

# THE FLETCHER FORUM *of* WORLD AFFAIRS

## A Return to Great Power Competition

### ***Great Power Competition in Latin America – A New Normal***

Douglas Farah and Caitlin Yates

### ***A Nebulous Construct: Why “Great-Power Competition” May Not Offer Sound Guidance for U.S. Foreign Policy***

Ali Wyne

### ***Disinformation’s Dangerous Appeal: How the Tactic Continues to Shape Great Power Politics***

A Conversation with Clint Watts

### ***Reset or Relapse? U.S.-Russia Relations in the 21st Century***

A Conversation with Thomas Pickering



THE FLETCHER  
SCHOOL

TUFTS UNIVERSITY



## EXECUTIVE TEAM

### EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

*Lukas Bundonis*

### MANAGING PRINT EDITOR

*Evan Corcoran*

### MANAGING WEB EDITOR

*Fatima Taskomur*

### MANAGING DIRECTOR FOR COMMUNICATIONS AND EXTERNAL AFFAIRS

*Annalise Burnett*

### MANAGING DIRECTOR OF BUSINESS AND STRATEGY

*Ben Levy*

### SENIOR PRINT EDITORS

*Max Fathy, Nathan Heath, Josh Lavine*

### SENIOR WEB EDITORS

*Samantha Chen, Laura Handly, Siobhan Heekin-Canedy*

### SENIOR PODCAST PRODUCER

*Shawn Ghuman*

### PRINT STAFF EDITORS

*Sameer Boray, Halsey Diakow,  
Emily Kennelly, Ben Krueger, Kendra Poole,  
Zachary Shapiro, Alessandra Testa*

### WEB STAFF EDITORS

*Joshua Herman, Anuradha Herur,  
Abigail Kukura, Eric Smith, Kate Weine*

### COMMUNICATIONS AND EXTERNAL RELATIONS ASSOCIATE

*Seth Owusu-Mante*

### LEGAL STAFF EDITOR

*Nourhan Tomoum*

## ADVISORY BOARD

*Yasushi Akashi, Eileen Babbitt, Emma Belcher,  
Johannes A. Binnendijk, Elise Crane,  
Alan K. Henrikson, Deborah Nutter,  
Farah Pandith, David Reidy, Tim Ridout,  
Dorothy Meadow Sobol, Shashi Tharoor*

## HOW TO CONTACT US

### THE FLETCHER FORUM OF WORLD AFFAIRS

*The Fletcher School, Tufts University*

*Medford, MA 02155 USA*

*Fletcher.forum@gmail.com*

*www.fletcherforum.org*

*The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs,  
published twice annually since 1975,  
is the student-managed international  
affairs journal of The Fletcher School of  
Law and Diplomacy. ©2020.*

**Cover Image:** Adobe Stock Photos



THE FLETCHER SCHOOL

TUFTS UNIVERSITY

## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Editor-in-Chief, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*

The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

(160 Packard Ave - include street address if for

mailing purposes)

Medford, MA 02155 USA

## ADVERTISING

Address e-mails to:

Business Director, [Fletcher.forum@gmail.com](mailto:Fletcher.forum@gmail.com)

## BACK ISSUES

All back issues are available from

William S. Hein & Company.

Tel: 800-828-7571; E-mail: [order@wshein.com](mailto:order@wshein.com)

## REPRINTS

Reprints are available for a fee from Puritan Press, Inc.,

95 Runnells Bridge Road

Hollis, NH 03049 USA

Tel: 800-635-6302

## INFORMATION FOR AUTHORS

Please address submissions to:

Editor-in-Chief, *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*

The Fletcher School

Medford, MA 02155 USA

E-mail: [Fletcher.forum@gmail.com](mailto:Fletcher.forum@gmail.com)

All submissions should be sent as a Microsoft Word file.

Features should be 3,000 to 8,000 words. Perspectives

and op-ed pieces should be 800-1000 words. *The Forum*

follows Chicago Manual of Style endnote format.

## REPRODUCTION RIGHTS

For permission to republish articles appearing in

*The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, please contact

the Managing Editor at [Fletcher.forum@gmail.com](mailto:Fletcher.forum@gmail.com).

## LISTINGS

Full-text databases: CSA Worldwide Political Science

Abstracts, HeinOnline, LexisNexis, PAIS International.

Indexers: Gale Directory of Publications and Broadcast

Media, Standard Periodical Directory, Ulrich's International

Periodical Directory, WESTLAW.

## INTERNATIONAL DISTRIBUTION

Ingram Periodicals, Inc.

1240 Heil Quaker Boulevard

La Vergne, TN 37086 USA

## SUBSCRIBER SERVICES

Ebsco Subscription Services (Birmingham, AL), Swets

Information Services (Runnemede, NJ), William S. Hein

& Co. (Buffalo, NY), William W. Gaunt & Sons, Inc.

(Holmes Beach, FL), Blackwell's Information Services

(Oxford, United Kingdom), Dawson France (Palaiseau,

Cedex, France), Karger Libri (Basel, Switzerland), Martinus

Nijhoff (Zoetermeer, Netherlands), Swets & Zeitlinger

(Lisse, Netherlands), SMS Canada (London, United

Kingdom; Ontario, Canada).

# THE FLETCHER FORUM of WORLD AFFAIRS

THE FLETCHER SCHOOL, TUFTS UNIVERSITY

SUMMER 2020 VOL. 44:2 \$12.00 USA

## EDITORS' NOTE

2020 has not been a kind year, least of all in the realm of world affairs. In January, Iran and the United States nearly came to blows over the killing of the Quds Force's Qassem Solemani. In February, the *New York Times* retracted breaking news that a Russian airstrike had killed Turkish soldiers in favor of using language describing "pro-Syrian government forces." In March, lock-downs to stem the tide of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) infections were instituted across the United States and remain in varying forms even as this edition is released. The events surrounding the pandemic have totally upended "normality" in the United States and the rest of the world. Indeed, world affairs have begun to untether so convincingly from "business-as-usual" that it often seems they might never return to normal.

And during these uncertain times, global actors have seized the moment. China, eager to prove itself as a public health leader rather than negligent bystander to the pandemic's origin, has engaged in an aggressive, global propaganda campaign. In a similar vein, Russia—contraposing a now long-bygone era of security cooperation and rapprochement with the West—has engaged in its own campaign to discredit U.S. and European institutions.

Inside the United States—amidst a growing pandemic death toll—political and racial tensions have boiled over, leading to mass protest in cities across the country. The tensions underlying this unrest have produced an America incoherent in its aims abroad and unsure of how to put America first in an increasingly chaotic world. In the absence of willing hegemonic leadership, the global community searches for steady ground.

Enter the Summer 2020 edition of *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*. In our Winter counterpart, we explored the largely collapsing state of the international rule of law. However, if the above snapshot of current-year affairs and COVID-19 uncertainty is any portent of what is to follow, the global order this rule of law was built upon may look quite different from what we have grown accustomed to.

The first of our contributors, **SASCHA-DOMINIK DOV BACHMANN**, **DOOWAN LEE**, AND **ANDREW DOWSE** assess the virus directly in a Perspective which covers China and Russia's use of COVID-19 as a weapon in an increasingly convergent toolkit for information warfare. An interview with **CLINT WATTS** similarly explores the recent evolution of information warfare, explaining disinformation-as-statecraft from the perspective of his many years of government service.

In an assessment of soft power theaters, **DOUGLAS FARAH** and **CAITLYN YATES** write of the "new normal" that characterizes modern Great Power competition in Latin America, arguing that while the region is accustomed to incursions by Russia and the U.S., China's entry has benefited directly from clash-induced fatigue. **WENDY ROBINSON** assesses how China's "Trojan Dragon" Balkan strategy may find it must clash or reconcile in some way with the European Union's desire to pull the region more firmly into its orbit.

Finally, and turning partially to the United States, the illustrious Ambassador **THOMAS PICKERING** (ret.) unpacks the changing state of U.S.-Russia relations, explaining that while there are parallels between the Cold War and current affairs, there is still fertile ground for both mutual cooperation and diplomacy. An interview with Fletcher's own former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General **JOSEPH DUNFORD** (ret.), imparts characteristically different wisdom on the changing nature of military and technological competition from the American perspective. Finally, **ALI WYNE** resoundingly deconstructs the phrase itself, writing that Great Power competition may offer entirely unhelpful guidance to the United States as the tectonics of global politics shift ever further away from its shores.

In these troubled times, your readership of this edition quite literally means the world to *The Forum*, and we hope you enjoy this edition as much as we took solace in putting it together.

**LUKAS P. BUNDONIS**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

**EVAN B. CORCORAN**  
MANAGING PRINT EDITOR

---

TABLE OF CONTENTS

# A Return to Great Power Competition

RACHEL KYTE

**Great Power, COVID-19, and Our Global Future. . . . . 5**

*New Tactics*

SASCHA-DOMINIK DOV BACHMANN,

DOOWAN LEE, ANDREW DOWSE

**COVID Information Warfare and the Future**

**of Great Power Competition . . . . . 11**

CLINT WATTS

**Disinformation's Dangerous Appeal:**

**How the Tactic Continues to Shape Great Power Politics. . . . . 19**

*New Theaters*

WENDY ROBINSON

**The Trojan Dragon Comes to the Balkans. . . . . 29**

DOUGLAS FARAH, CAITLIN YATES

**Great Power Competition in Latin America – A New Normal . . . . . 45**

*New Horizons*

THOMAS PICKERING

**Reset or Relapse? U.S.-Russia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century . . . . . 65**

JOSEPH DUNFORD

**America's Place in the New World Order . . . . . 75**

ALI WYNE

**A Nebulous Construct: Why "Great-Power Competition" May Not Offer Sound Guidance for U.S. Foreign Policy . . . . . 81**


---

*The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* aims to provide a broad, interdisciplinary platform for analysis of legal, political, economic, environmental, and diplomatic issues in international affairs. The editorial board of *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs* believes that the publication's audience values and expects the inclusion of conflicting viewpoints; the board does not expect readers to concur with all of the views expressed by *Forum* authors. This inherent diversity supports the very definition of a "forum," i.e., a public meeting place for open discussion.

The views and opinions expressed in the journal are solely those of individual authors and should not be regarded as reflecting any official opinion or position of *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, The Fletcher School, or its faculty.

---

---

# Great Power, COVID-19, and Our Global Future

A FOREWORD BY RACHEL KYTE

---

It is time to refresh and reexamine our understanding of Great Power theory. As was the case in 430 BC, when the Plague of Athens killed almost one-third of its population and changed the course of the Peloponnesian Wars, COVID-19 threatens to alter the trajectory of the new Great Power competition.

2020 may be the year when the warnings of a new Great Power struggle seem prescient, however, rather than analyzing great powers through the lens of their wars, won, and lost, we swapped out that lens for one of pandemic and looming existential threats. 2020 may be the year when the mark of a Great Power becomes its ability to win a war against a pandemic virus.

How countries manage and protect their people and economies from the virus is forming their collective sense of heroism (frontline workers), sacrifice (lockdown for the common good), and identity (“together, we can do this” mentality). Coming at a time when in the West, the identity-forming, “good” wars of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are fading away, the COVID-19 experience may form a powerful shared memory.

We will still distinguish Great Powers by their relative power, their type of regime, and the quality of their leadership. But as pandemics have shown throughout history, they can often act as accelerants of demise or ascent. War is an ever-present danger, but together with the threats of nuclear proliferation and cyber-attack are threats from pandemics and climate change.

---

**Rachel Kyte** is the 14th dean of The Fletcher School at Tufts University. Prior to joining Fletcher, Kyte served as special representative of the UN secretary-general. In her UN role and as CEO of SEforAll, a nonprofit public/private platform created from an initiative of the UN secretary-general, Kyte led efforts to promote and finance clean, affordable energy and low-carbon growth as part of the UN Sustainable Development Goals in the context of the Paris Agreement.

---

As we entered the 2020s, the decade stretched ahead of us. There were signs of a deglobalization with Europe, China, and the United States inhabiting different parts of an ice floe, breaking up and flowing apart. Rather like the impacts of climate change on the poles, no one was sure how fast and how far apart they would float. At the same time, there were signs of concern for the global economy, as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) warned of instability born of inequality. China's 14<sup>th</sup> five-year plan, due in Spring 2020, was to be the most critical climate action plan the world was ever to see, with the hopes and aspirations of the world bound up in the levels of ambition for their energy transition. While the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals arrived at their last decade of implementation, the blueprint for a world better than today remained hidden beneath the surface. At the same time, two more—climate change and pandemic disease—hid in plain sight. The Fourth Industrial Revolution was underway, and digitalization, machine learning, and artificial intelligence, if managed, offered opportunities for more inclusive and more sustainable development.

We do not know what will come to pass as COVID-19 settles into our world—will China recover first and advance its military and economic strategic objectives? Will the difficulty of grappling with a novel coronavirus, as well as the economic impacts of fighting it, reinvigorate international cooperation and revive multilateralism? Or will we muddle along? Watching one or more of these paths unfold will open an essential new chapter in the way we think about Great Powers.

Since 1945, the US has been the leading military, economic, and technological power. When there was a global crisis, the world most often looked to Washington for leadership and solutions. The US has based its soft power on a well-earned reputation as a pragmatic, problem-solving, economics-minded, and technologically innovative global actor, including in public health.

However, the United States' international stance in response to COVID-19, consistent with the nationalism of "America First," has been a disdain for, and retreat from, global institutions and agreements, creating a power vacuum and fraying the binding ties which underpin landmark international institutions. Despite all the evidence that absent active global coordination, both defeating COVID-19 and restarting the global economy will be more difficult, a narrow definition of American self-interest has emerged fully onto the international stage.

Will China occupy the space vacated by the United States? As the United States announced it would cut its contribution to the World Health



Organization (WHO), China announced a modest increase. As the United States announced it would withdraw from the WHO, China remained to shape the response and the inquiry into WHO's actions in the early weeks of the pandemic's spread. China has worked assiduously to claim as a success its domestic management of the pandemic and its loyal support to other nations. Combatting the virus has become an instrument of its soft power. What has been called China's "mask diplomacy"—delivering planeloads of masks, protective gear, and ventilators to countries in all regions of the world—has received mixed reviews. While many countries praise Beijing for stepping up when others haven't, some of the supplies have been faulty.

At the same time, U.S. antagonism towards instruments of cooperation on public health, blame of China for the spread of the virus, and diversion of supplies of medical equipment and Personal Protective Equipment from allies have undermined its global response. The United States moves to block efforts to support increased financial capacity for the IMF so it may manage requests from member countries and to stop the United Nations Security Council from agreeing on a resolution. It simultaneously de-fangs G20 resolutions on global health cooperation, while fumbling its G7 leadership means that its allies and others openly question its standing as the "necessary" nation. Additionally, it has seemingly been unwilling to use its chairpersonship of the G7 to galvanize global leadership at a time of peril.

These two most prominent of today's Great Powers has had a great start to the pandemic. Both have been accused of at best, obfuscation and delay, and at worst, willful manipulation and dangerous pursuit of narrowly defined self-interest.

Both China and the United States are leaving few propaganda stones unturned to create their narratives and counternarratives as to who has acted honorably and competently in managing the crisis, and who is a partner to others in managing the global response. China's heavy-handedness in creating a narrative has also ruffled feathers. The inevitable independent review of what happened in the early weeks of the virus will test Beijing, though its persistent quest to rewrite the narrative may be rooted in domestic concerns, as China suffered the worst economic growth for decades at the height of the outbreak in Wuhan.

The United States is shaping its narrative with an eye on the stock market and other economic data in an election year. Both in China and the United States, disquiet at home over the response to COVID-19 may challenge the legitimacy of their respective leadership.

The United States, despite a proud history of soft power projection in global public health, has struggled to project competence and has been

immune to calls for deepening cooperation. The technology rivalry between the two Great Powers has been on display in response to COVID-19 as well. China has deployed artificial intelligence both for health surveillance and for understanding the spread of the disease. Beijing has also used the U.S. COVID-19 distraction as an opportunity to assert its sovereignty, in particular, in Hong Kong, as well as to impose its claims on disputed territories in the South China Sea.

Given that no country can self-isolate or isolate others from a pandemic or climate change, the next crisis on the horizon, will the Great Powers find common cause?

COVID-19 hits the poorest and most vulnerable the hardest, and recurrent waves of the pandemic will batter poorer countries harshly. The virus will work against the self-interest of the Great Powers, not only in providing a launching pad for the virus to return in colder months to the northern hemisphere, but also, as the pandemic undermines progress on poverty and economic development over the last thirty years, as a new source of migrants. Already straining under the pressure of gaps in energy access to healthy diets, the financial, economic, and health crises that the pandemic has brought about threatens peace and security regionally while posing threats internationally.

COVID-19 seems to ring the death knell for economic globalization, accentuating the turn to nationalist policies in critical countries and focusing Powers on their frontiers as they seek to control the virus and realize the fragility of extenuated global supply chains. Therefore, the bell will toll for the institutions that such globalization requires. There would seem to be growing evidence that the rest of the world believes that the United States is failing the pandemic leadership test, as well as the climate and nuclear proliferation tests. Having signaled, at least rhetorically, its withdrawal from international instruments of cooperation, the United States forces others to move ahead without it. Europe, in particular, hopes to keep the doors open for America to rejoin at some future point. Nevertheless, as the United States vacates the international arena, China may take the crisis as an opportunity to start setting new rules.

What would a new era of pandemic-inspired cooperation look like? Great Power leadership would be essential for a massive COVID-19 support program, galvanizing the world to build the public health systems almost all countries are lacking, and which could not only mitigate the worst of this novel virus, but certain zoonotic diseases still to emerge, and resilience to the much larger shocks as a result of climate change.

The Great Powers may usefully co-operate to ensure that the interna-

tional financial system can withstand the unprecedented demands made of the IMF to provide support from countries of all income levels and every region. The solution set developed in the late 1940s may no longer be fit for purpose in the next period, where threats can be global and concentrated rapidly in real-time. Since the last global financial crisis in 2008, China has grown in size and economic power and assumes a more prominent seat at the table. China's role as the most consequential development partner for several countries that prefer the United States as their security partner complicates Great Power dynamics. 2020 is a year of maximum danger, a moment when China's growth, coming closer to parity in economic terms with the United States and matched with a muscular policy in the South China sea, may, on the one hand, be paused by the economic impact of the virus. On the other, China may use the apparent disarray of the United States and other Western powers as a moment to exert control and project power.

If the United States were to exercise its soft power, could the pandemic offer a golden opportunity to reset global cooperation in preparation for the even more significant crises on the horizon? If China were to develop its soft power fully, could the same be true? Or will the virus serve only to accelerate the shift to more nationalist populism and authoritarianism? A Great Power rivalry with bared teeth may not equate to a pathway to deeper international cooperation but may further mount tensions in contested areas of projected power as well as in the corridors of international organizations.

It's too early to tell, but COVID-19, like the Plague of Athens, will not leave any powers unscathed. If, in the words of Stephen Walt, COVID-19 heralds a world that is "less open, less prosperous and less free," which path the Great Powers take will have enormous implications for the future of the entire world. And whichever way we end up traveling along post-COVID-19, understanding the relationship between Great Powers will be critical to our analysis of a decade crucial for the furtherance of global well-being. *f*



---

# COVID Information Warfare and the Future of Great Power Competition

SASCHA-DOMINIK DOV BACHMANN,  
DOOWAN LEE, AND ANDREW DOWSE

---

## ABSTRACT

*The coronavirus pandemic has ushered in a golden age of information warfare. Russia and China—the two most prominent authoritarian regimes contraposing the liberal, rule-based international order the West has strived to build and promote—have prospered most during the current COVID crisis. We look at the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) and Kremlin’s key COVID information warfare characteristics and explore how they are reshaping Great Power competition. We conclude with some suggestions regarding resilience and a joint counterstrategy.*

---

**Sascha-Dominik Dov Bachmann** is a Professor in Law at the University of Canberra and Fellow NATO SHAPE Asia Pacific (Hybrid Threats and Lawfare). He is a regular contributor to NATO’s Legal Advisor Web (LAWFAS). He acted as NATO SME (Cyber and Rule of Law) for the 2011 Countering Hybrid Threats Experiment in Tallinn, Estonia and The Hague. He is also a regular visiting lecturer at the Australian Defence Force’s Information Operations Staff Officer Course as guest of the Directorate of Joint Influence Activities of the Information Warfare Division of Australian Department of Defence’s Joint Capability Group.

**Doowan Lee** is a senior director of research and strategy at Zignal Labs who leads collaborative research and engagements with public sector stakeholders. Before joining Zignal Labs, Lee served as a professor and principal investigator at the Naval Postgraduate School where he developed and executed federally funded analytic projects on collaborative information systems and the network dynamics of ideological diffusion. He completed his doctoral studies at the University of Chicago while interning at the Argonne National Laboratory and the Santa Fe Institute.

**Andrew Dowse AO** is a former Australian Air Force two-star officer at Edith Cowan University (ECU) in Perth, Australia. He is the head of Defence Research at ECU and leads their Information Warfare program.

---

## COVID-19 AND GREAT POWER COMPETITION

COVID-19 (or coronavirus) has ushered in a new era of heightened competition among major powers. The pandemic's impact has far exceeded national security and public health. In

*In addition to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, we see increasing weaponization of the pandemic by both the Kremlin and the CCP to achieve strategic goals. Unfortunately, our own resilience to oppose such aggressive acts remains under-matched.*

addition to COVID-19 as a global health emergency, we see increasing weaponization<sup>1</sup> of the pandemic by both the Kremlin and the CCP to achieve strategic goals. Unfortunately, our own resilience to oppose such aggressive acts remains under-matched.

One of the key components of the CCP's strategy concerns operations in the information sphere, per the so-called "Three Warfares"<sup>2</sup> which is discussed later in the article. Below the threshold of armed conflict and taking place in the 'grey zone', such information operations manifest as either influence operations and/or 'strategic preconditioning'<sup>3</sup> for any later action, both with and without the use of force.

One of the key components of the CCP's strategy concerns operations in the information sphere, per the so-called "Three Warfares"<sup>2</sup> which is discussed later in the article. Below the threshold of armed conflict and taking place in the 'grey zone', such information operations manifest as either influence operations and/or 'strategic preconditioning'<sup>3</sup> for any later action, both with and without the use of force.

## INFORMATION WARFARE DURING COVID-19

Great Power competition of today is evident in Western relations with both the Kremlin and the CCP. The CCP appears determined to shape the world to a strategic vision where it will safeguard its economic, strategic, and security interests in Asia, the Pacific, Europe, and the Arctic for generations to come.<sup>4</sup> Russia—its strategic partner—aims to rebuild Russia as a 'Great Power' and player on the international scene with twin foci on Europe and on where opportunities may arise for it to weaken Western influence and interests. It should be noted that both the Kremlin and the CCP are using concepts which we describe as either *hybrid warfare* and/or *grey-zone warfare*, examples of which are best provided by contemporary Russian warfare approaches.<sup>5</sup>

Responding to the use of irregular strategies employed by the CCP and the Kremlin, the U.S. has included the concept of Great Power competition in its national security strategy. Great Power competition entails the distribution of relative gains with no finite terminal objectives. In this

context, it is not hard to see how information warfare plays a critical role in shaping how the great powers are competing in key issue areas where major powers use weaponized narratives to sow internal discord and distrust,<sup>6</sup> rendering their adversaries unable to focus on external threats. In other words, the information environment has thus become one of the main battle spaces of Great Power competition.

The need to approach information warfare from a full-spectrum perspective is more acute than ever. While disinformation mitigation is a critical component of information statecraft, it is *only* a necessary component, not the sufficient whole. Both revisionist states use digital media platforms and other information warfare capabilities not only to consolidate their authoritarian rule, but also to undermine and disrupt the liberal international order that the United States and its allies have buttressed.<sup>7</sup> Drawing on this inspiration, other autocrats are emulating the CCP and the Kremlin to exploit the information environment and undermine the strategic interests of the United States.<sup>8</sup>

Authoritarian regimes further seem determined to weaponize digital media and information technology from domestic population control mechanisms to foreign policy tools.<sup>9</sup> Emulating the Kremlin, the CCP seems poised to weaponize the cyber domain, as well as publicly available information (PAI) as tools of disruption and coercion.<sup>10</sup> For example, the CCP has aggressively promoted patently false narratives about the origin of the coronavirus. In addition, it has actively promoted the Party's public health 'leadership' using automated accounts, bots, and trolls, despite numerous frauds and defects noticed in several countries.<sup>11</sup> The CCP's COVID aid to other countries has further been riddled with frauds, to say nothing of its explicit use for propaganda purposes.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, the Kremlin is exploiting the pandemic to highlight how the European Union is failing its mandates.<sup>13</sup> While this is consistent with the Kremlin's information operations as we saw in the 2016 election, it has palpably escalated its propaganda efforts during the COVID pandemic by intentionally propping up radical right conversations that promote the dissolution of the EU.<sup>14</sup>

## THE CCP'S INFORMATION WARFARE DOCTRINE

Today, the CCP is focusing on the 'cognitive' domain of information operations and aims to *precondition* the political, strategic, operational, and tactical arenas in the short and long run. It achieves its foreign policy and military goals through evolving strategies such as the introduction of propaganda at horizontal and vertical levels and the maintenance of a very reliable

and flexible apparatus in and outside of China.<sup>15</sup> It emphasizes ‘influence operations,’ which are materialized in the ‘Three Warfares’<sup>16</sup> (*san zhong zhanfa*). In 2003, the CCP Central Committee and the Central Military Commission (CMC) approved the concept of the Three Warfares,<sup>17</sup> which consists of:

*Public Opinion*—which intends to influence internal and external public opinion to project a good image and reputation of China and its interests;

*Psychological Warfare*—which seeks to undermine an enemy’s ability to conduct combat operations by deterring and demoralizing enemy military personnel, as well as supporting civilian populations; and

*Legal Warfare*—which uses national and international law to claim China’s legal high ground, interests, and build international support to precondition and change public international law in the benefit of China’s interests.

Applied to the current COVID crisis, the CCP is taking the opportunity to further its interests, exploiting the Three Warfares, the economic Belt and Road Initiative, and aid programs to increase influence over other nations, especially those in the Asia-Pacific.<sup>18</sup> The CCP is also moving

.....  
*However, the coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated the limits of the Three Warfares, with widespread disbelief of the Chinese propaganda offering alternative views of the coronavirus’ origin.*  
 .....

ahead to shore up long-held objectives, including Hong Kong,<sup>19</sup> the South China Sea,<sup>20</sup> and Taiwan.<sup>21</sup> However, the coronavirus pandemic has also demonstrated the limits of the Three Warfares, with widespread disbelief of the Chinese propaganda offering alternative views of the coronavirus’ origin. This has led to a Russian-inspired shift of Chinese disinformation from overt to covert.<sup>22</sup> We have also witnessed an increasing tendency by the CCP to counter critical nations with informa-

tion warfare, augmented with economic coercion, notably with acts against Australian imports.<sup>23</sup> In sum, Beijing’s information warfare is becoming increasingly sophisticated, powered by the use of artificial intelligence and aimed at overall ‘thought management’.<sup>24</sup>



## KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF COVID INFORMATION WARFARE CONDUCTED BY THE CCP AND THE KREMLIN

We define disinformation, as a subset of misinformation, as false or misleading information that is spread deliberately to deceive. It entails three components to unpack. First, agency as a part of a strategy. Disinformation is intentional where misinformation can be incidental or unwitting. Second, disinformation requires mechanisms to propagate. Intentionally designed disruptive narratives cannot achieve intended effects unless they reach larger audiences. Simply put, disinformation must spread to work. Third, unlike misinformation, disinformation has discernable objectives. These objectives range from obfuscation to distrust, disruption, and destabilization.

Of note, the trend of disinformation has not changed much as its notion originated from the Russian word *dezinformatsiya* as a component of Soviet 'active measures' at the onset of the Cold War. However, what is different during the COVID pandemic is the pace of disinformation propagation. This accelerated pace appears to have three broad characteristics. First, we notice an elevated level of politicized content. This is the first global crisis where major powers are all messaging to promote and advance their parochial interests, whether because of nationalism arising from the pandemic threat, or because of the global competition each power believes is critical to secure those interests. While international terrorism was the last global issue major powers messaged on, most of the actual acts of terrorism have remained localized, regional, or were not located in the West at all,<sup>25</sup> with only a few exceptions.

Second, we note elevated levels of artificial amplification,<sup>26</sup> employed by the CCP and the Kremlin. They appear to exploit bots, trolls, and syndicated news outlets that can propagate their narratives with much more haste than fact-checkers could anticipate. Third, we are also alarmed by an implicit or tacit convergence of like-minded actors along ideological lines, which appears to mirror the current political decoupling we see around the globe. It appears Larry Diamond's warnings about illiberal winds<sup>27</sup> at least partially prophesied their number during the COVID pandemic.

We need to refocus on the strategic context within which we see the rapid propagation of disinformation. Intensity of disinformation competition will stem from the actual competition among major powers. We must also ask how we increase awareness of this competition in order to become more resilient to its negative effects.

What is the content our adversaries are promoting when talking about the pandemic? What are the key themes of strategic disinformation?

What are the ‘failures’ and inherent weaknesses of democratic institutions and societies dealing with the pandemic and its potential for exploitation for strategic goals? How can these failures across FVEY political, military, economic, social, infrastructure, and information domains be exploited by this tactic through the use of diplomatic, informational, military, economic, financial, intelligence, and legal (DIMEFIL) strategy?

We must treat disinformation as a full-spectrum problem set. We must go beyond mitigation, become more proactive, and move from passive defense to active defense in these domains. We must promote public-private partnerships in the U.S. and among its partners to harvest and integrate the best solutions in support of influence competition and strategic communication. These solutions, in turn, will viably support diplomacy—as highlighted by U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo’s public support for Australia as a strategic partner<sup>28</sup>—and will offer concrete economic steps such as funding of vaccines research at home and in collaboration with partner nations.<sup>29</sup>

Countering the information warfare threat from our adversaries must account for the vulnerabilities caused by the current pandemic and its human and economic cost. It must also aim to actively contain and push back on CCP’s plan for a new Global Order.<sup>30</sup> Resembling our generation’s greatest threat, we need to ensure that our nations are not vulnerable to economic coercion and political interference by the CCP. Our future relations with the PRC must come from a position of unity and strength<sup>31</sup> and not one of weakness. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 “How China weaponizes COVID-19 in the East Vietnam Sea,” *VNexplorer*, April 26, 2020, <<https://vnexplorer.net/how-china-weaponizes-covid-19-in-the-east-vietnam-sea-a202029303.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 2 Stefan Halper, “China: The Three Warfares,” Study Report, May 2013, <<https://cryptome.org/2014/06/prc-three-wars.pdf>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 3 Munoz Mosquera and Sascha Dov-Dominik (Dov) Bachmann, “How China Uses Strategic Preconditioning in the Age of Great Power Competition,” *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, May 18, 2020, <<https://www.fletcherforum.org/home/2020/5/13/how-china-uses-strategic-preconditioning-in-the-age-of-great-power-competition>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 4 Sascha Dov Bachmann, Andrew Dowse, and Hakan Gunneriusson, “Competition Short of War – How Russia’s Hybrid and Grey-Zone Warfare Are a Blueprint for China’s Global Power Ambitions,” *Australian Journal of Defence and Strategic Studies* 1(1) (2019) <[https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3483981](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3483981)> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 5 Pep Escobar, “China updates its ‘Art of (Hybrid) War’,” *Asia Times*, May 19, 2020, <<https://asiatimes.com/2020/05/china-updates-its-art-of-hybrid-war/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).

- 6 Brad Allenby, "Weaponized Narrative Is the New Battlespace," *Defense One*, January 3, 2017 <<https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2017/01/weaponized-narrative-new-battlespace/134284/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 7 H. R. McMaster, "How China sees the World – And How we should see China," *The Atlantic*, May 2020, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/05/mcmaster-china-strategy/609088/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 8 Lachlan Markay, "Autocrats and Their Allies Use Coronavirus to Burnish U.S. Image," *Daily Beast*, May 14, 2020 <<https://www.thedailybeast.com/autocrats-and-their-allies-use-coronavirus-to-burnish-us-image>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 9 "'Too soon, too loud:' China's Wolf Warrior diplomacy is backfiring," *Democracy Digest*, May 14, 2020 <<https://www.demdigest.org/defend-democratic-norms-to-counter-chinas-expanding-malign-influence/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 10 Zak Doffman, "Chinese Military Cyber Spies just Caught Crossing a 'Very Dangerous' New Line," May 7, 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/zakdoffman/2020/05/07/chinese-military-cyber-spies-just-caught-crossing-a-very-dangerous-new-line/#56ee84fb2ab3>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 11 Alan Weedon, "China's coronavirus supplies are being rejected – how do we ensure quality in a pandemic," <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-04/china-coronavirus-covid-19-medical-supplies-recalled-regulation/12105110?nw=0>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 12 "China's post-covid propaganda push," *The Economist*, April 16, 2020, <<https://www.economist.com/china/2020/04/16/chinas-post-covid-propaganda-push>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 13 Mark Scott, "Russia and China push 'fake news' aims at weakening Europe: report," *Politico*, January 1, 2020, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/russia-china-disinformation-coronavirus-covid19-facebook-google/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 14 Ramadan Alout, "EU collapse brought as close as possible," May 12, 2020, <<https://www.idelreal.org/a/30584883.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 15 Sangkuk Lee, "China's 'Three Warfares': Origins, Applications, and Organizations," 37 (2) *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37(2), April 17, 2014, <<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01402390.2013.870071>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Timothy A. Walton, "China's Three Warfares," *Delex Special Report*, January 18, 2012 <<http://www.delex.com/data/files/Three%20Warfares.pdf>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 18 Jonathan Pryke & Richard McGregor, "China's Coronavirus Aid to Pacific Islands is part of a Geopolitical Game," *Lowy Institute*, Commentary, April 23, 2020 <<https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/china-coronavirus-aid-pacific-islands-part-geopolitical-game>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 19 Marc A. Thiessen, "China is using covid-19 to throttle Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement," *The Washington Post*, May 22, 2020 <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/05/21/china-is-using-covid-19-throttle-hong-kongs-pro-democracy-movement/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 20 Michael Sainsbury, "China uses COVID cover to push on with South China Sea expansion," *Crikey*, May 13, 2020 <<https://www.crikey.com.au/2020/05/13/china-uses-covid-cover-to-push-on-with-south-china-sea-expansion/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 21 Erin Hale, "In shadow of coronavirus, China steps up manoeuvres near Taiwan," *Al Jazeera*, April 23, 2020 <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/shadow-coronavirus-china-steps-manoevres-taiwan-200422011542456.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).

- 22 Sarah Cook, "Welcome to the New Era of Chinese Government Disinformation," *The Diplomat*, <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/welcome-to-the-new-era-of-chinese-government-disinformation/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 23 Ashley Townsend, "China's Pandemic-Fueled Standoff with Australia," *War On The Rocks*, May 20, 2020 <<https://warontherocks.com/2020/05/chinas-pandemic-fueled-standoff-with-australia/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 24 Devin Thorne, "AI-Powered Propaganda and the CCP's Plan for Next-Generation 'Thought Management,'" *The Jamestown Foundation – China Brief*, Volume 20(9), May 15, 2020 <<https://jamestown.org/program/ai-powered-propaganda-and-the-ccps-plans-for-next-generation-thought-management/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 25 "Number of terrorist attacks in 2018, by country," *Statista Research Department*, November 19, 2019 <<https://www.statista.com/statistics/236983/terrorist-attacks-by-country/>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 26 Peter Suci, "COVID-19 Misinformation Remains Difficult To Stop On Social Media," *Forbes*, April 17, 2020 <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/petersuci/2020/04/17/covid-19-misinformation-remains-difficult-to-stop-on-social-media/#5631b2b54819>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 27 Larry Diamond, "Ill Winds: Saving Democracy from Russian Rage, Chinese Ambition, and American Complacency," Stanford University, *Book Review*, 2019 <<https://diamond-democracy.stanford.edu/publications/ill-winds-saving-democracy-russian-rage-chinese-ambition-and-american-complacency>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 28 Matthew Knott, "'We stand with Australia': Mike Pompeo hits out at China threat," *The Sydney Morning Herald*, May 21, 2020 <<https://www.smh.com.au/world/north-america/we-stand-with-australia-mike-pompeo-hits-out-at-china-threats-20200521-p54uzz.html>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 29 "Trump's Operation Warp Speed: Hopes of coronavirus vaccine by end of year," *Sky News*, May 16, 2020 <<https://news.sky.com/story/trumps-operation-warp-speed-hopes-of-coronavirus-vaccine-by-end-of-year-11989190>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 30 Kurt M Campbell and Rush Doshi, "The Coronavirus Could Reshape Global Order," *Foreign Affairs*, March 18, 2020 <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2020-03-18/coronavirus-could-reshape-global-order>> (accessed May 15, 2020).
- 31 Tasha Levy, "INSIGHT: Australia's relationship with China – Andrew Hastie MP," *Defence Connect*, March 19, 2020 <<https://www.defenceconnect.com.au/key-enablers/5792-insight-australia-s-relationship-with-china-andrew-hastie-mp>> (accessed May 15, 2020).

---

# Disinformation's Dangerous Appeal: How the Tactic Continues to Shape Great Power Politics

A CONVERSATION WITH CLINT WATTS

---

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Can you define for us what is meant by the term, “disinformation”?*

**CLINT WATTS:** Disinformation is information that is deliberately created to achieve an objective that is knowingly false. This means that the person, the organization, the country, or the entity that is distributing it knows that it is not true, but it's designed to create or achieve a deliberate objective in the information space. And, actually, it is rooted in a Russian term, “dezinformatsiya.” They invented the concept of it, which is when you make deliberately false information and it spread everywhere. It is to be distinguished from misinformation, which is false information that people share unknowingly. They don't realize that it's false; they actually believe it. A good example is anti-vaccine misinformation; people believe that vaccines cause autism. To this day, many people believe that, but it has been disproven. But the people sharing it think that that is true. They're

---

**Clint Watts** is a Distinguished Research Fellow at the Foreign Policy Research Institute and Non-Resident Fellow at the Alliance for Securing Democracy. He is also a national security contributor for NBC News and MSNBC. He recently examined the rise of social media influence by publishing his first book entitled *Messing with The Enemy: Surviving in a Social Media World of Hackers, Terrorists, Russians and Fake News*. Before becoming a consultant, Clint served as a U.S. Army infantry officer, a FBI Special Agent, as the Executive Officer of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point (CTC), as a consultant to the FBI's Counter Terrorism Division (CTD) and National Security Branch (NSB), and as an analyst supporting the U.S. Intelligence Community and U.S. Special Operations Command.

---

not deliberately trying to mislead people. Whereas, when the Russians go after the election and try to advance conspiracies in the U.S. election space about Trump or Clinton or Biden—that is disinformation designed to achieve a political objective in that case.

**FORUM:** *What is the appeal of disinformation. What is the real psychological appeal? Many times, disinformation seems too fake to be real, but people across all manner of social media amplify it to the point of credibility alongside well-researched accounts. Why is that?*

**WATTS:** This is part of the research that I think has not been done very well. And, actually, a guy named Sam Wooley, who used to work at the Oxford Propaganda Project, talks about it—the demand for disinformation. Smart disinformation peddlers—the Kremlin being the best at it in the game, but political actors also being really good at it—spot things that they know the audience wants to hear. They design disinformation to engage them, and they know it will take off. Right now, a great example is the Bill Gates conspiracies and the World Health Organization. The narrative goes that there is some sort of organization or cabal—a secret elite organization that has spread the coronavirus. That doesn't come from Russia, but it comes from actors that want to build that narrative. You'll see these sort of narratives turned over and over and over again. One that immediately came up was Google and Apple creating tracking around coronavirus. As soon as I saw that, I thought, "Okay, there is demand out there amongst privacy people and technology conspiracists that they're being tracked everywhere they go." And as soon as they see that story, you're going to see disinformation being pushed. Some knowingly doing it just to track eyeballs; maybe they want clicks on ads or that sort of thing. But others push it for a political agenda. And then the misinformation layers on top. People believe that they are being tracked on their phone now, and they start sharing it because they're worried. So, disinformation and misinformation can overlap and amplify off of each other. And good—and when I say good I mean highly prolific—disinformation peddlers know what the audience wants and how to keep giving narratives or feeding narratives to confirm their beliefs.

**FORUM:** *Can you lay out who the major state players in the disinformation sphere are and what sort of strategies they are pursuing?*

**WATTS:** Russia is the sort of "godfather" of disinformation. They moved to it very deliberately, for one, to control their own internal population

during the Soviet era—to close down information and create conspiracies so that they controlled a version of truth. Once the internet age unfolded, they realized that the only thing worse than no information is too much information. As you flood audiences with so much conflicting information, disinformation, and things that they know to be false, people either don't know what to believe or fall back on their biases and start believing what they want and what their digital tribe believes. That's the implicit bias. People naturally want information that confirms their beliefs and from people that look like them and talk like them. That is why the Russian trolls were designed to look like Americans and talk like Americans and resurface American themes and narratives. Because, once you see that over time, you begin to trust it and that person becomes a source. So, the Russians are very good at it.

The Chinese have come on in recent months and years and are taking it on. I would say they are at about a Russian level circa 2014-2015; they're kind of learning all the techniques. We are seeing a lot of news stories—a lot of different political agendas in the U.S. are trying to advance this—that China is just as bad or worse. That will be the story. They are doing disinformation, and they are the ones to worry about over time. But they're not quite there yet. They will be better than the Russians eventually because they have technology, they have the science, they have AI, they have a lot of the tools and techniques that the Russians could never have or even afford. So with the art and science, once they come together, the Chinese are going to be powerful. I would look at 2024; they are going to be zooming along in this space.

.....  
*Authoritarians love  
disinformation, and now  
that the playbook is out  
there, everyone is copying it.*  
.....

Iran has also been a long-time disinformation peddler, particularly on social media. They built up their capacity after the 2009 Twitter revolution that popped up there. If you look at any other authoritarian state, what has been remarkable is how quickly they've gravitated toward it. We've seen it in Myanmar, Cambodia, the Philippines—there is a strong sense of that. The Saudis have jumped in at times, the UAE, Turkey, Israel—all different actors trying their hand at it. But their capability and their operational procedures around it aren't quite as strong, or at least not yet. That doesn't mean they won't get there. Authoritarians love disinformation, and now that the playbook is out there, everyone is copying it.

**FORUM:** *A very recent State Department report claims that the big three of disinformation (Russia, Iran, and China) are all pushing convergent narratives on COVID-19. All three now seem to be peddling very similar themes: the virus did not originate in China, the U.S. is responsible for spreading it, and Russia, Iran, and China are all handling the crisis far better than the United States. Is this the beginning of a new axis of disinformation?*

**WATTS:** Yes. It's interesting you say that because I wrote an article two weeks ago that I'm waiting to get published that is actually called, "The Axis of Disinformation," so good coin of term. I don't know if the State Department used it, but I briefed this March 23. What you see is that they come together and combine opportunistically when it is to their advantage. And that isn't just on COVID. COVID is what everyone is watching right now, and it is very easy to see because it is a single issue and they all jump on to a single issue. But these countries come together and overlap in different ways. So, around COVID, you are exactly right—"the US can't handle it," "it's a bioweapon created in the U.S. and proliferated around the world," etc... Those themes are going to advance and amplify off of each other. There is a degree of opportunism because, remember that, while these countries share in their resistance of the U.S. in terms of pushing back against the U.S. in authoritarian ways, they also diverge at times. Russia and China have their own little tiff about COVID right now on the China-Russia border. They are battling with each other, in certain ways, geo-strategically. And then there is the same with Iran and Russia. Russia plays to Trump. Iran doesn't like Trump. Those two things in the 2020 election don't match up, but geo-strategically in Syria they come together as allies. So what you're seeing is some opportunism and they're using each other's reach and each other's amplification to create that snowball effect over time.

It's a very opportunistic strategy, particularly when you control your own populations domestically. You can send that message down to cement it in the minds of your own domestic population, and you can project it out, and you can borrow from each other's content. For example, PressTV of Iran openly copies and pastes and resends out *RT* stories all the time. China will blow out tweets, but Russia has a much larger social media reach, so if they start retweeting it, they are elevating China almost as a proxy. They can all take advantage of each other's strengths as disinformation peddlers to advance their agenda against the United States.



**FORUM:** *We are curious to hear your perspective on some of the more peculiar disinformation campaigns we have come across. One concerns Iranian bots amplifying a campaign for California to secede from the U.S., especially following Governor Newsom's comment about California being a nation-state. The other controversy surrounds 5G and its alleged role in the COVID pandemic.*

**WATTS:** Sure, we'll do them in that order. "Cal-exit" is not new. It was part of the Russian disinformation campaign back in 2016 oriented around the political left in the U.S., which gets forgotten about or overlooked. There was an actual guy who set up Cal-exit, and if I'm correct, he then relocated to Russia after the election, which was curious. Cal-exit is a great wedge issue, because what Iran does is play to the American political left. They are looking for populist left consumers, and when we do our tracking for the 2020 Presidential election, they do a lot of amplification of Sanders, a touch for Warren, and AOC is a big person they like to do. Because their issues in the American space are racial issues and religious divides. Anti-Islam vs. accepting of Islam is a wedge. Black Lives Matter is another thing that the Iranians tend to focus on. So, when you see Newsom make those comments, what was remarkable about Iran's pushing of Cal-exit content was that it was highly coordinated and it incorporated both human and computational propaganda. We saw bots and a lot of Iranians filming themselves asking Californians to break away. That's a mix of the two and that sometimes gets lost in the discussion. There is a lot of talk about bots, but do you really believe that picture of a flower is shouting Cal-exit? Maybe not. But when you see people filming themselves, that is different. You've got the two together, making a rise on Twitter, which draws attention, and then you see real people. So that is a bit more sophisticated.

Another thing to remember with California and Iran, is that one of the largest Iranian diaspora populations in the world is in and around the Los Angeles area. So if you are Iran, you think, "Hmm, you've got people that look like me and talk like me and they are over there in California and Cal-exit is out there, readily available, and I can reach and grab and amplify it and get it into the U.S. mainstream and really jab the United States at a time that is highly divisive." So, is California going to break away because of Iran? No. But it shows that these disinformation-peddling states are doing now what they would have never come up with five or ten years ago. They wouldn't waste time on this, but now they see value in picking at the United States. And social media is a weapon that can do it with.

**FORUM:** *So what about the 5G COVID-19 disinformation campaigns?*

**WATTS:** When we talk about active measures from Russia, there are four narrative sets: calamitous messaging, which is fear-based messaging that draws in audiences; social messaging, which is social divides that we know very well in the States (e.g. pro-gun vs. anti-gun, pro-Islam vs. anti-Islam, religious, race, etc.); political messaging, which is for and against candidates; and financial messaging. If you can suppress 5G technology or derail U.S. 5G technology and turn the U.S. population against it... wow, that's a homerun, right? You're slowing them down. How do you do that? Fear-based messaging around health. Tie that in with it.

So, last year the Russians ran several stories on *RT*, which got some good coverage—*The New York Times* even covered it—asking “Is 5G safe?”

*For me, the most interesting one is the 5G narrative. It plays back in history, as well. Ten or fifteen years ago people were worried about getting brain tumors from their cell phones. Study after study came out in which it wasn't proven. There is a great RT broadcast about 5G with Rick Sanchez saying, “Well, remember back fifteen years ago when we weren't sure about getting brain tumors from talking on cell phones and now there's 5G...”*

Always question more—that is *RT*'s motto. That laid some seeds, right? And so come back around now to a pandemic breaking out. With health concerns and questions about “where did it come from?” “Oh, 5G!” And where do those conspiracies come from? Well, there is already a baseline of conspiracies that people can point to. “We didn't know if 5G was safe.” That is an old tried-and-true, fear-based message about health that impacts a country financially and technology-wise. Think about it as a double-whammy. You are getting an indigenous population upset, and they are using your content. You aren't spreading it; the domestic populations are spreading it with conspiracies. And now they go and destroy their own 5G towers, which hurts them economically, financially, and technology-wise (because the governments have to pay

for it) and makes it harder for them to respond to the pandemic, which further perpetuates this conspiracy.

For me, the most interesting one is the 5G narrative. It plays back in history, as well. Ten or fifteen years ago people were worried about getting brain tumors from their cell phones. Study after study came out in which

it wasn't proven. There is a great *RT* broadcast about 5G with Rick Sanchez saying, "Well, remember back fifteen years ago when we weren't sure about getting brain tumors from talking on cell phones and now there's 5G..." One of the interesting things I've read around the science is that 5G might actually be safer than 4G because of the bandwidth. It would not penetrate your skin. So even though the science is tough to refute, with 5G, I've been shocked by how many people ask me about it or have said, "Have you heard about 5G and coronavirus?" It's pretty remarkable.

**FORUM:** *Do disinformation campaigns that have a domestic nexus pursue different strategies from those of the foreign nexus? I'm thinking specifically of white nationalists, which I believe is a subject you've studied as well.*

**WATTS:** Right. That's probably the one that I'm most worried about in terms of violence right now. JM Berger—who's based right there down the street from you in Cambridge—he studies the extremist (domestic and international), and one of the things he quickly pointed out is that part of the lore around white supremacy is the idea that a pandemic kicks off a race war and is the impetus for it. So following the hit of this pandemic—one that is coming from a foreign country—we immediately started to see disinformation surrounding COVID-19 and racism. And so that's one angle where you can quickly see it spiral and mobilize to violence. If you go into some of the white supremacist forums and chat rooms and places like that, now, you'll see those conspiracies proliferating all over the place.

At the same point, there is foreign nexus now—we know this. The U.S. State Department, for the first time, kind of designated a white supremacist movement: the Russian Imperial movement. And we found out recently that the Base, a white nationalist or white supremacist group, domestic terrorist group in the United States—its leader is allegedly in Russia. And when you watch their conversations, they overlap intensely in the online space. So Russia's somewhat behind the white supremacist mobilization. But it's interesting how this confluence of identity, ideas, and disinformation are all coming together right now. And what you're seeing in this sort of white nationalist disinformation space is the use and spiral toward mobilizations to violence. There was an incident two to three weeks ago. There was a standoff arrests. If I'm correct, there was a senior citizens' home where the FBI did some arrest around potential bombing. It's not clear if that's around race-based disinformation and Coronavirus or where that comes from. But you're seeing these little incidents pop up, and I think it's definitely something to be watching in the coming weeks and months.

**FORUM:** *We'd like to pivot to the U.S. response to all this: how well is the United States doing in regards to countering disinformation campaigns, both in regards to COVID and everything else?*

**WATTS:** I'll start with everything else. With everything else, you're seeing a lot of elements of the government take this on. So DHS, with the disinfo around voting machines and voter rolls, they've taken a very proactive response. They're aware of it; they're trying to get in front of it. I think other elements of the U.S. government, when it comes to the foreign influence, they are trying to do everything they can, but it's a tough challenge for them, right? Because they just watched the FBI get embroiled in the Russian attack last time. Russia did a disinformation campaign and election interference, and in response, we destroyed the FBI's integrity. The politicians attacked the institution. So, again, that's like a double whammy. They interfere in the election, they tie us up bureaucratically, they create more infighting, and they weaken an institution which is designed in the counterintelligence space to counter Russian influence. Holy cow. So they can't really do anything other than talk in generalities because they're not supposed to be helping or hurting a candidate. I think the Bernie Sanders briefing that happened in February is illustrative of the problem. What do you want the FBI to do? They go and notify a campaign: "Hey, we think Russia might be elevating you," it gets out in the news, and now it's a conspiracy that's out there.

The worst offenders in the space are the politicians. They create the narratives, and so I can't really criticize Russia too much this go around because they don't need to make fake news. They literally just take the divisive narratives that are already available in the U.S. audience base,

*I don't know what Russia, China, Iran, or anyone else outside the U.S. could do that we're not already doing to ourselves inside the United States at this point.*

..... and they just resend them back into the U.S. audience base. They're amplifying known divisions. You'll see them troll us more overtly on their official Twitter accounts. The Alliance Securing Democracy, overwhelmingly, it's official Chinese accounts, it's official Russian accounts. So it's just kind of over at this point. I don't know, aside from Russia being able to hack, say, the Biden campaign and release dirt—they could do that—but other than that, I don't know what Russia, China, Iran, or anyone else outside the U.S. could do that we're not already doing to ourselves inside the United States at this point.

**FORUM:** *What should or could the United States be doing to more effectively combat disinformation, both domestically and abroad? Can U.S. public diplomacy efforts be strengthened in the State Department? Or is there space for some sort of Information Agency-type institution amid the need to combat these kinds of campaigns?*

**WATTS:** Yeah, I don't think we could do an Information Agency at this point because we don't have unity and purpose and message within our elected leaders. Until we have that, it's really hard for the U.S. to project a message, because a foreign adversary can always point and go, "Well, your other senator or congressman is saying this or your president said that..." We are not on the same sheet of music, so it's hard to advance a message. We also have to be rigorous holders of facts and telling the truth. And I've never seen any time like today where I find it hard to believe a lot of things that U.S. elected officials or institutions are saying. Intel leaders don't want to go to Congress to do briefings because they're afraid they'll anger the president. It's very difficult to know the truth. Today I read something about China's spreading conspiracies— martial law conspiracies. It doesn't seem like China made those messages. It reads like an American wrote them. And I received those messages at least ten or twelve times from other Americans I know that are well educated. So what can China do? In that space, it can be misleading, right? It leads you to believe that some foreign power is controlling our information environment. I think until we get the divisiveness between our elected leaders down, it's really hard for the institutions to do much to prevent or disrupt disinformation coming into the U.S. There's just too many available narratives that any foreign adversary can use right now to really try and break us up.

**FORUM:** *That's a very dystopian view, but to perhaps ask a question to crystallize all this: if we're already doing it to ourselves, is this constant stream of disinformation the new normal?*

**WATTS:** Yes, I think the disinformation space is the new normal. I do think there are some things on the horizon about the breakup of the internet that we need to be aware of. That there won't just be one internet. It's kind of already going that way. China controls their own internet, basically through censorship, with social scoring, and with surveillance. I think other countries are going to move that way. We're seeing a strong nationalist break, and COVID didn't create that, it's just accelerating it. The pandemic is just making those breaks more obvious, as you see.

I do think there's some upside, though. Domestically in the U.S., for example, you're seeing a lot of leaders other than the president step up. That's not a bad thing. The U.S. kind of got in this mode where everything started to look to the presidency. All we talked about was the election, the presidential elections. Not anymore. It turns out when we're really in a bind here at home, it's your local and state elected officials that will come through for you if you pick the right ones. One of the things I talked about over the last two years in a lot of sessions I've done is the push towards states' rights. We are a federation of states, essentially, right? And we have this federalism, where states and local municipalities have different rights. And so, if we can't achieve common agreement, what we could do is point to different states that are doing really well and people can make their own choices about where they want to live. And that's maybe how a lot of the founders thought the United States would be. It wasn't going to be this giant machine like a king, where that executive power was going to rule over everything. So, if people want to live based on their beliefs and their communities, maybe they should.

But you're also going to see people move the other way. We always look at the doomsday, the dystopian, which is, "Oh, states will all break up." This is a fantasy. I'm going to go to the extreme. "The states will break up." "There'll be local tyranny and everything will be terrible. Well, I think we're seeing something now. I live in New York. I'm pretty excited about how well New York State's government responded to COVID. I'm impressed. They have testing sites up. Massachusetts is another one. I have a daughter with special needs. And so when I look to educate my daughter, I may have to pay high taxes, but Massachusetts is number one in education. And New York is really good. I've lived in California and I think Wisconsin's a great spot in places. So I'm making decisions as a citizen based on my beliefs, based on what I want, what I care for, what I pay taxes for. And you'll actually see over time that for some states, people will go, "You know what, I want to live in that state because that is how I think or how I believe, and we can still be part of the United States." *f*

---

# The Trojan Dragon Comes to the Balkans

WENDY ROBINSON

---

## ABSTRACT

*In recent years, China has been expanding its influence throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe through the One Belt One Road Initiative (BRI). One area that has come under recent Chinese influence is the Balkan states bridging Europe and Asia. Technological development, especially through 5G networks, is a primary means of growing China's pull. However, the European Union is wary of the new Chinese influence in the Balkans and has tried to pull these states closer to the EU. It remains to be seen how the two opposing powers will reconcile their mutual goals for influence in the Balkans.*

*"I sent a letter to President Xi, in which for the first time I officially called him not only a dear friend but also a brother, and not only my personal friend but also a friend and brother of this country."*

— **Aleksandar Vučić**, President of Serbia, March 15, 2020<sup>1</sup>

Since 2013, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has helped Beijing expand its economic influence throughout Africa, Asia, and Europe. To carry this out, China often focuses on smaller geopolitical zones rife with political and economic instability. Indeed, states benefiting from the BRI's construction of infrastructure, investment in trade facilities, and technological support are often at the periphery of other major global and provision of regional powers, such as the EU, Russia, Iran, and Saudi Arabia.<sup>2</sup>

Bridging Europe and Asia, the Balkan states suffer from poor

---

**Wendy Robinson** graduated from *The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University*, where she was a *Tisch Fellow at the U.S. Department of State*. In addition, Wendy has built further expertise in international education and public service through her commitment as a *Peace Corps Volunteer* where she served in *Kosovo* for two years. Wendy received her *B.A. in Modern Languages with Interpreting* from *The University of Sheffield, United Kingdom*.

---

economic systems, high levels of corruption, post-conflict infrastructures, and are a far cry from cutting-edge markets.<sup>4</sup> Although civil society and development grant-focused programs offered by European states and the United States are often generous, China's offers of more money and advanced technology, with less restrictive oversight, have allowed China to better capitalize on regional vulnerabilities.<sup>5</sup> According to a report by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "the main challenge for the EU is how to deal with state-driven subsidization of state-owned companies and subsidies of whole industries that are currently not regulated."<sup>6</sup> This means that, not only do these private Chinese firms have access to public resources and funding, it is telling of how Beijing can jump the line without frittering away time on red tape. Examining Beijing's Balkan strategies, particularly those in the high-tech field, can provide insight as to how the United States and European countries can better use their economic and technological strengths (the latter chiefly via 5G networks explained in the next section) to counter a globally ascendant China.

China analyst Theresa Fallon termed China's advance in these areas as, "an anaconda strategy: surround it and squeeze it."<sup>7</sup> Under the auspices of offering advanced technology—among other development projects—Beijing is continuing its efforts to use the Balkan states to make inroads into Europe.<sup>8</sup> Having invested \$6.7 billion in the Western Balkans alone since 2010, China has stepped up as a serious power player in the region.<sup>9</sup>

### THE ROLE OF 5G NETWORKS AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

An integral part of the BRI and China's strategy in southeastern Europe is the promotion and assembly of new alliances through the sale, maintenance, and integration of technological products.<sup>10</sup> One major initiative for the Digital Silk Road, another component and objective of the BRI, has been the development of 5G, or "fifth-generation," wireless networks and supportive technology.<sup>11</sup>

Beijing promises 5G to smartphones and other digital platforms to achieve quicker downloads, as a platform to run autonomous vehicles and robots, and to become the foundation for gleaming futuristic cities.<sup>12</sup> As a cornerstone of China's Smart Cities initiative, which develops cities structured around livable, workable, and sustainable technology,<sup>13</sup> the use of 5G networks is touted as an affordable means to increase efficiency.<sup>14</sup> Some examples of 5G technology in the "Smart Cities" model have featured intelligent lighting, power grids, and smart traffic management while also offering bolstered domestic surveillance capabilities.<sup>15</sup>



Aware of developing economies' desire for technological advancement, China promotes 5G as the key to top-down modernization for these countries.<sup>16</sup> For less-democratically structured societies (in comparison to the United States, the European Union, and their allies), 5G and other Chinese-supplied technologies grant governments a dual advantage: futuristic technological advancement and a means to better control their own populations.<sup>17</sup> Simultaneously, this creates a further dependence on Beijing and its technological capabilities.

*Aware of developing economies' desire for technological advancement, China promotes 5G as the key to top-down modernization for these countries.*

#### **HUAWEI: FOLLOWING THE LEADER WHEREVER HE MAY GO**

Huawei is a Chinese telecommunications giant that is leading the charge on cutting-edge 5G technology and technology equipment. In 2018, the company invested in approximately 170 countries and signed forty-two major commercial 5G contracts. That same year, Huawei also received \$222 million in grant money from the Chinese government.<sup>18</sup> In 2019, Huawei received as much as \$75 billion in tax breaks from Beijing,<sup>19</sup> and in the past three years, it has become the largest communications company in the world.<sup>20</sup>

Huawei's rise appears to mimic that of China's state-owned enterprises (SOEs), having supposedly received billions of dollars' worth of financial backing from Beijing as it became the number one global telecom equipment provider in less than ten years.<sup>21</sup> SOEs, as described by Danish political scientist and China specialist Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, are corporations that dominate China's strategic sectors and principal industries, and are key instruments for the implementation of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) policies and strategic initiatives.<sup>22</sup> Every SOE is obligated to have Party members in its leadership, and all primary decision-making must be funneled through Party committees. This guarantees government involvement at each level of the enterprise.

Although consistently denied by Huawei's public relations team, state support may have been vital to Huawei's financial success, as it is potentially a key factor in Huawei's ability to offer significantly lower prices compared to other 5G competitors.<sup>23</sup> In addition, Huawei maintains lower price points through government-subsidized loans offered by Chinese state-owned banks.<sup>24</sup>

While not an official SOE, Huawei is widely reported to have extensive ties to the ruling CCP and has been accused of being a vehicle for Beijing to gain leverage in the global telecommunication sector.<sup>25</sup> However, the tech giant asserts that it has distanced itself from the CCP, repeatedly stating that its equipment has never been used and will never be used to spy.<sup>26</sup> In a 2019 Reuters article, Beijing's foreign ministry stated that China has not and will not demand companies or individuals use methods that run counter to local laws or install "backdoors to collect or provide the Chinese government with data, information or intelligence from home or abroad."<sup>27</sup> United States federal government bodies such as the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Commerce, have all countered this statement in recent years, proposing that entry could also be gained through more benign methods like software updates issued by the equipment distributors.<sup>28</sup>

To cloud matters further, in mid-2019, Huawei drafted a legal report which stated the company would not be coerced into espionage due to a hazy Chinese espionage law which claims there is no mandate for Chinese businesses to hand over sensitive corporate information to the Chinese intelligence.<sup>29</sup> Yet lawyers in China and abroad have contested the validity and true position of this law.<sup>30</sup> The Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) claims Huawei, among other Chinese private businesses, may have other unofficial links to the CCP.<sup>31</sup> Since 1996, Huawei has received special status from the Chinese government and military, garnering the title of "national champion"—a title given to companies for supporting China's broader geopolitical objectives.<sup>32</sup>

However, it is important to note Huawei has since received some pushback from countries like Australia, which was one of the first of Western countries to put 5G networks to the test, organizing a team of government hackers to find vulnerabilities in the system to be proposed by Huawei and other similar companies.<sup>33</sup> Six months after the August 2018 trial, the Australian government banned Huawei from any cooperation on core and non-core components of their networks.<sup>34</sup> Concerned about the company's close ties to the Chinese government, they declared the business offer too risky for their national security.<sup>35</sup> Following the decision, then Director-General of the Australian Signals Directorate (ASD) Mike Burgess stressed the importance of the "country's critical infrastructure - everything from electric power to water supplies to sewage."<sup>36</sup> The United States also shared Australia's perspective on the issue, and has tried to convince its allies of the dangers of incorporating Chinese 5G networks into their own infrastructure.<sup>37</sup>

Despite growing concerns over Chinese government interference and potential intelligence collection, Huawei's imprint on Europe has been considerable. A 2018 Bloomberg report found that China invested \$318 billion in European ventures over the past ten years,<sup>38</sup> chiefly through state-run and state-tied companies, with its global reach resulting in a reported \$100 billion in revenue.<sup>39</sup> In a 2019 CNN report, Huawei's European market share was determined to be between 35 and 40 percent.<sup>40</sup> These figures are expected to increase exponentially over the next decade.<sup>41</sup>

Countries such as South Korea, Thailand, and India are already beginning to incorporate Huawei's 5G plans.<sup>42</sup> Huawei claims to offer quality and modernity, along with pricing 30 percent<sup>43</sup> less than that of other companies like Finland's Nokia and South Korea's Samsung.<sup>44</sup> In January 2020, the United Kingdom signed an agreement with Huawei to authorize the company to construct and manage some of its 5G infrastructure despite strong protests by the United States.<sup>45</sup> However, the British government noted that it worked to decrease any possible security risks inherent in the partnership by not incorporating certain sensitive structures into the shared network.<sup>46</sup>

Huawei's vast global inroads have exacerbated concerns over the corporation's ownership structure, security, and the company's linkages to the Chinese government and intelligence apparatus. Nevertheless, as Western states adopt Huawei's offers, there is less incentive to push back against the telecommunications giant in other parts of the world such as the Western Balkans. While probing Europe's responses to its technology, China has received a relatively unequivocal welcome to work with Huawei.<sup>47</sup>

### **BEIJING COMES TO THE WESTERN BALKANS**

After two decades of divisive politics following the wars of the 1990s, widespread weak institutional structure, a crippled economy, high unemployment,<sup>48</sup> and rampant corruption throughout all levels of government across the Western Balkans, the region is especially vulnerable to foreign influence.<sup>49</sup> Unenforced EU regulations mean that there is no entity that can effectively restrict the flow of investments, money, and goods between the Balkans and non-EU states.<sup>50</sup> In addition, even after comparable grants were offered by the EU, the extensive red tape and other bureaucratic wrangling hindered Balkan interest in—and acceptance of—development assistance.<sup>51</sup>

In order to advance economic growth, modernize technology, and promote stability in line with their European neighbors, state govern-

ments from Serbia to North Macedonia are working to overcome their economic and industrial stagnation.<sup>52</sup> Almost all countries in southeastern Europe, with the exception of Kosovo,<sup>53</sup> are signing up for joint ventures with Chinese companies that make temptingly innovative and seemingly financially-savvy offers—such as the promised super-highway recently constructed by a Chinese firm connecting Montenegro to Serbia. This highway is still unfinished and has plunged the Montenegrin government into debt.<sup>54</sup>

### SERBIA'S OTHER FRIEND TO THE EAST

Serbia is the host of numerous multi-million dollar Chinese projects, including the Belgrade-Budapest high-speed railway, which officially opened at the end of last year.<sup>55</sup> Despite having the highest GDP of Western Balkan states, Serbia is one of the most enthusiastic recipients of financial assistance from China in the region.<sup>56</sup>

In 2014, Huawei launched a Safe Cities<sup>57</sup> project jointly with the Serbian government in order to reduce police investigation times, enhance the state's capability of arresting and detaining individuals, decrease crime rates, and hinder organized crime networks.<sup>58</sup> This Safe Cities<sup>59</sup> deal will improve technological connectivity and develop a surveillance and facial recognition system in Belgrade and across the country.<sup>60</sup> The Serbian

*According to journalist Bojan Stojkovski, as of the beginning of 2019, Huawei's surveillance system comprised 1,000 high-definition cameras, all of which contain specific "facial and license plate recognition software," dispersed across 800 locations around Belgrade.*

Ministry of Internal Affairs says they own the surveillance system, but Huawei is the authorized supplier.<sup>61</sup>

According to journalist Bojan Stojkovski, as of the beginning of 2019, Huawei's surveillance system comprised 1,000 high-definition cameras, all of which contain specific "facial and license plate recognition software," dispersed across 800 locations around Belgrade. Share Foundation, a Serbian human rights organization, says that this kind of software is a breach of "civil rights and freedoms" due to the way in which it collects information, including biometric data, on citizens. Bojan Perkov, a policy researcher with Share, stated that, "If a data protection impact assessment has not been conducted and if there are no precise rules for its processing, this sensitive data can be

misused.” Some Serbian citizens have also expressed concern regarding the infringement on civil liberties by this new surveillance system, especially because no official regulations on data privacy and usage are in place.<sup>62</sup>

Recently, as Serbia and the rest of the world battles the Coronavirus, the Serbian president’s statement regarding the EU’s hesitation in providing medical aid has only deepened anti-EU and ant-Western sentiment. In addition, China has been quick to provide doctors and medical equipment to its “friend and brother”—a striking signal of the continued advancement of this partnership.<sup>63</sup>

### **CHINA AND THE EU—WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS?**

The EU is worried about Chinese intelligence links to Chinese corporations and what that means for civil privacy and sensitive data access in Europe and ally nations. Further, the EU is hesitant, in part for historical reasons,<sup>64</sup> to include an economically debilitated and politically fractious Western Balkans in its organization.<sup>65</sup> The region’s increasing economic reliance on China heightens these concerns.<sup>66</sup>

In competition with China for influence in the Balkans, the EU has sent a number of mixed messages to Balkan states, further harming Western European influence in the region.<sup>67</sup> In 2019, France delayed the entry of Albania and North Macedonia into the EU for the second time since 2018<sup>68</sup> (for reasons related to continued issues with corruption, crime, and a lack of economic stability),<sup>69</sup> which caused significant disappointment for Albanians and North Macedonian politicians and citizens.<sup>70</sup> It also creates an opportunity for China as the two states move away from the security of the EU’s umbrella.

Until very recently, the EU asserted that Albania, North Macedonia, and the rest of the Balkans have been a part of a distant future plan for European integration, and therefore, EU policy makers did not present or approve of an exact timeline for their entry.<sup>71</sup> Consideration for EU accession has always been contingent upon North Macedonia and Albania carrying out reforms to address the aforementioned issues.<sup>72</sup> March 2020 saw a new date set for talks to start in the fall of this year that will entirely depend on “candidate countries [proving] they are reaching EU standards in areas such as the free movement of goods, and in taxation, energy and economic policies.”<sup>73</sup>

The EU’s ambivalent approach to the Balkan states over the past decade has left a vacuum that Beijing has moved quickly to fill. China’s

advances into the region have only deepened the challenges Western Balkan nations face to integrate into the EU.<sup>74</sup> Cash-strapped and looking for a means to gain further economic and infrastructure improvements, governments in the Western Balkans have welcomed numerous Chinese-financed developments at the cost of their own autonomy.<sup>75</sup> On a local level, lax regulations, a lack of transparency, and poor governance allow Chinese companies to bypass the weak regulations of Balkan states.<sup>76</sup>

China's foreign minister said in 2018 that "[there] is no backroom deal; everything is transparent. There is no 'winner takes it all,' but every project delivers win-win results."<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, Beijing's projects have been marked by corruption. According to the European Union Institute for Security Studies, one Chinese plan to construct a highway in Macedonia was exemplary in terms of how Beijing is actually "fueling corruption in the wider Western Balkan region."<sup>78</sup> For instance, in the case of Kicevo-Ohrid highway in North Macedonia, which was funded by Chinese government-owned China Exim Bank, senior Macedonian officials accepted direct bribes from the Chinese firm.<sup>79</sup>

Adding to concerns about corruption, economic, and political stability, the EU's hesitation regarding the Balkan states extends an internal lack of consensus among members on a variety of China-related issues, including a potential ban of Huawei's networks.<sup>80</sup> In light of mounting controversy over the use of Chinese telecommunications technology, Germany, France, and Italy have called for instituting their own procedures to more meticulously screen foreign investments.<sup>81</sup> However, none of these regulations on Chinese advanced technology have yet been implemented.<sup>82</sup> In fact, Italy has done little to obstruct Huawei's construction of 5G networks in the country, and Huawei has stated that it hopes to build a 5G factory in France to "supply the entire European market, not just France's."<sup>83</sup>

In 2018, Johannes Hahn, European Commissioner for the European Neighborhood Policy,<sup>84</sup> said that China could deploy several "Trojan horses," in the form of political and economic influence, as Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, and North Macedonia approach EU membership. In an interview with Politico, Hahn argued that the EU faces malign influences, such as corruption, due to Beijing's increased presence in the region.<sup>85</sup> The comparison is blatant: much like in the myth, China poses a risk to the EU as an alliance because the latter, by integrating vulnerable Balkan states into its union, would be inviting an enemy into their midst with the power to disrupt the whole system.

Hahn notes that the Chinese model combining capitalism and autoc-

racy could appeal to some leaders in the region.”<sup>86</sup> According to Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanovic’s analysis, Beijing’s presence in the Balkans also counters EU credibility through its capacity to build socio-political and economic trust in the People’s Republic of China. China offers its “own political and economic model in countries with weaker governance.”<sup>87</sup> For instance, in earlier efforts by the BRI, countries such as Sri Lanka and Djibouti have proven to become more economically vulnerable in the process, with sometimes unfinished and always expensive projects devastating these local governments’ coffers.<sup>88</sup>

As it has sought to offer economic incentives in the Balkans and Europe, China’s efforts to gain access to key infrastructure nodes in the EU has come onto the radar of policy makers in Brussels. Clearly hinting at China and Russia, Jean-Claude Juncker, President of the European Commission, advocated in 2017 for new screening measures for foreign SOEs, which were intended to hinder the “purchase [of] a new European harbor, part of our energy infrastructure or a defense technology firm.”<sup>89</sup>

Delaying decisions on whether to incorporate Huawei’s 5G networks, EU member states have been buying time on how to handle their own relations with China.<sup>90</sup> In January 2020, one senior EU official said, “[there] is a big gap between what we say and what we do. That gap has been reduced but we are still not where we need to be.”<sup>91</sup> For now, most member states have been moving very slowly to make any decision on China.<sup>92</sup>

## CHINA’S GRAND STRATEGY: AN ANALYSIS

The Balkans as a region does not have the capacity to regulate transparency in their political structure due to systemic corruption. In many cases, challenges already exist with freedom of the press, rule of law, and tendencies toward autocratic leadership.<sup>93</sup> State-run security systems can exacerbate these issues.<sup>94</sup> Finally, anti-Western sentiment present in Serbia, for example, creates an environment in which China can become a natural ally and undermines Serbia’s relationships with Western powers. Thus, China becomes the model for likeminded centralized, authoritarian political regimes.<sup>95</sup>

To counter China’s malign influence and increase transparent cooperation between the Western Balkans and partners and political allies in Europe and with other democracies, the EU should take a long view on foreign interference.<sup>96</sup> China is reshaping the global world order and will continue to expand its spheres of influence in Europe.<sup>97</sup> According to an article by the Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy, “Beijing has

stressed time and again that there are no geopolitical calculations behind the BRI. Yet the initiative's massive scale means that it will necessarily have geostrategic ramifications.<sup>98</sup> With this economic growth, China's capacity can expand to influence host countries' politics and ideology.

It is only a matter of time before Europe and the United States realize the importance of protecting the Balkans' fragile democracy and precarious economy. If it chooses to prevent an escalation of tension, China needs to change its tactics by demonstrating its capacity to maintain transparent objectives and foster a stable and secure environment with its partner countries. The Western Balkans need greater stability and security in order to sustain cooperation built on shared interests and values.<sup>99</sup>

## CONCLUSION

China's soft power strategy has grown from resting on forging economic ties and political partnerships through the BRI into developing models for technological infrastructure in order to gain competitive

*China's soft power strategy has grown from resting on forging economic ties and political partnerships through the BRI into developing models for technological infrastructure in order to gain competitive ground on the European stage.*

ground on the European stage. This is evident in Huawei's strategic plans in the Balkans, which will ultimately create an international dependence on China.<sup>100</sup> China has global aspirations and a long-term strategy to expand its reach, and is using the Western Balkans as a stepping stone.<sup>101</sup>

and escalating tension with the Asian power.<sup>102</sup> It is in the European Union's interest to support greater economic and political transparency in southeastern Europe.<sup>103</sup> The onus is also on state governments from Serbia to North Macedonia to strengthen their own cyber security groundwork through a unified system of security measures, investment protocol, and multi-level transparency in order to make themselves less susceptible to nefarious practices. *f*

As five of the seven Balkan countries wait their turn for EU membership over the next decade, China is poised to deepen its potential within the region, unless the EU unites on its stance toward China without damaging



## ENDNOTES

- 1 Milica Stojanovic, "Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China's Help," *Balkan Insight*, March 16, 2020, <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help/>> (accessed May 11, 2020); China Power Team, "How will the Belt and Road Initiative advance China's interests?" *Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS)*, May 8, 2017, October 18, 2019, <<https://chinapower.csis.org/china-belt-and-road-initiative/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 2 "China's Belt and Road Initiative in the Global Trade, Investment and Finance Landscape," *Office of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD)*, 2018, <<https://www.oecd.org/finance/Chinas-Belt-and-Road-Initiative-in-the-global-trade-investment-and-finance-landscape.pdf>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 3 Joanna Kakissis, "Chinese Firms Now Hold Stakes In Over A Dozen European Ports," *National Public Radio (NPR)*, October 9, 2018, <<https://www.npr.org/2018/10/09/642587456/chinese-firms-now-hold-stakes-in-over-a-dozen-european-ports>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 4 Valbona Zeneli, "The Western Balkans: Low Hanging Fruit for China?" *The Diplomat*, February 24, 2020, <<https://thediplomat.com/2020/02/the-western-balkans-low-hanging-fruit-for-china/>> (accessed March 20, 2020).
- 5 Erik Brattberg and Philippe Le Corre, "The EU and China in 2020: More Competition Ahead," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, February 19, 2020, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2020/02/19/eu-and-china-in-2020-more-competition-ahead-pub-81096>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 6 Kakissis.
- 7 Bojan Stojkovski, "Big Brother Comes to Belgrade," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2019, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/18/big-brother-comes-to-belgrade-huawei-china-facial-recognition-vucic/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 8 Nicholas Crawford, "Growing public debt isn't the only problem with Chinese lending to the Balkans," *International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, March 18, 2020, <<https://www.iiss.org/blogs/analysis/2020/03/gstrat-bri-in-the-balkans>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 9 Philippe Le Corre, "On Chinese Investment and Influence in Europe," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 23, 2018, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/23/on-chinese-investment-and-influence-in-europe-pub-76467>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 10 Lindsay Maizland, and Andrew Chatzky, "Huawei: China's Controversial Tech Giant," *Council on Foreign Relations*, June 12, 2019, <<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/huawei-chinas-controversial-tech-giant>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Tom Vander Ark, "How Cities Are Getting Smart Using Artificial Intelligence," *Forbes*, June 26, 2018, <<https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomvanderark/2018/06/26/how-cities-are-getting-smart-using-artificial-intelligence/#1606836e3803>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 13 *Fortune* Editors, "How Smart Cities and Homes Will Take China Into the Future," *Fortune*, November 7, 2019, <<https://fortune.com/2019/11/07/china-smart-cities/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 14 Jamil Anderlini, "How China's smart-city tech focuses on its own citizens," *the Financial Times*, June 4, 2019, <<https://www.ft.com/content/46bc137a-5d27-11e9-840c-530737425559>> (accessed May 11, 2020).

- 16 Lindsay Gorman, "5G Is Where China and the West Finally Diverge," *The Atlantic*, January 5, 2020, <<https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/01/5g-where-china-and-west-finally-diverge/604309/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 17 Gorman.
- 18 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 19 Chuin-Wei Yap, "State Support Helped Fuel Huawei's Global Rise," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 25, 2019, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/state-support-helped-fuel-huaweis-global-rise-11577280736>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 20 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 21 Elias Groll and Keith Johnson, "The Improbable Rise of Huawei," *Foreign Policy*, April 3, 2019, <<https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/04/03/the-improbable-rise-of-huawei-5g-global-network-china/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 22 Kjeld Erik Brødsgaard, "Can China Keep Controlling Its SOEs?," *The Diplomat*, March 5, 2018, <<https://thediplomat.com/2018/03/can-china-keep-controlling-its-soes/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 23 Groll and Johnson.
- 24 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 25 Cassell Bryan-Low et al, "Special Report: Hobbling Huawei — Inside the U.S. war on China's tech giant," *Reuters*, May 21, 2019, <<https://ca.reuters.com/article/technologyNews/idINKCN1SR1EV>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 26 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 27 Cassell Bryan-Low et al.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Cassell Bryan-Low et al.
- 34 Raymond Zhong, "Australia Bars China's Huawei From Building 5G Wireless Network," *The New York Times*, August 23, 2018, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/23/technology/huawei-banned-australia-5g.html>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Cassell Bryan-Low et al.
- 37 Barkin and Vasovic.
- 38 Andre Tartar, Mira Rojanasakul, and Jeremy Scott Diamond, *Bloomberg*, April 23, 2018, <<https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2018-china-business-in-europe/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 39 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 40 Julia Horowitz, "European Companies Want to Do Business with Huawei. That Just Got Harder," *CNN*, April 30, 2019, <<https://www.cnn.com/2019/04/30/business/huawei-vodafone-europe/index.html>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 41 Groll and Johnson.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Horowitz.
- 44 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 45 Cassell Bryan-Low et al.
- 46 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 47 Zeneli.

- 48 Alida Vracic, “Can Europe Help the Balkans Keep Its Young Emigrants?,” *Balkan Insight*, October 13, 2019, <<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/07/can-europe-help-the-balkans-keep-its-young-emigrants/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 49 Philippe Le Corre and Vuk Vuksanovic, “Serbia: China’s Open Door to the Balkans,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/01/01/serbia-china-s-open-door-to-balkans-pub-78054>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 50 Ibid.
- 51 Le Corre and Vuksanovic.
- 52 Noah Barkin and Aleksandar Vasovic, “Chinese ‘Highway to Nowhere’ Haunts Montenegro,” *Reuters*, July 16, 2018, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-silkroad-europe-montenegro-insi/chinese-highway-to-nowhere-haunts-montenegro-idUSKBN1K60QX>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 53 Kosovo has not been included in China’s strategy as China does not recognize the Balkan state’s sovereignty from Serbia—official since 2008 when it declared independence. Serbia receives significant support from China against the EU’s calls for reconciliation. Le Corre and Vuksanovic.
- 54 Barkin and Vasovic.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Le Corre and Vuksanovic.
- 57 Safe Cities have the same components as Smart Cities, but additionally prioritize the physical safety and digital security of the city’s residents. Andrea Lebron. “You’ve Heard of a ‘Smart City’, but What Is a ‘Safe City?’” You’ve Heard of a ‘Smart City’, but What is a ‘Safe City?’,” Rave Mobile Safety, December 5, 2018, <<https://www.ravemobilesafety.com/blog/what-is-a-safe-city>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 58 Ibid.
- 59 Safe Cities has been instituted in 230 cities globally by approximately ninety national or regional governments, many along the BRI route. Stojkovski.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Milica Stojanovic, “Serbia Imposes State of Emergency, Pleads for China’s Help,” *Balkan Insight*, March 16, 2020, <<https://balkaninsight.com/2020/03/16/serbia-imposes-state-of-emergency-pleads-for-chinas-help/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 64 Ivaylo Ditchchev, “My Europe: Balkan countries joining the EU—unwanted or unwilling?,” *Deutsche Welle*, July 8, 2019, <<https://www.dw.com/en/my-europe-balkan-countries-joining-the-eu-unwanted-or-unwilling/a-49513741>> (accessed May 23, 2020).
- 65 Zeneli.
- 66 Daniela Schwarzer, Shahin Vallée, and Milan Nic, “Macron Is Gambling Away EU Influence in Balkans,” *Balkan Insight*, October 31, 2019, <<https://balkaninsight.com/2019/10/31/macron-is-gambling-away-eu-influence-in-balkans/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 67 Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Rachel Rizzo, “The U.S. or China? Europe Needs to Pick a Side,” *Politico*, August 12, 2019, <<https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2019/08/12/us-china-europe-relations-227614>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 68 Schwarzer, Vallée, and Nic.
- 69 Robin Emmott, Francesco Guarascio, and Marine Penner, “France under fire for ‘historic error’ of blocking Balkan EU hopefuls,” *Reuters*, October 18, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-summit-balkans/france-under-fire-for-historic-error-of-blocking-balkan-eu-hopefuls-idUSKBN1WX1CT>> (accessed May 11, 2020).

- 70 Ryan Heath and Andrew Gray, “Beware Chinese Trojan Horses in the Balkans, EU Warns,” *Politico*, April 18, 2019, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/johannes-hahn-beware-chinese-trojan-horses-in-the-balkans-eu-warns-enlargement-politico-podcast/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 71 Schwarzer, Vallée, and Nic.
- 72 “After Years Of Delay, North Macedonia, Albania Get OK To Begin EU Accession Talks,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 24, 2020, <<https://www.rferl.org/a/after-years-of-delay-north-macedonia-albania-get-ok-to-begin-eu-accession-talks/30507053.html>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 73 *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*.
- 74 Le Corre and Vuksanovic.
- 75 Kakissis.
- 76 Ibid.
- 77 Tartar, Rojanasakul, and Diamond.
- 78 Michal Makocki and Zoran Nechev, “Balkan corruption: the China connection,” *European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS)*, July 2017, <<https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Alert%2022%20Balkans.pdf>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 79 Makocki, Michal and Zoran Nechev.
- 80 Horowitz.
- 81 Jodi Xu Klein, “Around the World, Doors Are Shutting on Chinese Investment,” *South China Morning Post*, September 14, 2018, <<https://www.scmp.com/business/banking-finance/article/2163974/its-not-just-us-around-world-doors-are-shutting-chinese>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 82 Kendall-Taylor and Rizzo.
- 83 Giuseppe Fonte, “Italy has no plans to exclude Chinese firms from 5G network, minister says,” *Reuters*, January 30, 2020, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-huawei-tech-5g/italy-has-no-plans-to-exclude-chinese-firms-from-5g-network-minister-says-idUSKBN1ZT2P3>>; Rosemain, Mathieu, “With West divided, Huawei plans first European 5G factory in France,” *Reuters*, February 27, 2020, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-france-huawei/with-west-divided-huawei-plans-first-european-5g-factory-in-france-idUSKCN20L246>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 84 “Johannes Hahn,” the European Commission, February 26, 2020, <[https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/hahn\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/commissioners/2019-2024/hahn_en)>.
- 85 “Hahn: Kujdes Nga Ndikimi Kinez Në Ballkanin Perëndimor,” *Telegrafi*, July 27, 2018, <<https://telegrafi.com/hahn-kujdes-nga-ndikimi-kinez-ne-ballkanin-perendimor/>>.
- 86 Heath and Gray.
- 87 Le Corre and Vuksanovic.
- 88 David Shullman, “Protect the Party: China’s growing influence in the developing world,” *The Brookings Institution*, January 22, 2019, <<https://www.brookings.edu/articles/protect-the-party-chinas-growing-influence-in-the-developing-world/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 89 Kakissis.
- 90 Noah Barkin, “Europe’s moment of truth with China,” *Politico*, January 13, 2020, <<https://www.politico.eu/article/europes-moment-of-truth-with-china-trade-eu/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 91 Ibid.
- 92 Ibid.
- 93 Stojkovski.

- 94 Paul Hubbard, “‘Fragmented authoritarianism’ and state ownership,” East Asia Forum, January 23, 2017, <<https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2017/01/23/fragmented-authoritarianism-and-state-ownership/>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 95 Le Corre.
- 96 Zeneli.
- 97 Kakissis.
- 98 Paul Haenle, Dmitri Trenin, Alexander Gabuev, Tomáš Valášek, Darshana M. Baruah, Feng Yujun, and Ma Bin, “How Are Various Countries Responding to China’s Belt and Road Initiative?,” *Carnegie-Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, April 25, 2019, <<https://carnegietsinghua.org/2019/04/25/how-are-various-countries-responding-to-china-s-belt-and-road-initiative-pub-79002>> (accessed May 11, 2020).
- 99 Maizland and Chatzky.
- 100 *Center for Strategic and International Studies*.
- 101 Stojkovski.
- 102 Croatia is the only Balkan member state in the EU. Albania, Montenegro, North Macedonia, and Serbia are still candidate countries. Bosnia and Herzegovina as well as Kosovo are potential candidates. “Countries,” the European Union, February 20, 2020, <[https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/countries_en)> (accessed May 11, 2020); Brattberg and Le Corre.
- 103 Haenle, Trenin, Gabuev, Valášek, Baruah, Yujun, and Bin.



---

# Great Power Competition in Latin America: A New Normal

DOUGLAS FARAH AND CAITLYN YATES

---

## ABSTRACT

*Over the last two centuries, Latin America has remained largely free of Great Power competition, with the United States serving as the region's primary trading and security partner. However, over the past two decades, U.S. foreign policy priorities shifted away from the United States' near periphery, centering ever more on the Middle East. At the same time, Russia reclaimed a place on the world stage, while China now leads the way with massive infrastructure and lending projects. As all three great powers operate within this emerging Great Power competition framework, the United States, the Russian Federation, and the People's Republic of China each actively pursue their own—often quite*

---

**Douglas Farah** is the president of IBI Consultants, a national security consulting firm. Prior to these positions, Farah worked as a foreign correspondent and investigative reporter for the *Washington Post* for more than 20 years, covering security in Latin America and West Africa. He is an expert on national security, transnational crime, illicit finance, and non-state armed actors. Farah has given testimony before House and Senate committees, sat as an expert witness in security conferences across the hemisphere, and published two books on these topics. He holds a Bachelor of Arts and a Bachelor of Science from the University of Kansas.

**Caitlyn Yates** is the Research Coordinator at IBI Consultants. Prior to this position, Yates worked as a Research Associate at the Strauss Center for International Security and Law's Mexico Security Initiative at the University of Texas at Austin. Her work focuses on human security, organized crime, and transit migration in Latin America. She has presented before the United Nations, United States government agencies and departments, and academic conferences. Yates holds a Bachelor of Arts from Trinity University and a Master of Global Policy Studies from the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin.

---

*divergent—objectives in Latin America. This article examines the three great powers' agendas, approaches, and anticipated outcomes to their engagement in the region and finds that all three countries engage the region despite each encountering significant challenges. The United States has strong cultural and proximal ties to the region, but increasingly engages on only narrow areas of interest, ones frequently at odds with the region's own policy priorities. Russia has a vested interest in the prosperity of a few ideologically linked countries in the region but does not have the resources to fully engage all of Latin America. China has perhaps experienced the easiest entry into Latin America given Beijing's massive resources and limited conditions for loans and aid. It is not immediately clear what this means for long-term Latin American prosperity. Overall, in a region seldom considered in the Great Power competition debates, tri-polar competition now appears to be the new normal for Latin America.*

## INTRODUCTION

Since the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and the Roosevelt Corollary in 1903—both of which espoused U.S. primacy in the Western Hemisphere—Latin America remained largely free of Great Power competition.<sup>1</sup> While the former Soviet Union acquired an ally in Cuba during the 1959 revolution and supported various revolutionary movements meant to disrupt U.S. hegemony in the region, the United States' preeminence in the hemisphere was not seriously challenged. Following the end of the Cold War, U.S. influence vis-a-vis trade, migration, remittances, direct investment, cultural affinity, and geographic proximity sat unrivaled. This influence was only cemented after the North American Free Trade Agreement's (NAFTA, now the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement, or USMCA) signing in 1994, which appeared to mark the beginning of a new, U.S.-dominated era of free trade, expanding democracy, economic liberalization, and increased rule of law.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the Russian Federation was a weak, imploding state with few remaining trappings of a superpower and a very limited presence in the Western Hemisphere. The People's Republic of China had only recently begun its forays into global markets, opting at that time to remain firmly engaged only in its near periphery. Outside of Cuba, the United States had maintained a near monopoly on weapons sales, foreign aid, military and police training, and development assistance throughout Latin America. Washington articulated this strategic interest in the region as an attempt to develop a "stable, peaceful hemisphere... keeping our partnerships in the Western Hemisphere strong and vibrant,



[given that the] region [is] directly connected to our homeland in every domain—land, sea, air, space, cyber, and most importantly, values.”<sup>2</sup>

However, unchallenged U.S. engagement in the Western Hemisphere served as only a short-lived historical parenthesis as U.S. foreign policy shifted dramatically following the events of September 11, 2001. After 9/11, the United States sharply realigned policy and resource priorities, reallocating resources and turning their attention away from Latin America toward the Middle East, with a new focus on fighting violent extremist organizations. In the decade that followed, Vladimir Putin solidified Russia’s desire to reclaim a place on the world stage, while China’s growing financial reserves increasingly met the demand for raw materials and developed a global infrastructure. By the early 2010s, both China and Russia had established a growing, albeit comparably weak, presence in Latin America.

Within this emerging Great Power competition, the United States, Russia, and China are now all actively pursuing their own, often quite divergent, objectives in the region through different means. For example, although all three countries are in search of economic opportunity through trade and development in the region, the manner in which they pursue these goals is highly variegated. China seeks to build broad, multifaceted economic and strategic engagement with little regard for partner nations’ ideological or political leanings. As such, Beijing maintains the fewest conditional strings attached to their loan programs and has allocated far more resources than the other two powers on a global scale. By comparison, Russia only engages Latin American countries based on narrow ideological ties or topically based strategic and economic interests. The United States, by contrast, seeks broader engagement with its historical allies but finds itself increasingly shut out as anti-U.S. sentiment has gained political ascendancy and as Washington’s allocation of resources in the hemisphere shrinks.

All three countries also have objectives and practices in common which, at their core, center on their desire to diminish the influence and friendships

.....  
*All three countries also have objectives and practices in common which, at their core, center on their desire to diminish the influence and friendships of the other great powers in Latin America.*  
 .....

of the other great powers in Latin America. The three countries seek to expand their own military and security training of local forces, increase arms sales for profit and influence, and gain strategic influence in the defense and trade sectors. That said, China and Russia’s particular interests in Latin

America extend beyond defense and trade. They also include building infrastructure, seeking to penetrate U.S. networks and satellite capabilities, creating a significant media presence to develop information and misinformation, and building an enduring voting bloc in the United Nations to isolate the United States and protect their own interests and those of their Latin American allies.<sup>3</sup>

Overall, while Latin America historically served as one of the world's least affected regions to Great Power competition (with the exception of isolated cases during the Cold War), this has changed over the last two decades. As the United States pulled back from the region, China and Russia both increased their activities. This competition is no longer a new phenomenon, but rather appears to be here for the long haul. The following sections analyze all three great powers' activities in Latin America, assessing the countries' broader objectives and the means by which the United States, China, and Russia opt to engage Latin America.

#### THE UNITED STATES IN LATIN AMERICA

*“Russia and China are expanding their influence in the Western Hemisphere, often at the expense of U.S. interests. Both enable—and are enabled by—actions in Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba that threaten hemispheric security and prosperity, and the actions of those three states in turn damage the stability and democratic progress across the region.”*

—ADMIRAL CRAIG S. FALLER

*Commander, U.S. Southern Command, January 30, 2020<sup>4</sup>*

The United States has the longest and most developed history of engagement in Latin America. As Admiral Faller's statement shows, the United States is aware of, and concerned by, the new emerging competition from Russia and China. Dating back almost two centuries since the Monroe Doctrine's inception, the United States has maintained strong diplomatic and trade relationships with countries throughout Latin America. Recently—and in particular since September 11, 2001—the region has waned as a policy priority for the United States. Now, U.S. objectives in the region are relegated to specific spheres such as trade and development, counternarcotics, immigration enforcement, and cultural ties. In many ways, the United States' priorities do not mirror those of Latin American countries' own priorities, which at times causes tension.

Despite some differences in priorities, the United States still actively

cooperates with many Latin American nations for economic, social, and security reasons. Latin America and the United States maintain perhaps the closest relationships with regards to trade. This is of course facilitated by the United States' geographic proximity to Latin America, its historical engagement in the hemisphere, and the multi-million-person diaspora communities of Latin Americans in the United States. The United States is a signatory to both the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USCMA, formerly NAFTA), both of which facilitate the movement of goods and people throughout the region. As a result of these phenomena, Mexico became the United States' top trading partner in 2019, surpassing China.<sup>5</sup> The interconnected economies of the United States and several Latin American countries helps maintain U.S. strategic interests in the region in a way that the other two Great Power competitors have not managed to counter.

This economic interconnectedness does have its limits, however. In 2019, the United States imported more than \$108 billion in Latin American goods and exported more than \$162 billion in goods to the Latin American region.<sup>6</sup> Despite these impressive numbers, trade between the United States and Latin America has actually decreased—if only slightly—over the past five years as Latin American countries look to expand their trading partners outside of the hemisphere. Moreover, in 2017, President Trump withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), which limited U.S. trade with three large Latin American economies—Chile, Mexico, and Peru.<sup>7</sup> And finally, the United States has also dramatically cut foreign aid to the region, slashing humanitarian and development funding by nearly a third in recent years.<sup>8</sup> Thus, despite historically strong economic links between the United States and Latin America, we see (with the exception of Mexico) declining U.S. influence in the region on this front.

A second area where the United States maintains strong relationships with Latin America is in security cooperation, having established alliances in Colombia, Mexico, Brazil, Chile and countries in Central America. The United States long held a near monopoly on security training and cooperation in Latin America, and in many respects continues to dominate the field. Maintaining security relationships is of interest to the United States given Latin America's nearness and the fact that Latin American countries often face the same or inter-connected security challenges to the U.S. Similar to the free trade agreements, the United States has several security-based agreements with partners in the region including Plan Colombia, the Mérida Initiative in Mexico, and the Central America Regional Security Initiative (CARSI).<sup>9</sup> In Colombia, the United States has collaborated with

local counterparts in the military and national police for more than two decades through a unique bilateral partnership to fight the flow of cocaine and counter-insurgencies. In Central America and Mexico, such agreements facilitate security officials' training, information exchange, and allow countries to better develop their own public safety and security institutions. These security programs have enjoyed broad bipartisan support in Washington across administrations since their inception.<sup>10</sup>

However, given that U.S. security aid to the region has been systematically cut or stalled in recent years, this dynamic is shifting. The United States has an ever-narrowing focus regarding regional insecurity, zeroing in almost exclusively on counternarcotics and immigration enforcement

*The United States has an ever-narrowing focus regarding regional insecurity, zeroing in almost exclusively on counternarcotics and immigration enforcement efforts rather than more robust projects such as rule of law programs, electoral process reform support, or strengthening judicial systems which are also listed objectives in the security programs' mandates.*

efforts rather than more robust projects such as rule of law programs, electoral process reform support, or strengthening judicial systems which are also listed objectives in the security programs' mandates. Counternarcotics efforts remain a high priority in countries throughout the region in which the United States is still able to operate. Cooperation in the form of joint operations, intelligence sharing, and even increased extradition requests has allowed the United States to maintain strong relationships in Latin America.

Over the last three years, however, President Trump's primary interest in Latin America has almost exclusively centered on stopping the flow of migrants to the United States.

Using tactics such as threatening to cut aid or increase tariffs on goods, the current administration has forced several countries' hands in deterring, apprehending, or deporting migrants en route to the United States. In Mexico, tens of thousands of migrants are now trapped, unable to enter the United States through a series of policies enacted by the Trump administration. Metering—a policy that requires those seeking asylum to wait at the U.S. southern border until officers have time to process them—and the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP)—a policy that sends asylum seekers who have entered the United States back to Mexico to await their asylum hearings—are two examples of U.S. pressure,

in this case towards Mexico.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in 2019, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador all signed Asylum Cooperative Agreements (ACAs) which send asylum seekers that passed through these countries (while en route to the United States) back to apply for asylum there.<sup>12</sup> So far only Guatemala has received migrants from their bilateral ACA. The culmination of the listed policies provoke outrage in the region and further misalign Latin American countries priorities from those of the U.S.

Aside from this misalignment in interests, by focusing U.S. security resources on such a narrow sphere, the United States has fewer resources for other types of security cooperation, especially with countries that do not fit within the United States' counternarcotics and immigration enforcement priorities. Moreover, the United States' Southern Command remains the smallest of the Combatant Commands, further limiting defense and security spending and engagement. This means that, in many regards, the United States is losing its dominance on security cooperation and defense in Latin America. Meanwhile, Russia and China are simultaneously making inroads to counter the gap left by the United States, though they still have a long way to go.

Another area where the United States still strongly outperforms China and Russia concerns the cultural and social ties binding the U.S. with the rest of the Western Hemisphere. As of 2017, almost 60 million individuals of Latin American descent live in the United States, and approximately thirty-three percent of those individuals were born outside of the United States.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, at least 800,000 U.S. citizens live in Mexico alone, with more than one million Americans throughout the region.<sup>14</sup> The result then is a hemisphere in which remittances, customs, and even communities move among countries with relative fluidity. However, increasing attempts to end migration to the United States are causing these cultural objectives and historic ties to weaken.

Overall, then, the United States does not just interact with countries based on ideological reasons, similar to Russia, but has increasingly begun engaging extensively only with countries that are critical to countering drug trafficking and migration flows. While some overlapping interests remain, the United States' limited inducements and shared objectives further divided it from Latin America. This has opened the space available for other Great Power competitors to enter a region that has historically been dominated by the United States. U.S. priorities toward the region are unlikely to better align in the short-term, suggesting that both Russia and China will have more space to operate throughout the region going forward.

## RUSSIA IN LATIN AMERICA

Since first taking power in 1999, Russian President Vladimir Putin has hardly veiled his desire to lead the Russian Federation back into superpower status.<sup>15</sup> Putin's rhetoric emphasizes a multipolar world where the United States is no longer the dominant power, and his actions present Russian global leadership as a viable alternative to that of the United States or China. Such a narrative includes developing Russian capabilities to project power and wield influence outside of its traditional spheres of influence. However, it wasn't until the consolidation of the Bolivarian Revolution led by Hugo Chávez in the mid-2000s—which embraced extra-regional actors as a counterweight to the United States—that Russia's projected priorities coalesced into the Great Power competition now underway.

Venezuela's Bolivarian Revolution espoused a specific doctrine that sought to limit U.S. influence in the region, while rejecting liberal democratic norms and seeking alliances with new, extra-regional actors.<sup>16</sup> As the Bolivarian movement, with Venezuela's support, took power in Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Suriname, and El Salvador, it formed an unprecedented regional bloc of populist nations. The Bolivarian Alliance espoused "21<sup>st</sup> Century Socialism" and an end to the influence of the U.S. "empire" in Latin America. The combination of Russia seeking a broader global role,

*The Putin regime's outreach in Latin America is calibrated to maximize impact with low-cost actions.*

and the Bolivarian Alliance aligning closely with Russia's strategic vision, led to a mutually beneficial partnership. Such actions occurred as the United States was already withdrawing its presence in the early 2000s. Lacking the resources for large projects and massive investments, Russia primarily works

through former Cold War allies such as Cuba, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, rather than engaging the entire region. The Putin regime's outreach in Latin America is calibrated to maximize impact with low-cost actions.

Moscow wields its influence in Latin America in three primary ways. First, Russia is increasingly engaged in shows of military prowess either through training or the deployment of Russian military technology. Second, Russia maintains an increased reliance on controlling the narrative of information and disinformation. Through both media outlets and social media targeting, Russia engages actively in Latin America's political and social life. Finally, Russia actively uses its own banking system and the development of cryptocurrencies to create a parallel financial system operating outside U.S.

and European financial systems and control—primarily to assist allies like Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Cuba in avoiding U.S. sanctions.

Russia's military and law enforcement activities in Latin America are more visible and targeted. Over the past two years, Russia has carried out several provocative military maneuvers designed to both project military power and demonstrate to the United States that Latin America is not beyond Russia's reach. Similar to what Russia views as the U.S. meddling in its "near abroad" of Ukraine and other neighbors, Russia wants to show that it can reach the United States' "near abroad" as a strategic counterpoint.<sup>17</sup> This includes the creation of a regional counternarcotics training center in Nicaragua, the expansion of regional cooperation consortiums, joint military training exercises with Venezuela and Nicaragua, and military-to-military exchanges for Russia's allies across the hemisphere.<sup>18</sup>

The Russian military has been particularly visible in Venezuela, one of Russia's staunchest Latin American partners. In September 2019, Interfax reported that a "group of Russian military specialists" arrived in Caracas and that the Venezuelan and Russian militaries were to discuss improving cooperation.<sup>19</sup> Recent Russian actions included the deployment of two nuclear-capable bombers, as well as the deployment of intelligence collection ships and an underwater research ship to Venezuela that is capable of mapping vital undersea cables.<sup>20</sup> All these measures are designed to show Russia's capability in projecting power into the Western Hemisphere.

Second, Russia uses media as an inexpensive influencing tool. RT TV and Sputnik News offer sophisticated Spanish-language programming that is widely consumed throughout the region. RT has also expanded its physical presence, and can now boast bureaus in Buenos Aires, Caracas, Havana, Los Angeles, Madrid, Managua, and Miami.<sup>21</sup> Beyond television, Russia accesses Latin American users through social media. For instance, when violent unrest roiled Colombia, Chile, and Ecuador in late 2019 and into early 2020, State Department analysts documented Russia's direct participation in spreading disinformation and running social media campaigns to sow violence and chaos. During Chile's unrest, nearly 10 percent of all tweets supporting the protests against the Piñera government originated in Russia.<sup>22</sup> Such actions serve as an extension of Russia's already documented interest in using its media and social media platforms to undermine trust in democratic institutions. As former Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for the Western Hemisphere, Frank Mora explained, Russia is:

“attempting to undermine and discredit the democratic consensus that the U.S. has, since at least the end of the Cold War, sought to defend and promote. Moscow's other key strategic objective is

to create or intensify existing cleavages between Washington and its allies, whether it's NATO or its two most important strategic partners in Latin America—Mexico and Colombia. Weakening U.S. influence and its historic bonds with Latin America serves the Kremlin's global objective of undermining the Western world and United States leadership of it."<sup>23</sup>

Russia's final primary area of interest revolves around its role in the international financial system. Russia's use of alternative financial institutions is primarily designed to avoid the U.S.-based dollarized banking system and subsequent susceptibility to financial sanctions. The development of regional cryptocurrencies, such as the Petro in Venezuela, was designed by Russian nationals in Uruguay.<sup>24</sup> In a departure from the design of other popular cryptocurrencies (like Ethereum and Bitcoin), the Petro has been auctioned as a 'pre-mined currency,' meaning the government would produce and control it. The only countries now using the Petro are Russia and Venezuela.<sup>25</sup> The transactions are carried out through a series of Russian and Venezuelan banks, all under U.S. and E.U. sanctions, operating in Venezuela and Panama. These include Gazprom Bank, Vneshekonombank (VEB), and Evrofinance Monsarbank.<sup>26</sup>

Overall, it is clear that Russia—through military projections of power, an expanding media and social media presence, and banking sector alternatives—is competing on a broader strategic level than is generally acknowledged. Even so, Moscow's focus remains relatively narrow and not backed by significant resources to build broad and sustainable alliances. While Russia's actions in Latin America certainly warrant attention, it is unlikely that Russian activities and influence will expand dramatically outside of these narrow actions and overall objectives in the near future. As such, Russia challenges for a growing, but still limited, amount of Great Power in Latin America. The same cannot be said for China.

## CHINA IN LATIN AMERICA

While Russia only engages ideological allies in Latin America, the People's Republic of China (PRC) engages with governments across the ideological spectrum. Since the early 2010s, and continuing in the last three to four years, China's growing presence in Latin America has focused on increasing trade, developing infrastructure investment, installing communications technologies, and deepening new or existing diplomatic ties. China presents itself as a global superpower capable of providing military training, business opportunities, and foreign assistance not conditioned by



anti-corruption benchmarks or environmental impact standards. China's three primary methods to engage the region are through major infrastructure programs (often through the Belt and Road Initiative), diplomatic and educational outreach, and through state-owned media outlets and technology companies.

Before exploring China's three primary areas of influence, it is essential to note that one reality that facilitated Beijing's entrance into Latin America is the inducement of countries throughout the region to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan. At the end of 2015, only twelve countries in Latin America and the Caribbean (and eighteen globally) recognized Taiwan. As China's interest in the region grew, so too did China's desire to engage countries with whom it had very little historic engagement.

China initiated a major initiative in January 2016 to actively seek new diplomatic relations with countries who historically recognized Taiwan, and within two years, Panama, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic switched their diplomatic relationship to Beijing.<sup>27</sup> In exchange, all three countries received large amounts of aid and promises of investments in mega-projects. With this entrée into Latin America, China successfully accelerated its effort to access the region writ large.

Chinese infrastructure and development programs are the most noticeable and quantifiable aspect of Beijing's influence in the region. Many current projects occur under the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which began in 2013 and has since become one of the largest global infrastructure programs in history.<sup>28</sup> Due in part to China's increased diplomatic campaigning, a total of nineteen Latin American countries formally participate in the BRI, with three new countries joining in 2019 alone.<sup>29</sup> Twenty-five of the hemisphere's thirty-one countries (including Caribbean nations) now host Chinese infrastructure projects that are largely financed through Beijing's pledged \$150 billion in loans. These loan structures now make China the region's largest foreign investor and creditor, surpassing the United States, though the United States still maintains dominance on trade with the region. As Admiral Faller noted, with these funds, China is "practicing the same type of predatory financing and 'no strings attached'

*China presents itself as a global superpower capable of providing military training, business opportunities, and foreign assistance not conditioned by anti-corruption benchmarks or environmental impact standards.*

largesse it has wielded in other parts of the world.”<sup>30</sup> The difference is that China only recently began actively interacting with Latin American nations.

While Chinese infrastructure projects in Latin America range from bridges to rail lines and highways to dams, one specific type of infrastructure project is particularly noteworthy: maritime ports.<sup>31</sup> Chinese companies now own outright, or control important parts of, fifty-five ports in Latin America, many of them tied directly to the Chinese state.<sup>32</sup> This includes both ends of the Panama Canal and other key choke points. As one report by the Washington, D.C.-based research center, C4ADS, noted, “port investments are viewed as vehicles with which China can cultivate political influence to constrain recipient countries and build dual-use infrastructure to facilitate Beijing’s long-range naval operations.”<sup>33</sup> Admiral Fallon called port investment the most concerning area of Chinese influence because of the strategic value ports offer the Chinese, as they create opportunities where the Chinese military could “threaten sea lanes vital to global commerce and the movement of U.S. forces.”<sup>34</sup>

Second, China is moving aggressively with its growing economic clout to shape hemispheric political events through diplomatic and education or cultural outreach projects. Between January 2013 and December 2018, Chinese President Xi Jinping and Foreign Minister Wang Yi made at least thirty-three state visits throughout Latin America.<sup>35</sup> In addition to Chinese visits to Latin America, China has received presidents from countries throughout the region, including—perhaps most notably—joint meetings with the presidents of Panama, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic, who all switched their countries’ diplomatic ties from Taiwan to the People’s Republic of China in November 2018.<sup>36</sup> China far outperforms both the United States and Russia in this form of high-level diplomatic engagement. Beyond the optics of consistent meetings, official visits have also frequently served a secondary purpose of announcing new infrastructure programs or educational exchanges between countries, furthering China’s position in the region.

Following this trend of high-level engagement, China also engages in a series of other diplomatic meetings. For instance, for the first time in April 2018, China was granted observer status at the Summit of the Americas held in Lima, Peru. This was also the first summit that a U.S. president did not attend, offering a stark reminder of the shifting regional priorities for both nations. While President Trump opted not to attend the summit (instead sending Vice President Pence), China elected to enter the Lima Summit with the hopes of dramatically increasing trade with Latin America.<sup>37</sup> Following the summit, China emerged as the top trading

partner for Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, some of the largest Latin American economies.<sup>38</sup> In 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic has spread across the world, China has reached out to Latin American nations to offer equipment donations, painting itself as the partner to many nations in a practice dubbed “medical diplomacy.”<sup>39</sup> While more costly than other activities discussed in this article, China’s economic outreach vis-à-vis diplomatic channels and high-level visits has proven to have strong returns in terms of Chinese objectives in the region.

Finally, Beijing is engaged in both media and technological engagement to expand their influence in Latin America. China, even more than Russia, has placed significant emphasis on building a media presence in the hemisphere, focusing on virtual platforms, while also not abandoning traditional media outlets. *Xinhua*, the state news agency, has twenty-one bureaus in nineteen countries and more than 200 media clients, many of whom receive the *Xinhua* online news for free or at a steep discount.<sup>40</sup> Cai Mingzhao, the director of Xinhua, said his mission is to use the agency’s fifty years of experience in the region to “play a larger role in shaping a China-Latin America and Caribbean community of common destiny.”<sup>41</sup> In addition to Xinhua, *The People’s Daily* produces Spanish and Portuguese language content and *China Central TV* (CCTV) has a 24-hour Spanish broadcast. China Today maintains two Spanish language websites, and these outlets have Spanish-language accounts on social media as well, thus accessing a significant portion of media and news consumers throughout Latin America.<sup>42</sup>

At the same time, Huawei and other Chinese technology companies are expanding rapidly in Latin America, with Huawei and ZTE now operating in sixteen countries throughout the region. These telecommunications firms support “the backbone of commercial and government communications systems, providing a backdoor for the Chinese government to monitor and intercept official information” the United States shares with its partner nations.<sup>43</sup> Huawei’s “Safe Cities” program of sophisticated surveillance through CCTV in urban areas operates in Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Argentina.<sup>44</sup> These programs have been widely documented as providing bulk data to the Chinese government, undermining individual privacy, and furthering surveillance state operations for host countries as well as China.<sup>45</sup>

Such technology projects are not limited to Huawei and ZTE, however. China’s military-run space station in the southern Patagonia region of Argentina, operational since October 2018, is another area where China appears to have gained a strategic edge over the United States. The isolated

station is operated by the China Satellite Launch and Tracking Control General (CLTC) of the Chinese Liberation Army.<sup>46</sup> Under the terms of the fifty-year lease, the 200-hectare (508 acre) property was granted diplomatic status, and the Argentine government has virtually no oversight. The first Argentine government delegation to visit the station came a year after it was operational. While claiming to have a visitor's center, no visitors are allowed.<sup>47</sup> U.S. and Argentine officials fear the station could be used to access satellite information, hide data collection efforts, and interfere with U.S. satellite command and control.

While Chinese objectives in the region center around economic gain and strategic positioning, rather than the pursuit of narrow ideological or political goals, China's presence in Latin America is also significantly more advanced and widespread than that of Russia. From controlling dozens of maritime ports to becoming a primary cellular services provider throughout the region, China now has control of many of the economic valves of Latin America while having access to significant amounts of data. Neither Russia nor the United States seem poised to compete with Beijing on this front, at least not in a sustainable manner. Rather, China seems best positioned to continue their activities in the short and medium term without a Great Power competitor to compete when it comes specifically to economic and soft power operations.

## CONCLUSION

In a multipolar world, jockeying for a geopolitical advantage does not necessarily imply a threat, and Great Power competition is not always harmful. In the case of Latin America, Great Power competition is increasingly complex. Competition prompted by the United States, Russia, and China often promotes all three countries' own interests rather than improving the conditions of the Latin American nations themselves. Emphasizing strategic objectives—such as eradicating corruption or building a mutually beneficial regional security structure—are not among the priority interests for China and Russia, nor the United States as of late. Nonetheless, all three primary actors engage the region with different agendas, approaches, and anticipated outcomes.

U.S. influence is waning, in part by design, and in part because of other emerging actors. That said, the United States still makes a concerted effort through counternarcotics, immigration enforcement, cultural interconnectedness, and trade to maintain strong partnerships. As U.S. aid to the region has been systematically cut and U.S. Southern Command remains

the smallest of the Combatant Commands, the security agenda is faltering. Moreover, training and exchange programs are withering, and messaging for the region through U.S. government platforms has been slashed. The United States does still retain some significant advantages. With geographic proximity, millions of Latin American people living in the United States (and vice versa), a shared history, and billions of dollars in remittances that flow back to the region, the United States and Latin America have cultural and historical ties that bind. The U.S. military is still viewed as the best in the world and remains a coveted training and strategic partner.

Russia holds fast to a few allies that are ideologically aligned—primarily Venezuela, Cuba and Nicaragua—while employing targeted, low-cost and high-impact strategies to garner public support from the countries in Latin America where Moscow operates. This allows the Putin regime to play in the United States' near abroad while limiting the financial burden or diplomatic clout needed for Russia to remain a player in the Western Hemisphere. Through a robust media, (dis)information, and cyber campaign, Russia is shaping an environment that asserts itself as a member of the three Great Power competitors. Finally, through the use of Russian banks and cryptocurrencies, Russia helps allies ensure some financial stability as U.S. sanctions have increased in recent years. At its core, such an engagement strategy allows Russia to compete globally as a Great Power through ideological allies with whom Moscow already has relations.

China has taken a more expensive, but likely more enduring approach in establishing itself as a significant force in the region. Rather than looking for ideological allies, China offers no-strings aid to governments across the hemisphere and has the resources to deliver on those promises. With an enormous state media presence, China constantly engages in a region where it now wields economic and social clout. This engagement architecture has become visible during the coronavirus pandemic, though extensive diplomatic outreach existed well before 2020. Additionally, through its cell phone, satellite, and electronic capabilities in the region, China has enormous access to bulk data and the market for residents' telecommunications services. Finally, with its robust infrastructure and development projects, China maintains direct access to maritime ports, airports, and even railways and dams. The culmination of this infrastructure buyup presents significant implications for future economic and military access points, placing China in an increasingly advantageous geopolitical space, at least in Latin America.

The United States, Russia, and China then are engaged in an unprecedented—and likely persistent—strategic competition in the Western

Hemisphere and throughout the world. The United States remains the predominant force in the region, however, both Russia and China have made significant inroads that should not be ignored. All three great powers pursue different strategic interests and approaches to the hemisphere, often for their own economic or ideological gain. This means that the once-automatic dominance of the United States in trade, military assistance, access to critical infrastructure, and control of sea lanes and ports is now a thing of the past. The United States is understood as one option, rather than the sole option, and continues to lose ground amid active influencing activities by both Russia and China. In a region seldom considered in the Great Power competition debates, tri-polar competition now appears to be the new normal in Latin America. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The article understands Latin America to be all countries in the Western Hemisphere that are south of the United States and outside of the Caribbean. Such a definition includes Mexico, Central America, and South America.
- 2 U.S. Senate, Armed Services Committee, *Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command*. 116<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2020.
- 3 Douglas Farah and Kathryn Babineau, "Extra-regional Actors in Latin America: The United States is not the Only Game in Town," *Prism* (8)(2019): 96-113.
- 4 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 5 Dan Kopf, "Mexico is finally the US's number-one trading partner," *Quartz*, August 8, 2019, <<https://qz.com/1682861/mexico-is-now-americas-number-one-trading-partner/>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 6 "Trade in Goods with South and Central America," U.S. Census Bureau, 2019, <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c0009.html> (accessed March 11, 2020).
- 7 "Latin America and the Caribbean: U.S. Policy Overview," *Congressional Research Service*, Last updated November 13, 2019, <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/IF10460.pdf>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 8 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 June Beittel, "Colombia: Background and U.S. Relations," *Congressional Research Service*, last updated November 29, 2019, <<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R43813.pdf>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 11 Camilo Montoya-Galvez, "Trump administration says 'Remain in Mexico' program is one 'we're building to last'," *CBS News*, August 19, 2019, <<https://www.cbsnews.com/news/remain-in-mexico-trump-administration-says-controversial-program-is-one-were-building-to-last/>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 12 Christopher Sherman, "US sending asylum seekers to Central America," *Associated Press*, January 15, 2020, <<https://apnews.com/4cf944fe4fb3ebb81f182668754858b1>> (accessed February 27, 2020).

- 13 Luis Noe-Bustamante and Antonio Flores, “Facts on Latinos in the U.S.,” *Pew Research Center*, September 16, 2019. <<https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/fact-sheet/latinos-in-the-u-s-fact-sheet/>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 14 Mary Beth Sheridan, “The Little-noticed surge across the U.S.-Mexico border: It’s Americans, heading south,” *The Washington Post*, May 18, 2019, <[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/the-little-noticed-surge-across-the-us-mexico-border-its-americans-heading-south/2019/05/18/7988421e-6c28-11e9-bbe7-1c798fb80536\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/the-little-noticed-surge-across-the-us-mexico-border-its-americans-heading-south/2019/05/18/7988421e-6c28-11e9-bbe7-1c798fb80536_story.html)> (accessed February 28, 2020).
- 15 Lucy Martirosyan, “20 years of Putin in power: a timeline,” *PRI the World*, August 9, 2019, <<https://www.pri.org/stories/2019-08-09/20-years-putin-power-timeline>> (accessed March 2, 2020).
- 16 The Bolivarian Alliance, officially *La Alianza Bolivariana Para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America) was created in 2004 by Venezuela and Cuba. The alliance has since grown to include Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Suriname, and several small Caribbean island nations. Ecuador withdrew in 2018.
- 17 Richard Myles, “Virtual Russian Influence in Latin America,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, May 9, 2018, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/virtual-russian-influence-latin-america>> (accessed February 20, 2020).
- 18 Farah and Babineau.
- 19 Tom Balmforth and Angus Berwick, “Russian military specialists arrive in Venezuela to service equipment: Interfax,” *Reuters News Service*, September 19, 2020, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-venezuela-specialists/russian-military-specialists-arrive-in-venezuela-to-service-equipment-interfax-idUSKBN1WA2FJ>> (accessed February 26, 2020).
- 20 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 21 Julia Gurganus, “Russia: Playing a Geopolitical Game in Latin America,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 3, 2018, <<https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/05/03/russia-playing-geopolitical-game-in-latin-america-pub-76228>> (accessed February 20, 2020).
- 22 Lara Jakes, “As Protests in South America Surged, so did Russian Trolls on Twitter, U.S. Finds,” *New York Times*, January 19, 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/19/us/politics/south-america-russian-twitter.html>> (accessed February 24, 2020).
- 23 Frank O. Mora, “Russia’s assault on Latin America’s democracies and sovereignty,” *Univision*, February 20, 2018, <<https://www.univision.com/univision-news/opinion/russias-assault-on-latin-americas-democracies-and-sovereignty>> (accessed February 11, 2020).
- 24 Emiliya Atanasova, “The Petro: Venezuela Woos Qatar as Maduro Hangs Onto Crypto Dream,” *Cryptovest*, January 19, 2018, <<https://cryptovest.com/news/the-petro-venezuela-woos-qatar-as-maduro-hangs-onto-crypto-dream/>> (accessed March 1, 2020).
- 25 Gideon Long, “Maduro’s Cryptocurrency Scheme Met with Skepticism,” *Financial Times*, January 15, 2018, <<https://www.ft.com/content/9c0fcc2c-faa9-11e7-9b32-d7d59aace167>> (accessed March 1, 2020).
- 26 Farah and Babineau.
- 27 “What Panama’s Recognition of China Means for America’s Backyard,” *World Politics Review*, October 5, 2017, <<https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/trend-lines/23316/what-panama-s-recognition-of-china-means-for-america-s-backyard>> (accessed February 27, 2020).

- 28 Andrew Chatzky and James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," *Council on Foreign Relations*, January 28, 2020, <<https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>> (accessed February 28, 2020).
- 29 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ben Miller, "China's Economic Footprint," *Americas Quarterly*, 2019, <<https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/chinas-economic-footprint>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 32 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 33 Devin Thorne and Ben Spevack, "Harbored Ambitions: How China's Port Investments Are Strategically Reshaping the Indo-Pacific," *Center for Advanced Defense Studies*, 2017, <<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/566ef8b4d8af107232d5358a/t/5ad5e20ef950b777a94b55c3/1523966489456/Harbored+Ambitions.pdf>> (accessed February 20, 2020).
- 34 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 35 The elaboration of visits was calculating by the authors and based on press releases by either the Chinese government or the receiving Latin American countries.
- 36 See for example: Ying Yong, "Presidente Sánchez Cerén cierra visita de Estado a China con una reunión con el alcalde de Shanghai," *Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores*, November 5, 2018, <<https://rree.gob.sv/presidente-sanchez-ceren-cierra-visita-de-estado-a-china-con-una-reunion-con-el-alcalde-de-shanghai-ying-yong/>> (accessed February 27, 2020).
- 37 Fred Imbert, "Trump misses opportunity to curb China's growing global influence by skipping Summit of the Americas," *CNBC*, April 13, 2018, <<https://www.cnbc.com/2018/04/13/trump-misses-opportunity-to-curb-china-influence-by-skip-ping-summit-of-the-americas.html>> (accessed March 16, 2020).
- 38 Jorge Heine and Anders Beal, "The Strategy Behind China's Diplomatic Offensive in Latin America," *Americas Quarterly*, May 2018, <<https://www.americasquarterly.org/content/strategy-behind-chinas-diplomatic-offensive-latin-america>> (accessed March 1, 2020).
- 39 Cassandra Garrison, "With the U.S. hit by virus, China courts Latin America with medical diplomacy," *Reuters News Service*, March 26, 2020, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-latam-china-featur/with-u-s-hit-by-virus-china-courts-latin-america-with-medical-diplomacy-idUSKBN21D346>> (accessed April 22, 2020).
- 40 "Xinhua News Agency ready to deepen media cooperation in LatAm: Xinhua president," *Xinhua News Agency*, November 26, 2016, <[http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-11/26/c\\_135859661.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2016-11/26/c_135859661.htm)> (accessed February 11, 2020).
- 41 Ibid.
- 42 Ricardo Barrios, "China's State Media in Latin America: Profile and Prospects," *Asia Dialogue*, May 28, 2018, <<http://theasiadialogue.com/2018/05/28/chinese-state-media-in-latin-america-profile-and-prospects/>> (accessed February 11, 2020).
- 43 Posture statement of Admiral Craig S. Faller, Commander, United States Southern Command.
- 44 Jonathan Hillman and Masea McCalpin, "Watching Huawei's 'Safe Cities,'" *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 4, 2019, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/watching-huaweis-safe-cities>> (accessed March 1, 2020).



- 45 Paul Mozur, Johan M. Kessel, and Melissa Chan, “Made in China, Exported to the World: The Surveillance State,” *The New York Times*, April 24, 2019, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/24/technology/ecuador-surveillance-cameras-police-government.html>> (accessed March 1, 2020).
- 46 Cassandra Garrison, “China’s military-run space station in Argentina is a ‘black box,’” *Reuters News Service*, January 31, 2019, <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-space-argentina-china-insight/chinas-military-run-space-station-in-argentina-is-a-black-box-idUSKCN1PP0I2>> (accessed February 20, 2020).
- 47 Douglas Farah site visit to satellite station and interviews with Argentine authorities and scientists, March 2019.



---

# Reset or Relapse?

## U.S.-Russia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

A CONVERSATION WITH  
AMBASSADOR THOMAS PICKERING

---

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Ambassador Pickering, thank you so much for joining us here.*

**THOMAS PICKERING:** It is nice to be with you.

**FORUM:** *The end of the Cold War promised a new era in United States-Russia relations. However, thirty years on, these relations are strained, to say the least. In short, what happened? What or who is to blame? What factors caused this?*

**PICKERING:** It's a very long story. In most enterprises of this sort, I think there is blame enough to go around. Russia under Putin hardened up their policies and saw the extension of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], the abrogation of the [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty, among other things, as issues they objected to. They were particularly concerned about our role in Libya. I think our role in Iraq was also something they took umbrage about. The United States clearly was deeply disturbed by Putin's actions in Crimea and in Ukraine, and less so but clearly felt quite deeply opposed to Syria. So

---

**Thomas Pickering** has served as Vice Chairman of Hills and Company since 2016. He previously served as the U.S. Ambassador and Representative to the United Nations in New York under President George H. W. Bush and as the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs under President Bill Clinton. In a diplomatic career spanning five decades, he was U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation, India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. He received the Distinguished Presidential Award and the Department of State's highest award, the Distinguished Service Award. Pickering holds a Bachelor of Arts from Bowdoin College and a Master of Arts from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

---

those things—as products of how each side wanted to conduct its domestic politics and its international activities—became contentions rather than areas of cooperation. It meant that over time and, on both sides, leadership

.....  
*It's complicated. There are areas where we still cooperate, there are areas where we don't, and there are areas where we could, but now don't seem to be interested in doing so.*  
 .....

took advantage of what the other side had done, was doing, or was presumed to be engaged in to create opposition. It supported them in their domestic political activities: Putin in popularity, Americans in elections. And so we went from a situation where we had, at the beginning of the century, conducted diplomacy—many people will say not very successfully, but that's an arguable point—to a situation where we engaged in demonology and that seems

to be a preeminent part of the relationship. It's complicated. There are areas where we still cooperate, there are areas where we don't, and there are areas where we could, but now don't seem to be interested in doing so.

**FORUM:** *The current national defense strategy of the U.S. emphasizes a return to Great Power competition, including with Russia. Do you agree that the United States faces a Great Power competition with Russia and is this "Cold War 2.0" inevitable?*

**PICKERING:** I think that many people will find comparisons with the Cold War which are apt and approaches to dealing with the problem which are germane. I think, though, that this is a different time and a different set of relationships. The original Cold War dimensions were such that we never thought there were any possibilities of negotiated solutions or redeeming virtues. It went from the 1940s, when we attempted to negotiate and we felt we were rebuffed by the Soviets, into a period in the 1950s where it became clear that avoiding that most horrific of all circumstances—a nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union—was all that really mattered. This marked a clear difference over time. Now, we appear to have forgotten some of those lessons, be headed down some of the same roads, be headed toward the direction of doing two things, while tearing up the agreements that helped us build stability in our nuclear relationship. It was far from perfect, but it was better than a zero-sum game. Opening the door to what clearly is pending as another nuclear arms race would not exactly repeat what we had in the Cold War. In the Cold

War, we jointly held 70,000 nuclear weapons at the peak. They provided no more assurance—to put it another way—of survival or stability than 10,000 weapons or 1,000 weapons. And so, it was a huge drain on the economies of both countries. Eventually, it was one of the things that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was, in many ways, an indication of no more security at jointly holding 70,000 roughly evenly divided than to holding 12,000 today, or 1,550 deliverable weapons as the most “accurate” number. So in many ways, we need to guard against committing the fallacies of the past and engaging in an arms race to believe that it produces some substantial security and foreign policy advantage for us rather than working on the possibility, as hard as this is to see now, of a set of relationships between the two of us which guard against things like accident miscalculation and misjudgment which could lead to a conflict. I’ve been very impressed by the fact that many of the experts can tell us how we might slip into nuclear war but there isn’t anyone who knows how to stop it once you get going. We are not configured to do that very well.

**FORUM:** *Shifting slightly to the Russian domestic front, Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia for nearly twenty years now through this near-two-decade consolidation of power. He seems to have all but ensured his permanence in Russia leadership. Is there any path, however unlikely, that you see him leaving power in the near to mid-future?*

**PICKERING:** No, I don’t. I think that to be best counsel based on the history of the past, when it seemed to me that the Putin party may have been in danger of losing its ascendancy in the Russian lower house—the Duma—in 2011 when Putin was about to come back as president after his short term as prime minister. Putin himself, I think, had a real bath of cold water when it came to his continuing capacity to stay in power. There were street demonstrations and several indications besides that he might have to high jump his next obstacle. I think he quickly moved in and turned that around, in part, through clever emphasis on Russian nationalism and foreign security policy in constant pressure to rebuild Russia as a great power. An emphasis on that as well as some efforts to criticize and attack the United States on things that he considered aggressive American activities and mistakes made toward Russia. Some effort to drive wedges between the U.S., the European Union, and NATO wherever he could. He was not totally successful in this, but he did manage to reinvigorate his popularity. We have seen in recent months that this can go up and down, but it has not tumbled so badly that one would consider he is in jeopardy.

He ends his term in 2024 and there are many theories about what he will do: become leader of a state council which he will elevate to a very high form, become prime minister and increase the roles of the prime minister (once again) while decreasing those of the president, join with Belarus and form some new, supra-national joint arrangement in which he would become (surprise, surprise) the president of that organization and allow that to amount to control of Russia as well. I do not think Lukashenko and Belarus, at the moment, are ready for that kind of step-down or step-aside, but we will see. Russia has significant power in the region and significant influence over Belarus.

**FORUM:** *Among Russian elites, there seems to be a myriad of swirling ideologies: from Russian nationalism, Eurasianism, Slavism... To what extent do you think that [President] Putin is guided by these ideologies, or are they simply tools for him?*

**PICKERING:** In many places, I think that assessing the durability of certain ideologies is impossible. Populist nationalism is perhaps a new adaptation which can selectively shift between left- and right-leaning ideas as in a way that most effectively maximizes its popularity and success.

*The fascinating thing is that Putin himself does not seem to pay a lot of attention to the economy. Maybe, in believing economic reforms are costly and painful, he doesn't want to undertake those now. He's prepared to see everything he can do through the magics of his other formulas, which I've discussed, to create a situation where people are prepared to bear the burden of a status quo economy.*

And so, I think we have come into a period where Russia is less ideologically motivated. Russia felt and Russians felt badly burnt by the ideological rigidity of Marxist Leninism and its attempts to proscribe all solutions from one single source of value. Russia further made some serious mistakes as a result of its rigidity, particularly in things like the organization of the economy, government spending on military equipment, and so on. This led to a situation where it had to move away from that because the government couldn't sustain it. Russia is not a capitalist society in traditional terms, but it is not a communist or even a socialist society and is perhaps growing more capitalist with the rise of its oligarchs and semi-open market. The fascinating

thing is that Putin himself does not seem to pay a lot of attention to the economy. Maybe, in believing economic reforms are costly and painful, he doesn't want to undertake those now. He's prepared to see everything he can do through the magics of his other formulas, which I've discussed, to create a situation where people are prepared to bear the burden of a status quo economy. There are statistics that laboring people haven't seen an increase in wages above inflation that have been in any way meaningful to them in some time.

**FORUM:** *One of the most worrying challenges—especially in 2020, an election year—is Russia's broad array of disinformation campaigns against the United States. What can the U.S. and other Western nations do to counter these Russian active measures?*

**PICKERING:** Well, I think that no respectable foreign intelligence agency—here or in Russia—would fail to take advantage of openings which would allow it to promote its national interests. The notion that there is now a settled policy about interference in internal affairs—despite the UN charter's requirement not to do so—is gone with the wind, at least for the moment. Countries are now in a position of having to defend themselves in many ways, and one of those is to tighten cybersecurity for interventionist purposes. That is to say that they need the means to directly combat misinformation, but this proves difficult because there is an overwhelming cascade of information coming at them from all sides. The more one uses untruth in his own system and in his own support, the more likely it is that he is going to confuse listeners and unbalance listeners in their willingness to trust a single source of information as reliable, or to stymie listeners in how they determine whether a source is true or not. That is very destructive because democracies rely on truth. Imagine, for example, what would happen if someone was able to completely dislodge the scientific method. It is essentially what the untruth propagation is an attack on. How would physics, chemistry, biology, and all their many ramifications operate successfully if everybody could choose their own laws and propagate them whether they produced repeatable, verifiable results or not? We saw in Soviet agriculture ideas that were biologically propagated which had no real meaning at all and tended to upset Soviet agriculture very badly. That also wasn't the only problem with Soviet agriculture. We've already seen experiments to manufacture independent versions of the truth in the area where it counts most—the measurable world of science—as well as what a clear mistake it is. As we all know, social science is not similarly able

to provide the stark data necessary to prove all of its truths, but it seeks to emulate the world of science because we know that reliance on established physical fact is something we can hang onto and it has no politics to it. It can produce real advantages and find progress in our country. Similarly, we can do that in politics but in economics we have a more statistical base. We don't ever reach for fiction. The unhooking of this in one of these areas is the effort to unhook the whole system in public confidence.

**FORUM:** *Moving to another large issue in the bilateral relationship—one that is rather slower burning in recent years—is the Ukraine question. What does a future resolution to the Ukrainian crisis look like, and what is the role for U.S. diplomacy there?*

**PICKERING:** Without repeating the earlier words of my discussion here at Fletcher in excruciating detail, there's a definite role for U.S. diplomacy. What I will also say is that it may start on the economic side where Ukraine badly needs help. The country essentially needs to put together a set of arrangements funded by the outside world—Europe, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so on—which could help to strengthen the Ukrainian economy and bring about reforms. The main reform vehicle would be to attack corruption, which is obviously an undermining aspect of what's happening in Ukraine. It could also bring more fairness into Ukrainian politics by recognizing both Russian and Ukrainian as equal languages for their people, which may in turn cause more average Ukrainians to examine the question of where and how more authority can be given to the oblasts—the local provinces—in governing their regions. This would further give greater voice to concerns which native Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine and the Donbas have felt are important to them. It could also help to look at the question of whether Ukraine can become a bridge country—or could have a foot in both sides of economic organizations such as the European Union (EU) and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). That would be hard but not impossible. Maybe, over time, the Ukrainian people could select which kinds of security arrangements and economic arrangements it might wish to join on a permanent basis. Something like this would be helpful if in fact it could lead early to an observation of the Minsk Agreements which might be honed and improved. The United States could join the group and participate in that. There doesn't seem to be any inclination on the U.S. side to take any of these views at the present time or to join in. This is only one set of ideas; there may be others worth looking at as well. No one would



want to give up the independence of Ukraine. One would try to solve the conflict and to do so in a way that left Ukraine whole and free—even recognizing that Ukraine should take a larger role in recognizing some of the complaints about it. This is only one set of ideas; there may be others worth looking at as well.

**FORUM:** *On the energy front, the United States seems to be fairly ineffective in stopping the construction of Russian gas pipelines to Europe. What should the U.S. do to limit Russian oil and gas leverage over the European continent? Or, given willing European cooperation in building these pipelines, should the U.S. really care or do anything at all?*

**PICKERING:** In 1994, I gave the annual speech at the Dishli meeting for the Dishli Conference and I had two paragraphs in it saying to the Europeans that they should be cautious about overreliance on Russia as a source of oil and gas for the various reasons that lie behind your question. You're still asking the question, so my two paragraphs had almost no effect, but it is a problem. And I think the way to proceed in this problem is to seek to provide the Europeans with alternative sources. Either on a competitive basis now or made readily available so that the ability to shut down the dependence they have on Russia is less and less significant in their own economic survival. And we're in a strong position to do that, in part because we've now become an exporter of oil and gas. Western Europe is also building more terminals for the absorption of things like [Liquefied Natural Gas], which require some significant industrial facilities. Over time, I suppose North African oil and gas and other sources are available. There are new provinces coming along in Guyana and Eastern Africa that could provide Europe with oil and gas. It's a fungible commodity, and it is world-wide traded. We also don't want to put the Europeans in a position where any structures they may have constructed—as useful as they will be—and as helpful as they may be in economic terms, become the sole source. And I think it's better to do that than try in one way or another to block the construction of arrangements that the Europeans themselves seem to want. But remind the Europeans, in fact that total dependence is not something that they should consider to be ideal. Or even, perhaps, useful.

**FORUM:** *Moving forward, are there any issues where you see potential cooperation between the United States and Russia?*

**PICKERING:** We have cooperated on the space station. We should and

continue to do that. We have a common interest in terrorism and fighting terrorism and that's important. We have a common interest in fighting drug and narcotic abuse and transport, and that's an important question. We have a common need to help resolve problems in the Middle East, which we each seem to be on a course where one way or another we don't meet. And that's difficult. I think that the Russians have continued to be helpful to us in having access to Afghanistan. The need has gone down, but it has not disappeared. And that's an important piece of ongoing cooperation. And I believe very strongly we should open a dialogue on a continuation of New START. And if it's possible, maybe to find ways that it could add what I would call a Trumpian initiative or a Trump initiative to New START. Perhaps by beginning to include some ideas and agenda for next steps in nuclear disarmament. My feeling there is that while President Trump wants to involve China, the way to involve China at this stage is perhaps to seek to develop an arrangement where the two negotiating partners who have to make the decisions keep the other three recognized nuclear powers—China, Britain, and France—fully au courant with the negotiations and where they're going. And maybe find times jointly to meet with them. But involving them in negotiations means putting extra fingers on the scale, so to speak, of balance. And I think that would be a mistake. But were we to do that this time, that would put them in a strong position, hopefully, to have enough knowledge and enough background to join in negotiations where the next stage comes along. And if the following stage to 1,550 deliverable weapons is around 1,000—below that it might be 600-800—and that would mean that they would have to play a role in that because we would want to begin to have concomitant reductions in other people's nuclear weapons stocks in order to provide for the international balance.

**FORUM:** *And finally, as a veteran statesman who was with the U.S. Foreign Service for over four decades, what advice would you give to President Trump or a future president to help strengthen the State Department, the Foreign Service, and American diplomacy in general?*

**PICKERING:** Well, I hesitate to provide advice because in some ways it might be misconstrued, if it ever is noticed, as something that comes from a tainted source. Which is, I think, something that the president unfortunately has adopted with respect to professional diplomats. And that is not a happy circumstance. I think the president should know that professional diplomats owe it to him to provide their best possible advice. That advice may not always coincide with what the president wants or where he is

going. They then have the obligation to carry out the president's foreign policies, and if they can't do that, they have full freedom to leave. My feeling is that our country needs a professional group of diplomats, and I think that not having them means that we lose the effectiveness of years of experience, the deep learning that comes with being involved in diplomacy on an active basis, and the ability to develop good judgment and some wisdom, knowing as many of the facts as one can know in advising about foreign policy. The disconnect that has evolved, and some cases, the contention that has evolved through fights over "political loyalty" or not, are, in many ways, I think, very damaging to the national interests of the country. And I would hope the president is seeing them as damaging to his own interest. After all, he's sworn an oath to support the constitution and follow the best interests of the country. But the president is in no way chained to a professional set of diplomats. It's a service that he should make available to himself, whether he agrees with them on everything or not. Just the way that the president should chain himself to the intelligence community to be sure that he doesn't miss vital facts, but in no way is he committed one way or another to use those facts in any other fashion. And that's the way our system is set up and the way it has worked, and it has been quite successful as a system. After all, we've been leaders of the world since 1945. And, in many ways, that hasn't been serendipity, but hard work and knowledge and a willingness, obviously, to deal with questions—and to debate them. And this is, in my view, where the State Department should be. I think pushing people out of upper levels of the State Department—everyone at the top grade, 40 percent or so at the next grade, and 20 percent at the next grade—means that you've lost years of service capability and what I would call honest advice-giving that you won't find easy to replicate in the future. This has a long-term influence on how the country performs over the years ahead, even beyond whatever the president's term might be.*f*



---

# America's Place in the New World Order

A CONVERSATION WITH JOSEPH DUNFORD

---

**FLETCHER FORUM:** *In 2018, you criticized Google for its inexplicable choice to avoid working with the DoD while simultaneously pursuing deeper business ties with China. As the United States operates in an era of Great Power competition with China, how can and should it confront this trend in the private sector?*

**GENERAL JOSEPH DUNFORD:** First of all, I'd like to provide a little bit of context about this issue. I speak a lot about competitive advantage. I was also looking at the issue through a U.S. military lens at that particular time. When I look at the elements that have given us a competitive military advantage, really, since World War II, the relationship the Department of Defense had with the private sector has always come to the forefront. Our ability to tap into the American people's intellectual capital, to tap into the production capability of U.S. industry, has given us the edge necessary to move men, materiel, and equipment around the world. And so, from my perspective, what I was first pointing out about Google was that they had qualified what they will and what they won't do with the United States government—with the Department of Defense, specifically. I also think the prevailing notion was that those bright lines didn't help China, but if you read about Xi Jinping and his concept of civil-military fusion,

---

**General Joseph Dunford** (ret.) served as the 19th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the nation's highest-ranking military officer. In this role, he was the principal military advisor to the President, Secretary of Defense, and National Security Council from 2015 to 2019. He is a Senior Fellow at the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, Harvard University, and currently serves as Chairman of the Board for the Semper Fi Fund & America's Fund, which supports wounded, ill, and injured active duty personnel and veterans from all services. A native of Boston, Massachusetts, General Dunford graduated from Saint Michael's College. He also earned master's degrees in Government from Georgetown University and in International Relations from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy.

---

and you take a look at how China deals with the intellectual property of any country or company that is of interest in China, it's unreasonable to expect that related work is not contributing to the development of military capabilities of the [Chinese] People's Liberation Army. I mean, it's just not possible. So from my perspective, this was not a "go to war with Google" issue. The expression I used was, "we're the good guys. We're not the perfect guys. And we make mistakes from time to time, but who would you like to have leading the world order? Who would you like to be underwriting the rules in a world order?" Given what China has done both domestically as well as in terms of economic coercion, political influence, and feeding corruption globally, my argument to Google and other companies is that it's in their long-term interests to cooperate with the U.S. government.

**FORUM:** *Public-private partnerships are also a powerful tool for bolstering American competitiveness. How can the government court the private sector, or more specifically, its talent, while pursuing this tougher line?*

**DUNFORD:** Per my previous answer, this relationship has shifted. Traditionally, a lot of U.S. R&D—or a majority of R&D—was done by the Department of Defense. So the U.S. government funded a lot of research and development, and frankly, funded a lot of technological development in the private sector. Today, most technological development takes place in the private sector. So that requires you to kind of redefine your relationship with the private sector and develop partnerships. An example of the Department of Defense's approach to that is what was DIUx, and now, DIU, which is the Defense Innovation Unit. And what that was designed to do is identify what emerging technologies are out there, available, and of utility today, even as we invest in the long-term potential of their horizons. I think that strong communication with industry is important. We can't be looking at industry as the enemy, either. Cost overruns, schedule challenges—those things notwithstanding. And there are many factors behind that just besides industry malfeasance, which is not the root cause of many of those things. We have to view U.S. industry as a full partner in developing the capabilities of the U.S. military, and frankly, across the U.S. government.

**FORUM:** *The civil-military divide has come to the forefront of national debate in recent years to include your tenure as Chairman. What advice would you give to young servicemembers who face difficult choices when their political beliefs run the risk of threatening mission focus?*

**DUNFORD:** This is a pretty easy one for me to answer. If you take a look at recent Gallup polls, the military runs somewhere between 70 percent to 80 percent favorability amongst the American people. One of the fundamental reasons for that is that we're not looked at as a Democrat organization or a Republican organization. We're looked at as men and women who swear to defend and uphold the Constitution of the United States, the very idea and foundation of our country. Participation in partisan politics erodes the trust that the American people have in us as a non-partisan organization. So what I have said many times to people is, "look, when it comes to policy that is being developed and executed by people who have the statutory authority and responsibility to execute policy—whether you like it or not, you execute it."

Many times, people ask questions like, "under what circumstances would you resign?" When it comes to these questions, my advice to young people is, "that's not an option you have in uniform. In particular, that's not an option you have as a senior leader."

Resigning over an issue of policy if that policy is again developed and executed by someone that has that statutory authority and statutory responsibility—a lance corporal, a specialist, a sailor, or an airman can't quit because they don't like the orders they are given. A senior leader is in no greater a position

*A senior leader is in no greater a position of moral responsibility to quit because they don't like the policy that's being implemented.*

of moral responsibility to quit because they don't like the policy that's being implemented. You obviously always have an opportunity quietly to retire or to resign and you can do that, but I think it would be a mistake and a violation of our ethos to make a public demonstration of your dissatisfaction with policy. I feel the same way whether an individual is in uniform or, in a case like mine, out of uniform. I don't think it is appropriate for me to publicly criticize an elected official or a policy. I feel pretty strongly about that. Someone who is just joining the U.S. military needs to think about that as one of the things that would be expected of them throughout a career.

You concede some rights by choosing to serve. There's not a law and there's not a directive—it's an ethic. You choose to be part of the profession and therefore you follow the ethos of the institution.

**FORUM:** *Your successor General Mark Milley is facing an array of threats to the United States. What's the greatest challenge he is facing as he begins his tenure as Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff?*

**DUNFORD:** I think General Milley is confronted with the same ones that I was confronted with in 2015, as are most leaders in the Department of Defense, and that is the challenge of balancing the management of today's crises and contingencies with making sure you develop the capabilities the Department of Defense is going to need for tomorrow. Getting that balance right has proven difficult. For well over a decade, we didn't. As a result, our competitive advantage eroded over time and the margin of our competitive advantage is much smaller than it was in 2000-2001. We're in the most complex, volatile security environment since World War II. Kissinger said that five years ago and I think it's truer today than it was then. General Milley is dealing with that, but at the same time still has to focus the organization on the path of capability development and force design for the future. Getting that balance right really is his biggest challenge.

If you want to talk about our greatest nation-state challenges, I probably would have characterized them differently six months ago. The relationship that is most tense right now is with Iran, particularly in light of recent developments for uranium enrichment and stockpiling over the last couple of weeks. Iran is either on a path towards a nuclear weapon or they are trying to use that as leverage as they use violence to bring people back to the table for the Joint Cooperative Plan of Action (JCPOA). The Iranian situation is the top of the list. General Milley's still dealing with violent extremism. Kim Jong Un, despite the diplomatic outreach over the last two years, did some testing two weeks ago [early spring 2020] and materially he is in a much different place than he was in 2016 when many of us thought he would announce in 2017 that they were a nuclear power. Ultimately, General Milley, along with the Secretary of Defense and leadership in Washington, are dealing with our competition with China and Russia. Therein lies the tension I described to you between today and tomorrow.

**FORUM:** *You've talked briefly about the Defense Innovation Unit. You've also talked about the way in which the U.S. private sector treats intellectual property as opposed to foreign governments. What are the major themes of capability development, acknowledging the possibility that if the United States doesn't get it right, they won't get it at all?*

**DUNFORD:** Artificial intelligence is much talked about, but I assess that it will have a profound impact on military capabilities, so it as a capability is near the top of the list. Additionally, the need for resilience in space and for space capabilities is why we stood up the Space Command and Space Force. We made some assumptions in the 1990s that space would largely



remain a benign environment. That assumption unfortunately failed to hold, so now space capabilities are also near the top of the list. Quantum computing combined with artificial intelligence is clearly going to have a profound impact. And then, technological developments that are already here create great challenges in the form anti-ship cruise missiles and anti-ship ballistic missiles. If you just look at Iran on a day-to-day basis, the ratio of Iranian missiles to our ability to defend those missiles is significantly greater. If you look at China, it's even greater still. There is a lot of technology out there, but I would highlight those as near the top of the list.

**FORUM:** *Last year you remarked that U.S. competition with other world powers in space has reached a Sputnik moment. What is your advice for the head of the Space Force right now?*

**DUNFORD:** I don't have to give the head of the Space Force much advice. We selected carefully. We selected General [John] Raymond who has had a deep background in space as the first commander of the United States Space Command. Our Vice Chairman of the Joint Staff today, General (John) Hyten, grew up in space issues and then went to Strategic Command. We actually have some very mature, seasoned leadership in the Department that understand space very well. I think the only advice that I do have is when you start a new initiative like this, you only have a slight window of opportunity to really mature that organization, articulate the requirement for resources, and lay out a vision that those resources will fulfill. You can't underestimate the need to communicate in Washington, D.C. to the American people in the form of their elected representatives about the importance of space and getting after some of the vulnerabilities we identified. One of the reasons I supported moving out with the Space Force and Space Command was the recognition that our dependence on space, day-to-day as well as in a conflict, makes us vulnerable enough to require serious changes on how we think about this newest warfighting domain.

**FORUM:** *Throughout your career, you've emphasized the importance of military modernization and readiness. In your mind, what's the next great modernization challenge the military will face in this new era?*

**DUNFORD:** It gets back to power projection. When I was a student here [at The Fletcher School], it was 1991. We had just completed [Operation] Desert Storm and an unprecedented ability to project power when it was necessary to advance our interests. For the next 10 years plus, we had an unchallenged ability to project power. When I look at the United States

Military from a perspective that asks, “what is our source of strength?” I think we have two sources of strength. At the strategic level, it’s our network of allies and partners that we have built up since World War II. At the operational level, it’s our ability to project power when and where

*I think we have two sources of strength. At the strategic level, it’s our network of allies and partners that we have built up since World War II. At the operational level, it’s our ability to project power when and where necessary to advance our interests.*

necessary to advance our interests. What power projection capability thus means is that if you are able to establish superiority in any domain, sea, air, land, space, and cyberspace, at the time and place of your choosing, you will be able to successfully advance your campaign. We are challenged now in our ability to project power and we are challenged in each of those domains by the development of new technologies that are fielded by China, Russia, Iran, and even North Korea. New benchmarks have been set for how we must

deal with all of them.

**FORUM:** *Speaking of your time here as a student, you came into your most recent role after studying at both Georgetown and Fletcher. While we know which school is really better, what advice might you give to young foreign policy and national security professionals looking to stay ahead of the curve in this new era of Great Power competition?*

**DUNFORD:** This is probably overstated and you all may have heard what I’m about to say so many times that you’ll roll your eyes when you hear it. One of the strengths of a place like Fletcher is the relationships that you build. You have to look outward. You can’t just be consumed by what you are doing on a day-to-day basis and I think one of the best ways to stay connected, to stay out in front, is to take that network that you’ve developed here as students at Fletcher and maintain it going forward. You are going to be engaged with people that will be headed off in a variety of different disciplines and I think that staying connected to those individuals, or staying connected to the trends in their disciplines, is going to mitigate the risk of being surprised. It won’t necessarily keep you from being surprised, but an ounce of mitigation is worth a pound of catastrophe. *f*

---

# A Nebulous Construct: Why “Great-Power Competition” May Not Offer Sound Guidance for U.S. Foreign Policy

ALI WYNE

---

## ABSTRACT

*Three decades after the end of the Cold War deprived U.S. foreign policy of an orienting construct, policymakers appear to have converged upon a new one: great-power competition. This essay argues that, at least as presently conceptualized, this construct is problematic on at least two grounds: it does not sufficiently distinguish between China and Russia and risks drawing the United States into an unbounded competition with those two countries.*

## INTRODUCTION

U.S. policymakers have spent the past three decades trying to converge upon an overarching principle that would help them define America's role in world affairs. While the end of the Cold War removed an

---

*Ali Wyne is a Washington, DC-based policy analyst with the RAND Corporation's Defense and Political Sciences Department. He serves as a nonresident fellow with the Atlantic Council's Brent Scowcroft Center on International Security, a security fellow with the Truman National Security Project, a new leader with the Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, and a Penn Kemble Fellow with the National Endowment for Democracy. He is also a contributing analyst with Wikistrat, a global fellow with the Project for the Study of the 21st Century, and a member of Young Professionals in Foreign Policy's (YFPF) Global Leaders Program.*

---

existential threat to the United States, it also deprived the country of its lodestar, anticommunism, thereby rendering U.S. foreign policy susceptible to strategic drift. The intellectual avatar of containment himself, George Kennan, warned of this risk in 1994, when asked to weigh the legacy of that doctrine. “Our statesmen and our public,” he explained, “are

.....  
*While the end of the Cold War removed an existential threat to the United States, it also deprived the country of its lodestar, anticommunism, thereby rendering U.S. foreign policy susceptible to strategic drift.*  
 .....

unaccustomed to reacting to a world situation that offers no such great and all-absorbing focal points for American policy.”<sup>1</sup>

It would appear, though, that policymakers have finally converged upon a new orienting construct. Despite fiercely disagreeing over how to answer the aforementioned questions, they widely embrace the core conclusion of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) that the Pentagon released in January 2018: “The central challenge to

U.S. prosperity and security is the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition* by...revisionist powers” especially a resurgent China and a revanchist Russia.<sup>2</sup> Referring to that document, *Politico* recently observed that “[t]he blueprint has proved popular on Capitol Hill, where both parties have called for adapting to meet new threats and pleas to wind down decades of war are gaining traction.”<sup>3</sup> This point bears reiteration, especially given how starkly Republicans and Democrats disagree over most aspects of the Trump administration’s foreign policy. While the current administration has played an important role in articulating and advancing the construct of “great-power competition” (GPC), the level of traction that notion now commands across the ideological spectrum means that it is likely to endure over the long term as a basis for shaping U.S. foreign policy.

## THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT IN WHICH GPC AROSE

When the Soviet Union collapsed three decades ago, it appeared that the world had entered into what the late Charles Krauthammer famously called “the unipolar moment.”<sup>4</sup> So preponderant was America’s perch that observers around the world spent the 1990s debating exactly what Washington would do with its extraordinary inheritance. Near the turn of the twenty-first century, the *Economist* summarized how commanding America’s position in world affairs had become: “The United States bestrides

the globe like a colossus. It dominates business, commerce, and communications; its economy is the world’s most successful, its military might second to none.”<sup>5</sup>

The “new world order” of which President George H. W. Bush famously spoke would be marked not only by U.S. preeminence, but also by a more pacific, cooperative turn: the European Union (EU) would affirm the capacity of countries to overcome historical enmities in the service of forging a shared identity, the Internet would undermine authoritarianism, democracy would be confidently ascendant, and globalization would reduce the salience of borders and usher in a new wave of regional and global cooperation on the world’s pressing challenges.<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to overstate how different today’s world looks from the one that many U.S. observers believed—or at least hoped—would emerge with the end of the Cold War.

Nearly two decades after the attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States is still conducting an ever-expanding campaign against a resilient and adaptive terrorist threat,

expanding beyond the theaters of Afghanistan and Iraq where its efforts were initially concentrated. The global financial crisis of 2008-2009 and soaring U.S. debt, meanwhile, have sown the impression that Washington is as fiscally profligate at home as it is strategically undisciplined abroad.

The EU was supposed to be the exemplar of enlightened postwar geopolitics. The 1990s and 2000s abounded with articles that advised the Asia-Pacific to look westward for guidance on nurturing regional stability. The EU, of course, now finds itself under siege from both left- and right-wing disintegrationist elements, with the United Kingdom’s vote to exit the EU serving as an especially sobering affirmation of that body’s declining role in world affairs. Another indicator of that phenomenon: the World Bank estimates that the eurozone’s output contracted by 2 percent between 2009 and 2017 (whereas America’s grew by 34 percent, India’s grew by 96 percent, and China’s grew by 139 percent).<sup>7</sup>

Many observers believed that the Internet would pose a serious, if not insurmountable, challenge to authoritarianism. President Clinton

*While the current administration has played an important role in articulating and advancing the construct of “great-power competition” (GPC), the level of traction that notion now commands across the ideological spectrum means that it is likely to endure over the long term as a basis for shaping U.S. foreign policy.*

famously observed in a March 9, 2000 speech that “liberty will spread by cell phone and cable modem.” He remarked shortly thereafter that “China has been trying to crack down on the Internet. Good luck! That’s sort of like trying to nail Jell-O to the wall.”<sup>8</sup> Instead, we see that while digital platforms are enabling dissident movements, they are also empowering strongmen. Thirty-nine of sixty experts whom *Foreign Affairs* surveyed in February 2019 agreed with the following statement: “Technological change today is strengthening authoritarianism relative to democracy.”<sup>9</sup>

Democratic progress is stalling, if not reversing. In its latest annual report, Freedom House found that twenty-five of forty-one established democracies have experienced net declines in their overall freedom scores, warning that “many freely elected leaders...are increasingly willing to break down institutional safeguards and disregard the rights of critics and minorities as they pursue their populist agendas.”<sup>10</sup>

Resurgent nationalism and populism have frustrated global cooperation on challenges as diverse as climate change and macroeconomic instability. There are presently over five times as many border walls and fences as there were when the Berlin Wall fell.<sup>11</sup> As trade tensions between the United States and China intensify, there is growing concern that global supply chains might fracture and that we may witness the emergence of technology blocs that operate on the basis of different norms and standards.

The failure of the aforementioned hopes to materialize has chastened the U.S. foreign policy establishment, leading to a wave of commentaries about “the return of history” and the reemergence of competitive geopolitics. In May 2017, then-National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster and then-Director of the National Economic Council Gary Cohn coauthored a widely discussed commentary in which they contended that “the world is not a ‘global community’ but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors, and businesses engage and compete for advantage.”<sup>12</sup> The Trump administration came into office persuaded not only that the United States had been preoccupied with counterterrorism for too long, but also, as McMaster and Cohn’s piece implied, that post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy had been naïve. This latter conviction served as a backdrop of its National Security Strategy (NSS), released in December 2017: “Since the 1990s, the United States displayed a great degree of strategic complacency. We assumed that our military superiority was guaranteed and that a democratic peace was inevitable. We believed that liberal-democratic enlargement and inclusion would fundamentally alter the nature of international relations and that competition would give way to peaceful cooperation.”

Instead, the NSS concluded, “after being dismissed as a phenomenon of an earlier century, great-power competition returned.”<sup>13</sup> It expressed particular concern over China and Russia, warning that they “challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”<sup>14</sup> The Pentagon corroborated that judgment in the aforementioned NDS, which was released the following month: “It is increasingly clear that China and Russia want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model—gaining veto authority over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions.”<sup>15</sup>

## TWO CRITIQUES OF GPC

Given how dubious the pillars of post-Cold War triumphalism proved to be and how vigorously a resurgent China and a revanchist Russia are contesting the foundations of the postwar order—individually and in partnership with one another—GPC appears to be a self-evidently meritorious frame through which to analyze world affairs. As presently conceptualized, however, it is problematic in two key respects.

First, it frames China and Russia jointly. The NSS, for example, stipulates “[t]hree main sets of challengers,” the first of which, it asserts, are “the revisionist powers of China and Russia.”

The document refers to the two countries in immediate juxtaposition on eight occasions in total, and the NDS employs a similar framing. It is analytically dubious to group together the two countries for at least two reasons. First, they are of markedly different material proportions; between 2008 and 2018, China’s gross domestic product went from being a little under three times as large as Russia’s to over eight times as large.<sup>16</sup> Second, they approach the postwar order in considerably different ways; Beijing is more of a selective revisionist, seeking to chip away at certain aspects of that system while appreci-

*Beijing is more of a selective revisionist, seeking to chip away at certain aspects of that system while appreciating how essential continued integration therein is to its ongoing resurgence, where Moscow is more of an opportunistic disruptor, looking to foment chaos and regarding itself as a victim of that system’s impositions.*

ating how essential continued integration therein is to its ongoing resurgence, where Moscow is more of an opportunistic disruptor, looking to foment chaos and regarding itself as a victim of that system’s impositions.

Grouping them together has significantly accelerated the progression of Sino-Russian military, economic, and diplomatic ties—a progression that had already acquired renewed momentum in early 2014, after the West imposed sanctions on Russia for annexing Crimea. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, the director of the Center for a New American Security's Transatlantic Security Program, concluded last March that “[t]he strong consensus in Washington around great-power competition as the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy is likely to continue to provide incentive for greater alignment between Russia and China.”<sup>17</sup> A more intentional entente between the two countries could further undercut U.S. foreign policy objectives vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea and intensify the global push to establish payment mechanisms that circumvent the reach of the U.S. dollar—to name just two potential consequences.

The second, and more concerning, problem with the current formulation of GPC is that it would appear to invite, if not compel, the United States to enter into an unbounded competition with China and Russia, irrespective of geography and issue. Consider these problem statements from the NSS:

- “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”
- “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.”
- “China and Russia target their investments in the developing world to expand influence and gain competitive advantages against the United States.”

Or consider the following distillations, which give some sense of how expansive mainstream observers outside of the government understand that competition to be:

- “Ultimately, great-power competition translates to the United States’ attempts to leverage its weight as a military and economic superpower...against the ability of China and Russia to send money, troops, and materiel with speed—and little, if any, oversight.”<sup>18</sup>
- “This conflict is over control of the modern levers of power—global rules and institutions, standards, trade, and technology.”<sup>19</sup>
- “This competition is one over resources, influence, and nothing short of the world order’s future contours.”<sup>20</sup>

A construct whose geographic purview and issue foci would both appear to be unlimited does not lend itself to the articulation of clear long-



term strategic objectives. It is telling that even those who are charged with crafting and executing a GPC-centric foreign policy are themselves unsure of what it would mean and entail. *Defense News* reported last May that “some policy and strategy experts say the Pentagon hasn’t yet figured out how to ‘compete’ with Russia and China. In fact, it hasn’t even settled on a definition for the ‘competition’ in ‘great-power competition.’”<sup>21</sup> Beyond being strategically unsound, uncircumscribed competition will encounter fiscal constraints and domestic wariness in the United States. America’s debt is growing rapidly—as is the elderly’s share of its population—and given its exhaustion over two decades of counterterrorist campaigns, the public is likely to be reluctant to support indefinite, multi-domain contestation against two formidable authoritarian powers.

### CONSIDERATIONS FOR DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE CONSTRUCT

In view of the preceding critique, what would a more sustainable U.S. approach to strategic competition entail? The following two pillars are far from comprising a coherent alternative to GPC’s present conceptualization. They might, however, furnish a basis for a conversation aimed at developing one.

#### *Adopt a Different Approach to Sino-Russian Rapprochement*

First, even though it is unlikely that it will be able to slow the short-term progression of ties between China and Russia, the United States should consider steps it might take in the medium to long run to undercut the momentum behind Sino-Russian cooperation. It should, for example, refer to them separately in public statements and adopt differentiated security strategies toward China and Russia, as treating them jointly will only compel them to be more intentional in collaborating to blunt the reach of U.S. influence. It should also emphasize to both countries that the United States does not seek permanently antagonistic ties, even though there may presently be few opportunities to collaborate with either. Only if China and Russia believe that there may be off-ramps in their respective

.....  
*Only if China and Russia believe that there may be off-ramps in their respective relationships with Washington will they reconsider the strategic virtue of sustained hostility.*  
.....

relationships with Washington will they reconsider the strategic virtue of sustained hostility.

In addition, while avoiding an overt effort to erect a wedge between China and Russia, which could have the unintended effect of driving them even closer together, the United States could reinforce concerns that both might have and/or should have about one another. It could remind China, for example, that the continuation of robust Chinese growth will ride on the security of maritime chokepoints, just as the expansion of the Belt and Road Initiative will ride on the stability of participating countries. Disruptive Russian gambits could undercut those objectives; Moscow's growing brinkmanship in the Middle East, for example, could destabilize the flow of energy from the region, upon which Beijing is increasingly dependent. The United States should stress to Russia, meanwhile, that it is risky for one to tie one's strategic fortunes so closely to a country that will increasingly consider one dispensable. As its own national security innovation base expands, China depends less on Russia for advanced military hardware.<sup>22</sup> Russia would do well to supplement its growing outreach to China with a more vigorous effort to bolster its partnerships with China's neighbors.

### *Prioritize Self-Renewal*

Second, while the United States will invariably react to certain actions taken by China and Russia, it should focus primarily on stimulating its own renewal. Its competitiveness should not—and need not—be beholden to two countries' decisions. Whether boosting the share of the federal budget allocated to basic and applied science and technology research, modernizing its immigration policies with an eye towards retaining more high-skilled talent, or enlisting the private sector in an effort to finance a credible geo-economic agenda abroad, there are many steps the United States can take independent of what China and Russia do or do not do.

Prioritizing an agenda of revitalization will be especially important in view of the possibility, if not certainty, that China and Russia will seek to provoke the United States into errors of overcommitment that emerge from a lack of strategic clarity. China, for example, may try to induce the United States to pursue a more reactive foreign policy by touting the progress of its geo-economic initiatives; announcing new and ambitious military, economic, and technological targets that it intends to achieve by 2049, the centenary of the People's Republic of China's establishment; and casting itself as a more predictable guardian of an open economic order.

Despite confronting increasingly acute domestic stresses and growing global disquiet about its strategic intentions, Beijing conveys an aura of inexorability around its resurgence. For its part, Russia may also try to goad the United States by pursuing symbolically significant—even if strategically disconnected—military forays in its near periphery, as well as in the Middle East and across Africa. While Russia may not possess the wherewithal to challenge the postwar order in a gradual, systemic manner, it exploits the U.S. fear that a more restrained U.S. foreign policy would create “vacuums” that Moscow and other subversive actors could fill.

## CONCLUSION

A construct such as GPC that is neither fiscally sustainable nor politically tenable is unlikely to offer policymakers rigorous guidance for formulating foreign policy. While specifying that China and Russia are its primary foci, GPC fails to distinguish sufficiently between the respective challenges that the two countries pose to U.S. national interests, and it actually risks driving them closer together. The broader concern is that, absent clarification, it essentially enjoins the United States to participate in a competition of indefinite duration that traverses the globe and broaches every issue. A foreign policy that avows the necessity .....  
for tradeoffs in the abstract but admits few, if any, in practice runs counter to the elemental precepts of strategy.

It bears repeating that the preceding is meant to critique the *present* conceptualization of GPC, not to argue that there is no interpretation of that construct that could enable the pursuit of U.S. national interests. China and Russia do, individually and in partnership, challenge U.S. national interests and the postwar order, and the United States should respond—selectively, though, and in a manner that enlists its allies and generates domestic support to the greatest extent possible. Critically, though, Washington must strive to develop a vision of its place in the world that derives at least as much from the principles that it seeks to advocate as from the challenges that it seeks to repel. In the aforementioned speech of his, Kennan advised that the United States “ought to shape its foreign relations in such

*Critically, though,  
Washington must strive to  
develop a vision of its place  
in the world that derives  
at least as much from the  
principles that it seeks  
to advocate as from the  
challenges that it seeks to  
repel.*

a way as to help it to be what it could be to itself and to its world environment, bearing in mind, of course, that it is primarily by example, never by precept, that a country such as ours exerts the most useful influence beyond its borders.” If considered competition with China and Russia enables the United States to redress its domestic dysfunction and restore its global standing, historians a generation hence may well sing its praises. *f*

## ENDNOTES

- 1 George F. Kennan, “The Failure in Our Success,” *The New York Times*, March 14, 1994, <<https://www.nytimes.com/1994/03/14/opinion/the-failure-in-our-success.html>> (accessed March 2, 2020).
- 2 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC, 2018), 2.
- 3 Connor O’Brien and Jacqueline Feldscher, “The Pentagon wants money for China, but troops are stuck in the Middle East,” *POLITICO*, February 8, 2020, <<https://www.politico.com/news/2020/02/08/pentagon-china-middle-east-112250>> (accessed February 9, 2020).
- 4 Charles Krauthammer, “The Unipolar Moment,” *Foreign Affairs* 70(1) (Winter 1990-9): 23-33.
- 5 “America’s world,” *The Economist*, October 21, 1999, <<https://www.economist.com/leaders/1999/10/21/americas-world>> (accessed July 8, 2019).
- 6 The term “new world order” appears in an address President Bush delivered before a joint session of Congress on September 11, 1990.
- 7 Walter Russell Mead, “Incredible Shrinking Europe,” *The Wall Street Journal*, February 11, 2019, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/incredible-shrinking-europe-11549928481>> (accessed September 2, 2019).
- 8 Hillary Clinton, Speech delivered delivered at Johns Hopkins SAIS, source: “Clinton’s Words on China: Trade Is the Smart Thing,” *The New York Times*, March 9, 2000, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/09/world/clinton-s-words-on-china-trade-is-the-smart-thing.html>> (accessed January 3, 2020).
- 9 “Does Technology Favor Tyranny? *Foreign Affairs* Asks the Experts,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 12, 2019, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ask-the-experts/2019-02-12/does-technology-favor-tyranny>> (accessed February 15, 2019).
- 10 Sarah Repucci, *Freedom in the World 2020: A Leaderless Struggle for Democracy* (Washington, DC: Freedom House, 2020), 10 and 1.
- 11 Kim Hjelmgaard, “From 7 to 77: There’s been an explosion in building border walls since World War II,” *USA Today*, May 24, 2018, <<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2018/05/24/border-walls-berlin-wall-donald-trump-wall/553250002/>> (accessed November 11, 2019).
- 12 H.R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, “America First Doesn’t Mean America Alone,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 30, 2017, <<https://www.wsj.com/articles/america-first-doesnt-mean-america-alone-1496187426>> (accessed January 28, 2019).
- 13 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), 27.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 2.
- 15 U.S. Department of Defense, *National Defense Strategy*, 2.
- 16 World Bank, “GDP (current US\$),” 2019, <<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.MKTP.CD?locations=CN-RU>> (accessed April 17, 2020).

- 17 The quote comes from her prepared statement for a U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission hearing entitled “An Emerging China-Russia Axis? Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition,” March 21, 2019, <[https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Kendall-Taylor%20Testimony%203.21.2019\\_final.pdf](https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/Kendall-Taylor%20Testimony%203.21.2019_final.pdf)> (accessed December 30, 2019).
- 18 Eric Schmitt and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Russia Projects Increasing Influence in Africa, Worrying the West,” *The New York Times*, January 29, 2020, <<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/africa/russia-africa-troops.html>> (accessed February 10, 2020).
- 19 James Andrew Lewis, “Technological Competition and China,” *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 30, 2018, <<https://www.csis.org/analysis/technological-competition-and-china>> (accessed August 5, 2019).
- 20 Patrick Quirk and David Shullman, “Want to prevail against China? Prioritize democracy assistance,” *The Hill*, October 1, 2019, <<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/463646-want-to-prevail-against-china-prioritize-democracy-assistance>> (accessed November 8, 2019).
- 21 Katie Bo Williams, “What’s Great Power Competition? No One Really Knows,” *Defense One*, May 13, 2019, <<https://www.defenseone.com/news/2019/05/whats-great-power-competition-no-one-really-knows/156969/>> (accessed March 23, 2020).
- 22 Robert Sutter, *China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and U.S. Policy Options* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2018), 10.



# THE FLETCHER FORUM *of* WORLD AFFAIRS

---

## CALL FOR PAPERS AND OP-EDS

---

*The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*

is pleased to announce a general call for papers for our Winter 2021 issue. Manuscripts will be reviewed on topics which address Global Inequality. Where and how has it worsened? What has been done to address it? Submissions may be either Features (3,000-8,000 words) or Perspectives (1,500-3,000 words). Please include an abstract and brief biography and adhere to the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

**The deadline for submissions for the Winter 2021 issue  
will be October 1, 2021.**

Additionally, *The Fletcher Forum* is welcoming Op-Ed submissions for our online edition, [www.fletcherforum.org](http://www.fletcherforum.org). Updated regularly to reflect a rapidly-changing international environment, *The Forum Online* provides students, academics, and policymakers an opportunity to write about critical topics in international affairs in Op-Ed form (no more than 800 words).

**Please send submissions and any questions to  
[Fletcher.forum@gmail.com](mailto:Fletcher.forum@gmail.com)**

For more information, visit  
<http://fletcherforum.org/submissions>.



# Russia and Eurasia Program

U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS INITIATIVE

The Fletcher School • Tufts University



The Fletcher Russia and Eurasia Program, inaugurated in 2018, is dedicated to teaching and research of a broad range of historical and contemporary issues related to Russia, Eastern Europe, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. Its mission is to educate future scholars and practitioners, generate cutting-edge scholarly analysis of the region, and foster U.S.-Russia cooperation.



The program includes the U.S.-Russia Relations Initiative sponsored by Carnegie Corporation of New York and the U.S. Russia Foundation. Through its partnerships with Russian universities and think tanks, the program provides students and faculty in Russia and the United States with unique opportunities to participate in joint courses, conferences, and exchanges. The program also hosts an ongoing speaker series, offers an annual U.S.-Russia relations book prize, gives financial support for student research and internships, and fosters the development of the Fletcher Eurasia Club.

