



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

While the U.S.'s competitive position as a global power and in uencer is a major tenet posited in the NSS and the NDS, the documents leave the Great Power Competition unde ned, 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 "rmly entrenched in conventional defense thinking" (Boro#020). Once an arcane concept and term, the Great Power Competition has become linked with every aspect of defense, strategy, and national security (Boro#020). 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 de nition and understanding, many gaps remain in its conceptual underpinnings. Thus, this chapter presents a conceptual perspective on the Great

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

The 21st-century GPC is a complex contest involving a signi cant 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 in uence, is just as crucial as statecraft as a military power. While the NSS states that perception of strength, speci cally 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 (Musgrave2020).

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" rst 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 con ict is no longer the driving force of international relations" (Friedma2019). This sentiment echoes of cials 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



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

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 8) 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 (Lover 2019; Thepa 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 spending on upgrading their military weaponry and capabilities and modernizing their nuclear enterprise. Notably, Russian military expenditure is 223.699 billion dollars (87792(f)-4) (or 2.8% of GDP) (CIA 2019). China has an overwhelming monopoly on rare earth minerals, supplying 67% of global



rare earth mineral production (Kiggi2015). 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 (Kiggi2015, Lyrichikova and Stolyaro2020). Like Russia, the United States imported 80% of its rare earth mineral supply from China (Reuters2019). 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 Scott2019).

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 Stolyaro2020). It also plans to offer to back foreign investments, reduce mining taxes, and give cheaper loans to investors (Lyrichikova and Stolyaro2020), according to Lyrichikova and Stolyaro2020. With the proper incentives to investors, Russia hopes that it will become the second-largest producer

to exploit the pandemic, while China has red 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 (Cao 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 (Cao 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 and China: A Mutual Distaste

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.



the “orderly and responsible withdrawal of foreign troops to avoid a power vacuum and possible terrorist resurgence” (Burr, 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

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



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 convergence 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, ha"07(os)-351tts,e

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



## 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.



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.

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## 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, in uence, 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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