurgency have been exorbitant, with more than 3 million Iraqis displaced since 2014.⁴ Sectarian divisions and episodic violence between groups also continue to flare, notably between Sunnis and Shias and

¹ Maxim A. Suchkov, "Between Baghdad and Erbil: Russia's Balancing Act in Iraq," London School of Economics, May 3, 2018.

² Council on Foreign Relations, "Global Conflict Tracker: Political Instability in Iraq," webpage, last updated June 10, 2021; and Security Council Report, "February 2021 Monthly Forecast: Iraq," January 29, 2021.

³ Christopher M. Blanchard, "Iraq and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, IF10404, last updated June 4, 2021.

⁴ Christopher M. Blanchard, *Iraq: Background and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, R45025, November 21, 2017, p. 2.

between Kurds and non-Kurds.⁵ Iraq's economic woes, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, further fuel these sources of instability.⁶

Iraq's numerous sources of instability and the high levels of involvement by all three great powers make it a prime potential theater for conflict that draws in the United States, China, Russia, and other U.S. competitors, such as Iran. As we demonstrate in this chapter, however, a conflict centered in Iraq that draws in external powers is not very likely to feature the United States and its strategic competitors overtly supporting parties on opposite sides. That is, such a conflict is unlikely to resemble the proxy wars and military interventions of the Cold War era.

In this chapter, we examine what a great-power conflict centered in Iraq might look like. First, we present an overview of local political dynamics to identify the key actors in the country and the likely causes of internal conflict. We then examine the interests and objectives of the three great powers in the country, their relative abilities to project power, and the capabilities they might bring to bear on such a conflict. Next, we assess how each power might choose to become involved in the conflict, if at all, and consider the factors that might influence the outcome of the conflict—especially the factors that could affect the United States' ability to achieve its aims. To empirically ground these assessments, we drew on a variety of sources to better understand how the United States, China, and Russia have approached proxy wars and limited conflicts in the past. This research included interviews with experts and an exploration of how Chinese and Russian experts—as well as Western ones—write about the subject today; those discussions are included in the summary volume in this series.⁷

Overview of Local Political Dynamics

The 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq fundamentally altered Iraq's political, military, and societal structures. One of the developments to emerge from this turmoil was the mass mobilization of Shia militias—first within Iraq to fight U.S. troops, Sunni insurgents, and terrorist organizations (such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and its successor, ISIS), then expanding to the rest of the region to take up arms in other conflicts (such as the ongoing Syrian civil war). Iran played a key role in creating these militias and continues to support them today. The most significant outpost of Iranian influence in Iraq is Hashd al-Shaabi, or the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) (also known as the Popular Mobilization Units); this paramilitary

⁵ Naufel Alhassan, "Once Again, Iraq Is at a Crossroads," Middle East Institute, May 3, 2021.

⁶ As of 2021, Iraq faced a large budget deficit—which grew to 20 percent in 2020 as Iraqi gross domestic product fell by roughly 11 percent amid the COVID-19 pandemic—as well as high levels of youth unemployment, rising inflation, and insufficient oil revenues from falling oil prices. Those falling oil prices have a particularly strong effect on the Iraqi economy because oil exports account for 90 percent of Iraq's revenue (Raad Alkadiri and Christine M. van den Toorn, "Aiming Big by Thinking Small: A New U.S. Policy for Iraq," *War on the Rocks*, February 3, 2021).

⁷ Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023.

group includes Sunni and Christian militias and at least 50 different Iraqi Shia militias organized into brigades that collectively number anywhere between 45,000 and 142,000 fighters.⁸ Although many of these militias are Iranian proxies, not all of the PMF's constituent forces are under Iran's influence.⁹ The PMF was ostensibly formed in response to a fatwa issued by Iraqi cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in the wake of ISIS's seizure of Mosul in 2014. Sistani's goal was to mobilize additional recruits to enlist in the ISF to fight ISIS. However, Iranian Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Qasem Soleimani, the then-commander of the Quds Force (a division of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps), called for the massive numbers of Shias who volunteered in response to this call to join Iran-backed paramilitary groups instead of the ISF.¹⁰

In November 2016, the Iraqi parliament legalized the existence of the PMF—which had been operating extrajudicially, given that the Iraqi constitution prohibits militias or paramilitary organizations—and provided for its eventual incorporation into the ISF, completed in 2018.¹¹ Under this arrangement, the PMF is notionally subordinate to the Iraqi military chain of command and the Office of the Prime Minister.¹² In practice, PMF militias have proven to be beyond the control of the government or the ISF on numerous occasions. Because of its legal status as a military entity, the PMF was explicitly prohibited under the Iraqi constitution from participating in politics. Nonetheless, the PMF has cultivated a great deal of political influence in Iraq. Notably, members of the PMF campaigned in the 2018 elections and continue to exert indirect control over several Iraqi ministries and governmental agencies.¹³

Within the PMF, power dynamics among the constituent groups are fluid, and various PMF groups have fought among themselves in the past. Following the assassinations of Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis (the former commander of the PMF and leader of one of its strongest constituent groups, Kata'ib Hezbollah) in January 2020, the PMF has grown increasingly more fractured.¹⁴ The future trajectory of the PMF as an organization is uncertain, but it is currently one of the most important power brokers in Iraq.

Despite the increasing internal divisions within the PMF, Iranian influence over Iraq's Shia militias remains extensive. Iran has been providing financial support, military assis-

⁸ International Crisis Group, *Iraq's Paramilitary Groups: The Challenge of Rebuilding a Functioning State*, Brussels, Middle East Report No. 188, July 30, 2018, p. 1. See also Johnston et al., 2020.

⁹ Fanar Haddad, "Understanding Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'bi," Century Foundation, March 5, 2018.

¹⁰ Blanchard, 2017, p. 12; International Crisis Group, 2018, p. 4.

¹¹ Crispin Smith and Jacques Singer-Emergy, "Servants of Two Masters: The Risks Inherent in Iraq's Hashd al-Sha'abi Legislation," *New York University Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol. 52, No. 1, December 26, 2019, p. 184.

¹² Crispin Smith, "United States Killed Iraqi Military Official and Iraqi Military Personnel in the Two Recent Attacks," *Just Security*, January 5, 2020a.

¹³ Smith and Singer-Emergy, 2019, p. 185.

¹⁴ Nancy Ezzeddine and Erwin Van Veen, "Warning Signs: Qassem Musleh and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces," *War on the Rocks*, August 4, 2021.

tance, weapons and technology, and even social services to the groups.¹⁵ Given that the PMF challenges state control and influence in the Iraqi political and military apparatus, Iran is able to exert a high degree of influence over political and security dynamics in Iraq and is evidently one of the most powerful actors in Iraq at present.

Iraq's official government is in a tenuous position. In late 2019, protesters demanded the resignation of Mahdi, citing concerns over corruption.¹⁶ After prolonged political negotiations in the subsequent months—during which two other potential candidates for Prime Minister were unable to form a government—Mustafa al-Kadhimi was chosen to take over the role of Prime Minister in May 2020.¹⁷ On paper, Kadhimi presents a viable partner for the United States: He has stated that his priorities are to promote election reform and law and order, including by responding to the protests and cracking down on attacks by the PMF. Indeed, the PMF had attempted to block Kadhimi's rise to power over concerns that he would seek to constrain its political influence.¹⁸ Iran has also expressed displeasure with Kadhimi's appointment. In practice, however, Kadhimi has fallen short of many of his administration's stated goals, and as of December 2021, it was too soon to tell whether he could be a reliable local partner for the United States in the long term.

Iraq's domestic politics are also shaped by cross-cutting ethnic and religious identities that often come into conflict or tension with one another. The majority of Iraqis are Shia Muslims (55–60 percent of the population), and the bulk of the rest are Sunni Muslims (roughly 40 percent of the population), split between Sunni Arabs and Sunni Kurds.¹⁹ Ethnically, Iraqis are predominantly Arab (approximately 75–80 percent of the population) with a Kurdish minority (15–20 percent of the population).²⁰ The Kurds in northern Iraq remain a key group in the country as they aspire to form an independent state—a demand repeatedly denied by the national government.²¹ The Kurdistan Regional Government comprises two main parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party in Erbil and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan based in Sulaymaniyah.²² Together, these parties hold the largest number of seats in the Iraqi

¹⁵ Frederic Wehrey, David E. Thaler, Nora Bensahel, Kim Cragin, Jerrold D. Green, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Nadia Oweidat, and Jennifer J. Li, *Dangerous but Not Omnipotent: Exploring the Reach and Limitations of Iranian Power in the Middle East*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-781-AF, 2009, p. 109.

¹⁶ Blanchard, 2021, p. 1.

¹⁷ Blanchard, 2021, p. 1.

¹⁸ Crispin Smith, "What's Next for Coalition Forces in Iraq?" Middle East Institute, March 10, 2020b.

¹⁹ Barah Mikail, "Nation or Religion? Iraq's Hybrid Identity Politics," Middle East Institute, June 16, 2020.

²⁰ Mikail, 2020.

²¹ "Who Are the Kurds?" BBC News, October 15, 2019.

²² Blanchard, 2021, p. 2.

parliament. Other minority groups include the Shabak, the Yazidis, the Chaldean Christians, the Assyrian Christians, and the Turkmen.²³

Iraq is a parliamentary republic with a Prime Minister, President, three Vice Presidents, and a Council of Representatives—a 328-seat legislative body that functions as the Iraqi parliament.²⁴ By legal agreement, all major Iraqi sects are represented in government: “Iraq’s presidency has been held by a member of the Kurdish minority, the speaker of the Council of Representatives has been a Sunni, and three vice presidencies have been held by representatives of the Shia Arab, Sunni Arab, and Kurdish communities.”²⁵ In keeping with this arrangement, the President of Iraq, Barham Salih, is a Kurdish politician who is the former Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region.²⁶ Although crafted to promote inclusivity, this arrangement has only cemented identity-based politics.

On the security front, the Islamic State and its affiliated violent extremist groups remain key actors and destabilizing forces in Iraq. As of spring 2021, ISIS had lost most of its territory, but there were still an estimated 10,000 members active in Iraq and Syria.²⁷ ISIS remnants continue to target Iraqis and have contributed to ongoing internal displacement of people within Iraq.²⁸ Additionally, sectarian divisions between Shias and Sunnis and between Kurds and non-Kurds have prompted periodic bouts of violence throughout the country.²⁹ As one article describes this situation,

Iraq remains one of the most fragmented countries in the Middle East. The central government controls only select territories with the rest of the terrain virtually run by leaders of local communities. Ethnic cleansings are not rare and so are subversive terrorist activities. Persecutions of ethnic and religious minorities—Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans and many others—continue at appalling scales.³⁰

Meanwhile, external actors, such as Iran and Turkey, have further exploited Iraq’s fragmentation; as a result, “Iraq today is not a united state but rather a collection of territo-

²³ United States Institute of Peace, “The Current Situation in Iraq: A USIP Fact Sheet,” August 4, 2020; and U.S. Department of Justice, “Iraq,” June 19, 2015.

²⁴ Blanchard, 2017, p. 2.

²⁵ Blanchard, 2017, p. 10.

²⁶ Blanchard, 2017, p. 10.

²⁷ Meghann Myers, “‘We’re Going to Stay in Iraq,’ Says Top US Middle East Commander,” *Military Times*, April 22, 2021.

²⁸ Sirwan Kajjo, “Iraqi Military Launches Operation Against IS Remnants,” *Voice of America*, April 12, 2021; and Daniel DePetris, “It’s Time for the U.S. to Leave Iraq,” *National Review*, May 12, 2021.

²⁹ Ranj Alaaldin, *Sectarianism, Governance, and Iraq’s Future*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, Doha Center Analysis Paper No. 24, November 2018.

³⁰ Suchkov, 2018.

ries, the economic, social and political ties of which are stronger with external powers than amongst themselves.”³¹

The security situation is further complicated by ongoing political tensions among the Iraqi government, the PMF, and the Iraqi public. In 2019, Iraq began experiencing a series of popular protests against government corruption, Iranian influence, and other governance issues; protesters have targeted the PMF’s headquarters and the Iranian consulate.³² The Iran-backed PMF militias responded by violently repressing protesters, which has further escalated domestic tensions. Although the Iraqi government has been pursuing electoral reform in partial response to these popular movements, few new political parties or candidates have emerged; instead, politicians have mostly organized into the same coalitions as they did in the 2018 national election.³³ Al-Kadhimi was re-elected in the October 2021 elections but soon after was the victim of a purportedly Iran-directed assassination attempt in November 2021.³⁴ This incident illustrates the fragility of Iraq’s domestic political situation and the tenuous posture of the Iraqi government, which may shift closer in alignment to any one of the external powers with significant influence in the country depending on who is at the helm in the future.

Comparative Analysis of Great-Power Interests and Objectives, Posture and Access, and Capabilities

In this section, we provide an overview of the interests and objectives, posture and access, and capabilities of the United States, China, and Russia in Iraq.

Interests and Objectives

U.S., Chinese, and Russian interests and objectives in Iraq fall under three main interrelated categories: strategic and geopolitical, security, and economic. The objectives of all three powers in Iraq largely align with their interests across the Middle East. Common themes include countering violent extremist organizations, supporting stabilization efforts, and seeking economic gain through investment in the energy sector and other natural resources.

³¹ Suchkov, 2018.

³² Mohammed Shiaa, “Iraq’s Reign of Fear: Inside the Violent Power Struggle Killing Basra’s Activists,” *New Arab*, September 3, 2020.

³³ Blanchard, 2021, p. 1.

³⁴ Abbas Kadhim, “The Failed Assassination Attempt on PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi Is a Reminder of Iraq’s Deferred Priorities,” *Atlantic Council*, December 2, 2021.

United States' Interests and Objectives

U.S. objectives in Iraq have evolved since the 2003 invasion, but the overarching U.S. objective in Iraq—at least from a national security standpoint—remains to counter terrorist and violent extremist organizations, particularly ISIS remnants.³⁵ However, unlike the highly kinetic operations that were the hallmark of U.S. and coalition operations in the heyday of the Iraq war or the partner capacity-building and support to warfighting through the “by, with, and through” efforts that followed, today’s operations largely consist of advising and enabling missions for the ISF.³⁶ The goal of these operations is to develop the ability of and transition responsibility to the ISF to independently deal with the threats posed by ISIS and other terrorist groups and decrease the burden on U.S. and coalition forces.³⁷ Such efforts are conducted under the command of Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, which is the military component of a global coalition comprising “77 nations and 5 international organizations who are operating in Iraq at the request of the Government of Iraq and in Syria in support of a lasting political settlement based on [United Nations] Security Council Resolution 2254.”³⁸

In addition to its military-led efforts in support of this objective, the United States engages in extensive security cooperation with the ISF, much of which falls under Title 22 funding administered by the U.S. Department of State. These efforts similarly seek to bolster the ISF’s “ability to respond to threats and conduct counter-terrorism operations, while supporting the long-term development of a modern, accountable, and professional ISF capable of defending Iraq, its people, and its borders while upholding the rule of law.”³⁹ The Office of Security Cooperation at the U.S. embassy in Iraq oversees the implementation of U.S.-Iraq security cooperation activities in the country. Such efforts include building the capacity of and supporting the professionalization of the ISF, especially its counterterrorism units; training and advising; supporting border and maritime security efforts; providing arms transfers; assisting with conventional weapon destruction; and bolstering cybersecurity capabilities.⁴⁰

The largest U.S. program in Iraq is the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund, which supports the U.S. objective of working “by, with, and through” the ISF “to build key capabilities and promote long term stability within the region by defeating and preventing the

³⁵ McKenzie, 2021.

³⁶ In July 2020, Operation Inherent Resolve entered phase four of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS campaign, which entailed “transitioning from a focus on tactical-level Train, Advise, and Assist (TAA), to a focus on advising and enabling partner forces at the operational and strategic levels” (McKenzie, 2021). See also Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-With-Through Operational Approach,” *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Vol. 89, 2018.

³⁷ McKenzie, 2021.

³⁸ Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, “History of CJTF-OIR,” September 3, 2020.

³⁹ Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Security Cooperation with Iraq: Fact Sheet,” U.S. Department of State, July 16, 2021b.

⁴⁰ See Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, 2021b.

resurgence of ISIS.⁴¹ The Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund was first authorized by Congress in the FY 2015 National Defense Authorization Act and continued through FY 2023.⁴² Through this fund and other lines of effort, the U.S. government has trained the ISF, police, Kurdish *peshmerga* (the Kurdistan Regional Government's military), Sunni tribal fighters, and border forces.⁴³

Another major U.S. objective is to mitigate Iranian influence in Iraq and throughout the region, especially through countering and constraining Iran-backed Shia militia proxies, such as the PMF. These Iran-backed groups have been problematic for the U.S. presence in Iraq because they routinely attack U.S. and coalition bases.⁴⁴ Additionally, the groups have undermined the Iraqi government in many areas, "challeng[ing] state sovereignty and the government's management of security affairs within Iraq's borders."⁴⁵

The United States also has economic concerns and interests in supporting democracy, development, and good governance in Iraq. On the economic front, the United States seeks to increase U.S. exports to Iraq and foster a better investment environment in the country while also reducing Iraqi dependence on Iran for electricity. The United States is now less dependent on oil imports from other countries than it was in the past: U.S. petroleum imports have declined in recent years as the United States began ramping up its own oil production, culminating in a negative net petroleum import level in 2020 (in the amount of -0.65 million barrels per day).⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Iraq has consistently been among the top ten oil suppliers for the United States. In 2020, the United States imported an average of 176,000 barrels per day from Iraq, down from 331,000 barrels per day in 2019.⁴⁷ The United States is also an important trading partner for Iraq; in 2019, U.S. exports to Iraq totaled \$1.2 billion and Iraqi exports to the United States totaled \$7 billion.⁴⁸ Additionally, in 2020, the Iraqi government signed memorandums of understanding providing for a potential \$8 billion in business deals with U.S. companies.⁴⁹

⁴¹ Armando Vasquez, "CTEF Program Equipment Helps Iraqi Air Force Control Their Skies," Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve, October 18, 2020.

⁴² House Committee on Appropriations, "Appropriations Committee Releases Fiscal Year 2023 Defense Funding Bill," press release, June 14, 2022.

⁴³ Blanchard, 2021, p. 34; and Kurdish Project, "Kurdish Peshmerga," webpage, undated.

⁴⁴ Myers, 2021.

⁴⁵ Alkadiri and van den Toorn, 2021.

⁴⁶ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Oil and Petroleum Products Explained: Oil Imports and Exports," webpage, April 21, 2021a.

⁴⁷ U.S. Energy Information Administration, "Petroleum and Other Liquids: U.S. Imports from Iraq of Crude Oil," webpage, August 31, 2021b.

⁴⁸ Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, "U.S. Relations with Iraq: Bilateral Relations Fact Sheet," U.S. Department of State, last updated December 14, 2020b.

⁴⁹ U.S. Department of State, 2020b.

To support both economic interests and good governance, the United States has provided technical assistance and capacity-building in education, banking sector reform, and law reform and has sought to address human rights issues in Iraq, including halting human trafficking and preventing ISIS-perpetrated violence against minorities.⁵⁰ Much of U.S. foreign aid and security assistance has been directed to help achieve these goals.⁵¹ The United States is the top donor for Iraq in terms of humanitarian aid and provided more than \$348 million in humanitarian aid in FY 2020 and FY 2021, including funds for COVID-19 programming.⁵²

Finally, as part of its strategic objective to preserve a Middle East that is “not dominated by any power hostile to the United States,” the United States has an interest in mitigating Chinese and Russian influence in Iraq.⁵³ The CENTCOM posture statement from 2020 identifies China and Russia as two of the four “global challenges that manifest across” the CENTCOM area of responsibility (the other two are Iran and violent extremist organizations).⁵⁴ The posture statement further specifies that Chinese and Russian activities in the region are of concern because, “where gaps open, China and Russia pursue steady economic and military measures that encroach on U.S. presence and influence in the region.”⁵⁵ Indeed, numerous analyses have observed that the growing influence of China and Russia in Iraq presents challenges to U.S. interests.⁵⁶

China’s Interests and Objectives

In contrast with U.S. interests, China’s primary interests in Iraq are economic. Although oil is not China’s only economic interest there, it is the predominant one.⁵⁷ In 2019, Iraq was China’s third-largest supplier of petroleum, after Saudi Arabia and Russia.⁵⁸ Iraqi crude accounts for only around 10 percent of all Chinese oil imports, but major investments by Chinese state-

⁵⁰ Alkadiri and van den Toorn, 2021.

⁵¹ Blanchard, 2021.

⁵² Blanchard, 2021. The Biden administration also requested \$448.5 million in foreign aid for Iraq for FY 2022.

⁵³ White House, 2017, p. 48.

⁵⁴ McKenzie, 2021, p. 2.

⁵⁵ McKenzie, 2021, p. 3.

⁵⁶ See, for example, John Calabrese, “China-Iraq Relations: Poised for a ‘Quantum Leap’?” Middle East Institute, October 8, 2019; Anna Borshchevskaya, “Why Russia’s Great Power Game in Iraq Matters,” *National Interest*, August 31, 2020; Stasa Salacanian, “Russia’s Growing Influence in Iraq: A New Challenge for the US,” *New Arab*, September 23, 2020; Diyari Salih, “Great Power Competition Comes to the Middle East: Iraq and the China-Iran Agreement,” *Geopolitical Monitor*, April 7, 2021; and Daniel J. Samet, “China, Not Iran, Is the Power to Watch in Iraq,” *The Diplomat*, October 30, 2019.

⁵⁷ Han Xiaoming [韩晓明], Qing Mu [青木], Wang Panpan [王盼盼], Hou Tao [侯涛], and Liu Yupeng [柳玉鹏], “In Iraq, over 10,000 Chinese Citizens Participate in Rapid Rebuilding” [“在伊中国人数上万 中国早已参与伊拉克重建”], *Global Times* [环球时报], December 23, 2015; and State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, 2016.

⁵⁸ Calabrese, 2019.

owned oil companies represent a long-term bet on the viability of the Iraqi oil industry and a clear signal that China considers Iraq to be a major long-term energy partner. In November 2020, China's state-backed Zhenhua Oil took the unusual step of agreeing to pay \$2 billion up front on a five-year oil supply contract.⁵⁹ Iraq, however, backed out of the deal, as rising oil prices led it to rethink the idea of allowing China to lock in low oil prices with guaranteed, prepaid purchases.⁶⁰ While the deal eventually fell through, it demonstrated not only China's faith that the Iraqi oil industry would remain able and willing to fulfill a massive, prepaid contract but also that Zhenhua stood to make a sizable profit from the deal, apart from any sale of oil to China. With large investments from multiple state-owned enterprises, China is invested in Iraq's ability not only to pump oil to China but to pump oil to anyone.⁶¹

Although oil dominates Chinese trade with and investment in Iraq, Chinese companies have also made investments in telecommunications, power generation, and other fields.⁶² The Persian Gulf has been described as the most important western segment of China's BRI, and Iraq sits in the midst of many of the most-important subregions in the Middle East, making it a prime candidate for BRI infrastructure investments.⁶³ Following Iraq's protracted fight with ISIS, the World Bank estimated Iraq's infrastructure needs to be around \$88 billion, much of which remains unmet.⁶⁴ Chinese companies have already snapped up many lucrative construction and reconstruction contracts in Iraq, and the companies' high risk tolerance, skill in completing large infrastructure projects, and ability to trade infrastructure investment for oil will likely lead to many more.⁶⁵

Given these large investments and contracts, China has a natural interest in continued Iraqi stability and security and is thus wary of supporting non-state actors or undertaking activity that could destabilize Iraq too much.⁶⁶ China has been deepening economic engage-

⁵⁹ Dania Saadi and Oceana Zhou, "Iraq Fully Cancels Pre-Paid Oil Deal with China's Zhenhua, Sells Crude to Other Customers," S&P Global, June 23, 2021.

⁶⁰ Interestingly, this contract included the stipulation that Zhenhua could then re-sell this Iraqi oil (at least some of which had already been paid for in the \$2 billion prepayment) to third parties, possibly diverting it from China altogether (Saadi and Zhou, 2021; and Khalid Al Ansary, "Iraq Decides Against Oil-Supply Deal with China's Zhenhua," Bloomberg, February 21, 2021).

⁶¹ Han et al., 2015; Liu Kun [刘昆], "Should We Take America's Gun? An Analysis of Chinese Military Interference in Iraq" ["接过美国的枪? 中国武力干涉伊拉克前景分析"], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 19, 2014; and Calabrese, 2019.

⁶² Han et al., 2015; and American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, "China Global Investment Tracker," webpage, undated.

⁶³ Liu Li [柳莉] and Wang Zesheng [王泽胜], "Progress and Challenges of 'One Belt One Road' in the Persian Gulf" ["'一带一路' 建设在海湾地区进展与挑战"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], March 24, 2017; and Samet, 2019.

⁶⁴ Calabrese, 2019.

⁶⁵ Calabrese, 2019; and Bingbing Wu, "China and New Middle East," *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 23, No. 3, 2021, p. 452.

⁶⁶ Wu, 2021, pp. 450–451.

ment in Iraq and plans to incorporate it into the BRI.⁶⁷ China is Iraq's top trading partner, and, as mentioned earlier, Iraq is one of China's top oil suppliers, behind only Saudi Arabia and Russia.⁶⁸ China has also been heavily involved in the reconstruction of Iraq and would not want to lose any of those contracts. Instability threatens not only the large energy and other investments made by Chinese state-owned companies but also the thousands of Chinese citizens living in Iraq.⁶⁹ Protecting Chinese citizens and investments is likely to be a key interest for Beijing and the PLA. During the 2014 ISIS offensive, the PLA's inability to meaningfully contribute to the defense of Chinese citizens in Iraq was a source of some consternation to some in Beijing, leading to calls for improved overseas operations.⁷⁰ Fortunately for China, its people and interests in Iraq are concentrated in the southeast, far from where ISIS fighters are concentrated.⁷¹

Strategically, Beijing is also interested in Iraqi stability because a wider regional war could have a much greater impact on China's economy. Only about 10 percent of China's oil comes from Iraq, but more than 40 percent comes from the broader Persian Gulf area, so any major conflict that disrupts either the transportation or production of crude petroleum in the wider region would be devastating for China's development goals.⁷² Chinese analysts fear that regional stability is endangered by terrorism, COVID-19, and proxy conflicts between regional or external states, and China has repeatedly called on all regional powers to refrain from cultivating armed proxies.⁷³ Like all countries, China's actions can diverge from its talking points, and China has a history of supporting armed non-state actors in South and Southeast Asia.⁷⁴ That being said, since the end of Maoism in the 1970s, China has generally refrained from supporting armed non-state groups far from its borders.⁷⁵

For China, defeating ISIS and any other jihadist group with global ambitions that could reach back to Central Asia and Western China is also a goal, independent of any need to pro-

⁶⁷ Calabrese, 2019.

⁶⁸ Calabrese, 2019.

⁶⁹ Han et al., 2015.

⁷⁰ Liu Kun, 2014.

⁷¹ Calabrese, 2019; Han et al., 2015.

⁷² Observatory of Economic Complexity, "China," webpage, undated.

⁷³ Liu and Zesheng, 2017; Liu Chang [刘畅], "'Cold Peace' May Become the New Normal for the Middle East" ["'冷和平'恐成中东局势新常态"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], December 9, 2020; and Sun Degong [孙德刚] and Wu Sike [吴思科], "Exploring the Theory and Practice of China's Participation in Middle Eastern Security Affairs in the New Age" ["新时代中国参与中东安全事务: 理念主张与实践探索"], China Institute of International Relations [中国国际问题研究院], July 23, 2020.

⁷⁴ Lintner, 2019. See also Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix B.

⁷⁵ James K. Wither, "Outsourcing Warfare: Proxy Forces in Contemporary Armed Conflicts," *Security and Defense Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2020, pp. 21, 28. See also Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix B.

tect Chinese people or property.⁷⁶ Although China is eager to see ISIS fail, the extent to which it is willing to risk its own blood or even treasure to reach this outcome is questionable. During ISIS's 2014 resurgence, China provided little more than rhetorical support to the Iraqi government.⁷⁷ Since then, China has provided greater economic assistance in the region and offered to share intelligence with the Assad regime in Syria, although the scope of China's cooperation remains limited.⁷⁸ There were rumors that China deployed some special forces detachments to Syria to monitor and fight Uighur militants, whom Beijing feared were working with ISIS and might return and spread extremism in Central Asia or Western China, but these reports remain unconfirmed.⁷⁹ China's freedom of action is constrained by a lack of expeditionary capabilities (at least for now) and fears that a more robust security posture in Iraq could suck China and the PLA into a quagmire there, as they assert happened to the United States.⁸⁰

Although its diplomatic interests are less important than its economic and security interests in the region, China also encourages and enjoys diplomatic support from Iraq and other regional states in international forums. Iraq has, for example, supported China's actions against the Uighur minority at the Human Rights Council.⁸¹ And regional states have supported China's position on the South China Sea territorial disputes and provided broad political support for Chinese priorities, such as United Nations reform.⁸²

Beijing's broader strategic interests in the region also bear on China's involvement in Iraq; the main strategic interest is a desire to stay on good terms with almost every major actor in the region. China's relations with Iran and some of Iran's proxies in Iraq are of concern in Washington, but China also maintains close ties with Saudi Arabia (its largest oil exporter, although Russia is a close second and at one point was China's number one source of oil⁸³) and Turkey (a key node connecting China's BRI to Europe), among others.⁸⁴ Beijing has cultivated somewhat troubling relations with some of Iraq's Iran-backed Shia militias, and it

⁷⁶ Li Zixin [李子昕], "Strike Against the Use of Terrorism as a Political Tool" ["打击恐怖主义岂容政治操弄"], China Institute of International Studies [中国国际问题研究院], December 29, 2020.

⁷⁷ Calabrese, 2019; Liu Kun, 2014; and "American Media: Why Is China Impotent and Silent on the Iraq Situation?" ["美媒: 中国为何对伊拉克局势沉默 确实无能为力"], *Global Times* [环球时报], June 30, 2014.

⁷⁸ Calabrese, 2019; and Logan Pauley and Jesse Marks, "Is China Increasing Its Military Presence in Syria?" *The Diplomat*, August 20, 2018.

⁷⁹ Calabrese, 2019; Pauley and Marks, 2018.

⁸⁰ Liu Kun, 2014; and Eyck Freymann, "Influence Without Entanglement in the Middle East," *Foreign Policy*, February 25, 2021.

⁸¹ Katherine Lawlor and Ketti Davison, *Iraq Is Fragile, Not Hopeless: How Iraq's Fragility Undermines Regional Stability*, Washington, D.C.: Institute for the Study of War, December 2020.

⁸² Wu, 2021, p. 451; State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2016.

⁸³ Muyu Xu, and Chen Aizhu, "Saudi Arabia Pips Russia to Be China's Biggest Oil Supplier in 2020," Reuters, January 20, 2021.

⁸⁴ State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2016; Wu, 2021, pp. 450–452; Freymann, 2021; and Selçuk Colakoğlu, "China's Belt and Road Initiative and Turkey's Middle Corridor: A Question of Compatibility," Middle East Institute, January 29, 2019.

is cultivating ties with nonviolent Iraqi groups, as well as Sunni and Kurdish groups.⁸⁵ In its pronouncements and declared policies on the region, China has consistently called for political solutions, de-escalation, and dialogue, and it is not difficult to see why—because it has important equities with most actors in the region.⁸⁶ That being said, some equities are greater than others. In Iraq, most Chinese interests are concentrated in the predominantly Shia southeast.⁸⁷ This may result in favoritism and economic resources for whichever militias or other actors have sway in those regions.⁸⁸

Russia's Interests and Objectives

Even though Iraq has not been the focal point for Russia's attention in the Middle East and Russia is not one of the top external powers with influence in the country, Russia and Iraq have had friendly relations since the Cold War era.⁸⁹ Russia's policy toward Iraq is shaped by Moscow's interests in building and maintaining influence in the region; concerns about the threat of terrorism; and economic interests, especially in energy markets and arms sales.

First, Russia's interests and objectives in Iraq are rooted in the broader geopolitics of Russia's return to the Middle East. In particular, its objectives in Iraq are oriented toward building influence in the region, which entails challenging U.S. dominance, balancing its relationships with Iran and Turkey, and managing its continued involvement in Syria. In Russia's official statements and strategic documents, U.S. interventionism features prominently as a threat to the international order and to the Russian regime.⁹⁰ To Moscow, Iraq represents the first instance in the 21st century of the kind of self-interested U.S. interventions aimed at regime change that Russia has repeatedly denounced and vowed to resist—and one that over-

⁸⁵ "CCP Delegation Visits Iraq" ["中共代表团访问伊拉克"], Xinhua [新华社], April 17, 2019; and "News Background: Major Candidates, Parties, and Alliances in Iraq's Parliamentary Elections" ["新闻背景: 伊拉克议会选举主要参选政党和联盟"], Xinhua [新华社], May 11, 2018.

⁸⁶ Xie E [谢锴], "China's Assistant Representative to the U.N. Calls on Iraq to Independently Advance Its Independent Political Process" ["中国常驻联合国副代表呼吁支持伊拉克自主推进国内政治进程"], Xinhua [新华社], November 25, 2020; and Sun and Wu, 2020.

⁸⁷ "American Media: Why Is China Impotent and Silent on the Iraq Situation?" 2014.

⁸⁸ China tends to rely on local troops or militias to maintain the physical security of its workers and facilities, although this might change as Chinese PMSCs become more capable or as the PLA begins to operate more extensively further afield (Alessandro Arduino, "China's Private Security Companies: The Evolution of a New Security Actor," in Nadège Rolland, ed., *Securing the Belt and Road Initiative: China's Evolving Military Engagement Along the Silk Roads*, Seattle, Wash.: National Bureau of Asian Research, NBR Special Report No. 80, September 2019).

⁸⁹ "Russia and the War in Iraq," Congressional Research Service, RS21462, April 14, 2003.

⁹⁰ See, for example, President Vladimir Putin's comments in 2014 (Kremlin, "Zasedanie Soveta Bezopasnosti," November 20, 2014). See also Andrey Kortunov, "Russia: The Power Broker in the Middle East?" Russian International Affairs Council, November 22, 2018; and Bettina Renz, *Russia's Military Revival*, Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 34–35.

threw a former Soviet client over Russia's objections.⁹¹ Russia's approach to Iraq thus presents Russia as an alternative to the United States and as an honest broker—one that respects sovereignty and whose value as a partner is demonstrated by its record in Syria.⁹²

Although Russia seeks to increase its weight in the region in order to rival the United States, Russia does not simply prefer above all that the United States be pushed out. Indeed, Russian officials have declared that, as long as U.S. presence is in full accordance with agreements reached with Iraq, then it is a reflection of Iraq's sovereign choice, which Russia supports.⁹³ Generally, Moscow seeks instead to build influence to use as leverage against the United States and compel Washington to deal with Russia as an equal, through which it might reap benefits in arenas closer to its core interests.⁹⁴ Moreover, Russia's regional interests go beyond competing with the United States and encompass managing a balancing act in the Middle East. In particular, Russia's relationship with Iraq has implications for Russia's tumultuous relationships with Iran and Turkey. Russia's interests in Iraq do not fully converge with those of Iran and Turkey, and Russia seeks to use its relationships in Iraq (with the Iraqi government, the PMF, and Iraqi Kurds) as levers with both of its complicated partners.⁹⁵

Second, Russia's official pronouncements present Moscow's objectives primarily in terms of countering terrorism—and ISIS specifically. There is well-grounded doubt that defeating ISIS was a primary objective for Russia in Syria, but ISIS and its brand of jihadi terrorism present real concerns for Russia. Russia therefore cooperated with Iraq on countering ISIS even prior to Russia's military intervention in Syria. And since that intervention in 2015, Russia's cooperation with Iraq has focused on countering ISIS and determining the future of Syria: Russia, Iraq, Iran, and Syria are part of a coalition set up to coordinate the fight against ISIS.⁹⁶ Iraq also joined (as an observer) the Astana Process, the conflict-resolution

⁹¹ Rumer, 2019. Moscow warned against such regime-change scenarios in 2011. As Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov put it, referring to the Western intervention in Libya, "As for Russia, we will not allow anything like this to happen again in the future" (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference with UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah Al Nahyan," November 1, 2011).

⁹² Witold Rodkiewicz, *Russia's Middle Eastern Policy: Regional Ambitions, Global Objectives*, Warsaw: Ośrodek Studiów Wschodnich, Centre for Eastern Studies, No. 71, December 2017.

⁹³ Sergey Lavrov, "Выступление и ответы на вопросы СМИ в ходе совместной пресс-конференции Министром иностранных дел Республики Ирак" ["Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at Joint Press Conference with the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Iraq"], Российский совет по международным делам [Russian International Affairs Council], January 31, 2019.

⁹⁴ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019; Rumer, 2019.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Arman Mahmoudian, "Russia and Iran's Relations in Iraq," *Middle East Centre Blog*, July 2, 2021; Ruslan Mamedov, "After the Caliphate: The Prospects of Russia-Iraq Relations," Russian International Affairs Council, Working Paper No. 46, February 1, 2019, pp. 7, 11; and Viktor Katona and Ruslan Mamedov, "Russia's Interests in the Arab Mashreq: Analyzing the Future of Oil and Gas in Iraq and Syria," Russian International Affairs Council, Working Paper No. 48, October 21, 2019, p. 4.

⁹⁶ Jethro Mullen and Yousuf Basil, "Iraq Agrees to Share Intelligence with Russia, Iran and Syria," CNN, September 28, 2015.

and consensus-building mechanism that Russia initiated with Turkey and Iran as an alternative to the United Nations' peacebuilding effort in Syria. Having all of Syria's neighbors, except Israel, join Russia's diplomatic efforts is viewed as important to the status, legitimacy, and efficacy of those efforts.⁹⁷ More pragmatically, the cooperation of Iraqi actors is necessary to regulate violence on the Syria-Iraq border and to retain control over cross-border flows of militants.⁹⁸

Third, Russia's most important economic interests in the Middle East pertain to hydrocarbons, and Iraq is no exception. Russia's declared objective is to deepen energy ties, expanding Russian presence in Iraq's energy markets.⁹⁹ Russia's deep interests in Iraq's energy sector—which could be compromised if the government were to fall or the country were to otherwise be plunged into chaos—constrain its willingness to support actors that could destabilize Iraq to the point of jeopardizing Moscow's interests. Iraq is a hydrocarbon competitor (especially for the China market) and a target for Russian investments. Russia's top energy companies (Lukoil, Rosneft, Gazprom Neft, and Bashneft) have invested more than \$13 billion in Iraq's energy sector.¹⁰⁰ For example, Gazprom made earlier investments in and Rosneft now owns a majority stake (60 percent) in the Kurdistan Regional Government's oil pipeline to Turkey (which connects to Iraq's main operational northern export line, the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline).

Russia's other economic-military interest in Iraq is the arms trade. The Middle East has been the fastest-growing market for Russian arms since about 2014. In the Soviet era, Iraq was one of the top importers of Soviet arms.¹⁰¹ The United States remains the top supplier of arms for Iraq, and Russia has not recovered its Soviet-era clout in this regard, but Russia's share is catching up.¹⁰² Iraq buys more Russian weapons than almost any other country in the Middle East and has been seeking to purchase Russia's S-400 missile defense system, among other weapon systems. Iraq is Russia's second-largest recipient of arms in the region; deliveries to Iraq went up by 212 percent between the 2010–2014 period and the 2015–2019 period.¹⁰³

⁹⁷ Marianna Belenkaya, "Russian Diplomats Sweep Through Lebanon, Iraq, Syria," *Al-Monitor*, June 21, 2019.

⁹⁸ Samuel Ramani, "Russia's Growing Ties with Iran-Aligned Militia Groups," *Middle East Institute*, March 26, 2021.

⁹⁹ John C. K. Daly, "Russia and Iraq Deepen Energy, Military Ties," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 17, No. 175, December 9, 2020.

¹⁰⁰ Daly, 2020; see also "Russia Promises Iraq \$20 Billion in Investments," *UAWire*, February 11, 2020.

¹⁰¹ TASS, "Военно-техническое сотрудничество России и Ирака. Досье" ["Military-Technical Cooperation Between Russia and Iraq. A Dossier"], May 20, 2015.

¹⁰² Pieter D. Wezeman, Alexandra Kuimova, and Siemon T. Wezeman, *Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2020*, Stockholm: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2021.

¹⁰³ Wezeman et al., 2020, p. 4.

Russia's approach to relationships in Iraq reflects Moscow's varied balancing concerns.¹⁰⁴ Its relationship with the Iran-backed PMF helps manage the relationship with Iran and helps Russia manage security in Syria while implicitly challenging the United States.¹⁰⁵ Russia's relations with Kurdistan position Russia as a voice calling for the normalization of relations between Erbil and Baghdad,¹⁰⁶ serve Russia's objectives in Syria (through the links with Syrian Kurdish groups),¹⁰⁷ and create leverage in Russia's fraught partnership with Turkey.¹⁰⁸ As elsewhere in the Middle East, Russia takes advantage of U.S. disengagement or gaps to strengthen its relationship with Iraq; for example, military cooperation deepened when the United States was slow to provide military aid in combating ISIS, which took over Mosul in 2014.¹⁰⁹ The same dynamics were at play as the United States began its drawdown from Iraq.¹¹⁰

Posture and Access

Despite recent U.S. drawdowns in Iraq and elsewhere in the region and increasingly restricted resources available for CENTCOM, the United States still has the most-robust posture and access of the three powers. Russia is also able to project power and access in Iraq, and China is in the weakest position of the three powers.

United States' Posture and Access

The United States has access, basing, and overflight privileges granted by Iraq as part of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS campaign's operations.¹¹¹ Since 2003, U.S. operations in Iraq have been conducted under the authority of the Authorization for Use of Military Force against al-Qaeda, under Public Law 107-40, which was passed one week after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001.¹¹² For several years, the United States has been decreasing its force presence in Iraq; in 2020, troop levels were at 5,200, and as of December 2021,

¹⁰⁴ Mamedov, 2019, p. 8.

¹⁰⁵ Ramani, 2021.

¹⁰⁶ Elnar Baynazarov, "Девять кругов Багдада: протесты в Ираке не повредили компаниям из РФ" ["The Nine Circles of Baghdad: The Protests in Iraq Did Not Harm the Companies from Russia"], *Izvestia*, October 8, 2019.

¹⁰⁷ Mamedov, 2019, p. 10.

¹⁰⁸ For example, control over the pipeline into Turkey gives Russia leverage; arming Kurdish groups also demonstrates Russia's ability to impose costs on Turkey. See Mamedov, 2019, p. 11; Rumer, 2019.

¹⁰⁹ TASS, 2015. For an account of how Russian energy companies similarly take advantage of openings, see Vera Mironova and Mohammed Hussein, "The Future of Iraq's Oil Is Russian," *Foreign Policy*, November 15, 2019.

¹¹⁰ Daly, 2020; and Igor Subbotin, "Россия способна полностью вооружить Ирак" ["Russia Is Able to Fully Arm Iraq"], *Независимая [The Independent]*, November 25, 2020.

¹¹¹ U.S. Department of State, 2021.

¹¹² Blanchard, 2017, p. 34.

there were approximately 2,500 troops left in Iraq.¹¹³ At the time of writing, there was ongoing debate over whether these forces would be permitted to stay now that the main goal of defeating ISIS's physical caliphate has been accomplished. Moreover, there are reasons to doubt whether the Iraqi government wants U.S. troops to stay.¹¹⁴ The circumstances and rhetoric surrounding the Iraqi parliamentary vote to expel the U.S. troops revealed the divisions within the Iraqi political forces: The vote was 170 to 0 in favor of expelling U.S. troops, but 150 Kurdish and Sunni legislators abstained from the vote.¹¹⁵ The removal of U.S. combat forces from the country has been on the agenda in bilateral dialogues with Iraq, leaving open the possibility that Iraq will eventually rescind its invitation for U.S. troops to remain.¹¹⁶ Such a move could create legal complications for continued U.S. operations, as the United States does not have a status of forces agreement with Iraq; instead, U.S. force presence is "governed by a bilateral exchange of diplomatic notes executed pursuant to the 2008 bilateral Strategic Framework Agreement."¹¹⁷ One major practical shift that already occurred is Iraq's requirement that the United States clear all air operations with it in advance. The United States has had to comply with this stipulation, which has limited U.S. forces' ability to conduct time-sensitive counterterrorism strikes (especially targeting Shia militia groups).¹¹⁸

Since the initial withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 under the Barack Obama administration, the United States has not held any permanent bases in Iraq.¹¹⁹ As of December 2021, it still had a significant presence at Ain al-Asad Air Base in Anbar Province, however. Additionally, the United States could operate from its other bases in the Persian Gulf, including those in neighboring Kuwait (including Ali Al Salem Air Base, Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring, and Camp Patriot) or Qatar (including Al Udeid Air Base), or it could use U.S. naval assets in the Gulf of Oman or the Arabian Sea.¹²⁰

Beyond the military presence, the U.S. embassy in Baghdad is the largest U.S. embassy in the world. Since March 2020, the embassy has "operated under ordered departure rules"

¹¹³ Blanchard, 2021, p. 2.

¹¹⁴ In response to the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in January 2020, the Iraqi parliament voted to expel U.S. troops. Upon assuming office, however, Prime Minister Kadhimi "instead has reaffirmed Iraq's invitation for U.S. and Coalition forces to remain, subject to agreed terms" (Blanchard, 2021).

¹¹⁵ Stacie L. Pettyjohn, "Can Iraq Evict U.S. Forces?" *RAND Blog*, January 6, 2020. By contrast, CENTCOM commander General McKenzie stated, "I think it's very important to realize that the government of Iraq wants us to stay. . . . They want us to stay. They need us to continue the fight against ISIS" (Myers, 2021).

¹¹⁶ DePetris, 2021.

¹¹⁷ Blanchard, 2017, p. 34.

¹¹⁸ Adam Saxton, "U.S. Airstrikes in Syria and Iraq: Legal Authorities and Presidential War Powers," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 8, 2021.

¹¹⁹ Wallin, 2018, p. 3.

¹²⁰ Wallin, 2018, pp. 5–7.

because of security conditions and COVID-19 restrictions.¹²¹ The State Department suspended operations at the U.S. consulate in Basrah in 2018, but the U.S. consulate in Erbil was still open as of this writing.¹²²

China's Posture and Access

At present, the PLA has only sporadic presence in the Persian Gulf region and only a limited ability to operate there.¹²³ The Chinese do maintain a relatively consistent anti-piracy patrol of a few warships and supply vessels in the nearby Gulf of Aden.¹²⁴ Their naval facility at Djibouti is constantly being improved and is able to support both large amphibious assault ships and aircraft carriers, although it lacks an airstrip capable of supporting most fixed-wing combat or transportation aircraft.¹²⁵ The base is much closer to Iraq than to PLA Navy bases in China, but it is still approximately 1,350 miles from the Strait of Hormuz and even farther from Iraqi ports at the far end of the Persian Gulf.

China maintains close relations with both Iran and Saudi Arabia, and, depending on the nature of the conflict that China might become engaged in, either Iran or Saudi Arabia (or perhaps even both) may allow China some military access. This would depend on which side of the fight China was aligned on, among other factors.¹²⁶ Pakistan is also a close quasi-ally of China and one of the leading candidates for an expansion of PLA basing in the area.¹²⁷ A new PLA Navy base at the Pakistani port of Gwadar would put PLA logistics facilities and possibly air bases much closer to the Persian Gulf.

Russia's Posture and Access

Russia's posture and access could be used to facilitate limited military operations throughout the region, including in Iraq. Russia has air and naval bases in Syria, has recently used Iranian airfields (e.g., Shahid Nojeh Air Base), and can draw on the Mozdok Air Base in southern Russia. Russia retains the use of the Hmeimim Air Base in western Syria, constructed in 2015 as the central base for its operations in that country. Furthermore, Russia can use the Tartus naval facility in Syria free of charge until 2066; has sovereign jurisdiction over it;

¹²¹ Blanchard, 2021, p. 2.

¹²² Blanchard, 2021, p. 2.

¹²³ Liu Kun, 2014.

¹²⁴ Andrew S. Erickson and Austin M. Strange, "China's Blue Soft Power," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 68, No. 1, Winter 2015, p. 11.

¹²⁵ Sam LaGrone, "AFRICOM: Chinese Naval Base in Africa Set to Support Aircraft Carriers," *USNI News*, April 20, 2021; and Peter A. Dutton, Isaac B. Kardon, and Conor M. Kennedy, *Djibouti: China's First Overseas Strategic Strongpoint*, Newport, R.I.: U.S. Naval War College, China Maritime Report No. 6, April 2020, p. 31.

¹²⁶ Freymann, 2021; Wu, 2021, p. 450.

¹²⁷ Wolf, 2020, p. 256; Peltier, Nurkin, and O'Connor, 2020, p. 30.

and can keep up to a dozen warships there, including nuclear-powered vessels.¹²⁸ Russia is upgrading both of its Syrian bases, which will enable it to support broader military activities in the Middle East, North Africa, and Eastern Mediterranean regions.¹²⁹ To overcome the limited capacity of the Hmeimim base during its operations in Syria, Russia also set up five other, secondary air bases in the country.¹³⁰ Moreover, in 2016, Iran allowed Russia limited use of the Shahid Nojeh Air Base in Iran's Hamadan province.¹³¹ When the agreement about the base came to light, backlash and diplomatic complications led Russia to abandon it; however, similar arrangements with Iran in a hypothetical future are quite plausible.¹³²

Iraq and Iran have previously extended overflight rights to allow the Russian Air Force to reach Syria from Mozdok Air Base.¹³³ If Turkish airspace remains unavailable to the Russian Air Force, overflight rights in Iraq or Iran would also be needed to fly to Iraq from southern Russia.¹³⁴ Assad's government in Syria controls part of the border with Iraq, which would also facilitate Russian access to Iraqi territory.

Capabilities

As with posture and access, at present, the United States has an edge in military capabilities resident in the Middle East. However, China and Russia also have considerable capabilities either in theater or capable of deploying to the Middle East, as well as important non-materiel capabilities, such as recent experience working with proxy forces or developing PMSC capabilities.

United States' Capabilities

The United States has multiple air assets and other capabilities in Iraq and in the broader CENTCOM theater. In Iraq, the United States maintains counter-rocket, -artillery, and -mortar capabilities; explosive ordnance disposal capabilities; a long-range air defense and

¹²⁸ Can Kasapoğlu and Sinan Ülgen, "Russia's Ambitious Military-Geostrategic Posture in the Mediterranean," Carnegie Europe, June 10, 2021.

¹²⁹ Joseph Trevithick, "Russia Is Extending One of the Runways at Its Syrian Airbase," *The Drive*, February 5, 2021.

¹³⁰ Michael Simpson, Adam R. Grissom, Christopher A. Mouton, John P. Godges, and Russell Hanson, *The Road to Damascus: The Russian Air Campaign in Syria, 2015 to 2018*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A1170-1, 2022, p. 35.

¹³¹ Ariane Tabatabai and Dina Esfandiary, *Triple-Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2021.

¹³² There have also been reports that "the VKS [Russian Aerospace Forces] has tacitly continued to use it" (the air base) after leaving in August 2016 (Simpson et al., 2022, p. 42).

¹³³ Damien Sharkov, "Iraq Opens Airspace to Russia After Iran Deployment," *Newsweek*, August 17, 2016.

¹³⁴ Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019, p. 9.

anti-ballistic missile system (including multiple PAC-2/3 Patriot units¹³⁵); radar and ISR capabilities; electronic warfare capabilities (including the EP-3E Aries II aircraft¹³⁶); and unmanned aerial vehicles capable of conducting both surveillance and air strikes (such as the MQ-9A Reaper¹³⁷). The U.S. Marine Corps' Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force – Crisis Response – Central Command is also present in theater and available to assist in the event of a crisis at the U.S. embassy in Iraq or elsewhere in the country.¹³⁸

To support its advising and enabling missions, the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve established the Military Advisory Group, which is “co located with the Iraqi Joint Operations Command to provide on-site intelligence, operations, logistics, fires, and air support from a central location.”¹³⁹ In a similar vein, CENTCOM established the Special Operations Advisory Group, which also provides enabling functions, such as ISR and air strike capabilities—two areas of particular weakness for the ISF.

In nearby Kuwait, the United States also has elements of an armored brigade, a combat aviation brigade, a support brigade, and an active protection system infantry brigade, totaling more than 13,000 U.S. troops.¹⁴⁰ Similar to its capabilities in Iraq, the United States has had Patriot batteries and MQ-9A squadrons in Kuwait, although it has withdrawn some of these capabilities in recent years.¹⁴¹ The forces and accompanying capabilities in Kuwait can contribute to any future operations in Iraq.

More broadly, the United States has years of experience in conducting psychological operations, military information support operations, and activities known as operations in the information environment, both in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world. It retains ample ability to provide covert support to actors in the region or to support groups overtly through arms sales and transfers, intelligence- and information-sharing, and training and advising.

China's Capabilities

China's capabilities to become involved in an Iraqi conflict would depend on whether Beijing is supporting the Iraqi government. If so and it is thus able to use Iraqi civilian ports and airports, there is the potential for significant levels of Chinese support. Given China's willingness to extend credit for oil, Iraqi actors may not even need to rely on Beijing's generosity; instead,

¹³⁵ “Patriot PAC-2,” Military-Today.com, undated.

¹³⁶ John Pike, “EP-3E Aries II,” webpage, Federation of American Scientists, Intelligence Resource Program, undated.

¹³⁷ U.S. Air Force, “MQ-9 Reaper Enhances Air Force Capabilities in Iraq,” July 22, 2008.

¹³⁸ See U.S. Marine Corps, “SPMAGTF-CR-CC,” webpage, undated.

¹³⁹ McKenzie, 2021.

¹⁴⁰ Rashaan Ayesha, “Where U.S. Troops and Assets Are Deployed in the Middle East,” Axios, January 8, 2020.

¹⁴¹ Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef, and Michael R. Gordon, “U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries from Middle East,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2021.

they could pay for any arms or other support with petroleum exports.¹⁴² Zhenhua, one of the Chinese oil companies investing heavily in the Iraqi energy sector, is a subsidiary of one of China's largest arms manufacturers, Norinco.¹⁴³ Although a lack of air bases in the region and China's modest (but quickly growing) fleet of transportation aircraft would make very rapid supply of arms by air difficult, these deficiencies are likely to be reduced as the PLA Air Force builds more heavy-lift planes and finds more bases in the region. The United States, Iran, or another regional power could complicate China's efforts by seeking to prevent Chinese arms from passing the Strait of Hormuz, although the PLA does have a history of moving large and highly sensitive weapon systems across the Indian Ocean clandestinely in small quantities.¹⁴⁴ In terms of training, China's ability to support Iraqi government or allied forces would be somewhat limited by China's own lack of experience, both in combat and in large-scale training for foreign militaries. Joint exercises with Russia and other Central Asian nations are providing the PLA with a growing body of experience with large-scale international ground training activities, but it still lags far behind U.S. and Russian forces in this respect.¹⁴⁵

Beijing's ability to support a proxy fighting against the Iraqi state (or one that the Iraqi government seeks to prevent Beijing from supporting) will be much more limited. During the Cold War, the United States, the Soviet Union, and China all built large organizations dedicated to supporting violent non-state actors around the world, which included special forces and units dedicated to the training of insurgents, covert transportation of arms and personnel, and covert communications. Since the end of the Cold War, China has not generally supported violent non-state actors far from its borders.¹⁴⁶ Rebuilding the institutions necessary to support foreign insurgencies is certainly not beyond China, but it has taken only halting steps to do so with such activities as longer-range independent special operations and support to insurgent groups that operate along China's border.¹⁴⁷

China is also capable of providing substantial financial, intelligence, and cyber support to either government or insurgent proxy forces. Given the robust black market for arms in nearby Syria, insurgents in the north may be able to rapidly turn any funds received from China into military supplies.¹⁴⁸ This is not to imply that it is at all likely that China would change its long-standing policy of generally supporting only government forces and their

¹⁴² Calabrese, 2019.

¹⁴³ Al Ansary, 2021.

¹⁴⁴ Phil Mattingly, Zachary Cohen, and Jeremy Herb, "Exclusive: U.S. Intel Shows Saudi Arabia Escalated Its Missile Program with Help from China," CNN, June 5, 2019.

¹⁴⁵ Southerland, Green, and Janik, 2020, pp. 1, 12.

¹⁴⁶ Wither, 2020, pp. 20–21.

¹⁴⁷ Southerland, Green, and Janik, 2020, p. 12; Lintner, 2019. See also Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix C.

¹⁴⁸ Shannon Dick, "The Arms Trade and Syria," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs*, September 2, 2019.

allies in the Middle East (with some notable exceptions) but simply that such a move is possible with some institutional innovation on Beijing's part.

Although China likely will gain the ability to launch air strikes in Iraq in the near to medium term, conducting such strikes (especially without host government approval) would be a substantial departure from past Chinese practice and is thus highly unlikely to occur unless there is a major shift in the security or geopolitical situation on the ground. Putting intent aside, from a capability standpoint, China's ability to launch air strikes in support of government or covert proxies in Iraq will depend to a great extent on the willingness of nearby countries to provide basing and overflight rights. If overflight rights can be secured, most of Iraq is within 3,000 km of China, within the range of China's newer H-6 bombers.¹⁴⁹ Securing bases in Iran or Pakistan could significantly reduce flight times and improve effectiveness. The PLA Rocket Force would also be able to launch precision conventional ballistic missiles on targets in Iraq—although, again, overflight rights could complicate any such strikes.

At present, China does not have any bases in the Persian Gulf or the Levant; however, it does maintain two warships and a replenishment ship off the coast of Somalia with some consistency, as well as a base in Djibouti, both of which could help it maintain a small naval presence (several warships on station for long intervals) in the Persian Gulf if it so desired. An additional base at Gwadar in Pakistan would enable even larger and more-consistent naval deployments, as well as a possible air presence in the region, although the construction of such a base may take some time. As the PLA Navy continues to grow and develop its expeditionary naval capabilities, larger and more-constant deployments in the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf will become possible even without a base in Pakistan. The PLA Navy may also be able to launch long-range cruise missile or carrier strikes from warships operating in the Persian Gulf by 2030.

Russia's Capabilities

It is unlikely that Russia would launch an overt military intervention comparable to that in Syria, but its expeditionary capabilities could accommodate such a hypothetical limited conflict, relying primarily on air operations. Russia's bases in Syria and southern Russia and the experience that Russian forces gathered during that conflict could support limited operations by the Russian Aerospace Forces in an Iraqi conflict.¹⁵⁰ However, RAND research on Russia's operations in Syria suggests that Russia's capability gaps and other shortcomings might present even bigger challenges outside the uniquely conducive setting of Syria. For example, Russia's reliance on long-range bombers, such as the Tu-22M3, which cannot be refueled in

¹⁴⁹ Janes, "XAC Y-20 Kunpeng," *All the World's Aircraft: Development and Production*, December 16, 2021b.

¹⁵⁰ Russian operations in Syria suggest that, for operations that are far east of Hmeimim, the Russian Aerospace Forces preferred to fly long-range bombers out of Mozdok Air Base (Simpson et al., 2022, pp. 27, 41).

mid-air, required reliance on an “adaptive basing posture” in Syria to support long-range strike. Russia’s ability to adapt as it did in Syria is likely to be more limited in other settings.¹⁵¹

However, upgrades to Russian bases might compensate for some of these gaps and expand the capabilities that Russia can bring to bear in a conflict or contingency in Iraq and in the region more broadly. Ongoing improvements to the air bases—such as extending the runways—also expand the menu of options for Russia. Upgrading repair facilities at the Tartus base could “allow [the] Russian navy to avoid dispatching ships to naval installations in the Black Sea for maintenance.”¹⁵² Some reports also suggest that Russia is building a new base in Qasr Deeb near the Turkish border in Syria, an area that also borders Iraq.¹⁵³ This is an unsubstantiated claim at the time of writing, but if it proves to be true, it would significantly bolster Russia’s ability to conduct operations in Iraq. Mozdok Air Base in Russia could also support Russian air strikes in Iraq; for example, Mozdok is 522 miles from Erbil and 930 miles from Basrah in the south.¹⁵⁴

The Hmeimim base also has served as the Russian Aerospace Forces’ “primary aviation logistics hub: Russian engineers had renovated the runways at Hmeimim to receive heavy inter-theater lift and cargo aircraft, enabling an air-based supply chain to operate in parallel to the sea-based ‘Syrian Express.’”¹⁵⁵ Syrian bases endow Russia with capabilities to transport people, including PMSC personnel, and equipment over the border, including in scenarios short of an overt military intervention. Indeed, the Hmeimim base has already been used to support Russia’s proxies in another conflict, as an “intermediate staging point for MiG-29 Fulcrum fighters and Su-24 Fencer combat jets that Russia sent to Libya to bolster forces aligned with rogue General Khalifa Haftar.”¹⁵⁶ The majority of Russian military commanders have also gained experience in Syria, and this experience has been incorporated into training and exercises.¹⁵⁷

Until 2016, Russia had use of an air base in Iran, and Iranian missiles reportedly used the Russian Globalnaya Navigazionnaya Sputnikovaya Sistema (GLONASS) satellite navigation system to target U.S. military bases in Iraq during Operation Martyr Soleimani in January

¹⁵¹ Simpson et al., 2022, pp. 95–96.

¹⁵² Jamie Dettmer, “Russia Expands Military Facilities in Syria,” *Voice of America*, May 12, 2021.

¹⁵³ Tom O’Connor, “Russia Challenges U.S. Military in Mediterranean by Asserting Foothold in Syria, Libya,” *Newsweek*, May 29, 2020; and Paul Iddon, “Warm Waters at Last: Russia’s Expanding Military Footprint in the Middle East,” *New Arab*, June 9, 2020.

¹⁵⁴ These distances, calculated using Google Maps, are well within the combat radius for Russia’s aircraft stationed at Mozdok (Tu-22, Tu-95, and Tu-160). See Simpson et al., 2022, p. 31.

¹⁵⁵ Simpson et al., 2022, p. 36.

¹⁵⁶ Trevithick, 2021.

¹⁵⁷ “Over 85% of Russian Army Commanders Gained Combat Experience in Syria, Says Putin,” TASS, May 25, 2021.

2020, illustrating the close military ties between the two countries.¹⁵⁸ In the past, Russia has also used Iraqi airspace for flights and conducted port calls in Oman.¹⁵⁹ Russia has various levels of military access in Egypt, Oman, Pakistan, and Syria, all of which could theoretically support any Russian operations in Iraq. However, we must stress that the United States maintains significant access and influence with its major non-NATO allies Egypt and Pakistan, as well as with Oman, so it is unclear under what circumstances those countries would approve access, basing, and overflight rights for Russian military operations in Iraq that challenged U.S. interests.

Short of an overt military intervention by its armed forces, Russia can support actors in Iraq through arms sales and transfers, intelligence- and information-sharing, and training and advising. Russia's arms sales and military-technical relationship with Iraq have grown in recent years and will very likely underlie any support that Russia renders to the Iraqi government. Russian officials have consistently stated that they are prepared to "meet any Iraqi needs for Russian-made military products," in the words of Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov.¹⁶⁰ Russia reportedly offered to sell Iraq its advanced S-400 system, a development that was thwarted by U.S. threats of sanctions on Iraq; however, significant shifts in circumstances may shift the Iraqi government's calculus in this respect.¹⁶¹

Russia has previously rendered military aid to the Iraqi government to combat ISIS, after the latter took over Mosul in 2014 and U.S. aid was delayed.¹⁶² Along with Syria and Iran, Russia and Iraq formed a security coalition in 2015 to cooperate in the fight against ISIS, with headquarters in Damascus and Baghdad.¹⁶³ Lavrov and Russia's ambassador in Iraq have both claimed that the Baghdad Information Center, set up in 2015 as part of the security coalition, has been a success and is functioning well.¹⁶⁴

¹⁵⁸ Alexey Muraviev, "Russia Makes Its Presence Known in Iran Crisis," *The Interpreter*, January 24, 2020.

¹⁵⁹ Matt Bradley, Gordon Lubold, and Nathan Hodge, "Deepening Russian Involvement in Iraq Complicates U.S. Airstrikes on Islamic State," *Wall Street Journal*, September 30, 2015; and Dorian Archus, "Russian Navy's Stereguschy-Class Corvette Visits Oman," *Naval Post*, March 15, 2021.

¹⁶⁰ Subbotin, 2020. According to an abstract for Daly (2020), Lavrov

added that Moscow was also prepared to increase arms deliveries to Baghdad, stating, "We are ready to meet any Iraqi needs for Russian-made military products. Our country has traditionally played and continues to play a very important and significant role in ensuring Iraq's defense capability and equipping its army and security forces, including in the context of continuing terrorist threats." (Columbia International Affairs Online, "Russia and Iraq Deepen Energy, Military Ties," abstract, 2020)

¹⁶¹ John C. K. Daly, "Russia Reemerging as Weapons Supplier to Iraq," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 15, No. 43, March 21, 2018.

¹⁶² TASS, 2015.

¹⁶³ Mullen and Basil, 2015. The agreement was commonly characterized as a challenge to U.S. influence in the Middle East (Matt Bradley, Carol E. Lee, and Jay Solomon, "Deal with Iraq to Fight Islamic State Extends Russia's Reach in Middle East," *Wall Street Journal*, September 27, 2015).

¹⁶⁴ Lavrov, 2019.

Russian involvement in a conflict in Iraq would likely have an informational component, exploiting the assets and tropes that Russian actors have already practiced using in Syria and elsewhere. Russia's support could also take covert forms, especially if Moscow is supporting an actor other than the Iraqi government (e.g., the PMF). The Wagner Group or other Russian PMSCs with close connections to the state may be employed in a variety of functions, including kinetic action for which Russia would be unwilling to overtly send in conventional forces. Russian PMSCs received their earliest operational experiences in Iraq, and members of smaller groups, such as Feraks, Redut-Antiterror, and the Moran Security Group, were reportedly operating in Iraq in more-recent years.¹⁶⁵

How Might a Conflict Unfold?

The most likely potential roads to renewed conflict in Iraq—including those that could involve the United States, China, and Russia—largely resemble historical paths to conflict in the country. When considering our analysis of the dynamics on the ground and U.S., Chinese, and Russian objectives, we identified two main routes to future conflict in Iraq. We then assessed the prospects for great-power involvement in each of these conflicts. The first route centers on a resurgence of ISIS that would pose a serious threat to U.S. or allied personnel in the region or to the U.S. homeland. The second path to a proxy conflict is an escalation of the ongoing low-level conflict between the United States and Iran-backed proxies, most likely in the context of a broader conflict between Iran and the Sunni Arab states. We explore each of these scenarios in more depth and evaluate the prospects for U.S., Chinese, and Russian involvement.

Resurgent Islamic State

Scenario Description

The first scenario that presents a possibility for proxy conflict is a potential resurgence of ISIS. Most scenarios that see a full-fledged conflict breaking out in Iraq hinge on the assumption that the United States will continue its withdrawal from the country, leaving a further-reduced force or disengaging entirely. Such a withdrawal could create the conditions for a conflict that could draw the United States back into Iraq, in a historical analogue to the 2011 troop withdrawal that facilitated the rise of ISIS.

Two other key conditions existed in 2011, when the U.S. withdrawal enabled the remnants of ISIS's precursor, al-Qaeda in Iraq (which, by 2011, had already rebranded as the Islamic

¹⁶⁵ Their activities, however, remain subject to less international attention than Wagner's (Irek Murtazin, "Служу Отечеству! Дорого" ["Serving the Motherland! Dearly"], *Новая Газета* [*New Gazette*], January 20, 2018).

State of Iraq), to rebuild and return stronger than before.¹⁶⁶ First, the U.S. withdrawal came on the heels of a tenuous political situation stemming partly from the U.S. decision to propel Nouri al-Maliki into the role of Prime Minister despite his lack of public support, especially among the Sunni tribes that had been a critical ally to the United States in fighting al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq (granted, there were few viable alternatives to Maliki at the time, so U.S. options for actors to support were constrained).¹⁶⁷ Second, at the time of withdrawal, the ISF did not have the capacity to take on the counterterrorism fight on its own. Failure to leave behind any U.S. troops to serve as advisers or adequately train the ISF prior to withdrawal contributed to the inability of the ISF to effectively fight ISIS when it rose to prominence just a couple years later.¹⁶⁸

These same conditions are still present to a degree. Iraq's domestic situation is unstable, and although Kadhimi was not pushed into power by an external force, he was not elected by the public, and the national elections in October 2021 sparked additional popular unrest among pro-Iran protesters (who were unhappy with the poor outcome for Iran-backed elements) and the ISF. Moreover, although the ISF is better now than in 2011, it still relies on U.S. and coalition support to conduct such operations as ISR, air strikes, and other actions that would be critical in an intensified campaign against ISIS.¹⁶⁹ Just prior to the 2011 withdrawal, there were roughly 50,000 U.S. troops in Iraq, all of which were withdrawn, leaving no troops in the country between 2011 and 2014.¹⁷⁰ Given the similar dynamics between 2011 and 2021, further reductions now—though they would be smaller in scale (given the drastic difference between the 2011 and 2021 troop numbers)—would likely set the stage for a resurgent ISIS, against which the ISF would not be able to fight effectively; create opportunities for Iran, Russia, China, and other powers to exploit; and further destabilize the already fragile political situation.

Indeed, a 2020 RAND paper that evaluated the implications of varying degrees of U.S. withdrawal from Iraq indicated that even a limited withdrawal of U.S. forces compared with early 2020 force levels would incur a high risk of ISIS resurging and a moderate risk of dam-

¹⁶⁶ Wilson Center, "Timeline: The Rise, Spread, and Fall of the Islamic State," October 28, 2019.

¹⁶⁷ Ryan N. Mannina, "How the 2011 US Troop Withdrawal from Iraq Led to the Rise of ISIS," *Small Wars Journal*, December 23, 2018.

¹⁶⁸ David E. Johnson, Agnes Gereben Schaefer, Brenna Allen, Raphael S. Cohen, Gian Gentile, James Hoo- bler, Michael Schwillie, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Sean M. Zeigler, *The U.S. Army and the Battle for Baghdad: Lessons Learned—And Still to Be Learned*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3076-A, 2019, p. 225.

¹⁶⁹ Katie Bo Williams, "Is Iraq's Military Good Enough for U.S. Troops to Leave?" *Defense One*, October 28, 2020.

¹⁷⁰ Ben Connable, James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, Raphael S. Cohen, and Becca Wasser, *Weighing U.S. Troop Withdrawal from Iraq: Strategic Risks and Recommendations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-362-OSD, 2020, p. 3.

aging the U.S. ability to counter Iran.¹⁷¹ Since that paper was released, the United States has reduced its force presence from roughly 5,200 in 2020 to 2,500 in 2021. This places the United States squarely in the scenario in which it can expect to see a degradation in the effectiveness of its counter-ISIS efforts, and additional withdrawals would further damage this campaign. If the United States were to fully disengage, not just by withdrawing troops but also by removing its diplomatic presence and ceasing its financial and materiel support to Iraq, the risks to the objectives of countering the Islamic State and Iran and of ensuring Iraq's economic prosperity and stability are assessed to be very high.¹⁷² Interestingly, the authors of that paper found that only upon full withdrawal or disengagement would there be a moderate chance of a negative effect on the U.S. competition with China and Russia.

In our assessment, an ISIS resurgence following a full U.S. withdrawal of troops is the scenario that would present the greatest potential for substantial involvement by all three great powers, up to the possibility of overt military action. In the event of a full withdrawal of the remaining U.S. troops in Iraq, ISIS or a successor organization would likely rise to full strength once more within the next few years. Simultaneously, the U.S. absence would invite and facilitate increased Iranian, Russian, and Chinese engagement.¹⁷³ As we emphasize throughout this report, to say that this scenario has the greatest potential of drawing in great-power involvement is not to say that it is very likely in absolute terms but rather that it is more likely to do so than are other conflict scenarios in Iraq (and the region more broadly).

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved in a Resurgent Islamic State Scenario, and Whom Might Each Support?

Notwithstanding the ongoing drawdown of forces from Iraq and across CENTCOM, the U.S. willingness to intervene in Iraq is perhaps the least in question of the three powers. The United States has done so repeatedly over the past three decades, and it remains engaged today, as detailed earlier. Although successive U.S. administrations have expressed an interest in withdrawing from Iraq and the Middle East in general, the United States retains an interest in countering terrorism and containing Iran-backed proxies, both of which threaten key U.S. allies and partners throughout the region.

If the United States were to get involved in another iteration of the Iraq conflict, there is now considerable precedent for what form such an operation would assume. A domestic political aversion to large ground wars, especially in the Middle East, is likely to limit the U.S. footprint in Iraq. However, as the United States demonstrated most recently in Operation Inherent Resolve, the U.S. military is proficient at conducting counterterrorism campaigns as part of a large international coalition primarily relying on airpower—providing intelli-

¹⁷¹ Connable et al., 2020, p. 3.

¹⁷² Connable et al., 2020, p. 7.

¹⁷³ In the past, Iraq welcomed such engagement because the United States was perceived as insufficiently protective of Iraq. See, for example, John Irish, "Iraq Would Welcome Russian Airstrikes Against ISIS, PM Says," *Haaretz*, October 1, 2015.

gence and strike capacity—with troops on the ground advising Iraqi forces (in particular, the Counter-Terrorism Forces) and other regional partners, such as the Kurds.¹⁷⁴

Both China and Russia would be motivated to intervene to varying degrees for security reasons, because both have serious concerns about ISIS or any terrorist group with international ambitions and reach rising to the level that it can threaten Beijing's or Moscow's interests in the region or launch attacks in China or Russia. For Russia, the resurgence of ISIS puts in jeopardy Russia's achievements in Syria, because ISIS is already very active on the Syria side of the border. Shifting the balance of power in Moscow's favor from the United States also would be a motivating factor, and some degree of involvement would be in keeping with Russia's approach to building regional influence by taking advantage of openings created by U.S. disengagement.¹⁷⁵

Russian involvement likely would take the form of ramping up arms sales and transfers; sending PMSCs (Wagner or others) in on the ground, including Wagner potentially funneling in Syrian mercenaries (as it is doing in Libya); and training and advising. Russia could also get involved more directly through an overt military intervention. This would not be Russia's preferred form of engagement, but there is precedent, and Russia does possess the capabilities to do so. Should the Iraqi government explicitly ask Russia for military assistance, therefore assuring access, Russia could conduct air strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and initiate military actions resembling those conducted in Syria.¹⁷⁶ Overt Russian military involvement in countering a resurgence of the Islamic State would be plausible, but it also carries risks for Moscow—particularly if the United States already is operating in the same area.

China, for its part, wishes to maintain a stable Iraq so as not to threaten Beijing's economic interests in the country, and an ISIS resurgence or the rise of a similar terrorist organization would clearly usher in instability. China is also concerned about Islamist extremist groups in the Middle East radicalizing its own citizens, especially its Muslim Uighur population, and inspiring them to commit extremist attacks at home or become fighters in conflicts in the Middle East.

Chinese involvement in Iraqi security has been limited, although China has hired guards for its compounds and facilities there. As Chinese capabilities grow or as circumstances were to shift in the event of an ISIS resurgence, that involvement could change. China could conduct civilian evacuations; possibly lend greater military support to the Iraqi government or the PMF; or perhaps even directly intervene militarily to protect Chinese facilities and people

¹⁷⁴ See Becca Wasser, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jeffrey Martini, Alexandra T. Evans, Karl P. Mueller, Nathaniel Edenfield, Gabrielle Tarini, Ryan Haberman, and Jalen Zeman, *The Air War Against the Islamic State: The Role of Airpower in Operation Inherent Resolve*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A388-1, 2021.

¹⁷⁵ See Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix C.

¹⁷⁶ A leading Russian expert on Iraq stated that,

when it comes to the presence of Russian conventional troops in Iraq, following the Syria example—here a determining role will be played by the Iraqi leadership's political will: if they express such a desire, Russia can render the same kind of military aid as it is doing in Syria (Mamedov, 2019, p. 15).

in the event of a conflict and with the acquiescence of Baghdad, although this is unlikely in the near term. China's economic and security interests likely will ensure that China will want to stay on good terms as much as possible with all sides, especially those operating near Chinese facilities. Action from Beijing is also more likely if instability affects its major investments in southern Iraq.

In a conflict in Iraq, the United States, China, and Russia would likely find themselves working toward similar ends, even if backing a somewhat different set of actors. The three powers would be aligned against ISIS and other Sunni extremist groups and would offer their support—at least notionally—to the Iraqi government and the ISF. And China may become more willing to provide support for Baghdad than it has been in the past if the regime is threatened by the resurgence of terrorist organizations. Because supporting the Iraqi government and the ISF is more likely to effectuate stability while also combating terrorism, China would likely focus its support on the government to bolster counterterrorism efforts.

At the same time, Iran, Russia, and China have strong relationships with the PMF—discussed further in the context of the second conflict scenario—and may engage with the PMF in the counter-ISIS fight. China might choose to engage with the PMF at some level to maintain good relations with all Iraqi armed actors that could have a bearing on the nation's future and China's operations there. Similar considerations drive Russia's preference for a multi-vector policy of engagement with multiple parties, as noted earlier. To be sure, although Russia and China have some relationship with both the Iraqi government and the PMF, both powers would prefer to work through the government, as long as it remains a viable institution.¹⁷⁷

Although the United States, China, Russia, and Iran are all aligned against ISIS, cooperation among these entities in another anti-ISIS war is highly unlikely. Russia may coordinate with the United States as it has done in Syria to deconflict certain counter-ISIS operations, but that is likely the height of cooperation.¹⁷⁸ China, for its part, is unlikely to want to engage in behavior that would destabilize Iraq to the point of regime collapse but would be content to see the United States struggle and is thus unlikely to directly support U.S. counterterrorism efforts. Because direct Chinese action is unlikely, any deconfliction between the United States and China would likely be a matter of avoiding damage to Chinese facilities or their guards. Should China decide to support armed proxy groups more actively or send the PLA in directly, deconfliction would be more of an issue. China and Russia might cooperate on a low-level basis in the counter-ISIS fight through intelligence-sharing and other means. But China-Russia cooperation, though perhaps alarming to the United States, would still not pit Russia or China against the United States in this counterterrorism campaign.

¹⁷⁷ See Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendixes B and C.

¹⁷⁸ For more on the prospects for cooperation among the United States, China, and Russia, see Treyger et al., 2023.

Escalation of Conflict Between the United States and Iran-Backed Proxies

Scenario Description

In a second, not wholly independent, scenario, the ongoing conflict between the United States and Iran-backed proxies escalates—either through an emboldened Iran launching more proxy attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq or through U.S. entanglement in a broader conflict between Iran and its Sunni Arab neighbors. At the time of writing, the United States is engaged in a low-level proxy war with Iran, its primary competitor in Iraq. Iran wishes to expel the United States from the entirety of the Middle East, but because Iran has deep interests in Iraq and has long sought to control its neighbor and rival, driving the United States out of Iraq is especially desirable for Iran. Thus, Iran continues to foment and fund such attacks by its proxy militias against U.S. targets throughout the Middle East. In February and June 2021, the United States conducted air strikes against facilities used by Iran-backed Shia militias in response to rocket and unmanned aerial vehicle attacks that these groups launched on U.S. personnel and facilities at Erbil International Airport, Baghdad International Airport, and Ain al-Asad Air Base.¹⁷⁹

Iraq has been on the front lines of the Sunni versus Shia divide since the Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s (under the leadership of Sunni adherent Saddam Hussein), feuding at various points with both Iran and U.S. partners Saudi Arabia and the UAE. As a result, were the United States to be drawn into a conflict between Iran and the Gulf states, the proximity of U.S. and Iran-backed forces in Iraq could invite further or more-extensive Iranian attacks on U.S. personnel and assets. Iraq presents an opportune venue for launching these types of attacks because the United States has forces and assets in the country and Iran has a well-developed proxy network in Iraq that it can call upon to conduct attacks.¹⁸⁰ As U.S. presence dwindles elsewhere in the Middle East, there are also increasingly fewer targets of opportunity for Iran to attack, making Iraq the most likely battleground for an escalating conflict.

Why Would the United States, China, and Russia Get Involved in an Iran-Backed Proxy Scenario, and Whom Might Each Support?

Were the Iran-backed attacks to grow in intensity or frequency, the United States would likely have to respond militarily to protect its citizens and facilities, as well as to rebuke Iran and mitigate Tehran's ability to further destabilize Iraq. Although countering Iran is an expressed strategic priority for the United States, increasing U.S. force presence on the ground is likely to be politically unpalatable for the near future, given very limited U.S. domestic political will for renewed deployments to the Middle East. As a result, U.S. involvement would likely resemble a continuation or intensification of the current approach, focused on conducting

¹⁷⁹ Jeff Schogol, "US Strikes in Syria and Iraq Show the Evolving Fight Against ISIS and Now Iran," *Task and Purpose*, June 28, 2021.

¹⁸⁰ This remains the case even if the degree of control that Iran commands over groups in Iraq has been called into question (Ollivant and Gaston, 2019).

air strikes against key Iranian targets in Iraq. Additionally, the United States could increase military aid and arms transfers in support of the Iraqi government. This type of support may be constrained in the context of a counter-Iran fight, however, because funds and equipment could end up in the hands of the pro-Iran PMF—given those forces' incorporation into the ISF—and be used against the United States or its interests rather than to fight Iran. As it has done in the past, such as in response to the rise of ISIS in 2014, the United States could also send additional U.S. special forces to serve as advisers and trainers for the ISF. The most significant driver affecting U.S. involvement in this scenario is whether the Iraqi government in power at the time would support the United States or whether it would seek to expel the U.S. presence, thus helping the Iranian cause even if the government does not wish to directly support Iran. The current government is relatively pro-West in its alignment, but future elections could see a more pro-Iran or anti-U.S. leader take office; moreover, although Iraqi public sentiment is largely against the pervasion of Iranian influence, there are also significant elements of society—most obviously the PMF—that remain staunchly pro-Iran. If the Iraqi government is not a willing partner, U.S. involvement would have to focus even more heavily on U.S. Air Force assets.

China and Russia have been cultivating relationships with the PMF for years. China has garnered high praise from the various Shia groups under the PMF, which are anti-U.S. in alignment and view China as an attractive partner. Following an economic agreement struck between China and Iraq in 2019, the PMF “adopted a strongly pro-Chinese posture and accused the United States of instigating protests in Iraq to impede Chinese investment.”¹⁸¹ The Iraqi Minister of Electricity followed suit, stating, “China is our primary option as a strategic partner in the long run.”¹⁸² Additionally, according to some reports, at least one PMF commander insisted that any new Iraqi Prime Minister must support Iraq's oil for development deal with China.¹⁸³ Clearly, the PMF has high interest in Chinese support; what is less clear is the depth of Chinese interest in the PMF.

China is unlikely to support the PMF to the detriment of the Iraqi government. It prefers a stable Iraq to protect its economic interests in the country and broader region, and the PMF has already proven to be a destabilizing force in the country. Supporting the government would be in keeping with China's general preference for supporting state actors over non-state armed groups.¹⁸⁴ That said, at least one expert suggested that the PMF views China as a greater asset to it than Russia is.¹⁸⁵ Thus, there is seemingly ample opportunity for China to

¹⁸¹ Ramani, 2021.

¹⁸² Freymann, 2021.

¹⁸³ See Adnan Abu Zeed, “PMU Factions Set Conditions for Next Iraqi Prime Minister,” *Al-Monitor*, January 30, 2020.

¹⁸⁴ For deeper discussion of Chinese approaches to supporting proxies and limited military interventions, see Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix B.

¹⁸⁵ Think tank expert on militant organizations, telephone interview with the authors, July 27, 2021.

deepen engagement with the PMF and perhaps even exert a degree of control over the group's activities should China wish to do so.

Russia, for its part, has sent high-ranking diplomats to court the PMF, including a visit by then-Secretary of the Russian Security Council Nikolai Patrushev to meet with PMF leader Falih al-Fayyadh to "discuss counterterrorism strategies that would not infringe upon state sovereignty and prospects for developing bilateral relations."¹⁸⁶ Russia's pursuit of relations with the PMF is motivated partly by the desire to leverage the PMF and its close ties to Assad to help Russia regulate violence on the border between Syria and Iraq.¹⁸⁷

It is plausible that Russia and potentially China would continue to funnel support to the PMF in a U.S.-Iran proxy conflict, which would place the United States on the opposite side of the conflict from its competitors. Such a move would entail considerable risk of escalation, however, because the United States often engages Iran-backed proxies directly with U.S. forces rather than through a proxy of its own, meaning Russia and China would be directly supporting the potential killing of U.S. soldiers. Nonetheless, Russia has rendered some kind of support to the Taliban, which was fighting against a U.S. proxy, and China and Russia also have reasons to support the PMF to fight terrorism.¹⁸⁸ But even if counterterrorism is the main motivator for Chinese and Russian support of the PMF, neither country can control how the PMF ultimately uses this support. Both China and Russia are very unlikely to intervene directly with military action or with substantial and overt indirect support, and both countries would likely be wary of taking actions that could plunge Iraq into full-fledged instability. Despite their efforts to cultivate close ties with the PMF, neither China nor Russia would be likely to lend significant, overt support to a non-state actor, unless it were clear that the Iraqi government were on the verge of collapse.

Were the Iraqi government to disintegrate, the PMF, with its own leadership and patronage structure, could also accrue more power and take on the role of the state, because it already has a great deal of influence over several sectors of government. Thus, it could become a valuable and viable partner for China and Russia. However, as long as the Iraqi government remained functional and recognized internationally as a legitimate government, China and Russia would be more likely to hedge their bets by supporting both the government and the PMF.

Russia has many reasons to avoid overtly and exclusively supporting the PMF over the Iraqi government: The collapse of the Iraqi regime would have negative spillover effects for Moscow's operations in Syria, endanger its economic interests, complicate its attempts to maintain relations with other states (Israel, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain), and likely

¹⁸⁶ Ramani, 2021.

¹⁸⁷ Ramani, 2021.

¹⁸⁸ Schroden, 2021, p. 22. See discussion of Russian support in Chapter Three.

strengthen Iran's hand beyond what is advantageous for Russia.¹⁸⁹ Russia's track record—which we review in the summary volume of this series—suggests that Russia would most likely support multiple parties to a conflict, perhaps some covertly, and that it is not very likely to oppose or openly undermine an internationally recognized government like the one in Iraq.¹⁹⁰ Indeed, Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Lavrov reportedly discussed the possibility of an escalating U.S.-Iran conflict with his Iraqi counterparts in 2019. According to Lavrov, Russia and Iraq purportedly agree in their concern about the possibility that, in case of a “direct armed conflict . . . Americans will most likely strike bases in Iraq rather than Iran proper, and the Iranians will do the same.”¹⁹¹ At least officially, Lavrov said that Russia's interests align with the interests of the Iraqi government regarding such threats to Iraqi stability.¹⁹²

Beyond supporting the PMF and the Iraqi government as it sees fit, Russia would be likely to employ such tactics as propaganda and disinformation campaigns with the goal of inciting anti-U.S. sentiment and potentially encouraging the Iraqi government to expel U.S. troops. Several analysts have suggested that Russia would exploit the opportunity to fill the void in Iraq (and elsewhere in the Middle East) should the United States leave voluntarily or be pushed out by the Iraqi government. As a result, it is plausible that Russia would employ subversive action to reduce U.S. presence and influence and create an opening for Russia to capitalize on.¹⁹³

In terms of specific forms of engagement, Russia is unlikely to engage with its own forces on the ground and will likely opt to use PMSCs, as it mostly has in Syria and elsewhere. At present, China's PMSC sector is highly underdeveloped, forcing Chinese companies to rely on local forces or international PMSCs to protect Chinese citizens and economic interests.¹⁹⁴ The PMSCs' deficiencies include a lack of understanding of local conditions in most countries, low levels of professionalization, and national regulations that make it difficult for PMSC members to carry weapons.¹⁹⁵ Beijing is working to address these deficiencies, although it remains hesitant to fully commit to the use of PMSCs because any bad behavior

¹⁸⁹ For example, Russia's offer to sell Iraq its S-400 missile defense system three months after Iran launched missiles at the U.S. Ain al-Asad Air Base in western Iraq in retaliation for the killing of Soleimani is interpreted by some to be a tacit rebuke to Iran, weakening its ability to target U.S. bases in Iraq (Mahmoudian, 2021).

¹⁹⁰ Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendix C.

¹⁹¹ Baynazarov, 2019.

¹⁹² Baynazarov, 2019.

¹⁹³ See, for example, Robyn Dixon, “Russia Stands to Benefit as Middle East Tensions Spike After Soleimani Killing,” *Washington Post*, January 6, 2020.

¹⁹⁴ Arduino, 2019, p. 98.

¹⁹⁵ Arduino, 2019, pp. 97–100; and Zhu Lu, “A Bridge Too Far: China's Overseas Security and Private Military and Security Companies,” *China: An International Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3, August 2020, pp. 176–181.

by contractors could cause a political crisis.¹⁹⁶ It is unclear how effective Beijing's reforms will be and whether Chinese PMSCs will ever become a more effective tool for physically protecting Chinese people and investments on a day-to-day basis, much less a potent tool of statecraft similar to Russia's Wagner Group. Some experts have suggested that China is far more likely to employ its special forces for discrete missions than to use PMSCs, given that special operations are more under the control of the Chinese government and military leadership.

Table 4.1 summarizes the key features of potential scenarios for conflict in Iraq with great-power involvement. In the table, by *external* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to broader geopolitical or other concerns beyond the borders of Iraq; by *internal* reasons, we mean objectives that pertain to concerns that are largely focused within Iraq. Of the two most likely drivers of conflict in Iraq, involvement by multiple great powers is most plausible in the scenario based on the resurgence of ISIS. It is the scenario that is most likely to motivate military involvement by all three powers—but they would be at least officially aligned on the same side of the conflict. In the second scenario, centering on the escalation of the U.S.-Iran proxy conflict, great-power involvement is less likely than in the first—and less likely to be substantial if it were to occur—but there is a higher chance that the United States and its competitors would back opposing sides of the conflict.

What Factors Might Influence the Outcome of the Conflict?

The United States faces a host of interrelated strategic, operational, and tactical challenges that could affect the course and outcomes of a hypothetical proxy conflict in Iraq.

First, the reduction of U.S. attention on and resources for Iraq and the broader Middle East might hamper the United States' ability to achieve its objectives were a conflict to break out. On a strategic level, the United States has elected to focus primarily on the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and U.S. European Command areas of responsibility, which has translated into a reduction of available resources for CENTCOM, with corresponding effects at the operational and tactical levels. Were the United States to substantially withdraw from Iraq and later decide to scale up its involvement again if ISIS resurges, U.S. forces would have lost or greatly diminished intelligence-collection capabilities, logistics support, and other capabilities key for such a fight. A complete withdrawal would also negatively affect the U.S. ability to operate in Syria, which may enable Russia and Iran to gain even more traction and influence in the broader region. The United States has already shut down or left many of its forward operating bases that were active during the height of the Iraq war. There are other key U.S. bases and assets in nearby Gulf countries, including neighboring Kuwait, but further base closures or troop reductions would risk ceding influence to Russia, China, and Iran, all of whom could use that time to build their own capabilities in Iraq. If withdrawal is precipitated by an Iraqi decision to expel the United States, the problems that U.S. forces would face in returning to

¹⁹⁶ Arduino, 2019, pp. 99–102.

TABLE 4.1
Key Characteristics of Possible Conflict Scenarios with Great-Power Involvement in Iraq

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

a non-permissive environment would become so substantial that only the most acute ISIS threat would warrant considering the option.

Second, the internal fragmentation of the Iraqi state narrows the options for viable partners with whom the United States could work in the context of an escalating conflict between the United States and Iran-backed proxies—and to a lesser extent, even in a counter-ISIS fight. Even though the United States currently has a good working relationship with the Iraqi government and the ISF—which is better resourced and overall a more reliable partner than the PMF is, given its status as an official institution of the state—the next Prime Minister may not be as friendly toward the United States and could ostensibly support Iran in a U.S.-Iran proxy contingency. Moreover, because the PMF is integrated into the ISF, even if the overall establishment is pro-U.S., the presence of the PMF limits the amount and type of support the United States can offer the ISF without also benefiting the PMF by default. In a counter-ISIS fight, this would be less of an issue, but the PMF has already shown that it can simultaneously wage war against ISIS while still attacking U.S. troops. Because of these constraints, the United States could be at a disadvantage relative to China and Russia when it comes to selecting viable partners in the counter-ISIS fight. As previously discussed, China and Russia do not face the same predicament: Both powers would be willing to work with the Iraqi government and the PMF, and they have cultivated these relationships accordingly. As a result, China and Russia can hedge their bets in terms of the partners they choose to work with, while the United States is mostly limited to working with the official Iraqi state apparatus. That said, the premier partner from a military capability standpoint is the U.S.-created Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service, which is a “three-tiered organizational structure which includes the CTS [Counter Terrorism Service] headquarters, the Counter Terrorism Command (CTC), and three Iraqi Special Operations Forces (ISOF) Brigades.”¹⁹⁷ The Counter Terrorism Service likely would not elect to work with China or Russia over the United States, thus presenting one clear U.S. advantage.

Third, recent U.S. policy choices and actions may complicate the U.S. ability to form and sustain reliable proxy relationships in the Middle East. Among the few potential U.S. partners beyond the Iraqi government are the Kurds, but they may be reluctant to engage fully with the United States in future conflicts, given past transgressions in the context of the Syrian conflict—namely, the U.S. decision to rapidly withdraw troops from northeastern Syria, leaving its Kurdish allies exposed to a Turkish offensive.¹⁹⁸ Moreover, the United States’ complete withdrawal from Afghanistan left its Afghan allies feeling abandoned by Washington,¹⁹⁹

¹⁹⁷ David Witty, *The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, June 2016.

¹⁹⁸ James Dobbins and Jeffrey Martini, “The Syrian Withdrawal: Where Things Stand,” *RAND Blog*, October 21, 2019.

¹⁹⁹ Zolan Kanno-Youngs and Annie Karni, “Series of U.S. Actions Left Afghan Allies Frantic, Stranded and Eager to Get Out,” *New York Times*, August 18, 2021; Quil Lawrence, “Afghan Allies Are Worried About Being Left Behind as Americans Evacuate,” NPR, August 25, 2021; and Peter R. Mansoor, “The Uncertain Fate of America’s Allies,” Hoover Institution, August 3, 2021.

which has stoked concerns among other partners and potential partners in the region about how reliable the United States is as an ally.²⁰⁰ Countries in the region may instead feel compelled to mitigate the risks of total reliance on the United States by also forging relationships with China or Russia. Indeed, Russia—ever willing to work with any actor that can provide it with an advantage, even if the actors it supports are in conflict with each other—has already been cultivating a relationship with the Kurdish Regional Government, reportedly supplying weapons to the Kurds in Iraq and supporting them in fighting Turkish troops in Syria.²⁰¹ With the Iran-backed contingents, China, and Russia arrayed on the same side against the United States, the U.S. military would be left facing multiple challenges at once with few options for additional partners.

In a related vein, the fourth issue is that U.S. alliances and partnerships may both help and complicate the ability of the United States to advance its goals in a hypothetical conflict. On the one hand, the United States has the benefit of having well-established allies in the counterterrorism fight. It is the leading member of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, which Russia and China (and of course Iran) are not part of. Additionally, the United States has robust relations with countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, several or all of which may provide support in the form of access, basing, and overflight rights and several of which conducted air strikes in Syria during early Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS operations. The United States also still has an edge when it comes to many Sunni and Kurdish groups. These groups are “still clearly and overtly willing to continue the partnership with the American side in various fields.”²⁰² On the other hand, the United States may not be able to constrain its allies from undertaking overly escalatory actions; for instance, Israel may act more boldly to counter Iran than the United States would wish, which could rope the United States into a conflict that it did not intend to participate in or shape the contours of U.S. involvement. Similarly, Saudi Arabia or the UAE could conduct operations against Iran that lead to unwanted escalation. Alternatively, in a U.S.-Iran proxy conflict scenario that is largely constrained to Iraq, the Gulf countries are unlikely to contribute more substantially to U.S. operations for fear that they may face repercussions from Iran for doing so. Allies conducting operations independent of the United States could also pose issues for deconfliction, an issue that was exacerbated by the Gulf Cooperation Council rift,²⁰³ which held back joint exercises and training that builds interoperability.

²⁰⁰ See, for example, Mina Al-Oraibi, “America Isn’t Exceptional Anymore,” *Foreign Policy*, September 1, 2021; and Joshua D. Kertzer, “American Credibility After Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, September 2, 2021.

²⁰¹ Rumer, 2019; and Mariya Petkova, “What Did Russia Get from Its Gamble with the Kurdish Regional Government in Iraq?” April 15, 2019.

²⁰² Freymann, 2021.

²⁰³ For more information on the dispute that several of the Gulf Cooperation Council states had with Qatar from 2017 through 2021, see Jon B. Alterman, “GCC Rift over Qatar Comes to an End,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, January 5, 2021.

Fifth, the United States may need to navigate tensions between great-power competition and the counterterrorism mission and the objectives and capabilities required for each. As discussed earlier, most of the scenarios that we assessed in which a conflict would erupt involving the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East would place all three powers on the same side; thus, counterterrorism and great-power competition missions may not be directly at odds in Afghanistan and Pakistan or in Iraq. However, counterterrorism operations could coincide with an eruption of a conflict between the United States and Iran-backed proxies, and in the latter, the United States might also need to face off against Russia and China. The capabilities needed for counterterrorism operations are primarily low-end capabilities, such as ISR and strike capabilities (e.g., Predator and Raptor platforms). Conversely, great-power contestation of airspace would require higher-end capabilities, such as stealth and high-speed platforms (e.g., F-35 and B-2 aircraft). Given the different capabilities needed, the United States may face tough decisions over how to optimize its assets to prepare for potential contingencies in the region.

Finally, Iranian actions could significantly affect the course and fate of any conflicts in Iraq and are difficult to predict, to some extent. Additionally, U.S., Chinese, and Russian relationships with proxy forces in Iraq are complicated by the strong Iranian influence over key actors in the country. Although Russia has been wary of deepening Iranian influence and military build-up in Syria, it is less concerned by Iranian activity in Iraq. The Iran-backed forces provide Russia with a convenient means of mitigating U.S. influence in Iraq, and Iran's activity does not currently encroach on key Russian interests in Iraq (which are, on the whole, less tangible than its interests in Syria, where Russia has bases and port access that it seeks to protect).²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, Russia's other regional ties, such as with Israel, preclude it from going all-in on Iran-backed forces in Iraq, because doing so could alienate or possibly jeopardize its interests elsewhere in the region. Thus, some experts have posited that "Russia will most likely maintain tacit (and semi-official) contacts with all parties involved, since this is one of the distinctive features of Russia's foreign policy in the region."²⁰⁵ Absent U.S. presence, the cracks in Iran's relationship with China and Russia may start to show, and there may be some fighting between these actors to preserve their individual interests.²⁰⁶

Overall, should the hypothetical scenario unfold in which the United States is fighting a reconstituted ISIS in the years following a withdrawal from Iraq, Washington would face numerous challenges, including additional complications from China and Russia. Keeping a small footprint in Iraq may thus be critical to ensure that the United States does not find itself in an undesirable position—because, as discussed earlier, previous RAND work and the history of U.S. involvement and withdrawal from Iraq suggest that drawdowns from the current posture will allow for the resurgence of ISIS. Assuming that the U.S. force presence does

²⁰⁴ Salacanian, 2020.

²⁰⁵ Salacanian, 2021.

²⁰⁶ For instance, China seeks to maintain close relationships with both Riyadh and Tel Aviv, which it would have to balance with its relationship with Tehran.

not continue to dwindle, the RAND authors assessed the risks of a resurgent ISIS to be very low.²⁰⁷ As a result, it is in the best interests of the United States to maintain this presence as a deterrent against a resurgent ISIS, although doing so is not without risk: The continued presence may also make U.S. forces a prime target in the U.S.-Iran proxy conflict.

²⁰⁷ Connable et al., 2020.

Conclusion

Much of the United States' warfighting since 2001 consisted of counterterrorism missions in the Middle East, but the rise of China and Russia as threats to the U.S.-led international order has prompted a shift in focus to strategic competition. With competition as the driving mission, U.S. efforts and resources have been concentrated in the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command and, to a lesser extent, U.S. European Command areas of responsibility, and attention has been increasingly shifting away from the Middle East and other theaters deemed to be secondary to the main U.S.-China and U.S.-Russia competitions. Nonetheless, the Middle East remains a strategically important region of the world in which competition among the great powers features prominently. Yet future great-power involvements in conflicts in the region are relatively unlikely to resemble those of the Cold War. Although conflicts that lead rival powers to back proxies on opposite sides in efforts to shift the balance of power are conceivable, they are less plausible than scenarios that draw in the great powers notionally on the same side, or at least opposing the same parties. In this chapter, we draw on the analysis in the preceding chapters to present key findings and recommendations for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force.

Findings

In this section, we summarize the key overarching findings that emerged from our analysis of competition across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains, as well as our Afghanistan and Pakistan scenario and our Iraq scenario. Because these findings were closely tied to the case studies and scenarios that we selected for analysis, not all of these findings may be generalizable to other cases or contexts.

Potential for Great-Power Competition in the Middle East Converges on Regional Centers of Economic and Political Power and States with Historical Relationships to the United States, Russia, or China

The United States, China, and Russia focused more influence-seeking efforts on countries that have large economies or militaries or that wield outsized influence in the region—in other words, countries that can be considered regional power centers. This is perhaps not surprising: Because great powers seek influence most in consequential countries, wealthier

and larger countries will almost always attract more attention in this regard than less well-off countries will. Similarly, wealthier countries often are better able to buy advanced weapons and develop advanced military relationships, so they will score higher on the military metrics. Wealthier and more-populous states may likewise present more-attractive targets for informational levers of influence because, even absent competition motives, it makes sense for a great power to place a regional bureau for a state-owned news agency in the largest market. As discussed in Chapter Two, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, both significant economic and military powers in the region, are at the top in the ranking of potential for competition across domains. The extent to which the convergence on such countries is a function of the inevitable large, wealthy-country bias divorced from strategic considerations, however, is by no means clear. Competitive logic quite likely plays a part; there are obvious strategic reasons to court more-significant powers. If the three powers all face resource constraints on their influence-seeking efforts, focusing resources on actors with the most clout and benefits to offer has obvious appeal.

Moreover, the United States, China, and Russia are drawn into competition in countries with which they have deep historical ties. Egypt, for instance, has a long history with both the United States and Russia. Pakistan has had a long-standing relationship with the United States and China. The fact that historic partnerships continue to affect patterns of great-power involvement is also not unexpected: Building on past relationships and mutual familiarity is often easier than pursuing new relationships is. And the state where the competition is occurring (e.g., Egypt, Pakistan) may gain experience in, and benefit from, playing one potential competitor against the other. Doing so can increase the rents that the host country receives from the competition and increase its geostrategic importance, further perpetuating the competition. Overall, focusing attention and resources on countries that have the most regional influence and offer the most opportunities to external powers is a logical approach that enables the United States, China, and Russia to maximize the impact of their limited resources.

The United States Remains Dominant in the Military Domain in the Middle East, but Russia and China Are Gaining Ground

Despite drawdowns in U.S. force presence across the Middle East, the United States currently retains its edge over China and Russia in both military capabilities and overall level of influence in the region. The United States has thousands more troops in theater than Russia does, while China has not stationed forces anywhere in the immediate region. U.S. exercises, training, and other security cooperation activities also surpass Chinese and Russian efforts in the region, and U.S. arms sales in the Middle East are more than five times greater than those of the United States' competitors.

However, both China and Russia have been steadily increasing their efforts across the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic domains. Although they are slowly gaining ground militarily, they have already outclassed the United States in some arenas of competi-

tion. China, for instance, wields more economic influence than the United States does—both in the Middle East and in most regions of the world. Both China and Russia have ramped up diplomatic and informational efforts in the region—especially in terms of high-level visits—while the United States has decreased its efforts in these domains.

Moreover, with circumstances changing quickly on the ground following the U.S. exit from Afghanistan, there is opportunity for China and Russia to fill the power vacuum, and Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan serve as launchpads for growing the great powers' influence across the region more broadly.

Great-Power Involvement in Potential Future Middle Eastern Conflicts Is Unlikely to Be Driven Primarily by Concerns over Competitors' Expanding Influence

Despite U.S. policymakers' general sense of concern over China's and Russia's expanding influence throughout the world, the Afghanistan and Pakistan scenario and the Iraq scenario suggest that concerns over competitors' increasing influence are not in themselves sufficient to motivate the great powers to become involved in conflicts in the Middle East. Instead, great-power involvement is largely spurred by issues internal to Middle Eastern countries. Of the scenarios that we explored in this report, the ones most likely to galvanize great-power intervention in the Middle East are those that involve the resurgence of ISIS, al-Qaeda, or other global terrorist organizations. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the breakdown of security conditions and stable governance within the country would pave the way for such a resurgence; these internal conditions could, in turn, spur external powers to intervene both to preserve their own security interests and to capitalize on the opportunity to deepen their respective relationships in the country and ideally weaken their competitors' positions. Absent internal dynamics that would prompt external intervention, the United States, China, and Russia are highly unlikely to start a proxy war solely to check or erode each other's influence.

Moreover, as previously discussed, the countries in the Middle East that are most prone to conflict are not necessarily the sites of the most intense competition. In fact, the countries that attract the greatest levels of competition often are those that are wealthier, more populous, and more influential in the region, while the countries most prone to conflict often are those that have weak governance, rampant poverty, or other structural issues that lead to instability. This further underscores that it is structural conditions within a country rather than great-power competition that make it more susceptible to the outbreak of conflict. Consequently, the countries most likely to serve as theaters for great-power proxy conflict or direct interventions are those that have both (1) internal instability and other security issues and (2) deep great-power interests.

The mismatch between conflict and competition in the Middle East, as in other regions of the world, suggests that preparing for competition and proxy conflicts may entail entirely different sets of countries, as well as different capabilities. Additionally, the subset of countries in the Middle East that present both great-power interests and conflict conditions is limited.

Counterterrorism and Great-Power Competition Are Interconnected in the Middle East

Competition is at times presented in U.S. strategic documents as its own mission set, distinct from counterterrorism. The 2018 National Defense Strategy, for example, cast these as two separate problems, arguing that “[i]nter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”¹ However, as our assessment of plausible conflict scenarios in the region suggests, the two concerns will likely remain intertwined. In most of the scenarios examined here, counterterrorism emerged as the most plausible major driver of great-power support for proxies and involvement in Middle Eastern conflicts. Moreover, counterterrorism interests underlie much of the great-power involvement and influence-seeking in the region and will likely continue to do so, even if none of the scenarios that we address materializes. For example, counterterrorism missions have enabled the United States to forge new and deeper relationships with partners in the region, including the Iraqi government and the (now former) Afghan government, which serves a second purpose of deepening U.S. influence in the region. And Russia has framed its support of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, as well as the PMF in Iraq, as being part of its counterterrorism efforts against ISIS.

In theory, all three powers would likely align on the same side to reach counterterrorism goals, because all three powers seek to counter global terrorist organizations that could affect their national security interests or jeopardize regional interests. In practice, counterterrorism efforts allow each of the competitors to cultivate more influence in the region even as they fight to protect their respective security and other interests. Terrorism can exacerbate great-power competition—for example, by drawing multiple powers into the same conflict in secondary theaters. Conversely, great-power competition can reinforce terrorism, especially if that competition plays out through covert means. In short, counterterrorism and competition are interconnected, and it may not be useful or practical to treat them as wholly distinct missions or to pursue a strict prioritization of competition over counterterrorism.²

Shifts in the Level of U.S. Engagement in the Middle East Might Contribute to Conditions That Lead to Great-Power Involvement in Proxy Conflict

In addition to highlighting internal conditions arising organically in countries in the Middle East, our analysis highlights the proposition that one of the more plausible paths to conflicts where the United States and one or both of its competitors become involved stems from shifts in the level of U.S. military presence in the region. In the Iraq case, further drawdown by the United States would likely create conditions favorable to the resurgence of ISIS or al-Qaeda,

¹ DoD, 2018a, p. 1.

² See Raphael S. Cohen, Marta Kepe, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Michelle Gris , Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in the Global Commons*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A597-4, 2023.

which would lay the foundation for a conflict that might involve all three great powers, even if they do not back opposite sides. In Afghanistan, the U.S. withdrawal has already allowed the Taliban to take over the country, potentially increasing the chances that Afghanistan once again becomes a safe haven for terrorist organizations. This, in turn, also creates the potential that both the United States and its competitors might once again have compelling reasons to become involved in a conflict there in some manner. Thus, shifts in U.S. force posture because of deprioritizing a particular theater could have the unintended effects of increasing the likelihood of conflict and leading to augmented Chinese and Russian influence in the theater.

The United States, China, and Russia Have Limited Willingness for Direct Military Engagement in the Region Unless There Are Direct Threats to Their Core Interests

Given that the Middle East is a secondary theater to the three powers and that none of the three automatically views each other's expanding influence as sufficient motivation for intervention in Middle East conflicts, it is unsurprising that all three powers have limited willingness for direct military engagement in the region. Across all the examined cases, we found that the United States is likely to be reluctant to engage in further conflicts in the Middle East unless there is a direct threat to U.S. personnel, facilities, or the homeland. Although the United States has many enduring interests in the Middle East, few would be compelling enough to trigger a U.S. intervention, particularly in the wake of the U.S. exit from Afghanistan and the aversion of the U.S. public to further wars in the Middle East.³ China is highly unlikely to intervene militarily unless a drastic threat to Chinese interests or citizens arises, in which case Beijing's involvement will most likely be narrowly tailored to addressing those threats (such as through noncombatant evacuation operations). And although it is more willing and able to engage than China is, Russia is unlikely to opt for direct military action unless there is a pressing threat to Russian interests in the region or to Russia proper.⁴ Because of this reluctance to engage, most plausible forms of intervention would entail indirect forms of support, such as providing funding or training; deploying PMSCs; or, at most, relying on special forces. In scenarios that would entail more-direct military involvement, all three powers are far more likely to rely on airpower than ground or even naval assets. Because the United States is wary of putting more boots on the ground—having just withdrawn from

³ Compelling exceptions include responding to drastic developments, such as if Iran were to close the Strait of Hormuz. Other exceptions that may prompt U.S. intervention include a serious external threat to Saudi Arabia or Jordan (particularly threats severe enough to threaten the survival of these states' regimes or territorial integrity).

⁴ The research for this project was completed in August 2021, as the situation in Afghanistan changed rapidly. As we note in Chapter Three, it is conceivable that, if the Afghanistan conflict becomes a more acute threat to Russia's CSTO allies in Central Asia, the requisite level of threat for greater involvement may well arise.

Afghanistan—and does not have substantial resources to devote to direct military interventions because of both domestic constraints and more-pressing interests to be pursued in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, air strikes are more plausible than any other tactic.

Conflicts in the Middle East Involving Great Powers May Not Resemble Those of the Cold War

We and our colleagues on this project aimed to investigate the shape of future conflicts in secondary theaters that draw in great powers: Would they resemble the conflicts of the Cold War, when rival powers backed opposite sides and produced sometimes long, bloody, and costly conflicts? Or would these conflicts resemble more the dynamics of the Syrian civil war, when, although the United States and Russia backed different parties, they found common cause in the fight against ISIS and generally did not use the conflict as primarily an occasion to impose costs on a competitor?

In the Middle Eastern conflict scenarios that we considered, our analysis suggests that all three great powers are more likely to support government forces than to support non-state actors (even if that support does not involve military tools or even substantial indirect support). Although China and Russia have been hedging their bets and diversifying their options for partners by deepening relations with such actors as the PMF and the Taliban (prior to the Taliban becoming the *de facto* government of Afghanistan), both competitors have generally preferred supporting government or official forces over non-state actors because government forces are viewed as generally more likely to be able to enforce stability in the country.⁵ To date, moreover, China's official adherence to the non-interference principle suggests that, at least for Beijing, the bar to render substantial support to non-state actors contrary to a sovereign state is high. Both Russia and China harbor concerns over Western-backed regime change and oppose it in the interests of protecting their own regimes. Because of these views, combined with the concerns about international terrorism, China and Russia are more likely to be notionally aligned on the same side of conflicts as the United States in the more plausible scenarios that we examined. This is so in Iraq in the event of ISIS resurgence, the conflict scenario we assessed to be more likely to produce potentially substantial involvement by more than one great power. This may be so even in Afghanistan, where all three powers may at least tolerate the Taliban government in pursuit of counterterrorism security interests. In a conflict centered on Pakistan, too, the more plausible response by the three powers would be overt support to or tacit acquiescence in a hypothetical military junta.

This is not to suggest that conflict scenarios where great powers back opposite sides, which are more reminiscent of the Cold War, are inconceivable. Despite incipient U.S. efforts to cooperate with the Taliban, the group is unlikely to become a reliable counterparty. Meanwhile, both Russia and China have *de facto* recognized the Taliban as the leader of Afghani-

⁵ See also discussion of Chinese and Russian views on this question in Cohen, Treyger, et al., 2023, Appendixes B and C.

stan and appear to have made their own agreements with the group.⁶ Given China's and Russia's varying levels of concern for and approaches to transnational terrorism, if the Taliban again sponsors al-Qaeda or other violent extremist organizations that do not pose an equivalent threat to the great powers, Washington may indeed feel prompted to intervene in an environment that puts it at odds with its competitors. Moreover, in an escalation of the U.S.-Iran proxy conflict in Iraq, there is a possibility that the Iraqi government—which underwent a transition following the October 2021 elections—could turn against the United States in favor of Iran. This would leave the United States with fewer options for reliable partners while giving China and Russia more inroads in the country. (There is also the possibility that Russia and China would covertly support the PMF, an Iran-backed proxy in Iraq, contrary to their preference for state actors.) In Pakistan too, as we note, a hypothetical military junta might be so threatening to U.S. interests—while accommodating China's—that the United States might consider supporting the junta's opponents. All such scenarios, however, are less plausible than the three powers backing the same side in a conflict and are less likely to draw substantial support from great powers for their respective proxies.

Recommendations

The insights that emerged from our analysis suggest several recommendations for how the United States may better prepare for the future competition against China and Russia in the Middle East, including in the context of conflicts. In this section, we provide recommendations for the U.S. government, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force.

Recommendations for the U.S. Government

The United States' renewed focus on great-power competition has translated into prioritizing the Indo-Pacific and European theaters. But China and Russia have increasingly global aspirations, and strategic competition is unlikely to be confined to those theaters. The Middle East remains a region where all three competitors have interests and are seeking influence—and where all three might become involved in conflicts. The Middle East remains a key strategic region, and the U.S. government should not underestimate its significance amid strategic planning for great-power competition. To this end, we make the following recommendations for the U.S. government.

⁶ Cindy Saine and Mirwais Rahmani, "Russia Latest Country to Establish Diplomatic Ties with Taliban," VOA News, April 9, 2022; and Jennifer Murtazashvili, "China's Activities and Influence in South and Central Asia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 17, 2022.

Recognize That U.S. Interests in the Middle East Require a Long-Term Vision for the Region

Protecting U.S. interests in the Middle East will require a renewed U.S. vision for the region that would enable the United States to compete successfully and prevent, or prepare for the possibility of, future conflicts. Such a vision needs to include an assessment of where and how Chinese and Russian influence would most likely undermine U.S. objectives and require countervailing actions. Chapter Two details where the potential for competition for influence is highest—and therefore where the United States might pay particular attention. Even in countries where the potential for competition is most acute, however, aspects of China’s or Russia’s involvement do not pose a direct threat to U.S. interests. For example, China’s deepening trade relationships with Iran’s regional rivals Saudi Arabia and the UAE likely serve as a constraint on China’s closeness with Iran, a desirable effect from a U.S. perspective. And, as we noted in Chapter Three, greater Russian and Chinese influence in Afghanistan post-U.S. withdrawal may constrain the degree of turmoil in that country without a significant adverse effect on U.S. interests.

In other areas, however, protecting U.S. interests may require more involvement in the region than would likely be the case under the current trajectory of U.S. strategy. After two decades of entanglement in Middle Eastern conflicts, U.S. policymakers and the public have grown weary, and in August 2021, President Joe Biden declared an end to an “era of major military operations to remake other countries.”⁷ However, to retain a dominant position in the security realm in competition and to prepare for—and, better yet, to prevent the escalation of—conflicts that might draw in U.S. competitors, the United States will need a strategy for maintaining influence with strategically important actors and places. This might mean maintaining a long-term presence in the region to secure the gains it has made over the course of its mission.

Maintain or Cultivate Ties to Friendly Governments and Non-State Actors

The United States has strong alliances and partnerships in the Middle East, but it can face more constraints in its choices of local partners than China and Russia do, largely because of the legal and normative demands on U.S. engagement. It is possible that the United States would find it difficult to protect its interests and advance its goals in a particular state if the government of that state chose to partner with China or Russia rather than the United States. In that event, the United States might be left with few viable options for partners to defend its interests. Meanwhile, China and Russia have both been proactively courting actors on all sides of regional rivalries and political conflicts—for example, forging ties with both the Iraqi government and the PMF, as well as with the now-former Afghan government and the Taliban. Although the United States does not need to compete with China or Russia for influence over the same parties, it could benefit from maintaining existing partnerships and building

⁷ Joe Biden, “Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan,” White House, August 31, 2021.

new relationships, consistent with U.S. legal and normative commitments. This includes a focus on maintaining close ties to pro-U.S. governments in the region and cultivating relationships with other potential non-state partners, such as the Kurds, certain Sunni tribes, and minority Christian groups in Iraq.

Rethink Arms Sales to the Middle East Through the Lens of Great-Power Competition

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the United States remains the largest arms supplier to the Middle East, approximately doubling Russian exports and surpassing Chinese arms sales by nearly sevenfold between 2014 and 2020.⁸ Over the past several decades, the United States has sold weapons to the region for a host of reasons—from cementing the Arab-Israeli peace accords to boosting Middle East countries' ability to counter terrorism and deter Iran.

Arms sales, however, provide the United States with a significant point of leverage in the overall great-power competition for influence in the region. The prospect of future arms sales provides an important carrot for Middle Eastern countries to maintain a friendly relationship with the United States, and because advanced weapon systems require continuous maintenance and training, selling U.S. equipment cements ties between the United States and the recipient country long after the sale is completed. The United States' reinterpretation in July 2020 of the 35-country Missile Technology Control Regime “in order to expedite sales of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to other countries” may have been fueled by competition concerns and provides the United States with the opportunity to sell such equipment to vulnerable partners.⁹

Selling weapons to the Middle East, however, also can be controversial. In 2021, U.S. military aid and F-35 fighter sales to Egypt, for example, triggered controversy because of the country's lackluster human rights records; the potential use of these systems in the ongoing war in Yemen; and Egypt's ties to other powers, including Russia and China.¹⁰ In this study, we did not go into the depth necessary to evaluate whether the United States should sell any particular weapon to any specific country, but our analysis does suggest that the United States should reevaluate how it weighs competing priorities in this domain. If the United States' number one priority is great-power competition, as some strategy documents suggest, then it needs to prioritize this dimension accordingly when it comes to arms sales.¹¹ Conversely, when the United States refuses to sell weapons to a country, it risks that country purchasing

⁸ SIPRI, undated-a, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian arms sales to the Middle East, in trade-indicator values, 2014–2020.

⁹ Daryl G. Kimball, “U.S. Reinterprets MTCR Rules,” Arms Control Association, September 2020.

¹⁰ See Nahal Toosi, “Biden to Withhold, Restrict Some Military Aid to Egypt,” *Politico*, September 13, 2021; and Nick Wadhams and Sylvia Westall, “Biden Prods UAE to Dump Huawei, Sowing Doubts on Key F-35 Sale,” *Bloomberg*, June 11, 2021.

¹¹ For analysis of the trade-offs, see Raphael S. Cohen, “What the UAE Weapons Deal Says About the United States and Its Alliances,” *Lawfare*, February 28, 2021.

from Russia or China instead. Even close U.S. partners, such as Saudi Arabia, have purchased weapons (e.g., ballistic missiles) from China, which places the United States in a difficult spot.

Recommendations for the Joint Force

In terms of strategic planning for defense, DoD (and, indeed, the U.S. government as a whole) tends to focus on the most-immediate or glaring issues to the exclusion of others, leading the U.S. military to lose some of its expertise and capabilities as it prepares for certain types of conflicts. Of course, the United States does not have unlimited resources, so it must be selective in the types of activities to which it devotes resources and attention. However, there are certain existing capabilities that may be instrumental to competition and are thus important to retain. With the following recommendations, we aim to provide the joint force with some strategic direction informed by our analysis.

Maintain Counterterrorism Capabilities While Cultivating Capabilities Relevant to Other Aspects of Great-Power Competition

As the summary of findings earlier in this chapter conveys, counterterrorism is closely connected to great-power competition in the Middle East. The United States has focused heavily on developing counterterrorism doctrine and capabilities since the September 11 attacks but has begun shifting focus away as it winds down the global war on terrorism. Great-power competition, by contrast, tends to require focusing on preparing for the prospect of high-end war against China or Russia, likely in the Indo-Pacific or Europe. This is undoubtedly a crucial component of deterrence and competition, but DoD should avoid the temptation to prepare for high-end war to the exclusion of other forms of warfare and other aspects of strategic competition that fall below the threshold of armed conflict. In particular, as the scenarios for plausible future conflicts in the Middle East suggest, DoD should also ensure that it does not lose valuable counterterrorism skills and capabilities, which it may need to leverage in the context of competition. These capabilities include not only military hardware but also regional knowledge and expertise (e.g., Arabic-language skills) and intelligence capabilities on the ground—both to track terrorism risk and to understand Russia’s and China’s activities.

Consider Maintaining Force Presence in the Middle East to Maintain Stability and Protect U.S. Interests

As our analysis of plausible conflict scenarios—as well as prior RAND research—suggests, shifts in the level of U.S. engagement could be a prerequisite to the outbreak of the kinds of conflicts in which multiple great powers might become involved. Even if these are not likely to resemble Cold War–style proxy conflicts or military interventions, with competitors backing opposite sides, they have the potential to escalate competitive dynamics; produce failures of deconfliction; expend resources; and result in the loss of U.S. influence over the conflict state, depending on the outcome. Consequently, the best preparation for conflicts in secondary theaters in the era of great-power competition remains conflict prevention.

To this end, as well as to preserve the gains the United States has made thus far, DoD should consider maintaining a force presence in the Middle East. This includes presence across multiple countries in the region—including in Iraq, where the approach to a drawdown is still taking shape. Decisions about presence, of course, must consider both benefits and costs and a detailed modeling of capabilities; although we did not conduct a comprehensive analysis of these factors in this study, our research does suggest that maintaining presence—in some form—would benefit U.S. interests. Force presence may allow the United States not only to ensure that ISIS and other terrorist organizations do not resurge, thereby preventing the eruption of conflicts, but also to maintain intelligence-collection capabilities and preserve U.S. influence with key actors in the Iraqi military.

Maintain Access Agreements in the Region, Especially for Overflight Rights

Although the United States likely will not intervene directly by deploying ground forces in the Middle East, it is much more likely to employ air strikes. Therefore, the United States needs to ensure that it can respond to any crises in this manner, so it must prioritize maintaining access and basing rights in the region. At present, should the United States need to conduct air strikes or other air operations in Afghanistan, it would need to transit the airspace of countries, such as Pakistan, that have been opposed to U.S. operations in the region. Moreover, Iraq has already recently voted to expel U.S. troops from the country. Because the United States has no status of forces agreement with Iraq, U.S. forces are reliant on the continued support of the Iraqi government for their presence. Absent such an agreement, the United States would face challenges to operate there.

At the same time, both China and Russia have leveraged diplomatic, economic, and informational influence to block the United States from operating effectively in the region. For example, Russia previously pressured Kyrgyzstan into voting to expel the United States from the Manas Transit Center in Kyrgyzstan, which had been an important hub for U.S. operations in Afghanistan.¹² Given China's and Russia's deepening influence across the Middle East, it is conceivable that they could pressure other countries into denying the United States access. With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States has already lost a great deal of access and has diminished posture and capabilities in the region.

Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

Given the United States' likely reluctance to deploy further ground forces to the Middle East in the future, the U.S. Air Force will, in all likelihood, have an even more prominent role going forward. The following recommendations provide suggestions for how the Department of the Air Force can prepare for this expanded role.

¹² Akhilesh Pillalamarri, "The United States Just Closed Its Last Base in Central Asia," *The Diplomat*, June 10, 2014.

Prepare for Continued Demand for U.S. Air Force Assets in the Theater and Invest Accordingly

The U.S. military has long relied on air assets for operations in the Middle East. Airpower, after all, played a key role in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even though the Iraq and Afghanistan wars may have ended, this may not make those air assets available for use in other theaters, for three reasons. First, as discussed in Chapters Three and Four, although the wars may have ended, the causes of regional instability have not. Second, as discussed throughout this report, the Middle East is an increasingly busy area for great-power competition. And third, the aversion to deploying additional ground forces or reengaging in Afghanistan and other parts of the Middle East where drawdowns have already occurred means that the U.S. Air Force will likely be called upon to supply an even greater share of military assets compared with the share of ground services.

As a result, the Department of the Air Force should invest in mobility and sustainment assets, ISR assets, and precision air strike capabilities to prepare for this expanded role. In addition to air strike assets, ISR capabilities will likely be in high demand for purposes of identifying targets and threats. Because the U.S. force presence and basing access in the Middle East has been decreasing, the Department of the Air Force may be called upon to provide mobility assets to deploy and sustain forces in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the region as conflicts arise. In areas where the United States no longer has overflight rights or is operating in contested airspace, the Department of the Air Force may have to stand up an air base in the country in question or nearby to support operations. The U.S. Air Force may also face increased demand for close air support for special operations forces that may be deployed to the Middle East for training, advising, or more-kinetic missions in the future.

The demand for air assets may end up being shared between the U.S. Air Force and the U.S. Navy, at least when it comes to areas of the Middle East where the United States no longer has nearby air bases. U.S. sources recently reported that the U.S. Navy may be tasked with leading counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal from the country, because of the “lack of U.S.-controlled airfields near Afghanistan,” which could mean “more planes taking off from decks at sea.”¹³ Although aircraft leaving from Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar or Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE are capable of striking targets in Afghanistan and have conducted such missions in the past, they face an arduous journey that entails flying over the Persian Gulf, around Iran, and through Pakistan before being able to strike a target.¹⁴ This means that aircraft launched from Navy aircraft carriers in the North Arabian Sea may actually be more efficient. Nonetheless, as the United States continues to shift its focus to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, a naval-heavy theater, it is possible that the Navy will

¹³ Paul McLeary, “The U.S. Ground War in Afghanistan Is Over. Now It’s the Navy’s Turn,” *Politico*, September 3, 2021.

¹⁴ McLeary, 2021.

not be able to spare aircraft carriers for the CENTCOM theater—with the burden falling on the Department of the Air Force.

Prepare for Multifaceted Deconfliction Challenges in Future Conflicts That May Involve China and Russia

Most of the plausible conflict scenarios that emerged from our analysis involve the United States at least notionally on the same side as one or both of its competitors. This does not mean, however, that cooperation among the great powers is very likely. It does mean that, in the event of direct U.S. military engagement in a proxy conflict in the Middle East, the U.S. military will likely face deconfliction challenges. As demonstrated most recently by the United States' and Russia's interactions in Syria, deconfliction is possible, but it is not likely to be simple or wholly successful.¹⁵ Notably, the increasing involvement of PMSCs, predominantly from the Russian side, produces “double proxy wars,” as Russian commentators note, or conflicts in which the intervening state seeks to hide its support for a local proxy behind yet another actor. These dynamics compound deconfliction problems.¹⁶ PMSCs—such as Russia's Wagner Group—may not be fully subordinate to conventional military command and may act on their own initiative. Thus, U.S. involvement in foreign conflicts alongside such competitors as Russia does not rule out periods of low-level and covert direct kinetic conflict between the powers.¹⁷

Final Thoughts

Our analysis shows that Cold War–style conflicts—in which the United States backs actors fighting those supported by China, Russia, or both and is driven by the logic of competition—are not highly likely in the Middle East. However, there are several scenarios in which some combination of the great powers would plausibly become involved. These scenarios are more likely to produce dynamics and challenges similar to the Syrian civil war—that is, problems of deconfliction and competition for influence over local actors behind the scenes, through nonmilitary means. In other words, although conflict persists across the Middle East, competition—even during a conflict—is a more likely state of affairs among the great powers in this region than is outright conflict.

¹⁵ Cohen, Kepe, et al., 2023; Treyger et al., 2023.

¹⁶ Vasily Mikryukov, “Повойоите за меня” [“Fight for Me”], *Военно-промышленный курьер* [*Military Industrial Courier*], October 5, 2015.

¹⁷ For example, Russian Wagner mercenaries attacked U.S. soldiers in Syria, although the connection to Moscow is unclear. In another example, Russia is alleged to have paid bounties for attacks on U.S. forces in Afghanistan, although evidence is not conclusive (Kimberly Marten, “The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir Al-Zour,” *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018; and Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, “Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2020).

Given the many intersecting interests that the United States, China, and Russia have in the Middle East, it remains a strategically important region of the world, including to the overall strategic competition among these powers. There are thus several steps that the U.S. government, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force could take to prepare for competition and potential conflict with great-power involvement in the Middle East. These steps largely hinge on ensuring that the United States adapts a long-term strategy for the region, allocates resources appropriately, and cultivates and maintains access and relationships in the region.

Details on the Competition-Potential and Conflict-Potential Indices

This appendix presents more-detailed information about the competition-potential index and the conflict-potential index presented in Chapter Two.

Competition Potential

Table A.1 summarizes the data used to measure each of the three great powers' involvement or influence-seeking in each country, across each of the four instruments of national power (diplomacy, information, military, economics). Binary variables—such as the existence of an embassy in a country—were assigned a value of 1 if the variable was present and 0 if it was absent.

To synthesize this broad set of variables, we constructed metrics, or *indices*, measuring great-power involvement in each of four domains (i.e., diplomacy, information, military, and economics) and combined them into an overall index for competition potential.¹ Next, we describe how we constructed the five indices for competition potential—that is, for each domain and overall.

Standardizing Variables

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

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

That is, for each country and great-power pair *ij*, a *z*-score for a given variable *x* measures standard deviations (σ) above or below a mean value (μ) of *x* across all countries *i* in the

¹ For a similar approach, see Daniel Kaufmann, Aart Kraay, and Massimo Mastruzzi, “Governance Matters VIII: Aggregate and Individual Governance Indicators, 1996–2008,” World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 4978, June 29, 2009, pp. 7–19.

TABLE A.1

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

Variable	Description	Sources
Diplomacy		
Foreign aid and assistance	Total aid or assistance reported to the country for the most recent year available (\$)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S.: 2019 disbursements of total foreign assistance, including military and economic assistance 	U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), "U.S. Overseas Loans and Grants: Obligations and Loan Authorizations, July 1, 1945–September 30, 2019," webpage, February 24, 2021. We supplemented USAID data with data on the Counter-ISIS Train and Equip Fund for Syria and Iraq (Security Assistance Monitor, Security Assistance Database, Center for International Policy, undated).
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Official Development Assistance for the latest year available between 2000 and 2014 	Calculations by AidData, "China's Global Development Footprint," webpage, undated.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia: Official Development Assistance (total net) for the latest year available between 2012 and 2019 	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, "Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions [DAC2a]," webpage, undated.	
High-level visits	Total visits by heads of state, top foreign policy officials, and top military officials (for the U.S.) between 2000 and 2020 (aggregated number of visits)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S.: Visits by the President, Secretary of State, and Secretary of Defense 	Office of the Historian, "Travels Abroad of the Secretary of State," webpage, U.S. Department of State, undated; and DoD, "Releases," webpage, undated.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs 	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Top Stories," webpage, undated-b; we supplemented that search by searching Chinese and regional news sources.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia: Visits by the President, Prime Minister, and Minister of Foreign Affairs 	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Russia in International Relations," webpage, undated; and President of Russia, "Events," webpage, undated.	

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
Embassy	<p>Existence of an embassy in the country (binary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verified for each country and great-power pair individually using official state information 	<p>U.S. Department of State, “Websites of U.S. Embassies, Consulates, and Diplomatic Missions,” webpage, undated-b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Chinese Embassies,” webpage, undated-a; and Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated.</p>
Visa-free travel	<p>Visa-free travel from each great power to and from the country (two binary variables)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Verified for each country and great-power pair individually using official state information 	<p>U.S. Department of State, undated-b; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, undated-a; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, undated.</p>
Information		
State-sponsored media	<p>Presence of each great power’s state-sponsored media (binary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S.: Presence of Voice of America bureaus, Middle East Broadcasting Networks bureaus, transmitters, FM frequencies, or contracts with local radio or television affiliates that retranslate • China: Presence of the China Global Television Network (i.e., China Central Television’s international division), China Radio International, or Xinhua bureaus • Russia: Presence of cooperation agreements signed by state-controlled media (RT, Sputnik, or TASS) with local media outlets and news agencies 	<p>U.S. Agency for Global Media, “Middle East Broadcasting Networks,” webpage, undated; and Voice of America, “VOA Around the World,” webpage, undated.</p> <p>China Global Television Network [هيئة البث العالمية], “Who We Are” [“نحن من”], webpage, undated-b; China Central Television, “List of Overseas Bureaus,” webpage, undated; and China Culture, “Xinhua News Agency,” webpage, undated.</p> <p>Nataliya Bugayova and George Barros, “The Kremlin’s Expanding Media Conglomerate,” Institute for the Study of War, January 15, 2020; we supplemented this source with news sources.</p>

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
Military		
Involvement in post-Cold War conflicts	<p>Participation in intra- or inter-state conflicts in the country between 1991 and 2021 (binary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Based on data on actors in conflicts between 1991 and 2021 	<p>Uppsala Conflict Data Program, web tool, Uppsala University Department of Peace and Conflict Research, undated (data are from 1975 to 2020)—in particular, the External Support Dataset provides data on the existence, type, and provider of external support for all warring parties (actors) coded as active in Uppsala Conflict Data Program data, on an annual basis, between 1975 and 2009 (see Stina Högbladh, Therése Pettersson, and Lotta Themnér, “External Support in Armed Conflict 1975–2009, Presenting New Data,” paper presented at the 52nd Annual International Studies Association Convention, Montreal, Canada, March 16–19, 2011)—and Dangerous Companions Project, homepage, undated.^a</p>
Arms exports	<p>Volume of exports to the country based on SIPRI’s trend-indicator value of exports</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S.: 2014–2019 China: 2014–2018 Russia: 2014–2018 	<p>SIPRI, undated-a; and SIPRI, “SIPRI Arms Transfers Database—Methodology,” webpage, undated-b.^b</p>
Presence of military forces and bases	<p>Each great power’s force presence in the country between 2014 and 2020 (number of person-years)</p>	<p>International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014–2020.</p>
Military agreements	<p>Presence of active military or defense cooperation agreements (binary)^c</p>	<p>Kinne, 2020 (covering bilateral defense cooperation agreements from 1980 to 2011); Office of Treaty Affairs, “Treaties in Force: A List of Treaties and Other International Agreements of the United States in Force on January 1, 2020,” U.S. Department of State, 2021; U.S. Department of State, undated-a; Government of the Russian Federation, “Mezhdunarodniye Dogovori Roisiiskoi Federacii” [“International Agreements of the Russian Federation”], database, undated; and various articles and sources in <i>Janes Defence Weekly</i>, <i>Defence Industry</i>, <i>Intelligence Weekly</i>, and <i>Country Risk Daily Report</i> publications, as well as Chinese-language news sources.</p>
Military exercises	<p>Total number of exercises performed with the country between 2014 and 2020</p>	<p>International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2014–2020. We supplemented this search by searching news sources in English, Mandarin, and Russian.</p>

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
PMSCs	<p>Presence of PMSCs in the country (binary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S.: Compiled based on the websites of major PMSCs and news sources • China and Russia: Compiled for each country and great-power pair based on various research, investigative, and media sources 	<p>The websites of Caliburn, Constellis, Continuity Global Solutions, DynCorp, K2Solutions, and Reed International. For the United States, we focused on current or recent information (post-2014).</p> <p>Legarda and Nouwens, 2018; Sergey Sukhankin, “Chinese Private Security Contractors: New Trends and Future Prospects,” <i>China Brief</i>, Vol. 20, No. 9, May 15, 2020; Brian Katz, Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, and Nicholas Harrington, “Moscow’s Mercenary Wars: The Expansion of Russian Private Military Companies,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, September 2020; Mikhail Khodarenok, “Частные армии желают узакониться” [“Private Armies Want Legitimacy”], <i>Gazeta.ru [Gazette]</i>, 2017; Candace Rondeaux, “Decoding the Wagner Group: Analyzing the Role of Private Military Security Contractors in Russian Proxy Warfare,” <i>New America</i>, November 7, 2019; and Luzin, 2019. We had no firm cutoff of how far back to look for PMSC presence, but, in all cases, presence was detected after 2000 and, in most cases, since 2014.</p>
Military access	<p>Access to the country (standing agreement or access granted in practice) (binary)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • U.S.: Presence of U.S. military installations or publicly known cooperative security locations • China: Port visits by the PLA Navy (visit frequency)^d 	<p>Stephen J. Townsend, general, U.S. Army, “A Secure and Stable Africa Is an Enduring American Interest,” statement before the U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., January 30, 2020; and Michael J. Lostumbo, Michael J. McNerney, Eric Peltz, Derek Eaton, David R. Frelinger, Victoria A. Greenfield, John Halliday, Patrick Mills, Bruce R. Nardulli, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jerry M. Sollinger, and Stephen M. Worman, <i>Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits</i>, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-201-OSD, 2013. We supplemented these sources with media reports.</p> <p>DoD, <i>Assessment on U.S. Defense Implications of China’s Expanding Global Access</i>, Washington, D.C., December 2018b.</p>

Table A.1—Continued

Variable	Description	Sources
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia: Access to ports or air bases (binary) 	We identified naval port calls and access to ports by searching English- and Russian-language press for each country.
Economics		
Trade volume	Trade volume (\$)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> World Bank's World Integrated Trade Solution, merchandise trade, for 2018, which was the most recent common year available 	World Integrated Trade Solution, undated, data set on U.S., Chinese, and Russian trade activity in the Middle East, 2000–2019.
Investment	Foreign direct investment position (U.S. and Russia), foreign investments (China) (\$)	U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, "U.S. Direct Investment Position Abroad on a Historical-Cost Basis," 2019; American Enterprise Institute and Heritage Foundation, undated (aggregate data for 2005–2020); and International Monetary Fund, "Coordinated Direct Investment Survey," webpage, undated (data for most recent year available, either 2018 or 2019).
Critical infrastructure	Presence of major Russian companies in critical infrastructure sectors (binary)	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Russia only: Investigated for each country individually through news reports and public corporate information, focusing on key Russian companies operating in the relevant sectors (energy, raw materials, transport, financial services, communications) 	We reviewed news and research reports on Russian companies in the Middle East and supplemented that research by reviewing the websites of key Russian companies—notably, Rosatom, Lukoil, Gazprom, Transneft, Alrosa, Rusal, Norilsk Nickel, Severstal, Nordgold, Ferrum Mining, and Uralkali. In addition, we reviewed news sources in English, Russian, and French.

^a The Dangerous Companions Project captures data on international support for non-state armed groups that are "engaged in violent conflict against one or more governments within or outside the state(s) they live." This support

takes many forms, such as funds, safe havens, sanctuary, arms, logistics, and transportation of such resources as well as diplomatic support from states, diaspora groups, non-governmental organizations (NGO), inter-governmental organizations (IGO), non-state armed groups, and foreign political parties (Dangerous Companions Project, undated).

^b SIPRI's trend-indicator value is

based on the known unit production costs of a core set of weapons and is intended to represent the transfer of military resources rather than the financial value of the transfer. . . . SIPRI calculates the volume of transfers to, from and between all parties using the [trend-indicator value] and the number of weapon systems or subsystems delivered in a given year. This data is intended to provide a common unit to allow the measurement [of] trends in the flow of arms to particular countries and regions over time (SIPRI, undated-b).

^c To determine what counts as a military agreement, we sought to follow the Correlates of War Project's Defense Cooperation Agreement Dataset, which defines *bilateral defense cooperation agreements* as "treaties that coordinate and institutionalize routine, day-to-day defense co-operation between signatories" (Kinne, 2020). Where we sought to identify such agreements outside this data set, we excluded agreements limited to arms sales and matters pertaining more to law enforcement than military cooperation.

^d PLA Navy visits were coded in bands from 0 to 4, where 0 = no visits to the country; 1 = 1 to 5 visits; 2 = 6 to 10 visits; 3 = 11 to 15 visits; and 4 = 15+ visits.

region for that great power j . For example, the z -scores for trade between Iraq and China indicate how much trade there is between those two countries, relative to China's trade with all other countries in the Middle East. We then converted the z -scores into percentiles, for easier interpretation.

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

Constructing the Influence-Seeking Indices

All standardized variables capturing influence-seeking activities in *each domain* (diplomacy, information, military, and economics) for each of the three great powers were then aggregated into an influence-seeking index, and each variable was accorded an equal weight, subject to some exceptions. That is, the z -scores were multiplied by the reciprocal of the number of variables in each dimension and summed for each country and great-power pair.² For example, each of the four variables in the diplomatic domain was weighted equally—as one-fourth—in the index that captures relative diplomatic involvement for each power in each country.

All standardized variables *across the four domains* were also combined into an index that captures overall influence-seeking *for each great power*, also weighting each variable equally.

Missing data for any variables for any country and great-power pair reduced the number of variables employed to construct the weighted index for that pair. For example, if foreign aid data from China were missing for a given country, the index was produced by averaging z -scores for the three nonmissing variables (i.e., high-level visits, presence of an embassy, visa-free travel) equally. However, for the countries for which foreign aid was present, all four z -scores were averaged.³

We chose to weight *each variable* equally—rather than *each of the four domains* equally—for the following reasons: Overall, we do not have strong theoretical reasons to prejudge that any single variable matters more than any other in creating the potential for competition.

² In the diplomatic dimension, we counted (1) the visa-free travel from each competing power to each country and (2) the visa-free travel in the reverse direction together as one variable. That is, the two sets of z -scores were weighted as one. For Russia, its direct investment position and critical infrastructure investments were also weighted together as a single variable. This is because both U.S. and Chinese direct investment data include critical infrastructure, whereas Russia's official direct investment position data are less reliable or complete.

³ Although this introduces a degree of non-comparability in the indices for each domain and great power, we concluded that this solution was preferable to the alternatives, such as imputing values, assigning zero to the missing cell, or not using otherwise informative data because such information was not available for every single country in a region.

That is, we want to avoid assumptions that, for example, the volume of trade matters more or less than the volume of diplomatic visits or military exercises in shaping the intensity of strategic competition in the future. Thus, we do not weight the diplomacy, information, military, and economics categories equally, as this would, in effect, suggest that each military variable is less informative about great-power interests than the single variable in the informational domain is. Therefore, our overall index is most influenced by military variables (of which we had seven) and least influenced by informational variables (of which we had only one). The emphasis on military or security forms of influence-seeking is partly a function of data availability, reflecting the fact that we were able to gather more-quantifiable information about the military domain than about the informational domain. However, given that the focus of this study is ultimately on the potential for involvement in conflicts, an index that is more influenced by military factors also appears justifiable. The analysis of each of the four domains separately helps ensure that we do not simply neglect countries where the potential for economic or informational competition, for example, is relatively high but military competition is low.

Constructing the Competition-Potential Indices

For *each domain*, the index that captures the potential for competition in each country was calculated by summing the influence-seeking indices for involvement in that domain for each of the three great powers. For example, in Table A.2, the diplomatic influence-seeking indices for the three great powers add up to produce a competition-potential index of 1.84 for Iraq in the diplomatic domain.

Tables A.2 through A.5 report results for each of the four domains, respectively. Specifically, the tables show the influence-seeking indices for each Middle Eastern country and great-power pair, as well as the competition-potential index for each Middle Eastern country in that domain. The countries are sorted from highest to lowest potential for competition.

Summing the overall influence-seeking indices for *all three powers* across *all four domains* produces the overall competition-potential index for each country in the region. We do not list these scores separately in this appendix, but the results are shown in Figure 2.5.

TABLE A.2
Diplomatic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East

Country	Influence-Seeking Index, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Iraq	0.71	0.56	0.57	1.84
UAE	0.43	0.70	0.60	1.74
Qatar	0.49	0.64	0.57	1.71
Jordan	0.70	0.48	0.45	1.63
Afghanistan	0.76	0.36	0.38	1.51
Saudi Arabia	0.54	0.43	0.52	1.49
Egypt	0.66	0.37	0.43	1.46
Pakistan	0.53	0.48	0.35	1.36
Lebanon	0.46	0.40	0.47	1.33
Syria	0.27	0.43	0.61	1.31
Bahrain	0.43	0.35	0.51	1.28
Iran	0.24	0.53	0.51	1.27
Oman	0.39	0.46	0.36	1.21
Kuwait	0.44	0.40	0.36	1.20
Yemen	0.27	0.41	0.43	1.11

TABLE A.3
Informational Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East

Country	Influence-Seeking Index, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Egypt	0.66	0.65	0.85	2.16
Lebanon	0.66	0.65	0.85	2.16
Pakistan	0.66	0.65	0.85	2.16
Saudi Arabia	0.66	0.65	0.85	2.16
UAE	0.66	0.65	0.85	2.16
Iran	0.33	0.65	0.85	1.82
Syria	0.33	0.65	0.85	1.82
Afghanistan	0.66	0.65	0.18	1.49
Iraq	0.66	0.65	0.18	1.49
Kuwait	0.66	0.65	0.18	1.49
Jordan	0.33	0.65	0.18	1.16
Qatar	0.33	0.65	0.18	1.16
Yemen	0.33	0.65	0.18	1.16
Bahrain	0.33	0.01	0.18	0.52
Oman	0.33	0.01	0.18	0.52

TABLE A.4
Military Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East

Country	Influence-Seeking Index, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
Pakistan	0.52	0.77	0.56	1.85
Egypt	0.56	0.55	0.74	1.85
Iraq	0.63	0.42	0.54	1.59
Saudi Arabia	0.64	0.51	0.37	1.52
Jordan	0.54	0.49	0.47	1.50
Kuwait	0.71	0.40	0.37	1.49
Afghanistan	0.64	0.39	0.44	1.48
UAE	0.66	0.50	0.28	1.43
Syria	0.34	0.29	0.75	1.38
Qatar	0.55	0.42	0.40	1.37
Yemen	0.42	0.48	0.44	1.35
Iran	0.15	0.55	0.62	1.32
Oman	0.38	0.52	0.37	1.27
Bahrain	0.56	0.33	0.31	1.19
Lebanon	0.25	0.49	0.35	1.09

TABLE A.5
Economic Influence-Seeking and Competition Potential in the Middle East

Country	Influence-Seeking Index, by Great Power			Competition-Potential Index
	United States	China	Russia	
UAE	0.96	0.89	0.61	2.46
Saudi Arabia	0.93	0.95	0.38	2.26
Egypt	0.68	0.53	0.83	2.03
Iraq	0.53	0.70	0.53	1.77
Iran	0.25	0.77	0.69	1.70
Pakistan	0.36	0.76	0.52	1.64
Qatar	0.69	0.34	0.29	1.31
Kuwait	0.34	0.44	0.34	1.12
Oman	0.35	0.43	0.29	1.07
Lebanon	0.27	0.18	0.49	0.95
Syria	0.24	0.21	0.48	0.94
Afghanistan	0.26	0.20	0.44	0.90
Jordan	0.30	0.25	0.34	0.89
Bahrain	0.30	0.19	0.27	0.76
Yemen	0.24	0.20	0.31	0.75

Internal Conflict Potential

To assess the potential for internal conflict erupting in each of the countries relative to the rest of the region, we relied on a combination of two complementary sources. The first is the Janes qualitative, intelligence-driven *internal conflict risk* measure, which is produced by the IHS Markit Economics and Country Risk team and “based on their own expert understanding of the countries’ political, economic, social, and security environment, using economic models, information from open sources, and structured intelligence gathered by a network of thousands of in-country personnel.”⁴ Alongside its qualitative text-based forecasts, this assessment produces scores, which are intended to be comparable across countries and range from

⁴ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020.

0.1 to 10 with steps of 0.1 on a logarithmic scale.⁵ Janes produces risk scores for different types of risks, including external and economic risks, as well as multiple dimensions of domestic risk. Its internal conflict risk is an assessment of the “likelihood . . . of intra-state military conflict (in the form of an organized insurgency, separatist conflict or full-blown civil war where rebels/insurgents are attempting to overthrow the government, achieve regional independence or at least heavily influence major government policies).”⁶ Janes internal conflict risk assessments focus on risk of violence involving non-state armed groups, which have “a relatively organised military force, exercise de facto authority over the population within a determinate portion of the national territory and have an organisation purporting to have the characteristics of a state (borrowing from the [International Committee of the Red Cross’s] definition).”⁷

We combined the Janes rankings with ratings from the State Fragility Index, an older measure produced by the Center for Systemic Peace.⁸ This index does not produce real-time estimates of conflict risk but instead assesses state fragility based on durable factors that have been demonstrably related to conflict and do not change easily—such as history of prior conflict, discrimination against particular ethnic groups, and the Human Development Index.⁹ In particular, the index

scores each country on both Effectiveness and Legitimacy in four performance dimensions: Security, Political, Economic, and Social, at the end of the year 2018. Each of the . . . indicators is rated on a four-point fragility scale: 0 “no fragility,” 1 “low fragility,” 2 “medium fragility,” and 3 “high fragility” with the exception of the Economic Effectiveness indicator, which is rated on a five-point fragility scale (including 4 “extreme fragility”). The State Fragility Index, then, combines scores on the eight indicators and ranges from 0 “no fragility” to 25 “extreme fragility.” A country’s fragility is closely associated with its state capacity to manage conflict, make and implement public policy, and deliver essential services, and its systemic resilience in maintaining system coherence, cohesion, and quality of life, responding effectively to challenges and crises, and sustaining progressive development.¹⁰

Because we are most interested in identifying which countries are at *relatively greater risk of conflict* than others—rather than by *how much* one country’s risk is greater than

⁵ This means that “a score increase from 8.1 to 8.2 represents a larger increase in risk than a move from 1.1 to 1.2” (Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020). However, in this study, we do not make finer-grained distinctions in terms of the distance in risk that separates any pair of countries that are ranked consecutively on the list.

⁶ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020.

⁷ Janes Military and Security Assessments Intelligence Centre, 2020.

⁸ Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, undated.

⁹ For full detail, see Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, 2017.

¹⁰ See Marshall and Elzinga-Marshall, 2017, p. 51.

another's—we converted the numeric ratings into ordinal rankings and combined the two (the Janes internal conflict risk rankings and the state fragility rankings) for a single ranking of countries from most to least potential for conflict. Table A.6 presents the scores and the rank of countries by scores from both sources—as well as the combined conflict-potential ranking that we employ in our risk assessment.

TABLE A.6
Conflict Potential

Country	Janes		State Fragility Index (Center for Systemic Peace)		Overall Conflict-Potential Ranking ^a
	Internal Conflict Score	Rank	Index	Rank	
Yemen	7.1	1	21	1	1
Afghanistan	5.1	4	20	2	2
Iraq	5.3	3	18	3	2
Syria	6.4	2	14	5	4
Pakistan	2.2	8	15	4	5
Iran	2.2	7	9	8	6
Egypt	2.0	10	10	6	7
Bahrain	2.1	9	9	9	8
Lebanon	2.6	5	5	13	8
Saudi Arabia	1.8	11	8	10	10
Jordan	1.3	12	6	12	11
Oman	0.7	15	5	14	12
Kuwait	1.0	14	4	16	13
UAE	0.7	16	5	15	14
Qatar	0.5	17	3	17	15

^a The overall ranking is based on the sum of the Janes ranking and State Fragility Index ranking, ordered from highest to lowest conflict potential.

Abbreviations

ANDSF	Afghan National Defense and Security Forces
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CENTCOM	U.S. Central Command
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CPEC	China-Pakistan Economic Corridor
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
DoD	U.S. Department of Defense
FY	fiscal year
ISF	Iraqi Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ISKP	Islamic State – Khorasan Province
ISR	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PLA	People’s Liberation Army
PMF	Popular Mobilization Forces
PMSC	private military and security company
TTP	Tehrik-e Taliban Pakistan
UAE	United Arab Emirates
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development

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