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true across several vital sectors such as production, manufacturing, and healthcare, and especially pronounced in those sectors most affected by the pandemic and most necessary for an expedient global recovery (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). From a positive perspective, this growing interconnectedness and interdependence affords our global communities much greater access to one another, and in turn, greater opportunities to form profitable alliances and cooperative relationships, even while engaged in economic competition.

Interconnectedness, however, has a dark side that was further exacerbated by the pandemic. During a recent presentation, Dr. Richard Legault, Senior Advisor for Social Sciences at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, demonstrated the implications of expanding social media platforms. The ability for users to transmit digital information across the globe rapidly means that vulnerable populations are now, more than ever, regularly exposed to dangerous messaging, disinformation, and the rhetoric of violent opportunists. The pandemic has, at least temporarily, created a global culture largely centered on fear and uncertainty, even in the most prosperous countries (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). The Central Region is thus ripe for the proliferation of disinformation and the increased spread of violent extremism.

In his introduction to the second GPC conference, Dr. Eric Eisenberg, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at USF, indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has opened additional channels for increased activity by malign actors. Dr. Eisenberg suggested that while notable changes in the international system had already marked the twenty-first century (before COVID-19), the pandemic has engendered an environment in which malign actors, supported by information and communication technology, may take advantage of the disruption caused by the pandemic to advance their agendas (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16-17).

Further, global interconnectedness has increased complexities in communications that intelligence mechanisms fail to fuse into cohesive intelligence gathering. Private wealth and enterprises, criminal networks, international media, and social media all increase these complexities and contribute to state and non-state actors' abilities to levy influence and obscure attribution. U.S. intelligence apparatuses must account for these changes and develop the ability to fuse disparate information into cohesive knowledge for commanders and decision-makers more rapidly. U.S. strategic command and control systems must now evolve beyond Combatant Command boundaries to all domains. Elaborating on this, LTG Karen Gibson, Deputy Director of National Intelligence for National Security Partnerships, has stated that, “[new threat vectors] include cyber, space, cognition, and influence” in our interconnected world of the COVID-19 era (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17).

**E** **C** **D-19**

Over the past century, the global landscape has been defined by international competition in terms of political, economic, military, and social power—with U.S. power and influence dominating the global stage since the end of the Second World War (Brands, Feaver and Inboden 2020). However, the common era has seen a shifting landscape of power, in which many new players are now vying for top position. Though the central tensions still lie between the three global powers (the U.S., China, and Russia), other major players cannot be overlooked. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and many others, hold their stakes and claims for regional power, influencing states’ actions and the private sector on the world stage.

This geopolitical shift has created a space for the devaluation of liberal values abroad and domestically. Further, critical shifts in population dynamics have spurred global unrest. “Economic inequality and rapid demographic changes have fueled populist resentment, ethno-nationalism, and sweeping distrust in national and inter-



is no longer advantageous or practical. Instead, the progressive utilization of U.S. soft power influence to bolster vital economic sectors in the CASA region is as critical





economic and employment growth and support its underdeveloped mining industry with additional infrastructure and education initiatives. Conversely, if Afghanistan remains perpetually reliant on U.S. and donor foreign aid, it will continue to wither in its present vulnerable and volatile economic condition. While Afghanistan remains broken, regional and international security likewise remains vulnerable.

Stabilizing Afghanistan by facilitating commercialization and market access for its vast wealth of minerals and economic integration with its neighbors, will ulti-

the northeast. This landlocked geography forces Afghanistan to depend on the cooperation of neighboring states for access to essential goods and transit access points such as the Gwadar Port in Southern Pakistan on the Arabian Sea. Afghanistan's centralized geographical location in the region renders it critical to the future development of energy transport pipelines linking the oil-rich Northern CASA states to oil-poor states in the south. The region is poised for development and integration with Afghanistan. This nation is waiting to bring its wealth of natural resources to the global market as the central transit hub.

China has begun to address the inclusion of Afghanistan in its regionalist efforts to dominate Central Asia. Only recently have major players in the CASA region looked in earnest at formalizing progressive regionalist aims that include Afghanistan in large-scale interstate infrastructure and trade initiatives. Two such current examples are the CPEC and TAPI Pipeline (Standish 2020), both involving China. Without renewed U.S. support of these budding regional alliances however, such vital initiatives may soon lose momentum due to the lure of short-term incentives for bi-lateral deals with China or Russia in place of regional multi-lateral agreements, thus further destabilizing local relations.

Noting the special considerations necessary for effectively aiding landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), the International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries and Asian Development Bank Institute posits that, "in the current international trading system, there is no special consideration for these states. For regional cooperation to promote productivity within the LLDCs, we need to promote regional integration that exploits the new trade space with technologies that both decrease search costs and promote the better design of institutions" (2017, p. 2).

Today, several prominent theorists predict a reactionary shift in geoeconomics away from decades-long trends in "globalization" towards a new era of "regionalism," occurring mainly as a byproduct of logistical necessity during the global pandemic. In this scenario, while a globalized economy may still exist and even thrive, new regional geoeconomic alliances and structures would become vital as well, creating more autonomous local supply chains and decreasing reliance on foreign production. In a recent interview with Yoshinari Kurose, historian and author Edward Luttwak stated, "I see a big retreat from globalization, a retreat from multinational organizations, a return to nation-state responsibility. Because this is the truth virus" (Luttwak 2020, Japan Forward).

Echoing this sentiment, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) expert Dr. Mathew Maavak highlights the perils of relying mainly on foreign supplies in a global economy. According to Maavak, at the onset of the pandemic, India "was sourcing 70% of its active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) imports worth \$2.4 billion from China," despite itself being a longtime "pharmaceutical powerhouse." Maavak continued, "The figures appear worse for the U.S. According to a recent CFR blog, about 97% of all antibiotics in the U.S. were sourced from China, on top of 80% of APIs used in local drug production. To make matters worse, both the U.S. and India are engaged in a serious geopolitical logjam with China." Maavak warns of "the consequences of a full-scale trade war" (2020).



and potential pathways to more holistic approaches to sustainable competition that decrease dangerous consequences.

These pathways include finding intersections and/or establishing cooperative efforts to combat common enemies such as terrorism and transnational organized crime in Afghanistan and the CASA region. If the U.S. does not heed China's growing influence in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Region, and fails to find a path to greater cooperation, it will miss critical opportunities to flex its soft power influence, encourage desirable alliances and outcomes, and gain access to vital populations and natural resources in Afghanistan and the larger region.

In particular, the CASA region and Afghanistan remain underdeveloped and vulnerable to third-party influence and domination. China has already created significant inroads in Pakistan and the Northern CASA states with its Belt and Road

by establishing its own brand of influence in the Central Region, based on its ability to integrate Afghanistan most efficiently in the economic corridor.

The extraction and commercialization of Afghan minerals, especially through progressive PPPs that focus on institutional accountability, sustainability, and education of local workforces, will be essential to reversing Afghanistan’s perpetual dependency on foreign aid and mitigating the present humanitarian crisis. Beyond the obvious strategic benefits of gaining access to Afghanistan’s critical minerals within the context of the GPC, durable interstate alliances and PPPs in the region will have significant positive geo-political outcomes as Afghanistan shifts to more autonomous economic stability and a decentralized economy.

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The notion that competition and cooperation can take place simultaneously between powerful nation-states is not new. China and the U.S. have a long-standing history of joining forces within the fields of research and science to tackle global health threats that otherwise could not have been managed as expediently. For example, during the SARS-CoV-1 outbreak that began in 2003 in Asia, epidemiologists and other specialists in China and the U.S. collaborated openly to successfully contain the emerging virus in a timely manner (Troullioud 2020). Unfortunately, the same level of cooperation between the U.S. and China has not existed during critical management junctures in the COVID-19 global pandemic, despite both countries leading the world in biomedical research and epidemiology. Rather, the U.S. and China have demonstrated antagonistic and even uncooperative stances towards one another, choosing to remain largely disconnected (even among research communities) in their efforts to manage the



of potentially critical innovations during the struggle to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opportunities still exist to work smarter and faster together on global solutions that can benefit the entire international community. Still, these will remain largely

Global economic interdependence demonstrates that the U.S. can no longer rely primarily on military might to maintain national security interests. Economic influence is swiftly becoming the name of the game in the modern GPC, with China moving into its role as the dominating influencer in the Central Region. For now, China remains somewhat hesitant to fully engage Afghanistan, primarily due to security concerns (Notezai 2021), but this could quickly change as China continues to gain traction in Pakistan, potentially leaving the U.S. out of future opportunities for meaningful engagement in Afghanistan when it most counts.

As the U.S. prepares to engage the new government in Afghanistan on a number of key issues, it faces a critical juncture in U.S. strategic planning: a fleeting opportunity to capitalize on its well-established relationships with local populations and convening power in the CASA region for the greater good. Additionally, the inevitable lever of U.S. shared security efforts in the region can incentivize cooperation from other influencers, like China, thus ensuring the balance of third-party control. Finally, exploring new opportunities for U.S. cooperation with China, in both the Central Region and within science and technology communities, remains essential during this crucial time of global healing.

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