

Conceptualizing the Great Power Competition and U.S. Geoeconomic Strategy for the Central and South Asia (CASA) Region

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Abstract Once a central point of competition in the 19th-century “Great Game” between the Russian and British Empires, with Afghanistan as the “pull-and-tug” buffer zone, the Greater Central and South Asia regions have once again become the theater for a Great Power Competition (GPC). Vying for influence, resources, and interests are the modern Great Powers, namely the United States, China, Russia, and the Regional Powers, namely Iran, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and the Central Asian and Gulf countries. The rival powers of Russia and China, in particular, continue to compete with the United States for hegemony through economics and other non-military soft-power means. Despite the high-stakes complexity and global implications, no consensus has yet been reached on a conceptual underpinning for the GPC that might effectively guide the U.S. strategic engagement in the region. This chapter attempts to fill this gap by defining and conceptualizing GPC with a focus on geoeconomics in the Central and South Asia region. The chapter furthermore recommends the U.S. transition to the New Silk Road Initiative’s soft-power strategy in the CASA region to preserve the hard-fought gains of the last two decades in Afghanistan and advance U.S. relevance and influence in this critical Great Power battleground. Geoeconomic and New Economic Geography theories support the recommendation.

Keywords Great power competition · United States · Afghanistan · Russia · China · Belt and road initiative · New silk road initiative · New economic geography · Geoeconomics · Rare earth minerals · Critical minerals · Lithium

Introduction

Over the past decade, the international political system has come to be characterized as a Great Power Competition (GPC) in which multiple would-be hegemony compete for power and influence. Instead of a global climate of unchallenged U.S. dominance,

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revisionist powers, notably the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, are vying for dominance through military and economic means. Also engaged in the GPC are regional powers such as India, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey; rogue regimes such as North Korea; and violent extremist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda.

A critical GPC battleground is the Central and South Asia (CASA) region. The high-stakes, multi-player GPC unfolding in this region is a natural extension of the Great Game of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the British and Russian empires competed for control of the territory among their respective empires. However, the 21st-century GPC is a more complex contest involving a greater number of players and global implications. Moreover, its battles are as much economic as they are political or military.

A major geostrategic initiative emerging in the GPC context is the modern Silk Road, a massive collaborative infrastructure project that promises to integrate the trade and economies of over 70 countries, ranging from Europe to China and beyond. For all of CASA's economic potential, it remains one of the least economically integrated areas of the world. The modern Silk Road, set to re-unify the region, represents a revival of the ancient Silk Road, a network of shifting land and sea trade routes that knit together Asia, Europe, and Africa for millennia until its disintegration in the nineteenth century. Although the U.S. has been entrenched in the CASA region for nearly 20 years, fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan, it is China who is the leader in rebuilding the modern Silk Road network of land and sea trade corridors through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

To date, the U.S. has not engaged any meaningful Silk Road projects, despite launching its own New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) in September of 2011. China's BRI, a reaction to the U.S.'s NSRI, was launched in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, and thus far, more than \$200 billion has been invested into the project. The estimated total cost of the BRI by 2027 is \$1.2–\$1.3 trillion (Chatzky and McBride 2020). China's action and reaction demonstrate the vying for power and influence, which is the essence of the GPC. With the planned military withdrawal from Afghanistan in late 2021, the U.S. has stated its intention of shifting attention away from the CASA in favor of a more isolationist foreign policy. This withdrawal leaves room for both China and Russia to seek greater dominance and influence in the region at the cost of U.S. global power and influence. Suppose China and Russia control access to Central and South Asia's natural resources. In that case, the U.S. stands to lose not only its economic hegemony but also its autonomy in future efforts to counter violent extremism, fostered in the poverty and isolation of the region that led to the tragic events of 9/11. The U.S.'s potential disengagement from, and isolationist approach to, Afghanistan and the CASA region may perpetuate the formation of ineffective national security policies and jeopardize the competitiveness of the American private sector in the global marketplace. Such an initiative underpins the GPC framework outlined in the U.S.'s National Security Strategy (NSS) and National Defense Strategy (NDS).

While the U.S.'s competitive position as a global power and influencer is a major tenet posited in the NSS and the NDS, the documents leave the Great Power Competition undefined, likely because the term "GPC" was still evolving and barely applied at the time of the documents' construction. Nevertheless, in recent years, the term has come to shape international relations and actions and is now "firmly entrenched in conventional defense thinking" (Boroff 2020). Once an arcane concept and term, the Great Power Competition has become linked with every aspect of defense, strategy, and national security (Boroff 2020). As such, "GPC" must be uniformly understood so that policies and actions can be shaped accordingly.

Due to the relative newness of the term "Great Power Competition" and the overall lack of a universal definition and understanding, many gaps remain in its conceptual underpinnings. Thus, this chapter presents a conceptual perspective on the Great Power Competition, focused on geoeconomics relevant to current and future affairs. The chapter proceeds in two major sections. The first section of the chapter provides background on the Great Power Competition, including the origins and definition of the term, and explores the geoeconomic role of two major U.S. rivals in the GPC: Russia and China. Following the GPC conceptual framework, the chapter argues that the U.S.'s best interest is to revive the NSRI and establish the states' relevance and economic power in this critical GPC battleground. This second section posits that the U.S. role in the GPC must support Afghanistan's economic development, which is at the heart of CASA. This argument is further supported by theoretical frameworks of geoeconomics and New Economic Geography.

Background and Definition of the Great Power Competition

The Great Power Competition era is one in which the international political system is defined by competition for power and influence through military and economic means. Since post-WW II, the GPC has been defined as an environment "marked not by unchallenged U.S. dominance" or by close cooperation among world powers but, rather, by competition for military and economic power and influence among the Great Powers of the United States, China, and Russia (Colby and Mitchell). While these modes of modern power have had various materializations, economic rivalries have increasingly prevailed over military power and presence in foreign lands (Csurgai 2017).

Like the Cold War, the Great Power Competition is a quiet manifestation of power. Its theatre has shifted away from displays of hard power to one in which "cyber espionage, defense planning, 5G spectrum, international aid, intellectual property theft, supply chains, coalition-building, and election interference" dominate (MITRE 2020). Increasingly, the Great Power Competition has led to competition for the natural resources that will become critical in the future. Lithium, for example, is one such critical resource found in abundance in CASA, especially in Afghanistan, and its presence creates a desire to control, compete, influence, and possess. The GPC economic rivalries play out in regional projects aimed at increasing economic power

and influence. As such, the potential spheres of state influence and theatres of war are endless.

The 21st-century GPC is a complex contest involving a significant number of players and global implications. Its battles are as much economic as they are political or military. The GPC great powers have developed economic projects, and political and military alliances intended to shape the international order in their favor and shift power away from their competitors. As in past power competitions, economic projects in the CASA region are positioned as vital for the facilitation of hard and soft power projections and economic growth. Joseph Nye, Harvard University political scientist, observed that soft power, or a country's reputation and influence, is just as crucial as statecraft as a military power. While the NSS states that perception of strength, specifically military strength, and the vitality of alliances can affect rivals' willingness to abandon or forgo aggression, soft power can attract allies on the state level and foster an international environment that is distinctly pro-American (Musgrave 2020).

Though the Great Power Competition is a distinctly modern era, the GPC has been often regarded as an extension of the Great Game, a period of expansionist competition during the nineteenth century between Russia and the United Kingdom, and as a continuation of the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union. In a later chapter of this volume, Mitch Shivers argues that "the Great Power competition is anything but new to Central Asia. Since the early Nineteenth Century, great powers have jostled and gamed with one another, diplomatically and politically, using the mountains, deserts, and steppes of Central Asia as a 'pitch' (Shivers 2020). Indeed, in the historical periods and the current period, the crossroad to the competition is the CASA region. As with the historical Great Game, Afghanistan is once again geographically situated at the intersection of the modern GPC.

In *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, Mearsheimer (2001) argues that the international system exists in a state of anarchy, which is to say that no stable or neutral government body can in fact oversee states and state actions. As such, this state of anarchy places competing states in a constant power competition and fear of each other's actions and intentions. Mearsheimer further argues that it is this fear and uncertainty that leads to offensive economic and military measures. He contends, "states recognize that the more powerful they are relative to their rivals, the better their survival chances. Indeed, the best guarantee of survival is to be a hegemon, because no other state can seriously threaten such a mighty power" (Mearsheimer 2001). Following from this argument, the goal of individual states competing in the Great Power Competition is to achieve hegemon status and, thus, exist in a state of permanent security.

The term "Great Power Competition" first emerged on the world stage in 2008 when Robert Haas, then-president of the Council on Foreign Relations, used the term to refer to a reality that was assumed to have already passed. He concluded that the "challenges derived from globalization will dominate the century," noting that "great-power competition and conflict is no longer the driving force of international relations" (Friedman 2019). This sentiment echoes officials in Washington at the time, including former President Barak Obama, who, in his 2006 book, *The Audacity of*

Hope, wrote that expansionist states of the past and great power competitions “no longer exist” (Friedman 2019). The mood in Washington was that the state of world affairs and its challenges, such as terrorism, climate change, and pandemic disease, called for global cooperation rather than global competition (Friedman 2019). As this chapter explores, many instances exist where U.S. national interests are indeed better served through collaboration than competition. Although the temperature in Washington has shifted away from collaboration and towards competition, these two strategies should not be firmly held as competing ideologies, but rather seen as complementary and fluid, each useful in different circumstances to further U.S. national interests.

By 2008, the utopian mindset of collaboration had shifted, with Chinese and Russian objectives becoming very clear in the South China Sea and neighboring countries, respectively. President Obama responded to these actions with an attention pivot to the Pacific. Meanwhile, Russia’s actions in the Middle East, a region vital to the U.S., also signaled a growing assertiveness that many now see as a “prelude to a new phase of Western depreciation” (Kempe and Massolo 2019). In 2008, Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel stated that “‘state-on-state aggression’ in Europe and ‘competition between rising powers’ in the Asia–Pacific region,” as well as “‘enduring and emerging powers, are challenging the world order that American leadership helped build after WWII’” (Friedman 2019). Such international competitions began to arise because of state dissatisfaction with the status quo, leading to economic warfare, as seen in the trade wars between the United States and China, as well as political warfare and military conflicts (Wohlforth 2009).

As the world transitioned to the second decade of the twenty-first century, liberalism, utopianism, and international cooperation gave way to the age of conservatism, realism, and global competition. Though state competition has always existed, the globalization age, alongside growing technological advances in warfare and trade, signify an age of competition such as has not yet been seen, with consequences throughout the world.

The shift was tied to a perceived loss of power by the U.S. According to MacDonald and Parent (2011), “For some observers, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan represent the ill-advised last gasps of a declining hegemon seeking to bolster its plummeting position.” These same observers might note that the sudden change in foreign policy from President Obama to President Trump, from global cooperation to global competition, is also reflective of a declining power. States like China and Russia thus see an opportunity to increase their own global prowess. International actors such as Russia and China claim the diminishing of U.S. global power in order to shift global politics in their own favor. Yet, many thinkers describe this diminishing of the U.S. as perception and not reality (Colby and Mitchell 2020). These perceptions have been driven not by questions of capability, but rather by, for example, shifting commitments to the peace and stability of Afghanistan (Kempe and Massolo 2019).

The concept of the Great Power Competition, still relatively undeveloped, has its official origins for U.S. national policy in the NSS and NDS, released in 2017. The NSS details national security concerns as well as presenting the administration’s plans for addressing them, while the NDS presents new frameworks and priorities for the

United States. Both the NSS and the NDS shifted focus away from counterterrorism and counterinsurgency and, instead, placed an increasing emphasis on “great power competition” in regions such as CASA. According to the NSS and the NDS, the Great Power Competition’s main competitors, known as the Great Powers, are the United States, Russia, and China. The NDS states, “The central challenge to U.S. prosperity and security is the reemergence of long-term, strategic competition by ... revisionist powers.” Defeating these rivals, should deterrence fail, will require far-reaching changes in what the American military purchases and how it fights.

Despite an increased focus on containing the expansionist ambitions of China and Russia in the CASA region, the strategy does offer prospects for collaboration and compromise, committing the U.S. to “seek areas of cooperation with competitors from a position of strength, foremost by ensuring our military power is second to none and fully integrated with our allies” (NSS 2017).

The NDS and the NSS describe the Great Power Competition as a complex environment in which the United States has shifted its focus from counterinsurgency and counterterrorism to the Great Power Competition with Russia, China, North Korea, Iran, and violent extremist organizations. However, policy documents provide no further explanation or universal understanding. This lack of discernment has wide-reaching issues for the military, the defense industry, the diplomatic arm, and U.S. policymakers (Boroff 2020). An unclear definition creates uncertainty, wherein development and training are not focused on the immediate strategic environment. Without a universal understanding of the Great Power Competition, a defense strategy is challenging to develop and implement. In 2019, it was reported that the Pentagon has not yet ascertained how to “compete” with Russia and China, nor even settled on a definition for the “competition” in “great power competition” (Williams 2019).

The GPC strategy has been evolving quietly in the U.S. No longer is the U.S. military focused only on combating rogue states, terrorist groups, and other deadly, albeit relatively weak, enemies. Instead, the U.S. Defense Department has prioritized its primary focus on China and Russia as the great power rivals contesting American military advantages and threatening to reorder the world. In 2018, Ali reported on the unveiling of the strategy, stating that the U.S. military had “put countering China and Russia at the center of a new national defense strategy,” in “the latest sign of shifting priorities after more than a decade and a half of focusing on the fight against Islamist militants” (Ali 2018). In the same report, Ali quoted then-U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s speech, noting, “We will continue to prosecute the campaign against terrorists that we are engaged in today, but great power competition, not terrorism, is now the primary focus of U.S. national security” (Ali 2018).

This new focus requires a restructuring of the U.S. military and new approaches to force planning. Since the end of the Gulf War, the U.S. has maintained a two-war approach. This approach proved to be “essential for meeting the ongoing demands of forward presence, crisis response, regional deterrence, humanitarian assistance, building partnership capacity, homeland defense, and support to civil authorities” (Goure 2013). In their analysis, Brand and Montgomery (2020) note that the U.S. Defense Department has departed from the two-war approach and has shifted toward a one-war standard.

Brand and Montgomery (2020) continue their analysis by arguing that the shift “is a recognition that defeating a great-power adversary would be far more difficult than anything the U.S. military has done in decades and that losing a great-power war would be devastating to America’s global interests.” Given these potentially devastating effects, an “all-hands-on-deck” approach is required for the U.S. to compete adequately in the Great Power Competition.

Russia and China as Major Players in the GPC

The United States’ global competition with emerging military and great economic powers has become a key focus of U.S. national security strategy. The NSS and NDS policy documents singled out China and Russia as the United States’ two main competitors for global power. The economic rivalries of the GPC are revealed in the regional projects that China and Russia, among others, have undertaken to increase their economic power and influence. Marine Corps Gen. Joe Dunford concurs that “China and Russia are doing what they can to challenge the U.S. and target American capabilities. This proactive approach means the two nations are working to subvert America’s network of allies and partners and are actively seeking to negate the American military’s ability to project forces when and where needed and sustain them” (Garamone 2020). With a perspective that the United States is weakened not only by domestic political competition but also decades of war in Iraq and Afghanistan, China and Russia are positioned to shift the status quo away from the era of American dominance.

Though all three Great Powers play important roles in the CASA region through economic, cultural, political, and military means, all three have opportunities to dominate and influence the region. It is Russia and China—not the U.S.—who are actively positioned as key regional players. This less attuned posture on the part of the U.S. is a costly mistake.

Lt. Gen. Thomas W. Bergeson, Deputy Commander of U.S. Central Command, addressed Russia and China’s pursuit of their interests in CASA at the inaugural Great Power Competition Conference in January 2020 at the University of South Florida (USF). These interests, which shift historical alliances and strengthen power and influence, take the shape of regional economic and infrastructure projects, such as China’s Belt and Road Initiative soft power projections, hard-power displays, and partnerships with regional powers and players. China and Russia’s distinct approach has progressively shifted the status quo of the past thirty years.

Russia’s Interplay in the GPC

The U.S. competition with Russia is hardly new. Lovotti (2019) argues that the tension between the U.S. and Russia has dominated the world stage since World War

II. It was only with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1990 that the United States was regarded as the world's sole Great Power. However, with Russia subverting international treaties, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and using its "veto authority over nations on its periphery," the U.S. (NDS 2018) position faltered in 2001. These actions have had the power to "shatter NATO and change European and Middle Eastern security and economic structures to its favor," through technological advances, sovereignty violations, and a growing and modernizing military (NDS 2018).

Russia has also made gains in international diplomacy; this is especially true in the Middle East as well as in Central and South Asia. This global energy-producing region has been significant to the U.S. for decades. This importance is reflected in the United States' four national security objectives that revolve around the free flow of energy resources and "preventing the growth of state or non-state actors antagonistic to the U.S." (RAND 2020). Russia works at interrupting these factors by using its soft power and its insertion in Middle Eastern and CASA region politics. Russia's capacities extend beyond that of the U.S. For example, Russia opens discussions with opposing sides of conflicts (i.e., Syria and Afghanistan) and facilitates peace talks such as the Astana Process, a Russian-led forum established in 2017 to negotiate peace in Syria along with parallel Afghan peace talks (Lovotti 2019; Thepaut 2020). As one of the most turbulent areas of the world, CASA often calls for international cooperation to end conflicts, and the increasing Russian (and Chinese) presence in the region is cause for concern among American planners and policymakers (Wechsler 2019).

In addition to Russia's increasing diplomatic presence, its military power is growing exponentially as well. Dunford points to concentrated Russian defense spending on upgrading their military weaponry and capabilities and modernizing their nuclear enterprise. Notably, Russian military expenditure has decreased significantly and consistently since 2016, and while the Russian economy still cannot compete with that of the U.S., Russia has been effective in complicating the U.S. position abroad. Sean Ryan (2020) insists the Great Power Competition is not solely about action, but also about the willingness to act. He notes in his address at the January 2020 GPC Conference at USF, "When we look at the possibility of escalation—consider that it is not just about objectives, methods, and resources. It is about the will to do it. Russians have demonstrated that they are willing to conduct disruptive operations." These disruptive operations are demonstrated by Russian cyberwarfare during the American elections of 2016, where it exerted its soft power and diminished the United States' soft power. Indeed, as Marcus concurred, Russia has been "waging a 'grey' or undeclared war against the West in recent years. This has many elements: cyber-attacks; disinformation campaigns; electoral interference; the funding of extremists in Western countries and so on" (Marcus 2020).

It is widely acknowledged that rare earth and critical minerals are vital in the Great Power Competition context. Rare earth minerals are used for military and consumer technologies such as electric vehicles and cellphones (Burke and Scott 2019). China has an overwhelming monopoly on rare earth minerals, supplying 67% of global

rare earth mineral production (Kiggins 2015). Russia, who holds the world's fourth-largest rare earth mineral reserves, imports 90% of its rare earth minerals from China (Cottig et al. 2019). This dependence on China for rare earth mineral importation and reserve creates an enormous risk given the supply insecurity (Kiggins 2015; Lyrichikova and Stolyarov 2020). Like Russia, the United States imported 80% of its rare earth mineral supply from China (Reuters 2019). In the Great Power Competition era, dependence on competing countries for minerals used for critical, defense, and civilian purposes can result in an economic and geopolitical weakness (Burke and Scott 2019).

However, Russia plans to break its dependence on China by actively seeking foreign investments of \$1.5 billion to develop further and expand its rare earth mineral industry (Lyrichikova and Stolyarov 2020). It also plans to offer to back foreign investments, reduce mining taxes, and give cheaper loans to investors (Lyrichikova and Stolyarov 2020), according to Lyrichikova and Stolyarov (2020). With the proper incentives to investors, Russia hopes that it will become the second-largest producer of rare earth minerals after China by 2030. This plan places further stress on the United States to keep pace in the Great Power Competition by developing its independent earth minerals source.

China's Interplay in the GPC

China proves to be an even greater rival to the U.S. in the GPC than Russia as China's economy is much larger and more robust than that of Russia. The country is described as economically and militarily ascendant, with a growing global presence.

China has embarked on a far-reaching military modernization that Colby has characterized as being in "deep contravention to our [U.S.] interests" (Ali 2018). Writing in a later chapter of this volume, Michael Singh of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy argues that the United States has singled out China as "its foremost peer and rival" in the CASA region. Both the United States and China compete for the same resources—energy, economic presence, and influence. Speaking at the 2020 GPC Conference at the University of South Florida, Singh argued for the importance of considering China's competitive focus of displacing the U.S. as hegemon, particularly in Asia, and in attaining global influence over the international order.

China's designs on hegemony have been especially evident in and around the South China Sea. In early April, for example, a Chinese aircraft carrier was deployed close to Japan and Taiwan in a move that seemed opportunistic and calculated, given the plight of another nearby carrier, the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt, which was pulled off operations (and its captain relieved of his post) after hundreds of the crew had contracted COVID-19. The U.S. Navy also had a powerful amphibious task group at sea in the region at the time, reinforced by an Australian frigate, and was "maintaining a drumbeat of other presence and freedom-of-navigation operations" (Childs 2020). According to Childs (2020), "Washington has explicitly accused Beijing of seeking

to exploit the pandemic, while China has fired back that it is the U.S. that is creating instability.” Tensions between the two powers show no signs of abating soon.

Over the past decade, China’s key project in the Great Power Competition has been the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), an infrastructure network of railroads, roads, pipelines, and electricity projects that directly passes, and links, 60 countries, engaging 60% of the world’s population across Asia and Europe, though it also involves many other states (Cai 2017; Shivers 2020). The BRI has served its purpose of increasing the Chinese presence throughout Asia and into Europe by creating the infrastructure that links countries by land and sea.

The BRI is the crux of Chinese president Xi’s foreign policy. It is an economic and diplomatic strategy designed to promote Chinese influence in the region and beyond and weaken U.S. dominance in the regional and global economy, including minimizing the U.S.’s policy effects of containing China (Cai 2017). Shivers (2020) argues that while the BRI has often been compared to the post-World War II U.S. Marshall Plan, it is actually “12 times larger than the Marshall Plan (in constant dollars), [and will] be stretched over a 3.5 times longer time period. Bigger in scale, the BRI nevertheless shares a common objective with America’s earlier Marshall Plan.” The BRI is estimated to cost upwards of USD 8 trillion upon completion. Alongside the infrastructural projects, the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) directly funds projects in the countries that line the BRI, eliminating the need for funding from institutions aligned with the U.S. and its allies.

Russia–China Alliance and the Need for U.S. Allies

Russia and China have historically not enjoyed a particularly friendly relationship. Sharing a large border, they have had distinct tensions over territorial expansion and naval designs on the Arctic (Hill et al. 2020). However, despite these tensions, Russia and China share various interests, and most importantly, they share what Hill et al. (2020) refer to as “a mutual distaste” for the United States’ operating in their backyards. This “mutual distaste” has resulted in various policies and alliances between Russia and China designed to shift the world order away from the United States.

The U.S.’ economic war with China has resulted in a trade war, which has lasted for over 18 months and has resulted in billions of dollars’ worth of tariffs on the imports of the United States and China (Smith 2019). Moreover, this trade war has resulted in the recent formation of a partnership between Russia and China, with Chinese President Xi Jinping promising Russian President Vladimir Putin that China was “ready to go hand in hand” with Russia (Smith 2018) in this trade initiative. According to Smith (2019), “Russian and Chinese news agencies reported recently that the two nations planned to almost double their trade over the next five years, hitting \$200 billion by 2024 compared to \$107 billion in 2018 by implementing collaborative projects in energy, industry, and agriculture.” Given this alliance between Russia and China, the U.S. requires stronger alliances of its own.

While not always translating to action, such alliances are alluded to in U.S. strategy documents. The NSS states that “the United States will seek areas of cooperation with competitors from a position of strength, foremost by ensuring our military power is second to none and fully integrated with our allies and all of our instruments of power” (NSS 2017). The same document details the United States’ plans to enhance missile defense; protect intellectual property, which it claims has long been a victim of Chinese thievery; tighten visa procedures; and protect data and underlying infrastructure. The NDS recommended “a more lethal, resilient, and rapidly innovating Joint Force, combined with a robust constellation of allies and partners.” The document stated a plan to maintain American power and preserve peace through strength and acknowledged the costs of not implementing the strategy: U.S. global influence could decrease cohesion amongst allies, and partners would erode, costing the U.S. access to markets; this, in turn, would cause a decline in prosperity and American standard of living (NSS 2017). According to Ali (2018), the NDS identified international alliances as “critical” for the U.S. military, emphasizing “a need for burden-sharing,” but also noted the contrast to President Trump’s “public criticism of allies who he says unfairly take advantage of U.S. security guarantees.” Carpenter demonstrates the United States’ tendency to turn away from alliances in recent years, citing President Trump’s choice to withdraw troops from Germany and his “questioning of the U.S. commitment to defend our allies.” Carpenter notes, “The Trump administration has taken a go-it-alone approach and neglected our alliances, which has greatly weakened our position vis-a-vis Russia and China” (Tucker 2020). In Carpenter’s view, a Biden presidency would be more likely than a second Trump presidency to “put our democratic allies and partners at the forefront of its foreign policy” (Tucker 2020).

As Twining and Quirk (2020) recently noted, for the U.S. “to prevail in any great power competition,” it needs “allies and partners.” The nation’s “strategic purpose is served by helping friendly democracies build the capabilities to meet their people’s needs while also strengthening their resilience to protect themselves from Russian and Chinese predation.” The measure of success will be “how effectively we are enabling global partners to better serve their citizens and repel opportunistic attempts by Russia and China from extending their illiberal influence” (Twining and Quirk 2020).

Russia and China have ancient relationships with Afghanistan. Writing in this collection, Professor Martin Weinbaum (2020) details how Afghanistan has been a site where the historic rivalry of the United States and the Soviet Union has played out since 1950 (albeit, the pre-1990 Soviet version of the competition differs from today’s). Weinbaum (2020) explains that the competition over Afghanistan “went only so far as their mutual concern that the other be kept from exercising a commanding influence in the country.” While not discounting Russia as a U.S. GPC rival, China is the U.S.’s main competition. China’s relationship with Afghanistan dates to the seventh century due to the Silk Road, which established a friendly, mutually prosperous relationship between the two countries (Rahajay 2019). China was one of the first Great Powers to issue a statement on “the Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan,” expressing its support for the deal and calling for

the “orderly and responsible withdrawal of foreign troops to avoid a power vacuum and possible terrorist resurgence” (Burns 2020). Like all other countries sharing a border with Afghanistan, China has active worries about the resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan and instability spilling into its territory. Recognizing that cooperation is the key to peace and stability in Afghanistan, China also hosted several regional meetings and dialogues between the Taliban and the Afghan government and increased its diplomatic and cultural presence in Afghanistan (Rahajay 2019). China’s Belt and Road Initiative would bring in economic prosperity and connectivity into Afghanistan, which Professors Frederick Starr and Barnett Rubin argue is the key to peace and stability in Afghanistan. Rubin (2020) argues that China has begun to develop a conception of their national interests through the Belt and Road Initiative, which is focused on creating international order as a public good that it will benefit from in a way similar to how the United States developed an interest in Europe through the Marshall Plan after the two World Wars. The enduring relationships between U.S. rivals Russia and China lend further support to the claim that the U.S. must remain engaged in Afghanistan.

U.S. GPC Strategy in Afghanistan

After nearly two decades of fighting the War on Terror in Afghanistan, the U.S., following a Peace Agreement with the Taliban, has agreed to withdraw its military forces by late 2021. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad (2020 GPC Inaugural Conference, USF) attributed this withdrawal agreement to the need to shift attention and resources to the Great Power Competition in other theatres at the very moment that both China and Russia are seeking to dominate and influence the Central and South Asia region. This planned withdrawal can be expected to cost the U.S. its presence in the region and its standing in the GPC, thereby potentially rendering it irrelevant and threatening U.S. national security. For the U.S. to compete effectively in the GPC, it must maintain an active soft-powers presence in the CASA region, and, specifically, in Afghanistan. This centrally located, landlocked nation bordering six other countries sits between East and West and has the potential to become a bridge that connects and stabilizes the entire region. The U.S. will effectively compete with China’s BRI in the region if it ensures a durable peace and economic stability in Afghanistan through the NSRI.

The key to Afghanistan’s stabilization, peace, and regional integration lies in continued U.S. economic engagement and its estimated untapped USD 1–3 trillion of natural resources, including rare earth and critical minerals such as lithium. In 2018, lithium was classified as a critical mineral by U.S. Executive Order 13,817 (National Archives 2020). The American Geosciences Institute (2020) describes critical minerals that are deemed vital to the economy and whose supply may be disrupted. Lithium and has been dubbed “white petroleum” (Sheraz 2014), and many scholars have noted that future resource conflicts will not focus on oil, but, rather, minerals such as lithium (Gulley et al. 2018). As such, the United States must maintain

unfettered access to Afghanistan's vast lithium wealth. If the U.S. military withdrawal results in a complete disengagement from Afghanistan, China and Russia and other regional rivals will engage and gain the upper hand in the great power resource competition.

Afghanistan's wealth has not yet been tapped because the country lacks the trade and transit infrastructure to bring the resources to market. For decades, Afghanistan has been in a precarious security situation as an aid-dependent rentier state suffering under a presumed "resource curse." Now, Afghanistan is even further destabilized by the withdrawal of the U.S. military and other NATO countries and major reductions in international foreign assistance. The loss of aggregate economic benefits from military presence leaves Afghanistan in danger of collapse, which would return the country to its failed state status of the 1990s. Afghanistan has already become a seedbed for global terrorism, insurgent-fueled violent conflict, and drugs, concerns that threaten peace and security worldwide. The global COVID-19 pandemic has brought even greater precarity to the region, putting a halt to its evolving peace talks. The increasingly precarious state of Afghanistan, coupled with pending U.S. disengagement by late 2021, would concern anyone familiar with recent history. Recall that it was in the aftermath of the U.S.'s disengagement from Afghanistan following the Russian military's 1989 withdrawal that led to the tragic events of 9/11.

However, should Afghanistan overcome its aid dependency as a rentier state and replace the lost revenues through sustainable economic growth, it can achieve durable peace and prosperity that, in turn, would help stabilize the entire region. Through U.S. support, Afghanistan has the potential to monetize its mineral wealth and become economically integrated with its CASA neighbors. The external factors that will provide Afghanistan with the necessary socio-cultural transformation from a culture of war to a culture of peace and from a war-based economy to a peace-based economy is an autonomous economy dependent on its natural resources. This NSRI transformation calls for cooperation, not competition, among the great powers.

The New Silk Road Initiative Vision

After four decades of continuous war and an economy dependent on foreign aid, it seems difficult to imagine a peaceful Afghanistan with a sustainable economy in a prosperous region. Continuing to depend on U.S. military and NATO forces to safeguard its security and foreign aid as a chief driver of economic development are no longer viable options. Afghanistan must shift to a new economic growth model based on the country's \$1–3 trillion natural resources to ensure peace and economic sustainability for its people. For the land-locked war-torn country Afghanistan to succeed in this transformation from war-economy to peace-economy, it must (1) break down regional trade and transit barriers, (2) invest in the transportation and energy infrastructure to facilitate the growth of transnational economic corridors, and (3) attract foreign investment from near and far on a scale previously unforeseen

in Afghanistan. The New Silk Road Initiative aims to establish Afghanistan as an efficient trade and transit hub that connects China with Europe and beyond. The NSRI seeks to revive Afghanistan's historic role as an essential land bridge for Asia, facilitating the exchange of commerce, culture, people, and ideas. Many have claimed that its geographic location has determined Afghanistan's fate, that Afghanistan could just as easily be an economic hub or a battleground.

The NSRI represents a shared commitment to promote private-sector investment, increase regional trade and transit, and foster a network of economic linkages throughout the region. With these components in place, Afghanistan and the region can maximize the value of natural resources, build human capacity, create jobs, generate revenue to pay for needed services, and capitalize on the region's economic potential in the years ahead. The NSRI vision is intended to make these objectives a reality for South and Central Asian people by advancing a comprehensive, long-term economic strategy centered on a peaceful Afghanistan.

The NSRI shared vision goes beyond Afghanistan and comprises the following elements. (1) The U.S. vision of a Silk Road connecting India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan with Central Asia and then Europe is not just a large-scale trade, transportation, and infrastructure project but also a metaphor for a vast and growing network of relationships among Central Asian states, Pakistan, and India, encompassing extraction of natural resources, power generation, railroads, and gas pipelines linking together Central and South Asian countries. (2) For several years, many scholars, experts, and well-informed observers of the CASA region have advocated a policy involving a coherent and coordinated infrastructure, trade, and transport that would reintegrate Afghanistan with its Central and South Asian neighbors. Scholars such as Frederick Starr, Andrew Kuchins, Reuel Hanks, Leif Rosenberger, Richard Ponzio, Gregory Gleason, Vladimir Paramonov, Alexei Stokov, and others have called for a serious "Silk Road" policy that would restore this long-lost regional integration. The policy aims to stabilize Afghanistan economically and geopolitically, strengthening Central Asia against great power threats to its real independence and tying it more to South Asia than to Russia or China or Iran. Such a plan will provide an economic basis for Afghanistan to recover from and possibly even terminate the war, resulting in a coherent and established economic base going forward. The NSRI vision, reflecting growing regional support for closer cooperation and deeper integration, was made possible by the Afghanistan reintegration into the region's fabric, the resumption of traditional trading routes, and the reconstruction of significant infrastructure links, broken by decades of conflict. The state of Afghanistan's current war-centered economy is a direct reflection of four decades of devastation that subjugated the country and its people.

The prerequisite for this visionary transformation is durable peace. Seemingly endless Columbia and Northern Ireland wars have resulted in lasting peace agreements. The NSRI provides the only viable vision for peace, prosperity, and cooperation within Afghanistan, the region, and the U.S. Since its inception in mid-2011, the NSRI was designed to represent and advance the core U.S. values of economic and political freedom, respect for one's neighbors, and increasing regional and global prosperity by encouraging government-to-government, business-to-business, and

government-to-business cooperation across borders. The NSRI's primary aim is for the U.S. and its allies to bolster peace and stability in the region by supporting a transition to trade and opening new markets that connect Afghanistan to Central Asia, Pakistan, India, and beyond. Countries in the region know they have more to gain economically by working together than by being isolated.

The NSRI, a comprehensive geoeconomic strategy for achieving peace, stability, and sustainable economic development in Afghanistan and the CASA region, would reestablish continental corridors where Afghanistan has not played a viable part for quite a while. Afghanistan has increasingly powerful neighbors with some of the fastest-growing economies in the world. For the past 40 years, Afghanistan has been the "black hole," yet with the help of regional actors and the United States, who already has a firm foothold in the country, Afghanistan can achieve peace and prosperity. Afghanistan can indeed be stabilized through its own economy. The NSRI would be an international web and network of economic, trade, transit, and people-to-people connections that link Central and South Asia, with Afghanistan at its heart, which would allow Afghanistan to attract new foreign sources of private-sector investment for its vast minerals and connect to markets abroad. Afghanistan is the pivot and, as of now, the missing link in such a Eurasian network. It is the confluence of cultures and interests that propels the vision of the New Silk Road Initiative. This initiative can once again revive the shared prosperity that the Ancient Silk Road once provided across Asia. This geographic connection would expand the U.S. influence in the region while containing China and Russia's influences, who are currently developing ambitious projects to expand the reach of their hard and soft power.

The U.S. Role in the New Silk Road Initiative

The United States, having maintained a military and economic foothold in Afghanistan for nearly two decades, is the only global power that can establish and properly champion the NSRI to succeed. As the NSRI is designed to rebuild the trust and relationships that have been lost after decades of war, not only within Afghanistan but also within the region itself, bringing a durable peace and stability in Afghanistan is vital for the U.S. to compete in the Great Power Competition effectively. In the complex and volatile environment of the GPC, the U.S. can exert leadership and "convening power," supporting and facilitating coordination of governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations interested in aiding the region through collaborative economic projects that will improve stability in the region. The U.S. can convene a broader community of stakeholders around the shared geoeconomic goal of integrating Afghanistan and the region and securing investments for its vast natural resources. Starr and Farhadi (2012) argue that the U.S. should put aside its costly "big-ticket infrastructure projects" and instead embrace "initiatives that require the U.S. to exercise its convening power and 'soft power' leadership." By working to facilitate a durable peace and economic stability in Afghanistan, the U.S.

can secure its presence, relevance, and strength in relation to global and regional powers competing in the GPC.

The alternative is bleak. If the U.S. and the West were to choose to abandon Afghanistan or even give the perception of abandonment at this critical moment, the U.S. would lose its credibility and influence in the CASA region, and the vulnerable Afghan state would deteriorate into failed state status once again. Rival great and regional powers would carve out Afghanistan and wage proxy wars over its vast minerals, particularly its rare earth and critical minerals. In such a situation, the U.S. would face even greater national security threats than at present, further weakening its position in the GPC. Notably, should the United States not integrate Afghanistan into an economic corridor, China most certainly will. This dire scenario would be a devastating loss of power, leadership, and opportunity for the United States, specifically as it relates to mineral extraction. As Farhadi and Bekdash (2020) argue, the era of the Great Power Competition is essentially a competition for mineral resources.

In February of 2020, the United States led by Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, Special Representative for Afghanistan Reconciliation at the State Department (and keynote speaker at the 2020 GPC, USF) signed a peace deal with the Taliban that sets conditions for a full military withdrawal from the country. Afghanistan is now approaching the Intra-Afghan negotiation stage, between the Taliban and the Kabul government. Khalilzad insisted that in order to focus on the Great Power Competition, peace in Afghanistan must be established, and the resources freed from the Afghan conflict must shift per the National Defense and National Security Strategies. However, to have a durable peace, the United States should remain engaged in Afghanistan through soft-power economics as opposed to hard-power military power. This engagement would be advantageous for the United States in the Great Power Competition era, allowing for the U.S. private sector to invest in Afghanistan's minerals and maintain its relevance and influence in the region.

The Great Power Competition era has spurred the United States to a peace deal with the Taliban in which the U.S. will militarily withdraw from Afghanistan by late 2021. This military withdrawal from Afghanistan should not mean abandonment, but rather a transformation from military engagement to NSRI. In the GPC era, the NSRI should be the U.S. response to China's BRI as well as its plan for sustained peace in Afghanistan. Michael Singh (2020), whose chapter appears later in this volume, argues that the BRI was itself a response to U.S. policy shifts and action. Singh (2020), citing Nadege Rolland, states that the "BRI emerged as a result of two developments that led the Chinese leadership to rethink their approach to achieving China's rise: the global financial crisis of 2008, which hampered Chinese economic growth, and the U.S. 'rebalance' to Asia, viewed in Beijing as an effort to contain China." Indeed, the BRI is now an overt attempt to contain the U.S. in the region. If the U.S. intends to maintain its role in the international order in the Great Power Competition era, it must effectively compete with the BRI.

Theoretical Basis for Recommendations: Geoeconomics and New Economic Geography Theory

As the Great Power Competition's defining feature is its economic character, China is widely accepted as the U.S.'s main competitor in the Great Power Competition. It is for this reason that this chapter recommends that the U.S.'s strategy in the GPC encompass economic influence. This chapter recommends that the U.S. strengthen its engagement in Afghanistan's economic development and integration, specifically through support for Afghanistan's transportation and trade infrastructure, underpinned by geoeconomics and New Economic Geography (NEG) theoretical frameworks.

Geoeconomics

Through economic dominance, states can act geostrategically in the world space through hard power projections. This economic power, described by Jaeger and Brites (2020) as a "mechanism for obtaining resources of power," is known as geoeconomics. Geoeconomics theory explains that economic intervention, such as that by the U.S., may exercise its soft and convening power in Afghanistan as an effective way to influence world power distribution structurally. According to Fußstetter (2016), "the aim of geoeconomics is to gain a sustainable competitive advantage over other countries and regions through geographical, cultural, or resource-related aspects." This advantage is accomplished by gaining control over foreign economies' strategic sectors (Csurgai 2017). The use of these economic means by international actors can structurally influence world power distribution in their favor. Geoeconomics can create spheres of influence while also reaping economic benefits, which is the goal of both China's Belt and Road Initiative and the U.S.'s New Silk Road Initiative.

In the current Great Power Competition era, economic and military power are interconnected, particularly in natural resources. Two prominent thinkers of geoeconomics, Harris and Blackwell (2016), argue that the U.S. has been losing ground internationally because it has continued to rely on military power while other nations "increasingly carry out geopolitical combat through economic means. Policies governing everything from trade and investment to energy and exchange rates are wielded as tools to win diplomatic allies, punish adversaries, and coerce those in between" (Harris and Blackwell 2016). Jaeger and Brites (2020) assert that geoeconomics is, in fact, the only economic power that can promote and sustain national interests and sustain the power of the Great Powers through the maintenance of military, diplomatic, and intelligence services. They characterize the Great Power Competition era as one of the international political economies in which economic factors determine international relations. This rationale can be seen in the race to procure the vaccine for COVID-19 through development or economic power.

Edward N. Luttwak, the authority on geoeconomics, predicted in the 1990s that economic rivalries would replace the ideological rivalries between the Western liberal and communist collectivist models of society. In other words, rather than a focus on military power, trade, finance, and important military technology, mastery of soft-power would prevail (Chacko 2016). This shift from military power to economic power is what Luttwak terms *geoeconomics*, which he defines as the “interstate rivalry and conflict conducted through commerce methods” (Chacko 2016). The prioritization of economic growth over military displays would, Luttwak argues, leads to competition for trade routes, access to natural resources, and conquering markets (Csurgai 2017). This shift away from military power has indeed been the dominant characteristic of the Great Power Competition, though military power does remain important. Csurgai argues that military confrontations and direct control of foreign lands, a methodology that has recently been given priority over economic power flexing, is now seen as less advantageous than the use of indirect strategies and soft power. However, such economically focused state behavior has been seen previously in the mercantilism era, which was closely associated with the nation state’s rise. Mercantilism led to Venice becoming the most powerful player of the Ancient Silk Road. The machination of the modern-day Great Power Competition, like those of the mercantilist era, has the potential to yield changes in the global stage and shift the concentration of power.

Many authors in this volume suggest that the United States should remain engaged in Afghanistan to aid in its socio-economic development. The United States should remain strategically engaged in Afghanistan to develop the extractive industry and establish an infrastructure that allows for the creation of the New Silk Road Corridors to provide market access for Afghanistan’s minerals. This will, in turn, benefit the United States. The U.S.’s geoeconomic strategy for Afghanistan’s minerals will put the U.S. in the role of entrepreneur. Moiso and Paasi (2013) echo this sentiment, characterizing the move as a privatization of the state.

According to geoeconomic theory, future conflicts will take the form of resource competition (Fußstetter 2016). Both the United States and China have a great need for the minerals and extractives that are abundant within the CASA region. Though China’s consumption of minerals and petroleum falls far below the levels of other industrialized countries, its government is setting the stage for future consumption levels, fully expecting that as China continues to industrialize and its economy continues to grow, its need for energy will continue to rise. The United States Energy Information Administration (2020) projects that U.S. energy consumption levels will also continue to rise. With this competition for resources, it becomes vital that the United States gain the upper hand in the resource competition and firmly establish the New Silk Road. With the establishment of the New Silk Road comes many opportunities. First, the United States would find itself in a position of economic power and security through a stable stream of resources. China currently has a near-monopoly on rare earth minerals and is unafraid to use this monopoly politically. This political power translates into economic power. Secondly, with the establishment of the New Silk Road, the United States would have immense influence in the region. This soft-power influence is vital in the creation of economic systems through cultural

understanding. This economic stability, especially in lands that have long suffered under the yoke of wars in Afghanistan, translates into sustainable peace. Lastly, the NSRI is the only viable option to successfully end the “endless war” and still preserve the gains of the last two decades for the U.S. and the Afghan people.

New Economic Geography

New economic geography (NEG) illuminates why Afghanistan’s transportation infrastructure, of all potential investment sites, is a critical economic intervention. For landlocked countries such as Afghanistan, transport connectivity is the most pressing priority for economic development. Landlocked Least Developed Countries, in particular, must devote significantly more resources to a functioning and effective transportation sector than countries with access to the sea. Because the traditional development aid model has proved itself neither viable nor sustainable in Afghanistan, the NEG offers the most appropriate economic growth theory for this landlocked, fragile, conflicted state. NEG states that once an economic belt is established, production, growth, development, and consumerism will flow, and the economy will grow (Krugman 1991).

As defined by Paul Krugman, the theoretical framework of NEG bears directly on Afghanistan’s economic growth challenges because of the country’s landlocked geography. Thus, unlike “neo-classic” or “endogenous” traditional economic growth theories, NEG recognizes the importance of geography and transportation costs as a major enabler or hindrance to economic growth. Gallup et al. (1999) argue that “geography matters” to economic growth due to high and difficult transport costs and procedures. NEG economic growth theory asserts that lowering transportation costs will have a direct positive effect on economies of scale and “agglomeration,” called the “home market effect,” required for sustainable economic growth (Hoaby 2005). NEG also asserts that “transportation costs will decline due to such things as economies of scale, technological advances that increase efficiency, better transport infrastructure, and removing procedural barriers” (Hoaby 2005). Also, the traditional economic theory, with its emphasis on “static allocative efficiency,” has a limited capacity to explain how economic growth and development can be achieved through such mechanisms as research and development and technological diffusions, especially in fragile, conflict-affected states (Agalewatte 2004). NEG is much more capable than the traditional economic theory of explaining how such dynamic factors influence growth and enable a country and international community to use resources more effectively to achieve a sustainable economic development model (Agalewatte 2004).

Summary

This chapter has presented a general conceptualization of the Great Power Competition, a proposed U.S. strategy for engagement, and a brief theoretical basis for that proposed strategy. The relative newness and extreme complexity of the GPC has prevented such a conceptualization from being cogently presented before now. The chapter described the origins of this geopolitical situation and of the GPC terminology itself, gave an overview of the major powers and their strategies and objectives to date, and proposed a role for the U.S., centered on Afghanistan, which is a precarious, but resource-rich country at the heart of Asia, the main battleground of the GPC. Finally, the chapter offered a brief theoretical basis for this proposed strategy, founded in geoeconomic and New Economic Geography theory. As this chapter recommends, it is in the United States' best interests to support Afghanistan in becoming a hub of the New Silk Road initiative in Central and South Asia, a move that will preserve U.S. relevance, influence, and two-decade gains in Afghanistan in this critical GPC battleground.

Countering the revisionist powers in the GPC requires the U.S. not only to understand its rivals' strategic objectives, perspectives, and challenges, but also to identify common areas of interest and potential pathways to more holistic approaches, intersections, and/or cooperative efforts in combatting terrorism and transnational organized crime in areas such as Afghanistan and Syria, deterring aggressive Iranian affronts, and reigning in a nuclear North Korea. There is a need for diverse perspectives in this increasingly complex and adaptive environment. If the United States does not remain engaged in Afghanistan as a partner in its extractive industry, the country will surely be engaged by competitors, such as Russia and China, the latter of which already has a firm foothold in the strategic rare earth and critical mineral sector.

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