EXPECTING THE UNEXPECTED: ESSAYS ON STRATEGIC SURPRISES IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Class of 2006
War Studies Conference
6-7 August 2024
West Point, New York

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Published in 2025 by West Point Press
Taylor Hall, Building 600
Swift Road, West Point, NY 10996

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Expecting The Unexpected: Essays on Strategic Surprises in the 21st Century, Class of 2006, War Studies Conference, 6–7 August 2024
West Point, New York

Published September 2025
ISBN: 978-1-959631-31-6

Design and layout support provided by Gina Lauria Creative Services.

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Proceedings Title: Expecting the Unexpected: Essays on Strategic Surprises in the 21st Century

Proceedings Publisher: West Point Press, Taylor Hall, Building 600, West Point, NY 10996

Publication Year: 2025

Conference Title, Date, Location: Expecting the Unexpected: Essays on Strategic Surprises in the 21st Century; Class of 2006 War Studies Conference, 6–7 August 2024, West Point, NY

Aims and Scope: The aim of this proceeding is to present essays on the theme of "strategic surprise" from leading scholars and practitioners in a way that is readily digestible by lay and policy audiences. The volume asks contributors to consider what international relations and foreign policy issues are not receiving enough attention in the national security community—whether because they have been incorrectly judged as exceptionally unlikely, as not having major consequences, or as unimportant. The scope applies to missed threats as well as missed opportunities, whether in terms of regional focus, types of actors, or types of events. The goal of the volume is to tackle these problems by thinking creatively and questioning assumptions, while staying within the context of today's political realities. In this way, it hopes to contribute to policymakers' strategic foresight as they look over the horizon of the coming decades.

Editorial Review Statement: We took the following steps to select, review, and edit this volume. Initially, we asked around fourteen scholars/practitioners to work together in groups of 4–5 to write and present ideas about a broad topic related to the overall theme of strategic surprises. These contributions came in just before the conference at varying levels of completeness and thematic fit. For some groups, the editors provided general feedback on partial drafts before submission. Over two days at the conference, all participants presented their contributions independently. All participants, led by the editors, provided extensive feedback to identify thematic fit and evaluate content/contribution.

From there, we started to see the project as a collection of individual essays instead of four broad themes. Some individual contributions were rejected for the edited volume because they either did not sufficiently speak to the theme or overlapped with another submission. Others were accepted as essentially on the right track, and others received new guidance on how to fit into the volume.

Most individual contributors submitted complete drafts of their new essays in Fall 2024. At this point, both editors reviewed their contents and returned them with feedback. Final drafts, with feedback integrated, came back in early Spring 2025. At this point, the editors worked on an introduction and compiled everything into a final submission.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: Policy Priorities and Prediction

Patrick J. Sullivan, Max Z. Margulies, and Vito J. D'Orazio

ABSTRACT

This introductory essay describes the context for and goals of the proceedings. It defines strategic surprise from the perspective of policymaking and situates this volume's thematic approach in the broader literature on conflict forecasting. While standard models and academic discussions of forecasting prioritize refining models to make accurate predictions, policymakers must pay much more attention to a risk calculus that includes not only the probability that an event will happen, but also the probability that there will be a high cost if the event does happen, as well as the trade-offs inherent in allocating resources to plan for multiple contingencies. It closes with general thematic considerations and a summary of how each essay in the proceedings addresses strategic surprises and blind spots.

The Modern War Institute at West Point hosts an annual conference to offer novel analysis and framing for issues of import to war studies scholars and practitioners. The conference is sponsored by the United States Military Academy's Class of 2006, whose generous endowment funds the honoraria for conference participants and the publication of conference proceedings. This volume is a collection of essays that emerged from the 2024 conference, which was themed on Strategic Surprises and Blind Spots.

The period leading up to the conference in August 2024 saw several strategic surprises and geopolitical developments that continue to defy the expectations of even seasoned analysts. From the October 7 attacks by Hamas against Israel and the *de facto* regional war it has spawned, to the Russo-Ukraine War entering its fourth year, to Houthi rebels attacking Western shipping in the Middle East, to India and Pakistan going kinetic in their long-simmering territorial dispute, to chaotic American foreign and economic policies inducing fractures in the international system, to Chinese strategic competition becoming more manifest globally—the spectrum of emerging challenges is broad, fluid, and hard to anticipate. These events, many of them unexpected in either their timing or intensity, underscore the central premise of this volume: we live in an era of intensifying strategic uncertainty, where the most significant threats may not be those we see or prepare for but rather those we systematically ignore, underestimate, or simply do not see coming.

The goal of this volume is to offer, contextualize, and analyze underappreciated patterns, risks, and foreign policy decision points that deserve more rigorous attention from scholars, policymakers, and defense planners. In doing so, we aim to spur more critical

thinking within the U.S. national security community about identifying and prioritizing planning for challenges and contingencies. A key element of this requires reconceptualizing how we think about the notion of strategic surprise itself.

We do this primarily by integrating probability assessments about an event or dynamic's costs and consequences into the debate in the forecasting field between those who emphasize the frustrating unpredictability of ultra-rare and impactful "black swan" events and those who advocate for incremental but continuous efforts to increase confidence and accuracy of predictions.[1] There is value to both approaches, but this volume does not attempt to forecast outcomes or assign likelihoods to events. Instead, we offer that this debate, along with much of the academic forecasting literature, misses a key dimension of strategic surprise that is important to policymakers: unfavorable and even disastrous outcomes can occur across the probability spectrum, and are often the result of events that are reasonably likely but overlooked. As Tetlock et al. note, policymakers must decide how to prioritize and allocate limited resources to hedge against events that might happen and whose consequences are probabilistic and dependent on other events. Thus, policymakers have a fundamentally different job from forecasters and analysts, who overwhelmingly see their role as predicting the likelihood of an event. Policymakers must make value judgments to set priorities, and "those priorities must rest, in part, on implicit probability judgments of expected impacts."[2] Accurate understandings of whether an event has low, medium, or high probability are important but impactful events can happen across the probability spectrum. It would be as misguided for policymakers to overprepare for extremely unlikely but disastrous events as it would be to neglect consistent or recurring problems that are less severe but still costly.

Importantly, however, our goal is not to provide definitive guidance about the value judgments that policymakers should make, either for prioritizing threats or establishing probability and cost thresholds. Any policy response to prevent or address strategic surprise inevitably requires decision-makers to make such judgments. Inevitably, these decisions depend not just on assessments of the security environment but also on domestic political considerations as informed by different moral and ethical frameworks. Yet the breadth of available policy options is often limited by cognitive biases and instinctive or emotional thinking.[3] As a result, well-intentioned leaders can still make

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[1] For examples, see Nassim Nicholas Taleb, Yaneer Bar-Yam, and Pasquale Cirillo, "On single point forecasts for fat-tailed variables," International Journal of Forecasting 38, no. 2 (April-June 2022), 413–422; Philip E. Tetlock, Yunzi Lu, and Barbara A. Mellers, "False dichotomy alert: Improving subjective probability estimates vs. raising awareness of systemic risk," International Journal of Forecasting 39, no. 2 (April-June 2023), 1021–1025.

[2] Tetlock et al., "False dichotomy alert," 1023, 1024.

[3] Daniel Kahneman, Thinking Fast and Slow (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2011); Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Garner, Superforcasting: The Art and Science of Prediction (Crown Publishing Group, 2015); Janice Gross Stein, "Foreign policy decision making: rational, psychological, and neurological models," in Foreign policy: theories, actors, cases, eds. Steve Smith, Tim Dunne, and Amelia Hadfield (Oxford University Press, 2008), 101–116.

suboptimal decisions because they are too focused on what they already know or the information immediately around them.

We aim to illuminate these conceptual blind spots, namely those areas where assumptions about probability or consequence may lead us toward complacency or misallocation of resources. Ultimately, we seek to widen the aperture through which strategic planning is conducted, bringing to the foreground insights and evidence from domains that often lie at the periphery of mainstream war studies. In service of this aim, the volume editors curated case studies and thematic inquiries from conference participants to map the emerging terrain of conflict, competition, and coercion. Each essay offers a different vantage point on what surprises can unfold and how—from institutional misalignment and cultural misreadings, to technological diffusion and narrative warfare. By integrating these seemingly disparate threads, we offer a comprehensive framework for recognizing and responding to the strategic blind spots of the contemporary security environment.

This volume thus offers a dual critique. It challenges the narrow threat perceptions that continue to dominate security thinking (and policymaking, in turn) and it calls for a more holistic, systems-based approach to identifying where risk and opportunity truly reside in the contemporary security environment. It is about confronting our assumptions before our adversaries do.

DEFINING STRATEGIC SURPRISE AND BLIND SPOTS

Fundamentally, strategic surprise is the failure to devote appropriate planning and preparation to events or dynamics. Strategic surprises often stem from flawed assumptions about adversary intentions, our own capabilities, or the character of the international system itself. They can also arise from problems or issues that are underappreciated, misclassified, or deemed too politically inconvenient to prioritize. These surprises are not dangerous because they are random or even difficult to predict, but because they are plausible and consequential yet overlooked. Although there is not a consensus definition amongst scholars on what constitutes strategic surprise and how it might be operationalized as a concept, beginning with a typology that distinguishes between two principal sources of surprise seems useful:

> **Underestimating Probability:** Events and outcomes across the probability spectrum can be a strategic surprise if their likelihood is sufficiently underestimated. Some scenarios may be deemed so unlikely that they are omitted from serious planning processes. The assumption of improbability becomes a self-justifying reason for neglect, even when the cost of failure would be immense. Some may see an extended war with China that requires mass mobilization as improbable, but the implications of being unprepared are catastrophic.
>
> **Underestimating Cost:** In other cases, the likelihood of an event may be acknowledged, but its significance is downplayed. These are situations where planners may say, "Yes, this could happen" (or even, "Yes, this is already happening") but do not sufficiently account for the depth of the consequences if it

does. Misjudging the impact of proxy attacks, technology proliferation, or global narcotics networks are examples of this form.

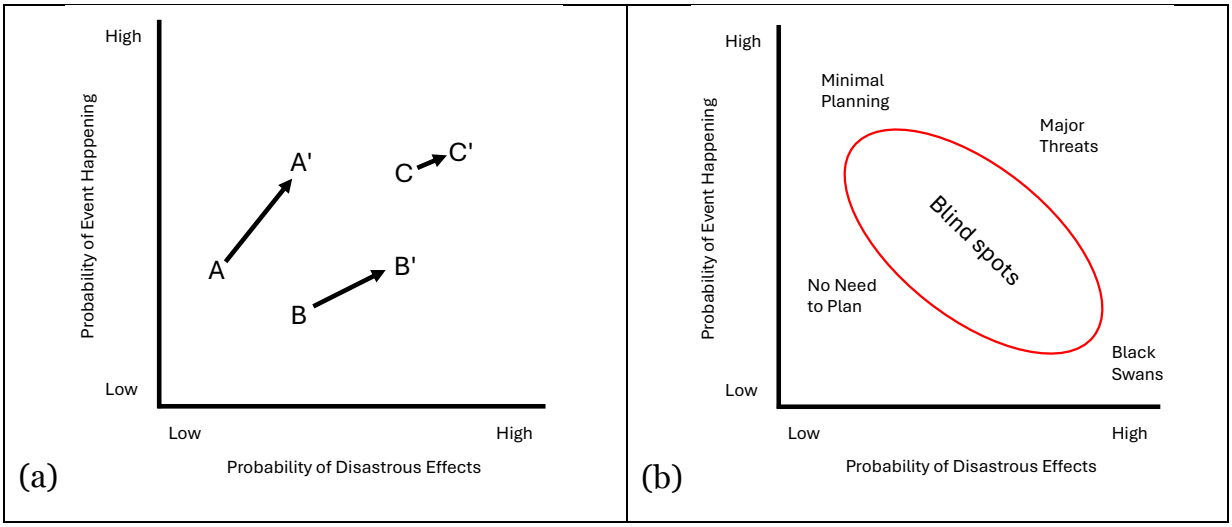
While the source of strategic surprise for any single, independent event is rooted in underestimating probabilities and costs, events are dependent on one another, and policymakers have finite resources. As a result, overestimating probabilities and costs is also problematic as it likely means devoting more resources than required to manage the risk. In turn, this may reduce the ability to manage risk on other issues even when the probability and cost are appropriately estimated. Potentially, this exacerbates the impact of events that could otherwise have been prevented or mitigated. Overestimation is not itself a surprise, but it can lead to surprise elsewhere as resources are misallocated.

Strategic surprise thus lives at the intersection of probability and cost, but this alone is not sufficient for conceptualizing strategic surprise. Events are dependent on other events in the strategic environment, meaning the occurrence (or nonoccurrence) of an event influences the probability of observing (or not observing) others. Further, the cost of an event itself is probabilistic and dependent. Thus, strategic surprise is not simply about forecasting failure to plan for an individual outcome, but about analytical and institutional blind spots. i.e., where resource allocations are not aligned with complex risk assessments. Failure in this context is not a lapse in intelligence but a systemic error in the policymaking body that inhibits effective risk management.

Another way of thinking about this is that the first type refers to the probability that an event will happen, while the second type refers to the probability that an event will have χ cost, conditional on the event happening. In the context of strategic surprise, χ is a disastrous consequence where the precise threshold for how much cost constitutes "disaster" depends on policymaker assessments. As discussed above, these assessments are dependent on a variety of factors, including expectations about other threats and strategic surprises that require preparation.

Figure 1 below shows two panels to conceptualize strategic surprise. Looking at Panel A, expecting events to be A/B when they are actually A-prime or B-prime is clearly a surprise and makes those important blind spots. Note that we are not prescriptive about how to value A-prime versus B-prime regarding planning and resource allocation. However, in these cases, the probability of occurrence and disastrous consequences is underestimated. Conversely, the delta between C and C-prime may be surprising but is not a blind spot from the perspective of having major planning implications, both because the delta is small and because it is in a quadrant where there is probably already sufficient planning going toward it. That said, C-prime is clearly more threatening (and thus should probably have more resources) than A-prime or B-prime.

Figure 1: *Plotting Costly Predictions*



Strategic surprises or blind spots can occur in almost any area of Figure 1. However, some regions are more prone than others. When events are believed to be very common or almost certain, surprise tends not to be an issue. In the lower-left corner, it would be a waste of resources to plan for events that have both a low chance at disastrous effects and a low probability. Furthermore, policymakers often need not pay much attention to even higher probability issues as long as there is high confidence that their consequences will not be very costly. In these cases, the events in question are routine enough that existing efforts are often sufficient to respond to them, and if existing efforts are *insufficient,* the cost of the event is likely to be sufficiently low that it is not worth diverting attention away from more costly events to preempt these ones.

As we move further right along the x-axis and the probability of a high-cost outcome increases, policymakers are likely already paying more attention to planning for it. For example, in the upper-right region would be conflicts and contingencies discussed in the Council on Foreign Relations' "Conflicts to Watch" report that is annual released by their Center for Preventive Action.[4] These conflicts are all known to policymakers, making a strategic surprise unlikely, although some of their costly consequences may be underestimated.

The most obvious area for blind spots is in the large empty arc across the middle values of both axes. Here, it may not only be difficult to correctly assess the likelihood that

[4] Paul B. Stares, "Conflicts to Watch in 2025." Council on Foreign Relations. https://www.cfr.org/report/conflicts-watch-2025

something will happen but there may also be the most room for disagreement about the appropriate amount of resources to devote to a given set of circumstances. Black swan events are almost by definition a surprise due to their low probability and the difficulty of predicting them or even inherent unpredictability. Their high cost means policymakers likely have some contingency plan for them in place, but they can still constitute a blind spot if planners underestimate the likelihood of occurrence, as well as if they fail to devote adequate resources toward prevention or mitigation. Thus, a strategic surprise or blind spot can occur because the true probability of occurrence or disaster differs from what planners assess it to be. However, it can also occur when planners correctly assess or overestimate probabilities, but in (over)preparing for one event, fail to adequately allocate resources to another.

This conceptualization of strategic surprise relies heavily on policymaker assessments of acceptable and unacceptable costs. This dimension is not something that academic forecasting models tend to account for.[5] Rather, these models focus on estimating the probability of an event such as the onset of a conflict between actors, or the number of fatalities in a spatio-temporal region.[6] Some have estimated the likelihood of low-probability and high-fatality events using power laws, so focused more on costly outcomes although not necessarily aligned with policymaker judgments of cost.[7] For example, these have been employed to forecast the chance that a region in Syria will suffer a mass-casualty event in a three month period during the Syrian Civil War.[8] Many academic forecasting projects have emphasized their policy-relevance, such as the Violence and Impacts Early Warning System, Patterns of Conflict Emergence, or Conflict Forecast.[9] In general, the policy-related goal for these projects is to improve decision-making by improving estimates of the probability of an event, which is a component of strategic surprise but not, as we have argued, the entire picture.

Some academic research at the intersection of forecasting and policy incorporates the cost functions of policymakers, but generally in a more theoretical sense. For example,

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[5] Espen Geelmuyden Rød, Tim Gåsste, and Håvard Hegre, "A review and comparison of conflict early warning systems." International Journal of Forecasting 40, no. 1 (2024): 96-112.

[6] Hannes Mueller and Christopher Rauh, "The hard problem of prediction for conflict prevention." Journal of the European Economic Association 20, no. 6 (2022): 2440-2467. Hegre, Håvard, et al. "The 2023/24 VIEWS Prediction challenge: Predicting the number of fatalities in armed conflict, with uncertainty." Journal of Peace Research (2024): 00223433241300862.

[7] Lars-Erik Cederman, "Modeling the size of wars: From billiard balls to sandpiles." *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 135-150. Clauset, Aaron, and Ryan Woodard. "Estimating the historical and future probabilities of large terrorist events." *The Annals of Applied Statistics* (2013): 1838-1865. Cirillo, Pasquale, and Nassim Nicholas Taleb. "On the statistical properties and tail risk of violent conflicts." *Physica A: Statistical Mechanics and its Applications* 452 (2016): 29-45.

[8] Adam Scharpf et al., "Forecasting the risk of extreme massacres in Syria." *European Review of International Studies* 1, no. 2 (2014): 50-68.

[9] See https://viewsforecasting.org/, https://www.forecastlab.org/, https://conflictforecast.org/.

Kristian Gleditsch's 2022 presidential address to the International Studies Association emphasized the role of forecasting in policymaking and the need for a better understanding of the policymaking process. Meyer et al. examine conflict "warnings" and why some warnings of impending conflict lead actors to take action while others do not. An understanding of strategic surprise and blind spots could help to guide academic efforts towards forecasting models that focus on events and outcomes that are less commonly studied but more likely to catch planners off-guard.

These events can take many forms. Some surprises, like the COVID-19 pandemic or the 9/11 terrorist attacks, reveal the limitations of standard forecasting models. Others, like Russia's invasion of Ukraine, highlight the costs of assuming that adversaries share our deterrence logic or risk calculus. Still, others, such as China's quiet expansion of digital influence operations or the diffusion of dual-use technology to proxy actors, show that surprises can unfold gradually, with their danger masked by the slow pace and seemingly benign cover of accumulation.

It is worth noting that strategic surprise is not always about the appearance of a novel threat. It often results from failing to see connections between trends, actors, and environments that appear unrelated on the surface. The U.S. domestic opioid crisis, for instance, has long been recognized and treated (politically speaking) as a public health problem. Only recently has its exploitation by foreign actors begun to be recognized as a strategic concern. Likewise, proxy warfare has often been viewed through a tactical or operational lens rather than as a pathway for adversaries to test and refine asymmetric strategies that could eventually be turned against us.

Finally, we should remember that blind spots are not just about failing to prepare for threats but missing opportunities. While we have mostly framed the discussion so far in terms of the costs incurred from dangerous events, there are also costs to failing to identify changes in the international system that we can benefit from. Domestic coalition shifts, technological innovations, and other events that contribute to shifts in relative power and political orientation can make allies appear in unlikely places. Failing to develop a partnership with a rising power like India, may not create immediate costs for the U.S. to mitigate but may limit foreign policy options down the road.

THEMES AND BLIND SPOTS

The following chapters (essays) explore a range of such blind spots, drawing on real-world case studies and theoretical insights to examine where and how the U.S. and its allies may fail to anticipate or prepare for the next major strategic disruption. In particular, each case study demonstrates either an underestimation of probability or an underestimation of the cost of failure. Their goal is not to be a definitive accounting of blind spots. Rather, each essay is a call for more attention. Each reflects an argument about a particular issue or event that the author believes is receiving insufficient attention—for whatever reason—in current U.S. policymaking.

In "The Future of Great Power Conflict," Kerry Chávez challenges the assumption that great power rivalry and counterterrorism are mutually exclusive priorities. Instead, she illustrates how violent nonstate actors (VNSAs) are being augmented by and embedded within great power strategies. States are tolerating and sometimes leveraging these groups as tools of asymmetric competition. This integration creates both a planning dilemma and a resource challenge. By focusing exclusively on state threats, the U.S. risks allowing VNSAs to evolve under the radar, especially as these actors adopt commercial off-the-shelf technologies and mimic state capabilities. Chávez calls for rethinking the strategic taxonomy to include hybrid threats that blur the lines between insurgency and great power conflict.

Amos Fox's contribution examines the diffusion of technology to proxy forces and its implications for long-term strategic advantage. Whether in Iraq, Syria, or Ukraine, the provision of sophisticated weapons and surveillance tools has extended conflicts, eroded U.S. technological advantages, and created new vulnerabilities. This is a blind spot in how we think about technological superiority. Once disseminated, technology cannot be contained. Fox shows how adversaries study and reverse-engineer our systems and how proxies—even when successful—can contribute to wars of attrition that drain political capital and material resources. The insight is clear: technology can be a double-edged sword, particularly when diffused through layered and complex conflict networks.

Emily Stranger's chapter investigates how Iranian-backed militias in Iraq frame themselves not as proxies but as sovereign actors with nationalist credentials. Through a comparative media analysis, Stranger reveals the dissonance between U.S. characterizations and the self-representations of these groups, particularly in the wake of the Israel-Hamas conflict. She is speaking to a different kind of blind spot—the narrative and informational domains of conflict. When adversaries can control the narrative, both locally and globally, they erode U.S. legitimacy and distort the strategic picture. Understanding how proxy groups shape public perception is crucial, especially at a time when wars are increasingly fought in the cognitive and digital spaces.

Nick Dockery's "The Weaponization of Addiction" makes a compelling case that synthetic opioids, particularly fentanyl, are not merely a public health crisis but a strategic threat. The chapter outlines how China-based networks, working through Mexican cartels and transnational criminal organizations, have created a durable and deadly supply chain. The result is societal destabilization and a subtle form of state-enabled coercion that undermines U.S. resilience. Accordingly, the fentanyl case is one of underestimated cost. The national security apparatus has struggled to frame addiction as a strategic threat, in part because its effects are diffuse and its causes embedded in complex social systems. But as Dockery demonstrates, the economic, political, and demographic toll of fentanyl is weakening the U.S. from within, making this a slow-burning crisis that deserves a central place in strategic planning.

R. Evan Ellis's chapter on China's military actions in Latin America outlines a provocative scenario of underestimating probability: China could leverage its commercial and diplomatic inroads in Latin America to disrupt U.S. logistics and sustainment operations in a future Indo-Pacific War. With its economic leverage, port access, and intelligence

networks, China could generate strategic effects in the Western Hemisphere at a relatively low cost. Because a Chinese military presence in Latin America seems implausible in peacetime, U.S. defense planners may not adequately account for how quickly that calculus could change in wartime. Ellis warns against assuming strategic depth in the Western Hemisphere and calls for contingency planning that includes threat vectors from this region.

Philip Hultquist offers an incisive critique of U.S. assumptions about India as a reliable partner in the Indo-Pacific. Despite decades of diplomatic and defense investments, India remains deeply committed to its strategic autonomy and may not side with the U.S. in a contingency against China. Hultquist outlines the risks of building an Indo-Pacific strategy on such a shaky foundation. The expectation that India will grant basing rights or join a U.S.-led coalition in the event of a conflict in the Western Pacific may prove illusory. The consequences of this miscalculation would cascade through operational planning, logistics, and alliance considerations. Hultquist urges planners to diversify partnerships and build redundancy into their core assumptions about conflict in the Indo-Pacific region.

Jessica Blankshain, Heather Venable, and Bradford Wineman's chapter, "Winning at Home," closes by turning the lens inward toward the domestic political terrain. Exploring how public support shapes the feasibility of U.S. military engagement, especially in large-scale or protracted conflicts, exposes a core vulnerability: U.S. political will may not be a reliable asset in future wars. They show how public perceptions of legitimacy, equity in cost distribution, and the legacy of past interventions all impact the public's willingness to support military action. This analysis is not just about civil-military relations—it is a strategic warning. A failure to secure and sustain domestic support could paralyze operational choices in a conflict with a major power like China or Russia. It is a blind spot to assume that kinetic superiority or allied consensus will suffice without a robust domestic consensus. Policymakers must engage in pre-conflict shaping operations on the homefront to prepare society psychologically and politically.

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These chapters demonstrate that strategic surprises do not always announce themselves with explosions or invasions. Sometimes, they can unfold in the stories adversaries tell, the markets they manipulate, or the technologies we give away. The volume proceeds thematically, beginning with the internal vulnerabilities of public support and nontraditional warfare, then moving through hybrid threats, regional scenarios, and strategic misalignments in alliance politics. Each chapter identifies a specific domain—public opinion, narcotics, media, proxies, regional posture, technology, or partnerships—where assumptions are misaligned with strategic reality. Together, they serve as a call to broaden our definition of security threats and recalibrate our risk assessment frameworks. In doing so, this volume makes a singular contribution: it insists that preparing for war means more than planning operations. It requires the intellectual humility to admit what we do not know, the strategic foresight to explore what seems unlikely, and the institutional agility to allocate resources accordingly. In an era of threats

that are increasingly complex, interrelated, and dynamic, the greatest surprise may be the one we saw but failed to recognize.

Chapter 2 – The Future of Great Power Conflict

Kerry Chávez

ABSTRACT

For nearly two decades after 9/11, U.S. strategy documents and activities centered on counterterrorism and efforts to undermine violent nonstate actors. Returning as a buzzword in the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy, great power competition now defines and colors American foreign policy priorities. Great power competition is multifaceted and resource-intensive, requiring that other missions be shed or chancing overextension. Planning and resourcing for counterterrorism—often viewed as the opposite pole from great power competition on a spectrum of threats—has been the primary victim of this strategic refocus. Yet near-peer competition will most likely to heat up and boil over in the gray zone, periphery, and through proxies. Furthermore, standalone threats from armed nonstate actors are increasing in quantity, variety, and intensity while security resources are being diverted to overt dimensions of GPC. This chapter focuses on the risks of overlooking these, the connections between strategic competition and counterterrorism, and misjudging the degree to which adversaries think the same way. The combination of these blind spots and vulnerabilities portends strategic surprise.

For nearly two decades after 9/11, U.S. strategy documents and activities centered on counterterrorism, primarily through efforts to undermine violent nonstate actors (VNSAs). Returning as a buzzword in the 2017 National Security Strategy and 2018 National Defense Strategy, great power competition (GPC) now defines and colors American foreign policy priorities, with a concomitant reorientation toward powerful state actors.[10] Great power competition is multifaceted and resource intensive, requiring that other missions be shed or chancing overextension. Planning and resourcing for counterterrorism—often viewed as the opposite pole from GPC on a spectrum of threats—has been the primary victim of this strategic refocus. In the most recent 2022 National

[10] Trump Administration, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905-2.pdf; Trump Administration, *Summary of the National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge* (Washington, DC: White House, 2018), https://www.hsdl.org/c/2018-national-defense-strategy/.

Security Strategy, for instance, counterterrorism is relegated to the last subtopic of the last global priority, not mentioned until page 30 of the 47-page document.[11]

A myopic focus on GPC might lead to miscalculation and neglect of salient security threats outside its scope, like counterterrorism and VNSAs. Yet great power competition is most likely to heat up and boil over in the gray zone, periphery, and through proxies, including VNSAs.[12] Furthermore, standalone threats from armed nonstate actors are increasing in quantity, variety, and intensity. At the same time, security resources are being diverted to overt dimensions of GPC.[13] This chapter focuses on the risks of overlooking these, the connections between strategic competition and counterterrorism, and misjudging the degree to which adversaries think the same way. The combination of these blind spots and vulnerabilities portends a strategic surprise.

DEMANDS OF GPC

Great power competition is multidimensional, multidomain, long-term strategic competition against a nation of relative or rising parity. Being multidimensional, it requires orchestrating all national instruments of power—diplomatic, informational, military, and economic. Being multidomain, it manifests in multiple regions and in air, land, sea, space, and cyber skirmishes. Strategic competition implies spirited exchanges short of war to maintain an edge and to shape global frameworks, norms, and security architectures in one's own favor. Finally, as a long-term, continuous vying between near-peer powers, it is bound to be remarkably expensive, high-stakes, and uncertain as the scales oscillate across efforts and attributes.

Altogether, GPC consumes substantial resources, both material and immaterial. To do it well, the U.S. must trim some missions, limit the initiation of new ones, and avoid broadening or prolonging standing missions that make the cut. Some might celebrate this focus, preferring a pointed and streamlined agenda that provides a north star for foreign

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[11] Biden Administration, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, DC: White House, 2022), https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf.

[12] Kerry Chávez and Richard D. Newton, "Yesterdays, Today's and Tomorrow's Small Wars," *Small Wars Journal,* November 11, 2024, https://smallwarsjournal.com/2024/11/11/yesterdays-todays-and-tomorrows-small-wars-2/.

[13] Mara Karlin, "The Return of Total War: Understanding—and Preparing for—a New Era of Comprehensive Conflict," *Foreign Affairs,* October 22, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ukraine/return-total-war-karlin.

policy.[14] In today's globalized, digitally rich, open era of innovation,[15] however, even straightforward threats splay across constellations of issues and actors. As GPC eclipses other security concerns, this chapter traces potential strategic voids that merit attention in the congested security agenda. Expanding in concentric degrees of overlap from the standalone VNSA threat to dense and dangerous adversarial webs leveraging VNSAs as laboratories, henchmen, and shields, I reject a tidy dichotomy between counterterrorism and GPC and consider how they integrate.

THE STANDALONE VNSA THREAT

Continuously and existentially at risk by their nature, VNSAs innovate distinctly. On average, these groups are risk-averse, given their smaller, weaker forces and competitive operating environments. Contrary to common misconceptions that terrorists are irrational, they keenly perform cost-benefit calculus when deliberating tactics, weapons, and collaborations that maximize their ability to execute their agendas under dangerous conditions. They carefully build dark networks, dense with particularized in-group trust but obscured to outsiders, to obtain resources from information to recruits and weapons. They especially struggle to gain reliable access to regulated, complex technologies or robust talent to engineer or manufacture it in-house. If a given organization does experience a breakthrough, disseminating it through dark networks can be dangerous, slow-going, and partial. Consequently, most VNSAs gravitate toward democratized technologies that are broadly available, unregulated, and easy to repair or replace on open markets.[16] Historically, this has considerably limited their military effectiveness and lethality. Exceptions reflect rare events when entrepreneurial groups gamble with emerging capabilities, heavily invest in complex engineering efforts, or hijack these capacities from stronger actors.

The landscape and ledger are changing. In the current open era of innovation, private industry is developing commercial analogs of several platforms central to security and warfare (i.e., cyber tools, drones, satellite imagery, artificial intelligence).[17] The products that have manifold benevolent and benign uses and the producers being profit-oriented, markets spurn regulations that might mitigate the handful of malicious misuses

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[14] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., "Redefining the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs* 78, no. 4 (1999): 22–35. DOI: 10.2307/20049361

[15] Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Technology and Strategic Surprise: Adapting to an Era of Open Innovation," *Parameters* 50, no. 3 (2020): 71–84. DOI. 10.55540/0031-1723.2675.

[16] Audrey Kurth Cronin, Power to the People: How Open Technological Innovation is Arming Tomorrow's Terrorists (Oxford University Press, 2020).

[17] Cronin, "Technology and Strategic Surprise," 2020.

stemming from VNSAs.[18] Furthermore, manufacturers continuously upgrade, advance, and embellish emerging platforms at decreasing costs.[19] On top of this, modern information and communication technologies enable VNSAs to build, leverage, and collapse networks faster and with fewer risks of detection and interdiction. This widens and hastens the diffusion of tacit knowledge through their dark networks, grants on demand, and access to demonstration points previously far beyond their apertures of observation.

Altogether, today's universe of VNSAs has affordable access to a much more cutting-edge toolkit and much more globalized networks through which conflict-specific capital and know-how can travel than even a decade ago. Neither requires financial, technical, or organizational intensity.[20] This augments emerging, marginal, and formidable groups, sustaining some beyond-expected durations to increase the quantity and variety of the threat. As a result, that universe is growing in size, ambition, connectedness, and combat prowess. VNSAs are increasingly forming joint operations rooms, merging and splintering in kaleidoscopic shifts, shuffling foreign fighters, and emulating tactics, techniques, and procedures from salient conflicts. They are establishing more cells and provinces, putting up stronger and longer fights against their enemies, and planning or mounting more attacks. The capability and combat experience gap between state and nonstate combatants is narrowing, making the latter a more pernicious threat absolutely and relatively.

As the U.S. fixates on deterring great power competitors, the emergence of a larger, more varied roster of more capable VNSAs will problematize national and international security. Given the costs and presumed consequences of GPC, fewer security resources are available to bolster the counterterror agenda. While one could debate the wisdom of any administration's priorities and allocation of resources, the threat is now, and the reality is slender resources. Sidestepping grand strategy keystones, I argue from a more pragmatic front that the U.S. must develop innovative and clever ways to economize, streamline, and share counterterror efforts. To that end, leaders should consider continuous social network analysis of VNSA clusters to monitor, classify, anticipate, and disrupt key nodes of innovation, knowledge transfers, and movement of conflict-specific capital.

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[18] Kerry Chávez and Ori Swed, "Between Scylla and Charybdis: The Threat of Democratized Artificial Intelligence," in *Towards an International Political Economy of Artificial Intelligence*, 177–194, edited by Tugrul Keskin and Ryan David Kiggins (Springer / Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

[19] Dagmar Rychnovská, "Governing Dual-use Knowledge: From the Politics of Responsible Science to the Ethicalization of Security," *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 4 (2016): 310–328. DOI: 10.1177/0967010616658848

[20] Michael C. Horowitz, The Diffusion of Military Power: Causes and Consequences for International Politics (University of Princeton Press, 2010).

THE VNSA THREAT AUGMENTED BY GPC

Although the threat posed by violent nonstate actors is formidable on its own, it is also intertwined with GPC. Many processes and actions in the great power stratosphere trickle down to terrorists, further augmenting their capabilities. Of higher concern, several states establish bipartite networks with VNSAs to directly and intentionally leverage their lateral networks, innovation, and assets and to launder their own activity. More than simple state sponsorship, cunning adversaries can benefit more from these partnerships than they donate, especially if the calculations are made relative to other great powers.

Indirectly Through Militarization of Commercial Platforms

The commercialized emerging technologies that are up-leveling VNSAs pale in comparison to advanced, military-grade capacities. Thus, few scholars expected wealthy states with strong militaries to express interest in or utility with them.[21] A new trend[22] is taking shape in modern warfare, however, that favors quantity over quality in some battlespaces.[23] Exquisite platforms are deployed with a degree of scarcity logic. Replacing them is remarkably costly and time-consuming, necessitating sparse, careful allocation. Commercialized platforms, although dramatically less capable, are disposable in comparison. Several implications stem from this. First, while expensive systems must stay allocated at fewer, higher levels of warfare, cheap systems can be democratized to the unit or foot soldier. Second, in many cases, cheap civilian variants elicit expensive defensive responses, pressuring strong actors to hemorrhage resources at a faster rate. Third, asymmetrically weak states and VNSAs have demonstrated that cheap mass can overwhelm and overcome exquisite capability. Finally, the sheer cost of total modern war outstrips the defense industrial base of even the wealthiest nations, forcing states at war to substitute cheaper platforms the longer the conflict. As great powers compete, they are coming to recognize the value of scalability for modern and future war.[24]

Beginning with Ukraine's response to Russia's 2022 invasion, several states are now incorporating systems ranging from off-the-shelf, plug-and-play models to hybrid commercial platforms enriched with after-market military modifications. Before this, manufacturers developed civilian technologies that VNSAs had to jury-rig, jailbreak, or

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[21] Kerry Chávez and Ori Swed, "Emulating Underdogs: Tactical Drones in the Russia-Ukraine War," *Contemporary Security Policy* 44, no. 4 (2023): 592–605. DOI: 10.1080/13523260.2023.2257964.

[22] In one sense, this could be framed as a returning trend, featuring massed technology instead of massed soldiers. Insofar as massed technology does not incur casualties and maximizes enemy damage, the asymmetric effects constitute a new trend in another sense.

[23] Christian Brose, "The New Revolution in Military Affairs," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 3: 122–134.

[24] Kathryn Hedgecock, Dominika Kunertova, Teddy MacDonald, and Trinity Stenger, "Emerging Technology and Strategy," *Defence Studies* 24, no. 1 (2024): 133–140. DOI: 10.1080/14702436.2023.2279618.

creatively modify to retool them for conflict applications. In response to demand signals from affluent states, many manufacturers are now designing models and applications explicitly for conflict theaters and uses. Even if these technologies are partially regulated, they will make their way into VNSA arsenals through black markets, state sponsorship, or from downing and scavenging systems in conflict. In addition, the source coincides more with VNSAs' *modus operandi* of leveraging democratized technologies versus bureaucratic militaries acculturated to different acquisition and deployment pathways. This will equip nonstate adversaries even more, presenting a more challenging threat without additional security resources. Importantly, it might also grant armed nonstate actors a temporary pacing edge as they absorb and assimilate new capabilities more quickly.

Directly Through Feedback Loops

Thus far, this chapter has examined the VNSA actor threat detached from GPC. In this arrangement, armed nonstate actors can emulate demonstration points and exploit opportunities drifting from the great power arena, amplifying their viability and lethality. Many U.S. challengers—great, rising, and rogue powers—intentionally engage with VNSAs as multipurpose proxies, partners, and laboratories. "Proxy" is a blunt label, masking considerable variety among patrons, surrogates, their relational dynamics, and their transactions. Some invoke principal-agent theory, emphasizing factors of principal monitoring and control.[25] Others find the patron-client literature more apt, highlighting that local actors have their own identities and interests and assessing levels of dependence and directionality of ties between them.[26] Both frameworks embrace the importance of reciprocity, however, that has crucial implications for GPC.

Savvy sponsor states leverage feedback loops from local actors. As states furnish proxy groups with weapons, training, and intelligence, nonstate groups develop local inventions and solutions that travel back to state sponsors. In effect, VNSAs serve as in-theater laboratories to test weapons and tactics, techniques, and procedures. This tightly

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[25] Gary J. Miller, "The Political Evolution of Principal-Agent Models," *Annual Review of Political Science* 8 (2005): 203–225. DOI: 10.1146/annurev.polisci.8.082103.104840; Abbass Farasoo, "Rethinking Proxy War Theory in IR: A Critical Analysis of Principal-Agent Theory," *International Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2021): 1835–1858. DOI: 10.1093/isr/viab050; Alexandra Chinchilla, "Formal Theory and Proxy Wars," in Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars, 47–59, edited by Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss (London: Routledge, 2023).

[26] Robert R. Kaufman, "The Patron-Client Concept and Macro-Politics: Prospects and Problems," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 16, no. 3 (1974): 284–308. DOI: 10.1017/S0010417500012457; Vladimir Rauta, "A Structural-relational Analysis of Party Dynamics in Proxy Wars," *International Relations* 32, no. 4 (2018): 449–467. DOI: 10.1177/0047117818802436; Wojciech Michnik and Spyridon Plakoudas, "Partnering with a Patron: Syrian Kurdish Factions as US Proxies in the Syrian Civil War," in *Palgrave Handbook on Non-state Actors in East-West Relations,* 1–12, edited by Péter Marton, Gry Thomasen, Csaba Békés, and András Rácz (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2024).

coincides with Dr. Fox's observation that supporting proxies entails risks of diffusing technology and tacitly learned best practices to adversaries. Military bureaucracies tend to have slower research and development, acquisition, and deployment cycles than VNSAs. They also might lack opportunities to battle-test innovations, leading to miscalculated or misaligned force structures for future war. This is especially relevant as countries vie to stay on the leading edge of emerging technologies. As new concepts and capabilities emerge, it is unclear if, which, and how they will become dominant in warfare or prove merely marginal.[27] Speculations, particularly those with financial skin in the game, abound, but until the audit of battle, observers will not know the actual empirical effect of new platforms.[28] Using VNSAs as a shortcut, rival and rogue states can test emerging technologies and tactics to fast track and vivify their military modernization relative to the U.S. and its allies.

This discrepancy is more acute in the short term. Some strategic surprises come from new technologies or tactics, techniques, and procedures wielded by weaker actors. Once stronger actors can observe, workshop, and become preeminent in it, the innovations come to favor the powerful in the long term. Reflecting a classic offense-defense dialectic, it is likely that the U.S. will predominate in emerging technologies over time. In the interim, though, rapid battle-tested VNSA innovation fueling rapid adversarial modernization will advantage America's competitors. For now, Western leaders must exercise marked wisdom and restraint to avoid falling into Thucydides' trap as emboldened revisionists lurch incrementally forward and true capabilities balances come into focus. For the medium to long term, the U.S. must ensure that China, Russia, and its axis of allies do not ultimately gain ground as they maximize these feedback loops to economize innovation epicycles.

THE GPC THREAT ACTUALIZED THROUGH VNSAS

The most direct connection between GPC and counterterrorism occurs when great powers delegate goals and tasks to VNSAs. In fact, given the steep costs of direct confrontation between major powers, competition is likely to manifest at lower thresholds, in alternative theaters, and through proxies. In the context of GPC, delegating to proxies allows adversaries to distract, hassle, and attrite the U.S. while devoting efforts toward their own improvement. Sharing offensive costs with proxies and deflecting the defensive costs is doubly expedient for their cost-benefit calculus. There is also a powerful signaling element to these relationships. Activating or authorizing a proxy to attack U.S. assets or allies, great power patrons aim to signal persistent resolve without provoking war. In the

[27] Kenneth Pollack, "The Middle East Abhors a Vacuum: America's Exit and the Coming Contest for Military Supremacy," *Foreign Affairs,* April 19, 2022, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2022-04-19/middle-east-abhors-vacuum.

[28] Paul Lushenko and Keith Carter, "A New Military-industrial Complex: How Tech Bros Are Hyping AI's Role in War." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists,* October 7, 2024, https://thebulletin.org/2024/10/a-new-military-industrial-complex-how-tech-bros-are-hyping-ais-role-in-war/.

patron-client relationship, both are signaling legitimacy and ambition to one another, and the proxy signals scrappy strength to the U.S. and bold capacity to local populations and competitors.[29] The U.S. commonly responds to such attacks with airstrikes, signaling low commitment against the proxy perpetrator and mere rhetorical acknowledgment of the sponsor state's role, if any. U.S. adversaries' proactive, cost-effective, high-yield approach grants them significant purchases relative to America's reactive, expensive band-aiding one.

It is important to recognize the depth and layers of this dynamic across different regional security constellations. As a prime example of a proxy curator, while one would not classify Iran as a great power, it plays a central role in GPC. Affirming Ms. Stranger's insights, Iran artfully manages its global Basij or threat network of diverse proxies through its expeditionary Quds Force, sapping U.S. and Israeli attention and resources. In Iraq alone, there are an estimated 120,000 fighters across 40 militias with close links with the Quds Force (i.e., Badr Organization, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata'ib Hezbollah).[30] Besetting commercial and military vessels in the Red Sea and elsewhere, Houthi (Ansar Allah) fighters regularly make headlines and merit retaliatory airstrikes. Surrounding Israel, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and more have become household names as the Gaza conflict wears on and the warfront expands into Lebanon.

In addition to representing individual agendas and ambitions for regional power projection and hegemony, these actors are tied to Russia and China and edify their GPC efforts. In 2021, China and Iran formalized a long-term cooperation agreement, announcing a new level of strategic partnership.[31] In 2023, China hosted then-Iranian president Raisi for a high-profile visit,[32] and most recently Chinese leadership has verbalized that it will back Iran if war breaks out.[33] Following the October 7 attacks by Hamas, China stepped past Iran and directly engaged one of its proxies when Chinese

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[29] Nakissa Jahanbani, Caleb Benjamin, Robert Fisher, Muhammad Najjar, Muhammad al-'Ubaydi, Benjamin Johnson, "How Iranian-Backed Militias Do Political Signaling," *Lawfare,* December 18, 2023, https://www.lawfaremedia.org/article/how-iranian-backed-militias-do-political-signaling.

[30] Nicholas A. Heras, "Iraq's Fifth Column: Iran's Proxy Network," *Middle East Institute,* October 2017, https://www.mei.edu/publications/iraqs-fifth-column-irans-proxy-network.

[31] Reuters Staff, "Iran and China Sign 25-year Cooperation Agreement," *Reuters,* March 27, 2021, https://www.reuters.com/world/china/iran-china-sign-25-year-cooperation-agreement-2021-03-27/.

[32] Jonathan Fulton, Paul Foley, and Tuvia Gering, "China-Iran Relations Are Warming: Here's What the Rest of the World Should Know," *Atlantic Council*, February 19, 2023, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/china-iran-relations-are-warming-heres-what-the-rest-of-the-world-should-know/.

[33] James M. Dorsey, "Commentary: China's Support for Iran in Conflict with Israel is a Double-edged Sword," *Channel News Asia*, October 15, 2024, https://www.channelnewsasia.com/commentary/china-iran-israel-middle-east-relationship-gulf-states-4676796.

officials met with Hamas, provided diplomatic cover, and vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions that would have condemned Hamas. China also generated and algorithmically pushed anti-Israel and anti-American propaganda through TikTok surrounding the invasion.[34] Using Iran as a fulcrum, China furthers its geopolitical ambitions in the Middle East through economic leverage, weapon transfers, and diplomatic influence.[35]

Russia has deep ties to Iran and its threat network as well. The two nations have collaborated for years in the Syria civil war, a theater where VNSAs like Hezbollah fought alongside and gleaned combat experience from the Russian military. After depletion of Russia's unmanned aerial system stockpiles early in the war in Ukraine, Iran began supplying Shahed-136 loitering munitions, surface-to-air missiles, and several additional drones.[36] Although speculative and unfolding, some analysts have suggested that the recent drone strike by Hezbollah on an Israeli training base south of Haifa might have featured a model of Russian provenance.[37] Even without this artifact, the multidimensional linkages between Russia, Iran, and VNSAs throughout the Middle East are clear. Meanwhile, the Middle East is a single region reflecting the layered relationships between near-peer adversaries, middle powers, and armed nonstate actors that must be considered in formulating an effective, sustainable GPC strategy.

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[34] Matt Pottinger and Mike Gallagher, "No Substitute for Victory: America's Competition With China Must Be Won, Not Managed," *Foreign Affairs,* April 10, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/no-substitute-victory-pottinger-gallagher.

[35] Will Green and Taylore Roth, "China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership," *U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission,* June 28, 2021, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/China-Iran_Relations.pdf#:~:text=Having%20suffered%20years%20of%20diplomatic%20and%20economic%20isolation,a%20leading%20energy%20importer%2C%20and%20a%20top%20investor.

[36] Gabriela Rosa Hernández, "Iran Supplies Arms to Russia," *Arms Control Association,* November 2022, https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2022-11/news/iran-supplies-arms-russia#:~:text=Last%20summer%2C%20Iran%20began%20delivering%20drones%20that%20loiter%2C,missiles%20and%20many%20additional%20cheap%20drones%2C%20Reuters%20reported.

[37] Patrick Kingsley and Gabby Sobelman, "Deadly Hezbollah Strike on Army Base Shows Israel's Weakness Against Drones," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/14/world/middleeast/hezbollah-drone-attack-israel.html. While some experts speculate that the drone was an Iranian-made Ababil variant, others (authors' proprietary sources) have disputed that the specifications correlate with the Russian Orion.

IMPLICATIONS

Great power competition is not so straightforward that the U.S. can directly calculate relative capabilities and unilaterally calibrate investments. This is especially true in a globalized, open era of innovation. After spending two decades fighting and all too often losing against guerrillas, terrorists, and insurgents despite a stark qualitative military edge, the allure to return to "the halcyon days of the Cold War" involving large budgets to fighting a cutting-edge war against a sophisticated enemy is understandable.[38] Yet rather than toggling from counterterrorism to a GPC mindset, policymakers should be examining how they integrate. Adversaries are cultivating networks with VNSAs to reap disproportionately high benefits—namely in battle-audited innovation and distraction and attrition of American attention and resources—at disproportionately low costs. They leverage their strengths (China usually gives money, Iran provides weapons and training, etc.) and expect a continuous stream of idiosyncratic reciprocation in return. While the U.S. does collaborate with middle-power states and, at times, sponsors armed nonstate actors, it expends far more than it receives, especially in the short-term.

If U.S. leaders ignore these linkages, even concerted, extravagant efforts toward great power competition will not be enough to keep pace with adroit adversaries using keen shortcuts. Strategically, the U.S. will run itself ragged reactively putting down pop-up threats and putting out large and small fires lest they conflagrate. Competitors will seed and feed their proxy networks to ensure it, selectively provoking and rankling the U.S. directly to keep it extended on all fronts. Meanwhile, they will accumulate strength with few leaks while the U.S. churns in a cycle of amassing and expending. Operationally, the U.S. military's technological edge and command prowess might obsolesce in the face of emerging technologies and tactics. Without opportunities for warfighters to test their mettle and concepts of operation in dynamically changing contexts, weaker adversaries might learn to close the parity gap far closer than the U.S. prefers. Military initiatives to simulate, workshop, and adapt, while vital, will cost far more than the symbiotic proxy laboratories competitors leverage and will likely be less innovative.

In sum, because the counterterror agenda is downgraded in U.S. strategy yet upleveled by adversarial assistance, the standalone VNSA threat will continue to be salient, wicked hard, and at times imminent. Rising and great power competitors are outmaneuvering the U.S. in creating structures that favor their (state military and VNSA proxy) offense and penalize the U.S. by keeping it stretched thin on defense. This calls for two overarching efforts. First, policymakers must map these social networks, tracing what travels along ties and identifying key nodes, thick edges (implying dense collaboration), and vulnerabilities. Counterterror efforts and responses will likely remain lean, so administrations must work smarter on this front amid GPC. Second, they should consider ways to build similar shortcuts, economizing structures, and credible signaling mechanisms. Top-down innovation and bureaucratic acquisition must become more

[38] Fareed Zakaria, "The New China Scare: Why America Shouldn't Panic About Its Latest Challenger," *Foreign Affairs*, December 6, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-12-06/new-china-scare.

agile, coinciding with profit-seeking and urgently pressurized incentive structures. Leaders should leverage every opportunity to responsibly outsource, simulate, streamline, and reward grassroots learning regarding deploying and integrating new platforms and tactics, techniques, and procedures. To avoid another 9/11 of any scale, the U.S. must maintain sufficient focus on the burgeoning universe of VNSAs. To keep pace and then win the multidimensional, multidomain, long-term strategic competition against near-peer adversaries, leaders must recognize and lean into how VNSAs upgrade the great power game.

Chapter 3 – Technology Diffusion in Proxy Conflict: Its Challenges and Implications

Amos C. Fox

ABSTRACT

This article explores the strategic implications of state-based technology diffusion to proxy forces. While arming and equipping proxy forces is a longstanding practice in modern conflict, transferring advanced capabilities—such as high-tech weapons systems, intelligence tools, and innovative communications capabilities—carries many unintended consequences. Using the war against the Islamic State and the Russo-Ukrainian War as case studies, the article addresses two core questions: How does technology diffusion to proxy forces impact conflict duration, and how does technology diffusion impact an adversary's ability to reverse-engineer and exploit novel battlefield technology? Three major findings emerge from this analysis: first, technology diffusion tends to prolong conflicts by enhancing the proxy's capacity to wage war; second, advanced systems often end up in enemy hands; and third, adversaries can exploit exposure to these technologies to erode U.S. strategic advantages. Finally, though proxy strategies might appear as cost-effective alternatives to a state committing its own forces, proxy employment tends to contribute to long, grueling wars of attrition and the degradation of technological asymmetry.

Proxy wars, or stated more precisely, a state's use of a proxy strategy in a conflict, are a seemingly cost-effective way for one party to wage war against another party through an intermediary actor.[39] To be sure, scholars like Tyrone Groh refer to a state's use of proxy strategy as "the least bad option" for how to address many of the changes of strategic competition.[40] Many things contribute to a good proxy strategy, to include how to control (or manage) the proxy force in the field, how to overcome (or offset) a proxy's agency costs, and how to support the proxy with technology to enable it to compete with state-

[39] Daniel Byman, "Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective," *Brookings Institute*, May 21, 2018, accessed September 7, 2024, available at: https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-engage-in-proxy-war-a-states-perspective/.

[40] Tyrone Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).

based opponents. This latter consideration – technology diffusion to proxies – is a long-standing pillar of good proxy strategy.[41] Technology diffusion, or providing proxies with weapon systems, intelligence gathering tools, and communications systems, is crucial for any proxy strategy to succeed, but it is not without cost.

In this chapter, I examine the challenges and impacts of technology diffusion in proxy strategies. I explore this subject by asking two questions: How does technology diffusion to proxies impact a conflict's duration? How does the diffusion of technology to proxies impact the enemy's ability to understand principal-provided technology? I use the war to against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria and the Russo-Ukrainian War to provide the analytical lens and empirical evidence to support three significant findings.

I find three strategic factors that states and their militaries must grapple with when making policy and strategy decisions about their potential involvement in a conflict. First, technology diffusion to proxies extends a conflict's duration because the transfer of arms expands the proxy's capacity to wage war, whether under their own interests or for those of their benefactor. Second, technology diffusion to proxies can easily lead to technology diffusion to one's enemy. Third, the diffusion of technology to proxies leads to the loss of technological asymmetries due of the adversary's active effort to find the gaps, loopholes, and other vulnerabilities in the principal's military and intelligence-gathering technology. The cumulative effect of these three findings results in the assessment that a proxy strategy might be the least bad option for many reasons, but policymakers, strategists, and senior military leaders must appreciate that proxy strategy can (and does) contribute to long wars of attrition and the loss of strategic asymmetric advantages.

TECHNOLOGY DIFFUSION TO PROXIES MEANS EXTENDING A CONFLICT'S DURATION

As a rule, one can generally assume that any contest between imbalanced forces will often go in favor of the stronger opponent, especially in situations where the weaker opponent attempts to face the stronger opponent on the latter's own terms. This basic rule applies across the board, whether in sports, business, or military affairs. Yet, on occasions, weaker participants can find a way to sap the power differential that exists between them and the stronger actor or identify paths and partners to generate relative situational parity.[42] This section explores that latter option – creating parity – and importantly, what impact that has on war.

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[41] Byman, "Why Engage in Proxy War? A State's Perspective,"; Jakob Grygiel, Return of the Barbarians: Confronting Non-State Actors from Ancient Rome to the Present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 92–93; Geraint Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* Vol. 25, no. 35 (2014): 24. DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2014.913542.

[42] Patricia Sullivan, "At What Price Victory? The Effects of Uncertainty on Military Intervention Duration and Outcome," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* Vol. 25 (2008): 51. DOI: 10.1080/07388940701860383.

Proxies emerge in one of two fundamental ways. Proxies are either a pre-existing actor that a state (i.e., a principal) enlists to support its own interests or states create proxies out of disparate groups and forge them into a generally cohesive force.[43] For this article, the pre-existing actor method is referred to as Situation 1 and Situation 2 is when states create a proxy force.

Situation 1 can, and sometimes does, involve state-to-state principal-proxy relationships. Considering that in Situation 1, principals (Actor A) often enlist pre-existing actors (Actor B) to support their own (Actor A) ends, this does not mean that the goals of both actors are not different. Actor A possesses the power to pragmatically interject themselves into a situation it might not do if not for the mutual interest of Actor B. During Operation Inherent Resolve, for instance, a principal-proxy relationship existed between the US and Iraq. By the summer of 2014, combat in Iraq clearly demonstrated that the means to defeat the Islamic State (IS) exceeded what Iraq could muster on its own. Early battles around Mosul, Ramadi, and Fallujah demonstrated that the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) were no match for IS's swift, brutal, and effective fighting force.[44] From an ends-ways-means perspective, Iraq's policy goals about IS exceeded what Iraq's military could accomplish on its own, despite years of US military training and security assistance.[45] Thus, the Iraqi government needed significant military support to eliminate the Islamic State (IS) – as least as a proto-state – in Iraq.[46]

On the other hand, the US was interested in eliminating IS. Then-US President Barack Obama outlined that the US government viewed IS as a threat to US national security and accordingly sought to degrade and destroy it.[47] Obama also noted that the US was not interested in deploying a large land force back on the ground in Iraq, but that it would operate through other forces, while providing a sturdy backbone of support from across the elements of national power, to that intermediary fighting force. [48] Without using the phrase "proxy strategy," Obama articulated a US-Iraq proxy strategy for eliminating IS in Iraq.

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[43] Chris Loveman, "Assessing the Phenomenon of Proxy Intervention," *Conflict, Security, and Development* Vol. 2, no. 3 (2002): 39–40. DOI: 10.1080/14678800200590618.

[44] "United States Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," *Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations*, United States Senate, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, September 17, 2014: 7–9. https://www.foreign.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/091714_Transcript_United%20States%20Strategy%20to%20Defeat%20the%20Islamic%20State%20in%20Iraq%20and%20the%20Levant.pdf.

[45] "United States Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," 7–9.

[46] "United States Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," 7–9.

[47] Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL," *White House*, 10 September 2014, accessed 6 September 2024, available at: https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-Isil-1.

[48] Obama, "Statement by the President on ISIL."

In this situation, the US and Iraq formed a state-to-state principal-proxy dyad to combat IS. Proxy war scholarship refers to this type of dyad as a transactional principal-proxy relationship.[49] In this dyad, the US served as the principal, while Iraq served as the proxy. The US provided Iraq intelligence, weapons, strike support (both air and land-based fires), and combat advisors, and the Iraqis provided the brunt of the combat forces to engage in direct physical combat with IS.[50]The mutual policy aim of destroying IS in Iraq annealed the grouping, yet each state retained their own agency, while the US both directly and indirectly provided Iraq with a vast array of technology to address the IS threat.[51]

Counterfactual discourse can help understand cause and effect by examining alternative futures. We cannot rewind the conflict and let it play out with US intervention in Iraq. Yet, we can be certain in surmising that the US's creation of the US-Iraq proxy dyad contributed to extending Iraq's longevity in the conflict. For instance, had the US not created this political-military arrangement, Iraq would have certainly faltered and, given their combat record against IS to date, likely failed in any attempt to retake Mosul.[52] Thus, one can deduce that technology diffusion to proxies, in this case through a state-to-state principal-proxy dyad, extends the duration of a conflict. In doing so, proxy strategies accelerate the death, destruction, collateral damage, civilian casualties, and civilian harm in a conflict. Put another way, proxy strategies are a womb from which wars of attrition emerge. To be sure, proxy strategies might be good for the domestic politics of the principal state, but they are far from the "least bad" strategy for the proxy or the state in which the proxy war exists.

Moreover, one can easily replace Iraq in the situation outlined above with Ukraine, and replace IS with Russia, and find a near facsimile for the US's approach to the Russo-Ukrainian War. The US and Ukraine's national interests both reside in the restoration of Ukraine's internationally recognized boundaries and the defeat of Russian armed forces

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[49] For more information on the range of principal-proxy dyads, to include transactional relationships, see the author's following publications: "Confronting Proxies," Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss eds., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (London: Routledge, 2024); "Reframing Proxy War Thinking: Temporal Advantage, Strategic Flexibility, and Attrition," Georgetown Security Studies Review, Vol. 11, no. 1 (2023); "On Proxy War," *Journal of Military Studies* Vol. 12, no. 1 (2023); "Strategic Relationships, Risk, and Proxy War," *Journal of Strategic Security* Vol. 14, no. 2 (2020); and "Time, Power, and Principal-Agent Problems: Why the US Army is Ill-Suited for Proxy Warfare Hotspots," *Military Review* Vol. 99, no. 2 (2019).

[50] "United States Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," 9.

[51] Amos Fox, "Confronting Proxies," Assaf Moghadam, Vladimir Rauta, and Michel Wyss eds., *Routledge Handbook of Proxy Wars* (London: Routledge, 2024), 261.

[52] Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, United States Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant: Hearing Before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Thirteenth Congress, Second Session, September 17, 2014, S. Hrg. 113-668 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2015), http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/.

in Ukraine.[53] Setting emotion aside and examining the US's arrangement with Ukraine from an analytical position, one can easily find the same state-to-state transactional principal-proxy dyad in Ukraine as in Iraq.[54] Moreover, without the US's creation of that dyad, Ukraine would have faltered in its defense due to the lack of modern warfighting and intelligence technology.[55] Thus, like Iraq, technology diffusion in Ukraine has extended, or elongated, the conflict, at least as a conventional war, in ways that would have been inconceivable in any other circumstance.

Situation 2 differs from Situation 1 in several meaningful ways. In Situation 1, state-to-state connections facilitated technology diffusion to proxies. In Situation 2, however, states create proxy forces from available nonstate forces. Subsequently, state forces, either directly, indirectly, or a blended version of directly and indirectly, provide their proxy with the technology it needs to accomplish its principal's goals. In Syria, the US cobbled together the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) from scratch to combat IS.[56] After forming and training the SDF, the US provided (and continues to provide) the SDF with intelligence, weapons, strike, combat advisors, and other military technology, to enable it to do the preponderance of ground combat.[57]

Russia's relationship with the Wagner Group is another example of the state-to-nonstate force proxy dyad. In addition to Wagner Group's own technology procurement, the Kremlin directly and indirectly provided (and still provides) the Wagner Group with the military and information technology that it needs to help Russia accomplish the Kremlin's

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[53] Amos Fox, "Comparative Proxy Strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War," Comparative Strategy Vol. 42, no. 5 (2023): 605–606. DOI: 10.1080/01495933.2023.2236488

[54] Fox, "Comparative Proxy Strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War," 606.

[55] "Zelensky Says Without US Aid, Ukraine Forces Will Have to Retreat," Reuters, March 29, 2024, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/zelenskiy-says-without-us-aid-ukraine-forces-will-have-retreat-2024-03-29/.

[56] "Who Are the Syrian Democratic Forces," Economist, January 19, 2023, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2023/01/19/who-are-the-syrian-democratic-forces.

[57] Christopher Blanchard, "Syria and US Policy," *Congressional Research Service,* IF11930 (2024), available at: https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF11930#:~:text=U.S.%20Military%20Presence%3A%20Operation%20Inherent%20Resolve&text=Most%20U.S.%20forces%20are%20deployed,and%20by%20Iran%2Dbacked%20militias.

policy objectives regarding Ukraine.[58] Whereas Situation 1's typology is a transaction, this dyad is characterized in proxy war literature as a contractual proxy dyad.[59]

To this end, Russia enlisted the Wagner Group in 2014 to help create a proxy army in Ukraine's Donbas region, as well as to contribute combat power during the 2014-2015 period of the Donbas campaign.[60] More noticeable, the Wagner Group was used to devastating effect following Russia's February 2022 re-invasion of Ukraine.[61] The Wagner Group provided the nexus of combat power for battles in the Donbas, and at Bakhmut, Soledar, Avdiivka, and others.[62] Following a mutiny in the summer of 2023, Wagner Group's presence has lessened, but nonetheless, they remain a viable Russian proxy force.[63] That is, the Wagner Group continues to assist the Russian Ministry of Defense advance toward accomplishing the Kremlin and Putin's policy objectives for Ukraine.

In both the SDF and Wagner Group examples, the creation of each proxy dyad, and the subsequent diffusion of technology from the respective state to their proxy force, prove to be the causal mechanism that elongates each conflict. The SDF without US technology would likely drift back into an amorphous blend of nonstate forces operating toward their

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[58] Kimberly Marten, "Russia's Use of the Wagner Group: Definitions, Strategic Objectives, and Accountability," *Testimony before the Committee on Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security United States House of Representatives*, September 15, 2022, 9. https://docs.house.gov/meetings/GO/GO06/20220921/115113/HHRG-117-GO06-Wstate-MartenK-20220921.pdf

[59] Fox, "Comparative Proxy Strategies in the Russo-Ukrainian War," 609.

[60] Amos Fox, "The Donbas in Flames: An Operational Level Analysis of Russia's 2014-2015 Donbas Campaign," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* (2022): 5. DOI: 10.1080/09592318.2022.2111496.

[61] Andrew Bowen, "Russia's Wagner Private Military Company (PMC)," *Congressional Research Service*, IF12344, (2023): 1-2. https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IF/IF12344.

[62] Ben Dalton and Candace Rondeaux, "Rebranding the Russian Way of War," New America, February 16, 2023, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/reports/russian-way-of-war-wagner/; Sam Kiley, "Wagner Forces Claim to Have Captured Bahkmut. But Ukraine's Forces Could Still Exact a Heavy Toll," *CNN*, May 22, 2023, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.cnn.com/2023/05/22/europe/bakhmut-capture-wagner-russia-ukraine-intl/index.html; David Axe, "Russian Mercenaries' Human Wave Tactics Push Back Ukrainian Troops in Soledar," *Forbes*, January 12, 2023, accessed 6 September 2024, available at: https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2023/01/12/russian-mercenaries-human-wave-tactics-push-back-ukrainian-troops-in-soledar/; Siobhán O'Grady and Kostiantyn Khudov, "Inside Ukraine's Last Stand in Avdiivka and Its 'Road of Death'," *Washington Post*, March 2, 2024, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/03/02/ukraine-avdiivka-retreat-russia-advance/; Mark Trevelyan, Andrew Osborn and Jonathan Landay, "Russia's Mercenary Boss Deepens Fog of Ukraine War While Deflecting Blame," *Reuters*, May 5, 2023, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russias-mercenary-boss-deepens-fog-ukraine-war-while-deflecting-blame-2023-05-05/.

[63] Matt Murphy, "A Year After Mutiny, Kremlin Controls Wagner Remnants," *BBC News*, June 23, 2024, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4nn1p81q59o.

own aims. Likewise, the Wagner Group would have been far less successful on the battlefield without the diffusion of Russian arms and intelligence.

To conclude this section, technology diffusion to proxies, regardless of the type of principal-proxy dyad (i.e., Situation 1 or Situation 2), elongates the conflict. This elongation emerges because technology serves as the fuel that allows a proxy, which often comes with far more limited resources than the principal, to remain engaged in combat longer than their inherent technology capacity would otherwise allow.

TECHNOLOGY DIFFUSION TO PROXIES MEANS TECHNOLOGY DIFFUSION TO ENEMIES

Following the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom / Operation New Dawn, the US sold the Iraqi military 140 M1 Abrams tanks.[64] This was part of a larger package of foreign military sales that totaled $2.160 billion and came with a robust maintenance support package to boot.[65] The sale sought to bolster the Iraqi Army's 9th Armored Division, which was based at Camp Taji.[66]

Yet, in 2014, IS slashed through western and northern Iraq and, in the process, took possession of several of these tanks as their Iraqi crews fled in despair. Reporting varies, but fighters from IS captured between six and 10 M1 Abrams tanks after Iraqi crewmen abandoned their positions.[67] Later in Operation Inherent Resolve, Iranian-backed Shia military groups, commonly referred to as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), acquired as many as 10 M1 Abrams tanks.[68] A 2017 Department of Defense (DoD) Inspector General (IG) report to Congress stated that the PMF obtained these tanks from IS.[69] and that IS acquired these tanks following battlefield routes of the ISF. Considering

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[64] Edward Daileg, "Iraqi Army Receives Last Shipment of Abrams Tanks," US Army, September 6, 2011, available at: https://www.army.mil/article/64944/iraqi_army_receives_last_shipment_of_abrams_tanks.

[65] "Iraq – M1A1 and Upgrade to M1A1M Abrams Tanks," *Defense Security Cooperation Agency*, Transmittal no. 09-08, https://www.dsca.mil/sites/default/files/mas/09-08.pdf.

[66] Daileg, "Iraqi Army Receives Last Shipment of Abrams Tanks."

[67] Richard Sisk, "ISIS Captures Hundreds of US Vehicles and Tanks in Ramadi from Iraqis," *Military.com*, May 20, 2015, available at: https://www.military.com/daily-news/2015/05/20/isis-captures-hundreds-of-us-vehicles-and-tanks-in-ramadi-from-i.html.

[68] "Iran-Backed Militias 'Used US-Made Tanks' Fighting IS in Syria," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 10, 2018, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-iraq-syria-militia-pmf-tanks-kurds/29031768.html.

[69] "Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines, October 1, 2017 – December 31, 2018," *Inspector General Quarterly Report to the United States Congress*, 8. https://media.defense.gov/2018/Feb/02/2001872555/-1/-1/1/FY2018_LIG_OCO_OIR_Q1_12222017_2.PDF.

that Iranian military officers, often from the Islamic Republican Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force, led or combat advised the PMF, as well as other Iranian proxies in the region, it is not a stretch to assume that some of these missing tanks made their way to Iran for technological exploitation.[70] If not to transported to Iran, it would be illogical to assume that Iranian intelligence and Quds force operatives did not exploit those tanks for as much technological information as they could retrieve at any number of exploitation sites within Iraq. Further speculation might suggest that Iranian intelligence could have very well shared all or portions of that intelligence with other state-based threats like Russia, China, and North Korea. However, open-source reporting currently supports this assumption.

In the Russo-Ukrainian War, a similar incident occurred. In February 2024, Russia captured a US-provided Bradley Fighting Vehicle (Bradley).[71] Although the Bradley does not possess the same technological innovations regarding its armor and its main gun's firing computer, this is nonetheless troubling for the US. Both its tank and Bradley – foundational components of the Army's armored brigade combat team – are in the hands of threats eager to find any advantage against the US. Although a worthwhile endeavor, technology diffusion to proxies certainly comes with high costs, such as losing technological advantages to strategic competitors.

TECHNOLOGY DIFFUSION TO PROXIES MEANS INFORMATION DIFFUSION TO ENEMIES

Like the previous point, but slightly different, a state's technological diffusion to proxies can, and does, result in adroit enemies learning to overcome additional principal-provided technology. The TB2 Bayraktar, for instance, is instructive. Coming out of the 2020 Nagorno-Karabakh War, the Bayraktar gained the legend of warfighting supremacy, forever changing the character of warfare, and as many commenters emphatically (and erroneously) stated that the Bayraktar – and others like it – all but obviated tanks, armored land warfare, and large telluric military operations.[72] The war in Ukraine, however, demonstrated that the Bayraktar had limited staying power, especially when faced against an adversary with sophisticated air defense capabilities. As Michael

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[70] "Iranian Forces Obtain US M1 Abrams Tanks," *Military Watch Magazine*, February 12, 2018, accessed September 5, 2024, available at: https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/iranian-forces-obtain-u-s-m1-abrams-tanks-implications-of-the-west-s-most-advanced-battle-tank-falling-into-enemy-hands.

[71] "Russia Claims Night Time Seizure of US Bradley Fighting Vehicle from Ukraine," *Reuters*, December 6, 2023, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-claims-night-time-seizure-us-bradley-fighting-vehicle-ukraine-2023-12-06/.

[72] Stephen Witt, "The Turkish Drone that Changed the Nature of Warfare," *New Yorker*, May 9, 2022, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/05/16/the-turkish-drone-that-changed-the-nature-of-warfare; John Antal, "Top Attack: Lessons Learned from the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War," *Army Mad Scientist* (podcast), April 1, 2021, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://madsciblog.tradoc.army.mil/317-top-attack-lessons-learned-from-the-second-nagorno-karabakh-war/.

Kofman, Rob Lee, and others have noted, Russia was able to neutralize the Bayraktar within the first few weeks of the war and essentially sidelined it for the remainder of the conflict.[73] Yes, the Bayraktar was purchased by the Ukrainian military, but the principle of learning-in-contact is important when considering technology diffusion to proxies.

Kofman has also noted that many of the US's sophisticated munitions, whether fired by artillery, High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS), or any other number of delivery systems, have been neutralized by a reflective Russian military.[74] The Russians have been able to use cyber-attack, and other methods, to effectively neutralize many of the US-provided high-technology munition systems.[75] This is certainly problematic for the US because it further erodes the US's military advantages and demonstrates another negative aspect of provide highly sophisticated weaponry to battlefield proxies.

The US faced a similar situation during Operation Inherent Resolve. As we've already discussed, the US provided the ISF – its proxy against IS – with 140 M1 Abrams tanks. In October 2017, following a Kurdish independence referendum, the ISF invaded Iraqi Kurdistan to quell what the government of Iraq saw as a reemerging Kurdish independence movement.[76] During the invasion, US-provided tanks moved on Kurdish forces in and around Erbil, Karbala, and other sites.[77] Surprising to those paying attention, Kurdish forces unleashed Chinese made anti-tank rockets against US-supplied Iraqi M1 Abrams tanks.[78] Much of the information about how this anti-tank system got into the hands of Kurdish forces remains veiled in secrecy. Still, this situation – and any

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[73] Michael Kofman, "Fresh Impressions from the Frontlines in Ukraine," *Russian Contingency with Michael Kofman* (podcast), July 9, 2024, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://warontherocks.com/premium/therussiacontingency/.

[74] Michael Kofman, "Michael Kofman on Attrition, Doodling Range Rings, and Magical Thinking in Modern War," *Revolution in Military Affairs* (podcast), April 1, 2024, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://shows.acast.com/650105b75a8d440011ecd53c/6608b8507aefcb00164b03d5.

[75] Michael Kofman, "Michael Kofman on Attrition, Doodling Range Rings, and Magical Thinking in Modern War."

[76] David Zucchino, "Iraqi Forces Sweep Into Kirkuk, Checking Kurdish Independence Drive," *New York Times*, October 16, 2017, accessed September 62024, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/16/world/middleeast/kirkuk-iraq-kurds.html.

[77] Shawn Snow, "US Abrams Tanks Sway the Battle in Kirkuk," *Army Times*, October19, 2017, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://www.armytimes.com/flashpoints/2017/10/19/us-abrams-tanks-sway-the-battle-in-kirkuk/; David Axe, "Made in America, But Lost in Iraq," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2018, accessed September 6, 2024, available at: https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/02/u-s-made-tanks-that-fell-into-militia-hands-in-iraq-sparks-assistance-standoff/.

[78] Robert Beckhusen, "Did a Chinese-Made Anti-Tank Missile Kill America's Best Tank in Battle?" *National Interest*, October 25, 2017, accessed on September 6, 2024, available at: https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/did-chinese-made-anti-tank-missile-kill-americas-best-tank-22894.

others that might have occurred but not been reported – are an example of US adversaries field-testing their weapon systems against US technology.

The lesson from US proxy strategies in Ukraine and Iraq illustrates that technology diffusion to proxies can, and does, allow adversaries to field-test technology, identify practical methods to overcome US technology, and do so without having to directly confront the US military. Thus, technology diffusion to proxies provides a useful means for principal states to avoid deploying their land forces at scale; doing so often results in competing state actors identifying technology, means, and methods for neutralizing US technological asymmetry.

IMPLICATIONS

Proxy strategies are often seemingly advantageous for states seeking to exploit international affairs in third-party states where the ability to achieve policy goals against a strategic adversary is present. The US's reliance on Ukrainian and Iraqi land forces as substitutes for their own land forces in the Russo-Ukrainian War and the war against IS, respectively, are excellent examples of this situation. Nonetheless, proxy strategies come with considerable costs. Most scholarship on the subject places the costs on losses of control over a proxy, denying a proxy agency over their self-interest, and similar subjects. Those are worthy considerations, but they provide an incomplete picture of the challenges of proxy strategy.

Principal actors seeking to use proxy strategies based on the diffusion of technology to the proxy face three basic risks. First, the principal must appreciate that any technology used on the battlefield will likely fall into an enemy's hands. Thus, strategic competitors can quickly erode a principal's asymmetric battlefield advantages by exploiting any captured weapon systems and other warfighting equipment. Second, the principal must appreciate that enemies on the battlefield will test their warfighting capabilities against the principal-supplied technology and identify how to defeat the principal's technology. This does not mean an enemy will identify how to defeat all of the principal's weapons systems, but they will figure out how to neutralize many new technological innovations. This cycle, in turn, creates significant challenges for the principal because they must subsequently identify how to defeat the enemy's new battlefield strategies while also developing new battlefield technology and employment methods. In short, the diffusion of technology to proxies creates a challenge-response cycle that the principal must always stay ahead of if they hope to retain asymmetric strategic and tactical advantages in armed conflict. Third, and finally, the diffusion of technology to proxies extends that conflict in time and space. Technological support to proxy forces allows them to remain engaged in a conflict longer than they would without external support. While this support might come with goodwill at heart, the technology diffusion to proxies causes the expansion of death, destruction, civilian harm, and collateral damage. This consideration, perhaps most of all, is what states must consider.

Principals can mitigate the challenges outlined herein in a few ways. Prevention is the first way. Avoiding proxy strategies altogether is the best way to prevent proxy-related

conflict elongation, prevent strategic adversaries from acquiring one's equipment, and avoid fueling the subsequent adaptation to one's own technology.

Second, preparation can help alleviate these challenges. Preparation can come in the form of integrating mitigation measures into one's proxy strategies. Considering that all wars are characterized by unique dynamics, one should, however, shy away from universal guidance for mitigating these challenges. The factors contributing to conflict delegation in one conflict might not be present in a similar conflict or may even exacerbate elongation.

Third, principals can mitigate the challenges of technology diffusion to proxies through agency cost offset. Agency cost is the entropic effect of a principal offloading combat operations to a proxy. This typically materializes as a proxy underdelivering on the principal's desired outcomes and thus creating additional requirements and unintended consequences for the principal. When unprepared, principals must react to the agency's cost, often in the heat of a moment, to overcome proxy suboptimization. Principals must know going into a proxy strategy that agency costs will occur. Combat advisors, early, often, and everywhere, are perhaps the best way to help insulate oneself from the potential negative impacts of technology diffusion to proxy forces.

Fourth and most importantly, education and awareness are the most meaningful strategies for mitigating the ill effects of technology diffusion to proxies. Understanding and appreciating proxy typologies and the associated range of principal-proxy dyads is salient for those seeking to use proxy strategy. The wrong proxy for a job will result in significant agency costs and utterly complicate the principal's ability to accomplish his goals. The right proxy for the right job, on the other hand, will result in low agency costs and a principal being able to more rapidly achieve their strategic goals. Status quo – assuming all proxies are the same, that there is no diversity among principal-proxy dyads, and seeing all proxy employment strategies as the same – is the surest way to continue floundering in wars in which proxy strategies are employed.

In conclusion, technology diffusion to proxies is inevitable in a state's use of a proxy strategy. Yet, states must weigh the cost of proxy intervention against the nearly inevitable implications of that strategy. Moreover, states must not assume that a proxy strategy is inherently "safer" for them than direct, conventional intervention. Though we cannot rewind a conflict and replay it with principal forces fighting instead of proxy forces, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that direct intervention yields more decisive results, in a quicker time.

Chapter 4 – One Man's Proxy is Another Man's Freedom Fighter: Representations of Anti-U.S. Iraqi Militias in the Virtual Space

Emily Stranger

ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates how Iranian media outlets and militia virtual platforms collectively construct narratives that create, propagate, and reinforce the objectives of an Iran-supported Axis of Resistance, which challenges Western narratives about Iranian proxy forces. The study analyzes how three Iranian newspapers, and two U.S. newspapers reported attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East following the Hamas-led attack on Israel, Operation al-Aqsa Flood, on October 7, 2023. While U.S. media consistently frames the militias involved in the attacks as Iranian-sponsored proxies, Iranian sources portray them as autonomous Iraqi actors resisting U.S. aggression in support of Palestinians. For an additional perspective, the website of Kat'aib Hezbollah is explored to illustrate that, despite its ideological ties to Iran, the group still maintains that it is an Iraqi defense force. The results highlight how both state and non-state actors utilize digital platforms to reshape public perceptions of Principal-Client relationships.

On October 7, 2023, Hamas launched Operation al-Aqsa Flood into southern Israel, killing and abducting hundreds of Israeli soldiers and civilians. As a result, Israel launched a retaliatory military campaign into Gaza that, according to experts interviewed by the *Associated Press*, is one of the "deadliest and most destructive in recent history."[79] Between October 7, 2023 and May 1, 2024, Uppsala University's Uppsala Conflict Data

[79] Jeffrey Frankel, "Israeli Military Campaign in Gaza among Deadliest in History, Experts Say," AP News, January 11, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/israel-gaza-bombs-destruction-death-toll-scope-419488c511f83c85baea22458472a796.

Program (UCDP) identified over 30,000 deaths.[80] At the time of the writing of this article in October 2024, many news outlets estimated civilian casualties exceeding 40,000.[81] The conflict has been devastating to both sides and has plunged the Middle East region into turmoil.

In retribution for U.S. support for Israel, groups identified in the U.S. press as being Iran-sponsored "proxy" militias launched over 160 drone, missile, and rocket attacks at various U.S. bases throughout Syria, Iraq, and Jordan.[82] The attacks culminated on January 28, 2024, when an unmanned aerial drone killed three U.S. service members at Tower 22, a U.S. military outpost located in northeast Jordan. In response, the U.S. subsequently bombed facilities allegedly used by Iranian forces and Iranian militias on February 3, 2024.[83]

The reporting of this unprecedented and collective response from militias identified as "Iranian proxies" by U.S. media outlets provides a unique opportunity to explore how the Iranian regime identifies and reports on the activities of these groups through state-controlled publishing. In U.S. sources, these "proxy" organizations are often described as Iranian puppets that receive financial and military support from Iran with little to no agency; they are rarely depicted as autonomous actors with their own unique objectives and authority. Understanding how the Iranian regime identifies these actors in media reports is vital for comprehending how civilian populations in the region perceive the narrative. Whereas U.S. sources consistently refer to them as "proxies," Iranian sources present a different perspective. Analyzing Iranian reports of militia attacks post-Al-Aqsa Flood aids in this exploration.

In addition, exploring how these "proxy" groups portray themselves online illuminates how non-state actors utilize digital platforms to reshape public perceptions of Principal-Client relationships. It is argued here that Iranian media outlets and militia social media

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[80] Sofia Gunnarsson, "Mapping the Death Toll in Gaza," *Uppsala University*, June 5, 2024. Accessed October 17, 2024, https://www.uu.se/en/news/2024/2024-06-05-mapping-the-death-toll-in-gaza.

[81] Al Arabiya News, October 17, 2024, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/10/17/health-ministry-in-gaza-says-war-death-toll-at-42-438; AFP, "Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza Says War Death Toll at 42, 409," *Barron's,* October 16, 20924, https://www.barrons.com/news/health-ministry-in-hamas-run-gaza-says-war-death-toll-at-42-409-96ebdbcf; Sara Dorn, "Why the Israel-Hamas War Death Toll is Uncertain—1 Year After Start of War, *Forbes,* October 6, 2024, https://www.forbes.com/sites/saradorn/2024/10/06/why-the-israel-hamas-war-death-toll-is-uncertain-1-year-after-start-of-war/.

[82] Leo Sands, "Why Pro-Iran Militias Are Attacking U.S. Troops in Iraq, Jordan, Syria," *The Washington Post*, January 29, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/01/29/us-troops-jordan-iraq-militias/.

[83] Mohammed Hassan, "US Response to Tower 22 Attack in Jordan: Less Intense, More Restrained than Anticipated," *Middle East Institute*, February 9, 2024, https://www.mei.edu/publications/us-response-tower-22-attack-jordan-less-intense-more-restrained-anticipated.

accounts form a dyadic messaging network that depicts Iranian proxies as autonomous Iraqi actors with both military and political influence within Iraq. While these organizations may publicly assert their support for Iran and collectively strive for the liberation of Palestine, their primary focus remains on serving their own national interests. This analysis holds significance for U.S. officials because competing narratives in the virtual space are crucial, especially when vying for "hearts and minds" against major regional adversaries.

A NOTE ON TRANSLATIONS AND TRANSLITERATIONS

Every effort was made to adhere to a standard transliteration for Arabic and Persian sources. For the most part, the IJMES transliteration system was utilized, except for some long vowels; for example, the researcher transliterated "ا" both as "aa" within the text and ā in several charts. In addition, transliterations by outside sources were not changed to stay true to the source. For example, "Hezbollah" is also spelled "Hizbollah," and this difference in spelling occurs in several passages. The researcher also chose only to include the English translations of texts explored during this project. However, readers of Arabic and/or Persian are encouraged to read the cited texts in their original language.

MEDIA PORTRAYALS OF AL-AQSA FLOOD ATTACKS IN IRANIAN AND U.S. MEDIA SOURCES

For a chapter in the author's dissertation, three major Iranian newspapers and two major American newspapers were analyzed to investigate how significant dates of attacks against U.S. forces—from the Al-Aqsa operation on October 7 to the Tower 22 attack on January 28—were reported. The U.S. news sources were included to contrast the reporting of events from the American perspective, focusing on the language used to define the actors involved in the attacks.

In addition, articles were reviewed in which Iranian forces, either directly or indirectly, were involved in fighting the Islamic State (ISIL)[84], Syrian rebels, and other armed organizations identified as being adversarial to Iran and Iranian allies. This offered a comparative perspective to examine whether American and Iranian press sources reported Iran's involvement in these offensives differently than in the post-October 7 attacks against U.S. troops. Three specific events where an Iranian presence was reported in U.S. and/or Iranian sources were identified: The Liberation of Mosul, The Liberation of Aleppo, and Operation Khan Tuman.

[84] I refer to the Islamic State throughout this article by the acronym ISIL. When the acronym ISIS is utilized, it is a direct quotation from the referenced source.

METHODOLOGY

First, three major Iranian newspapers and two major American newspapers were selected for this study. The criteria were based on three factors: the daily circulation of each newspaper, its potential to reach the largest readership, and the availability of an online edition that allows for searching articles by dates and keywords. Several articles published by Iranian and non-Iranian resources regarding circulation and size of readership were utilized to determine which newspapers were most popular within Iran. According *to Media Landscapes*, a project created by the European Journalism Centre (EJC) in partnership with the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCW), there are "no official figures on circulation" for the approximate 100 newspapers published daily in Iran.[85] Despite this lack of official data, Media Landscapes claims that *Hamshahri* and *Jām Jam* are among the best-selling newspapers, with an estimated circulation of around 50,000 copies each day[86]

A 2018 article by the Iranian Students' News Agency lists the three top-circulating newspapers in Iran as *Hamshahri* with 207,200 copies, *Iran* with 72,240, and *Jām Jam* with 33,600. Furthermore, a January 25, 2023, article authored by the Iranian think tank Namafar also identifies *Hamshahri*, *Iran*, and *Jām Jam* as the leading newspapers in Iran.[87]

Unfortunately, *Iran*'s online search function did not work despite multiple attempts at multiple intervals; the website also did not have the option to filter articles by date, complicating the research of specific events. Therefore, the English version of *IRNA* was chosen, as it publishes *Iran Newspaper* and features an advanced search option. The two American news sources included in this study were *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, both identified by Pew Research Center as being two of the highest-circulating papers in the U.S.[88] A student account was utilized to access these American sources, while all Iranian newspapers were free to access.

Second, significant dates of attacks against U.S. forces from October 7 until January 28 were identified. The news outlet *Reuters* provided a timeline of major attacks against U.S. forces in a January 28, 2024, article about the Tower 22 attack, which was used as a reference point. Due to the considerable number of attacks that occurred between

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[85] *Media Landscapes*, "Iran." Accessed March 3, 2024, https://medialandscapes.org/country/iran/media/print.

[86] See note 7 above.

[87] آمار مقایسه‌ای روزنامه‌های پر تیراژ در کشور. [Comparative statistics of newspapers with high circulation in the country]. Namafar.ir. Accessed March 1, 2024. https://namafar.ir/stats/.

[88] Pew Research Center, *Newspapers Fact Sheet*, 2023. https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/fact-sheet/newspapers/.

October 2023 and late January 2024,[89] only attacks that reported injuries or casualties were observed. These attacks occurred: October 18, 19, and 26 of 2023; November 17 of 2023; December 25 of 2023; and January 20 and 28 of 2024**.** According to *Reuters*[90] (see Table 1).

Table 1:

Attacks on U.S. forces between October 7, 2023 until January 28, 2024 as reported by Reuters

DATE OF ATTACK	**BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF ATTACK**
October 18, 2023	U.S. forces are targeted by two separate drone attacks in Iraq. Minor injuries and damaged equipment reported.
October 19, 2023	Two drones target U.S. forces in Syria causing minor injuries. Two U.S. bases in Iraq also targeted by drones and rockets; no injuries reported.
October 26, 2023	A drone launched by an "Iran-backed militia" at a U.S. "air base" results in service member suffering a concussion. The timeline did not provide a location of the attack.
November 17, 2023	Drone attacks reported in Iraq and Syria; A service member in Syria suffers minor injuries.
December 25, 2023	A drone attack in Iraq causes three U.S. injuries, one reported critically wounded.
January 20, 2024	An air base in Iraq is attacked by ballistic missiles and rockets, resulting in four service members suffering traumatic brain injuries.
January 28, 2024	Three U.S. troops were killed and dozens wounded when a drone hit Tower 22, a military base in Jordan.

[89] In a report published by the Institute for the Study of War on January 28, 2024, militias had conducted over 170 attacks since October 2023. See: https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/iran-update-january-28-2024

[90] "Iran-Backed Attacks on US Troops in the Middle East since Oct. 7," *Reuters*, January 28, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-backed-attacks-us-troops-middle-east-since-oct-7-2024-01-28/.

Stories were filtered utilizing a specific timeframe, starting from the date of the first significant attack on October 18 and ending on January 28, 2024. To locate articles related to the specific attacks, identical English terms and their Persian translations were entered into the search function of the American and Iranian sources. Words were chosen that were general and would likely return the most matches related to the event. Given the use of drones, rockets, and ballistic attacks, the simple term "attack" was used to yield more results in both sources. Also included were the terms "American base" and "U.S. military base," as the terms "American" and "U.S." within the phrases, coupled with the word "attack", refined the search to focus specifically on events where U.S. personnel were involved:

حمله	hamleh	Attack
پایگاه آمریکایی	Pāyigāh-ye Āmrikāy-e	American base
پایگاه ارتش آمریکا	Pāyigāh-ye Ārtesh-e Āmrikā	U.S. military base

The terms and dates were input into each news media website's search function to identify articles relevant to the research project. Both *Hamshahri* and *Jām Jam* utilize the Jalaali calendar, so the Gregorian dates were converted accordingly. *IRNA English*, despite being published in Iran, uses the Gregorian calendar. While the primary focus was on reports where U.S. personnel were injured or killed, articles about additional attacks were also noted if they fell within the time window. This was important, as several incidents were reported in Iranian sources outside the dates listed by *Reuters*.

Third, dates and search terms were identified for the three operations against ISIL, Syrian rebels, and other groups/organizations considered adversarial to Iran and its allies. A brief description of each event, the timeframe for article searches, and the relevant search terms are included here. To maximize search results, the phrases "Operation of" and "Liberation of" were paired with the specific location of each to generate as many matches as possible.

DESCRIPTIONS OF CONFLICTS WERE IRANIAN FORCES WERE PRESENT

The Battle of Mosul: The Battle of Mosul was not one single event but an approximately nine-month operation to oust ISIL fighters from the city of Mosul in 2016 - 2017. The oppositional forces included various international coalitions that both advised and supported Iraqi security forces. Included in this "patchwork" of anti-ISIL forces, according to West Point's Modern War Institute (MWI), were:

> …forty thousand fighters from the Kurdish Regional Government's Peshmerga; Kurdistan Workers' Party guerrillas; various Turkmen, Christian, Sunni and Shi'a militias; and Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve's (CJTF-OIR) sixty Western nations with 500 personnel in direct support and thousands of troops in indirect support led by the United States.[91]

MWI writes that the Battle of Mosul began on October 16, 2016, and ended on July 20, 2017.[92] The search was narrowed to the timeframe of August 1, 2016, to July 31, 2017. August was selected as the starting point rather than October due to a *Long War Journal* report that Qassim Soleimani, Iran's notorious general, was present in Iraq in August and would play "…a major role in the upcoming operations to take the city of Mosul from the Islamic State."[93] The search terms used were:

آزادسازی موصل	Āzādsāzi-ye Mōzūl	Liberation of Mosul
عملیات موصل	Ameliyāt-e Mōzūl	Mosul Operation

Operation Dawn of Victory (Liberation of Aleppo/Aleppo Offensive: After a four-and-a-half-year struggle by Syrian government forces to regain control of Aleppo, a rapid offensive in November and December of 2016 enabled the government to secure the city. This was achieved with the assistance of Russian airstrikes and militia forces supported by Iran.[94] Articles published between November 1, 2016, and December 31,

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[91] John Spencer, and John Geroux, "Urban Warfare Project Case Study #2: Battle of Mosul," *Modern War Institute*, September 15, 2021, https://mwi.westpoint.edu/urban-warfare-project-case-study-2-battle-of-mosul/.

[92] Exact dates for the beginning and end of the battle vary according to different sources, although American sources reviewed for this project placed the dates within the October 2016-July 2017 timeline. For example, see U.S. Department of Defense press release "Iraqi Forces Begin Battle for Mosul" (https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/975239/iraqi-forces-begin-battle-for-mosul/); ABC News "Iraq Announces Offensive on Mosul" (https://abcnews.go.com/International/iraq-announces-offensive-mosul/story?id=42846848); CNN World "ISIL in the crosshairs: Battle for Mosul begins" (https://www.cnn.com/2016/10/16/middleeast/mosul-ISIL-operation-begins-iraq/index.html).

[93] Amir Toumaj, "Qassem Soleimani to Play 'Major Role' in Mosul Operations," *FDD's Long War Journal*, August 12, 2016, https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2016/08/qassem-soleimani-to-play-major-role-in-mosul-operations.php.

[94] Seth G. Jones, Joseph S. Bermudez Jr, and Nicholas Harrington, "Dangerous Liaisons: Russian Cooperation with Iran in Syria," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 16, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/dangerous-liaisons-russian-cooperation-iran-syria; Seth Jones, "Russia's Battlefield Success in Syria: Will it Be a Pyrrhic Victory,?" *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 9 (October 2019), https://ctc.westpoint.edu/russias-battlefield-success-syria-will-pyrrhic-victory/.

2016, were included in this search. The terms utilized were “Liberation of Aleppo” and “Aleppo Operation”:

آزادسازی حلب	Āzādsāzi-ye Haleb	Liberation of Aleppo
عملیات حلب	Ameliyāt-e Haleb	Aleppo Operation

Operation Khan Tuman: In May 2016, Syrian rebels managed to capture and control the village of Khan Tuman, a strategically important location outside of Aleppo. According to *Critical Threats*, Jabhat al-Nusra and allied groups “overran Iranian positions… leading to scores of casualties among IRGC troops and proxy militia forces.”[95] Initially, the time window for the search was based on the *Critical Threats* report of the event, extending from April 1 to May 31, 2016.[96] Because the event was specific to one small village, only the phrase “Operation Khan Tuman” was utilized in both Persian and English:

عملیات خان طومان	Ameliyāt-e Khān Tōmān	Operation Khan Tuman[97]

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

First, in the articles pertaining to the post-October 7 attacks on U.S. forces, the American sources almost always directly link the militias accused of the attacks, specifically the Islamic Resistance of Iraq and its affiliates, back to Iran. The term “proxy” was used frequently to describe the relationship between U.S. adversaries and Iran. For example, a *New York Times* article published on November 21, several days after a drone attack in Syria on November 17 injured a U.S. service member, reported that U.S. airstrikes targeted “two facilities used by Iranian proxies that had been targeting American and coalition troops.” The article specifically mentions that the U.S. targeted an operations

[95] Paul Bucala, “What the Khan Tuman Defeat Means for Iran,” *Critical Threats*, May 12, 2016, https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/what-the-khan-tuman-defeat-means-for-iran.

[96] The Critical Threats dates specifically began on April 2 and ended on May 6.

[97] I searched both “Khan Tuman” and “Khan Toman” to screen for transliteration variants in the American sources.

center in Baghdad used by "Kata'ib Hezbollah, a militia group in Iraq that is considered a proxy of Iran."[98]

Another example is a *Wall Street Journal* opinion piece published on December 26, which is critical of President Joe Biden's administration's non-confrontational approach to the attacks on U.S. forces. The piece directly implicates Iran in every attack, beginning with the first sentence: "It was going to happen sooner or later: American service members would be seriously hurt as Iran-backed militias conduct lethal target practice against U.S. bases in the Middle East." Throughout the article, the attackers are referred to as "Iranian proxies," "Shiite militias," "Iranian front groups," and "proxy dogs." The editorial board urges the Biden administration to restore deterrence.[99] Additionally, the American sources also allege that "Iranian-back[ed] militias (sic)" were involved in the Liberation of Mosul, the Liberation of Aleppo, and Operation Khan Tuman. The article reports that these Iranian-backed militias were engaged in kinetic military action.

This differs significantly from reports published in the Iranian sources. In coverage of attacks on U.S. forces post-October 7, there is never a connection made between Iran and the attacks, nor is there mention of Iranian support for the attackers. Several articles feature Iranian officials explicitly denying that Iran was complicit in the attacks. For example, Iranian news outlet *Hamshahri* published an article about an attack on November 17, stating that the Islamic Resistance of Iraq announced in a statement that it had targeted the al-Harir base with a drone."[100] In an article published two days later, on November 19, *Hamshahri* provided an overview of attacks by "various resistance groups in the region in support of the Palestinian people," but argued that Iran, despite accusations by U.S. authorities, does not control the activities of the groups. According to the article:

> … we have seen American authorities and media point the finger of accusation at Tehran in recent days and try to insinuate that the resistance groups are receiving orders from Tehran to attack American targets. Meanwhile, the Iranian authorities have repeatedly emphasized in recent days that despite supporting the resistance groups, they do not assign tasks to any of them, and that attacks on American targets are their own decision, with the aim of supporting the oppressed people of

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[98] Helene Cooper, "U.S. Strikes Iranian-Linked Facilities in Iraq." The New York Times, November 21, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2023/11/21/world/middleeast/us-strike-iraq-iran.html.

[99] The Editorial Board, "Biden Endangers U.S. Troops," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 26, 2023, https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-injured-iraq-iran-houthis-strike-biden-administration-4773fa27.

[100] Hamshahrionline, "The US Military Base in Iraqi Kurdistan Was Targeted by a Drone Attack," *Hamshahrionline*, November 17, 2023. https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/808046/ پایگاه-نظامی-آمریکا-در-کردستان-عراق-هدف-حمله-پهپادی-قرار-گرفت.

Gaza and preventing the continuation of the crimes of the Zionist regime and its main supporter, America.[101]

The Iranian articles consistently attribute the attacks to the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, often quoting accountability statements released by the resistance or member militias. The Iranian sources also repeatedly claim that the Iraqi resistance is attacking Americans due to U.S. support of Israel in the Gaza conflict.

This perspective shifts, however, in Iranian reports of the other operations, where ISIL and other insurgent groups are the enemy. In the Liberation of Mosul and Liberation of Aleppo, Iran is described as having an advisory role. However, some Iranian sources reported that the Fatemiyoun brigade, an Iranian-sponsored militia composed of Afghan fighters, and Qassim Soleimani, the famed Iranian general who was killed in January 2020 by a U.S. air strike, helped drive ISIL from the Iraqi-Syrian border.[102] In reporting on the Khan Tuman operation, there is explicit description of Iranian military involvement, both in an advisory and infantry capacity. An article published in *Jam* on May 3, 2016, and "Exclusive News" reported that the "Iranian Green Berets" of the Iranian 65th Special Forces Brigade helped the Syrian army defeat terrorists in the southern suburbs of Khan Tuman.[103]

Second, there is a distinct difference in the terminology used by U.S. and Iranian sources to describe various actors throughout the articles. In reporting attacks on U.S. troops post-October 7, the U.S. sources consistently use phrasing that implicates Iran in the attacks, such as "Iranian proxy" or "Iranian-aligned militia." The Iranian sources, however, refer to the attackers only by their Arabic names and report the events as neutral observers.

In sum, the Iranian media, which is overseen by the State, is careful in how it publishes news articles about attacks on U.S. forces. Articles clearly implicate outside actors who are allegedly operating autonomously when there are attacks on U.S. troops. This narrative changes, however, when the adversary is ISIL or other non-U.S. Iranian

[101] Hamshahrionline, "4 American Scenarios to Deal with Iran and Resistance Groups," *Hamshahrionline*, November 19, 2023, https://www.hamshahrionline.ir/news/808637/ سناریوی-آمریکایی-برای-مقابله-با-ایران-و--۴ گروه-های-مقاومت.

[102] Jamejamonline, "Fatemiyoun Army with Sardar Soleimani Arrived at the Border of Iraq and Syria + Photo," *Jamejamonline*, June 12, 2017. https://jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/1040720/ لشکر-فاطمیون-با-سردار-سلیمانی-به-مرز-عراق-و-سوریه-رسید-عکس.

[103] Jamejamonline. "How Did the Iranian Green Berets Ground the 'Al-Nusra' Front?" *Jamejamonline*, May 3, 2016, https://jamejamonline.ir/fa/news/901350/ سبز های-ایرانی-چگونه-جبهه-النصره-را-کلاه%E2%80%8Cگیر-کردند%E2%80%8Cزمین.

adversaries. Iranian sources are open about Iranian support and manpower when the conflict involves ISIL or other "Takfiri[104] terrorists."

MILITIA MESSAGING ON SOCIAL MEDIA: REBELS WITH A CAUSE

For additional perspective, examining the narrative that the militias themselves propagate via the internet is valuable. The degree to which these groups publicly acknowledge or deny ties to Iran plays a crucial role in their efforts to maintain the appearance of autonomy. To explore this, an additional analysis was conducted of how several militias identified in attacks against American forces, particularly in the post-Al Aqsa Flood period, present themselves through their websites and the social media platform *Telegram*. These groups include the Islamic Resistance of Iraq, Harakat Hezbollah al-Nujaba, Kataib Seyyed al-Shahada, Kata'ib Hezbollah, Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq, Tashkil Al-Varithin, Fatemiyoun Brigade, and Zeinabiyoun Brigade.

Kat'aib Hezbollah is included as a single case study to illustrate how these groups formulate their messages. The group has a lengthy history of violently targeting U.S. interests in the region. According to the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), Kata'ib Hezbollah presents a high threat to U.S. interests in Iraq and Syria, where it has a history of conducting attacks. The NCTC identified 2007 as the year the group was founded and writes that Kata'ib Hezbollah "seeks to establish an Iran-aligned government in Iraq, expel U.S. and coalition forces from the country, and advance Iranian interests throughout the Middle East."[105] On June 24, 2009, the U.S. designated the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization "responsible for numerous terrorist acts against Iraqi, U.S., and other targets in Iraq since 2007."[106]

Unlike several other groups with an active *Telegram* presence, Kata'ib Hezballah appears to communicate strongly through its website. It has eight navigation tabs as follows: *About the Battalions, News, Library, Graveyard of Martyrs, Resistance Writings, Official Jihadi Operations*, and a *Contact Us* link.[107] A brief synthesis of information published across these sections reveals the organization's public stance towards Iran and the lens through which it views itself.

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[104] An Arabic word used by some Muslim extremist groups to declare APOSTASY.

[105] Kata'ib Hizballah (KH). National Counterterrorism Center Counterterrorism Guide. June 2024. Accessed November 30, 2024. https://www.dni.gov/nctc/ftos/kh_fto.html.

[106] Bureau of Public Affairs, Office of the Spokesman, "Designation of Kata'ib Hizballah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization," *U.S. Department of State*, July 2, 2009. Accessed November 30, 2024. https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2009/july/125582.htm.

[107] There is also a "home" tab, but I have left it out of the summary due to its utilization as a function rather than content.

The section *About the Battalions* has a drop-down menu and is organized into two additional categories: *Who We Are* and *Institutions*. In the *Who We Are* section, the group defines itself as an "Islamic resistance jihadist organization" that believes in the principles of "authentic Muhammadan Islam."[108] It has been argued that the phrase "Muhammadan Islam" was utilized by the leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to politicize Islam by drawing a contrast between "Muhammadan Islam" and "American Islam."[109] This explicit reference to Khomeinist ideology suggests that Kata'ib Hezbollah subscribes to Iran's resistance ideology. In addition, the website authors write:

We believe that the Guardianship of the Jurist is the best way to achieve the sovereignty of Islam in the time of occultation, and the great achievement of establishing the Islamic Republic in Iran is only a basic stage in preparing for the state of divine justice and a form of the sovereignty of Islam and the Guardianship of the Jurist.[110]

Since the concept of the Guardian of the Jurorist also originated with Khomeini, this quote about the Guardian of the Jurorist, in conjunction with the concept of Muhammadan Islam, links Kata'ib Hezbollah with Iran's resistance ideology.

However, Kata'ib Hezbollah has also published sub-goals that correspond to Iraq's specific circumstances, rooted in ongoing resistance against the Baathist regime, American occupation, and the fight against ISIL. There are five goals listed; Goal 3 claims that the Brigades are dedicated to "Preserving the unity of Iraq, defending its rights, and emphasizing the Islamic nature of its cultural identity."[111] Thus, the group publicly states that despite its adoption of Iranian resistance ideology, it still believes in Iraq's autonomy as an Islamic state.

Also included in the tab "About the Battalions" is a page titled "Institutions," which lists five organizations affiliated with the group, along with their individual logos and space for a description of each; two institutions do not have a description, once again suggesting that the website is either not being updated or was never fully completed. The first institution listed is the Elite Academic Foundation. The logo contains the English acronym for "Nongovernmental organization" (N.G.O.) and is the only logo with English text, perhaps to reassure English-speaking readers that Kata'ib Hezbollah goes beyond being simply an armed militia (see Figure 2):

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[108] "About the Battalion," Kataib Hezbollah, 2024. Accessed September 28, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/about.

[109] See the Al-Abdal.co article "Authentic Muhammadan Islam: The Origin of the name, its validity, and the problems with it," https://abdal.co/12641/الإسلام-المحمدي-الأصيل-منشأ-التسمية-و/.

[110] "About the Battalion."

[111] "About the Battalion."

Figure 2:

Kata'ib Hezbollah institution that contains the English acronym "N.G.O."[112]

According to the description of Elite Academic Foundation, its primary purpose is to work with students and teachers at all levels, especially in the universities. Its activities include organizing conferences, arranging for students to visit government and civil society organizations, organizing professional workshops, and establishing scout camps. The description begins by claiming that it is needed because Iraqi youth "…are under the influence of dangerous Western culture that wants to divert them from their correct path, destroy their high moral values, and sow alternative concepts of religion that are in line with Western civilization…"[113] The next institution listed, Zainabiyat Foundation, focuses on women empowerment according to Islam by organizing courses, seminars, and conferences.[114] The Al-Hadafi Foundation[115] focuses on propagating Islamic thought, and the last two institutions listed, The Authority of Mosques and Husseiniya[116] and the Clear Paths Foundation,[117] provide no descriptions. The presence of these institutions signals that Kata'ib Hezbollah is an organization that invests in Iraqi civil society.

The *News* section appeared to be updated weekly. When it was accessed on June 7, 2024, an article was posted that day; the previous four articles on display were posted on May 31, May 24, May 20, and May 17, so it appears that news articles were posted at least once weekly. The first news post had a publication date of March 22, 2010. The articles cover a

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[112] "Elite Academic Foundation Logo," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute.

[113] "Elite Academic Foundation: About the Institution," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 11, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute/2710.

[114] "Zainabiyat Foundation: About the Institution," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 11, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute/2710.

[115] "Al-Hadafi Foundation: About the Institution," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 11, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute/2710.

[116] "The Authority of Mosques and Husseiniyas," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 11, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute/2710.

[117] "Clear Paths Foundation," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 11, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/institute/2710.

range of topics, mainly focusing on the deaths of Kata'ib Hezbollah group members or information about attacks on another axis of resistance groups, such as the Houthis. Some articles provide an author or source, while others do not. A review and synthesis of the most recently published articles, starting with the one posted on June 7, illustrates the information the group deems important for website viewers.

The article, published on June 7, is titled 'Hezbollah Brigades on the Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Imam Al-Jawad: Everything that Contributes to Strengthening the Zionist-American Killing Machine Against the Innocent People in Gaza Should Be Boycotted.' The author is listed as the Kata'ib Hezbollah Council of Cultural Mobilization. Imam Al-Jawad, formally known as Muhammad ibn Ali al-Jawad, is the 9th Imam according to Twelver Shi'ism. The article states that Imam Al-Jawad boycotted his oppressors and did not submit to the Abbasid government. The article draws a parallel between Al-Jawad's resistance to the Abbasid government and the Israeli-Gaza war, writing:

The systematic killing of children, women and the elderly that the Palestinian people are exposed to today by the American-backed Zionist entity requires the Islamic nation to adopt the approach of boycotting the oppressors and their goods and everything that contributes to strengthening the Zionist-American killing machine against the innocents in Gaza.[118]

The two ensuing articles mention Iran. The article, published May 20, 2024, commiserates with Iran over the deaths of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and other top Iranian officials who were killed in a helicopter crash in northern Iran the previous day. The title of the article is "Kata'ib Hezbollah Offers Condolences for the Tragedy of the Martyrdom of Seyyed Raisi and His Companions and Confirms That Iran is Paying the Price for Its Support for the Nations Against Global Arrogance." The group (there is no author listed) "extends its condolences to Imam Al-Hujjah (peace be upon him),[119] the Leader, Seyyed Ali Khamenei, our great advisors, the brothers in the Revolutionary Guards, and the brotherly Iranian people, for the tragedy."[120] Note here the use of the words "advisors," "brother," and "brotherly" when describing Iranian leadership and citizens. The article further praises Iran for enduring America's sanctions and emphasizes that it is the price Iran is paying for its "support of vulnerable peoples" being targeted by "global arrogance." Important to note here is that Iranian news sources later

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[118] Kataib Hezbollah Council of Cultural Mobilization. "On the Anniversary of the Martyrdom of Imam Al-Jawad. Hezbollah Brigades: Everything That Contributes to Strengthening the Zionist-American Killing Machine against Innocent People in Gaza Should Be Boycotted." *Kataib Hezbollah*, June 7, 2024. Accessed June 7, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/news/3382.

[119] Another name for the Mahdi.

[120] "Kataib Hezbollah Offers Condolences for the Tragedy of the Martyrdom of Seyyed Raisi and His Companions and Confirms: Iran Is Paying the Price for Its Support for the Nations against Global Arrogance," *Kataib Hezbollah*, May 20, 2024. Accessed June 10, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/news/3378.

publicly announced that an internal probe of the incident found that the crash was caused by bad weather and not nefarious actors.[121]

The article, published March 19, 2024, titled "The Secretary-General of the Hezbollah Brigades Meets with a Number of Resistance Leaders in Tehran and Confirms: Suspension of Military Operations Is Not the End of the Matter," is attributed to the Kata'ib Hezbollah Media Department. According to the article, the Secretary-General of Kata'ib Hezbollah, Hajj Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, met with "a number of leaders from the axis of resistance from inside and outside Iraq" in Tehran regarding a previous announcement of the suspension of military operations after the three U.S. soldiers were killed in the drone attack on Tower 22. The article did not provide the reason for the meeting or the names of the other resistance groups or their leaders. It mostly quotes al-Hamidawi's statements emphasizing that the resistance would continue its efforts.

The article, published May 9, 2024, commiserates with Al-Nujaba, another group identified as an "Iranian proxy," after its cultural office in Damascus was allegedly attacked by Israeli forces. The title of the articles is "Hezbollah Brigades After the Targeting of the Al-Nujaba Cultural Centers in Damascus: Crimes That Remove the Mask of False Civilization Which Western Countries Have Long Used to Deceive Islamic Peoples About Their Religion and Principles," and it was authored by the Kata'ib Hezbollah Cultural Mobilization Council.[122] In the article, Kata'ib Hezbollah offers condolences to "our brothers in the Al-Nujaba Movement and all those who are oppressed…"[123] for the attack. Emphasis here is referring to Al-Nujaba members as "brothers."

The library is a collection of audio, video, and picture media and publications. The majority of the videos feature successful Kata'ib Hezbollah operations against the U.S. Two videos, one titled "Eyewitnesses: U.S. Planes Dropped Aid to Two ISIL Vehicles in Fallujah"[124] and the other "'U.S. Helicopters Land to Help ISIL Elements in Southern Fallujah,"[125] claim to show U.S. forces supporting ISIL elements in Iraq. Both videos are

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[121] "Iran Probe Finds Bad Weather Caused Ex-President Raisi's Helicopter Crash," *Al Jazeera*, September 1, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/9/1/iran-probe-finds-bad-weather-caused-ex-president-raisis-helicopter-crash.

[122] Kataib Hezbollah Cultural Mobilization Council, "Hezbollah Brigades after the Targeting of the Al-Nujaba Cultural Centers in Damascus: Crimes That Remove the Mask of False Civilization Which Western Countries Have Long Removed to Deceive Islamic Peoples about Their Religion and Principles," *Kataib Hezbollah*, May 9, 2024. Accessed June 10, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/news/3372.

[123] See note 44 above.

[124] "Eyewitnesses: US Planes Dropped Aid to Two ISIS Vehicles in Fallujah," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, February 2, 2015, Accessed September 29, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/video/2633.

[125] "US Helicopters Land to Help ISIS Elements in Southern Fallujah," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, February 2, 2015, Accessed September 29, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/video/2634.

timestamped in 2015. The photos consist of soldiers in various action shots. The audio section contains resistance anthems honoring the brigade, including one song titled "This is your weapon, my country,"[126] posted in 2017. In this section, Kata'ib Hezbollah is depicted as a defender of the country, with no mention or inference of ties to Iran.

A tab titled "electronic library" contains several scholarly publications about engaging in soft warfare, including a book titled *Imam Khamenei's Vision for Confronting Soft Power*, with a release date listed as February 25, 2015.[127] The book features chapters detailing U.S. utilization of soft power as part of a larger strategic concept and claims that U.S.'s ultimate goal of using soft power is for regime change in Iran (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

Screenshot of the "Electronic Library" page on Kata'ib Hezbollah's website featuring a book detailing Khamenei's thought on soft power[128]

[126] "This Is Your Weapon, My Country," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, July 29, 2017, Accessed September 29, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/sound/129.

[127] "Electronic Library," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed September 29, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/book/cat/15.

[128] "Electronic Library," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed September 29, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/book/cat/15.

Although the videos depicting the U.S. assisting ISIL and the inclusion of a book by Ayatollah Khamenei are not the only electronic media included in the group's online library, their presence suggests that the group supports the narrative that the U.S. is an enemy of both Iraq and Iran.

The section titled "Graveyard of Martyrs" is divided into several categories: "Everyone," "Martyrs of the Resistance to the Occupation," and "State Martyrs." The "Everyone" consolidates the other two categories. Each entry includes a picture of the martyr, their birthplace, date of birth, and the location of their death. It was difficult to determine why the martyrs were separated into these categories, and no explanation is provided on the website. For example, in the "State Martyrs" tab, only two men are listed, both of whom were killed in Baghdad in the late 1990s.[129] If they were the only individuals born in Iraq and killed while defending Iraq, their classification as "State Martyrs" would be understandable. However, in the category "Martyrs of Faith and Dignity" category, nine individuals are listed, all of whom were born in Iraq and killed either in Iraq or Syria.[130] Again, no explanation is provided for why these individuals are designated as "Faith and dignity" martyrs. The researcher assumes that they died protecting Shia shrines. The most recent death listed in this category occurred in 2014. The martyrs listed under "Martyrs of Resistance to the Occupation" do not share any identifiable common thread other than being born in Iraq. Seventeen individuals are listed, with the latest death recorded in 2011.[131]

The section of the website titled "Resistance Writings" contains a collection of essays on various subjects, including religious exegesis, political statements, and general commentary on events in the region. The most recent article published is timestamped January 1, 2018, while the earliest article dates back to December 12, 2009. Some essays are attributed to specific authors, while others do not list an author. Several of these essays explicitly support Iran and will be mentioned here.

An article, published on January 2, 2018, "Why is Iran Being Targeted?" is written by a Ghalib Qandil. Accordingly, the article claims that Iran is being targeted by the U.S. and Israel for several reasons: It is a liberal, independent state that is hostile to Israel; it is a rising major power that is developing an eastern bloc with Russia and China to challenge the U.S. global hegemony; it "played a role" in defeating Israeli supported proxies in Syria and Iraq; it has a "decisive role" in building and forming the power of resistance axis, and it is a "major regional country" that confronts Israel and supports the resistance and

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[129] "State Martyrs," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed September 29, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/martyr/cat/54.

[130] "Martyr Mujahid Ahmed Mahdi Damad Abd Al-Nabi Al-Shuwaili," *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed June 7, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/martyr/2761.

[131] "The Martyr, the Mujahid, Naseer Naeem Abbas Al-Rusaitmaw," *Official Website of Kata'ib Hezbollah*, 2024. Accessed September 29, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/martyr/2768.

intifada in Palestine.[132] The publication of this article is sympathetic to Iran and highlights how Iran's anti-Israel and anti-U.S. stance aligns with Kata'ib Hezbollah's goals.

An article published on August 9, 2018, "Iran Will Not Kneel as Long as Khamenei and Soleimani Are There," was written by a Muhammad al-Talqani." In the article, the author criticizes the Iraqi Prime Minister for supporting the U.S. and its sanctions against Iran. The article also accuses the U.S., Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE of supporting terrorism in Iraq. Despite these challenges, the author praises the Iranian people for overcoming adversity over the past 35 years, noting that Iran has become an "economic power and a scientific, industrial, and military fortress" due to the leadership of Khamenei and Qassim Soleimani. The author asserts, "we" will stand with the Iranian Muslim people and will not abandon those who "stood with us in our ordeal the day ISIL reached the walls of Baghdad."[133] These statements reflect a strong affinity toward Iran and an alliance with its leadership. However, they do not explicitly indicate an allegiance.

The official tab contains multiple statements published since 2007, according to the timestamps attributed to each. The first statement, "Designation of Kata'ib Hezbollah," was published on August 21, 2007. In it, the brigade outlines its goals, which include preserving Iraq's identity, liberating Iraq from foreign occupation, and securing victory for oppressed Muslims around the world.[134] The statement is not attributed to any specific author.

Many statements are attributed to Hajj Abu Hussein Al-Hamidawi, the Secretary-General of the Islamic Resistance, Kata'ib Hezbollah. The most recent statement was published on September 6, 2023. The majority of Al-Hamidawi's statements consist of declarations of support for various groups, particularly Lebanese Hezbollah and the Houthis, as well as warnings against countries such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Bahrain, Israel, and the U.S. Additionally, his statements often honor martyrs from both Kata'ib Hezbollah and its allied groups.[135]

Relevant to this research project is a statement released on June 23, 2009, titled "We Declare our Support for the Islamic Republic Regime." In the statement, Kata'ib Hezbollah accuses the U.S. and Britain of supporting Israeli operations inside Iran to

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[132] Ghalib Qandil, "Why Is Iran Being Targeted," *Kataib Hezbollah*, January 2, 2018, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/article/2847.

[133] Muhammad Al-Talqani, "Iran Will Not Kneel as Long as Khamenei and Soleimani Are There," *Kataib Hezbollah*, August 9, 2018. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/article/2944.

[134] "Designation of Kataib Hezbollah," *Kataib Hezbollah*, August 21, 2007. Accessed June 6, 2024. https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/statment/1170.

[135] *Kataib Hezbollah: Official Statements*. *Kataib Hezbollah*, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/statment.

undermine the regime, which they claim "supports the mujahideen and the oppressed." Furthermore, the statement asserts that:

> We declare our support for Iran, represented by the Supreme Jurist, Seyyed Khamenei, and we warn the American-British occupation that your malicious actions in the Islamic Republic will result in severe punishment from the Hezbollah Brigades.[136]

Here, emphasis is on the verbiage; the group claims to support Iran and the Iranian regime.

There were also published statements expressing nationalist sentiments. In a statement published October 10, 2023, Kata'ib Hezbollah congratulates the Palestinian people and resistance for Hamas' October 7 attack against Israel and declares it is ready to attack both Zionist and American enemies. Notably, the statement emphasizes the necessity to "repel the evils of enemies from our nation," and Iraqis are encouraged to attend demonstrations organized in Baghdad and other cities where they are instructed to raise the flags of both Palestine and Iraq.[137]

The final tab, titled "Jihadist Operations," is a collection of videos depicting attacks against Kata'ib Hezbollah's enemies. The earliest videos show attacks against U.S. forces, starting in 2004, [138] while the later videos primarily document assaults on ISIL, with the most recent allegedly occurring in 2015.[139] Notably, there were no videos published regarding attacks on U.S. forces following the Al-Aqsa Flood, despite Kata'ib Hezbollah being accused by some sources of being the primary militia responsible for the attacks.

Based on a review of Kata'ib Hezbollah's website, the group proudly supports Iran but maintains it is an Iraqi defense force. While the website highlights a close ideological alignment with Iran, this does not necessarily equate to military sponsorship. The group further underscores a nationalist Iraqi identity, as reflected in statements on its website, including specific sub-goals in its mission statement. While a viewer of the website would undoubtedly recognize the group's strong ties with Iran, it would be a stretch to classify it as an Iranian proxy solely based on the information provided.

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[136] "We Declare Our Support for the Islamic Republic Regime," *Kataib Hezbollah*, June 23, 2009. Accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/statment/1182.

[137] "Secretary-General Hajj Al-Hamidawi: Our Missiles Will Be Directed against the American Bases If They Intervene in the Battle, and Their Sites and Its Agents Will Be Attacked by Our Firepower If Necessary," *Kataib Hezbollah*, October 10, 2023. Accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/statment/3321.

[138] "Targeting a US Occupation Vehicle / Baghdad / 1-17-2006." *Kataib Hezbollah*, January 17, 2006. Video accessed June 6, 2024, https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/attack/2480.

[139] See https://www.kataibhezbollah.me/attack?page=1.

CONCLUSION

Social media and the internet have provided an open and easily accessible public forum for global actors, both state and non-state, to disseminate their narratives across the world. Gone are the days when printed pamphlets and manifestos were the only medium for spreading group ideologies and rhetorical appeals; the quick creation of an account on any number of social media platforms or the building of a website enables wide access to published content on the open web. In the virtual space, Iranian media sources and militia websites can propagate a counternarrative to U.S. efforts that claim Iran is the actor behind militia attacks against U.S. forces in the Middle East. In addition, these narratives further depict the U.S. and its allies as regional invaders that support ISIL and terrorize the Palestinians.

It is, therefore, important to consider the language utilized when discussing these groups, both in the virtual space and during strategic planning. Dismissing most Shi'ite militia groups, such as those mentioned in this article, as simply "proxies" of Iran has narrowly categorized these organizations and leaves little opportunity for leveraging potential ideological fault lines between these groups and Iranian leadership. In addition, identifying and acknowledging the individual goals of each organization illuminates why its leadership gravitates toward and continues to seek support from Iran. It is highly unlikely that the U.S. will ever engage successfully with these organizations due to inherently conflicting objectives and a history of violence. Still, the U.S. can recognize that there are reasons why these groups remain active in Iraq and Syria despite years of U.S. retaliation: Support from segments of the civilian population that likely see them as guardians.

Chapter 5 – The Weaponization of Addiction: China's Exploitation of Fentanyl

Nicholas Dockery

ABSTRACT

The People's Republic of China (PRC), under the rule of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), has played a leading role in the deadly global fentanyl crisis. While the opioid epidemic began within the United States, the PRC has seized the opportunity to accelerate its effects by enabling the mass export of fentanyl and fentanyl precursor chemicals through deliberate and intentional action. Over the past decade, evidence shows that the PRC's role reflects a broader strategy of asymmetric warfare that intentionally or at least tacitly enables the global fentanyl trade. These highly addictive drugs feed a transnational criminal organization–dominated industry that destroys American communities, depletes public health infrastructure, and undermines national resilience. The PRC's response has been performative at best: vague commitments, token enforcement, and calculated deniability. This model extends beyond narcotics; intellectual property theft, rare earth monopolization, and pharmaceutical manipulation are all part of the same approach. Fentanyl is merely the most lethal example of a global threat in motion.

From China's laboratories to Mexico's cartels, the flow of fentanyl into the U.S. has unleashed a crisis deadlier than gun violence and car accidents combined—claiming 293 lives every day. This new front in America's battle is not fought with bullets but with addiction, poisoning communities at an unprecedented scale. Fentanyl has since become the nation's most lethal drug, driving overdose deaths and intensifying the broader opioid crisis.[140] Characterized by three distinct waves, the crisis evolved from prescription opioid abuse to the rise of heroin in the early 2010s and more recently, synthetic opioids like fentanyl have driven the crisis to unprecedented levels.[141]

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[140] U.S. Department of Justice, Drug Enforcement Administration, "DEA Drug Fact Sheet," April 2022, accessed April 4, 2024.

[141] Daniel Ciccarone, "The Triple Wave Epidemic: Supply and Demand Drivers of the US Opioid Overdose Crisis," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 71 (September 2019): 183–88.

Over the past 20 years, 300,000 Americans have succumbed to opioid overdoses, marking a tenfold increase in mortality since 1999.[142] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), between 2013 and 2021, deaths from synthetic opioids like fentanyl increased by more than 500%. In 2016, the U.S. recorded around 20,000 synthetic opioid-related deaths; by 2021, it skyrocketed to over 80,000.[143] The crisis, arising from overprescribing legal opioid painkillers in the 1990s, has been exacerbated by the influx of illicit fentanyl, produced mainly in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Mexico, then smuggled into the U.S., complicating public health and national security efforts.[144] Illegal fentanyl's low cost for potency has made it a favored commodity for Transnational Crime Organizations (TCO) and Drug Trafficking Networks (DTO), contributing to its rapid spread across the U.S.[145]

IMPACTS ON U.S. HEALTHCARE AND SOCIETY

Fentanyl-related deaths have disproportionately affected minority communities, mainly Black and Hispanic populations, where fentanyl overdose deaths have seen a marked increase in recent years, often tied to access to healthcare and social disparities.[146] Socio-economic factors play a significant role in exacerbating the mental health challenges for those affected by opioids, leading to increased rates of depression, anxiety, and absenteeism. Furthermore, the crisis has far-reaching implications for families,

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[142] Preeti Vankar, "Number of Overdose Deaths from Fentanyl in the U.S. from 1999 to 2022," *Statista*, May 22, 2024, https://www.statista.com/statistics/895945/fentanyl-overdose-deaths-us/; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics, "Wide-Ranging Online Data for Epidemiologic Research (WONDER)," Atlanta, GA, http://wonder.cdc.gov; National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), "Provisional Drug Overdose Deaths from 12 Months Ending in April 2022," *NCHS: A Blog of the National Center for Health Statistics*, September 14, 2022, https://blogs.cdc.gov/nchs/2022/09/14/6598/.

[143] Melissa R. Spencer, Farida B. Garnett, and Arialdi M. Miniño, *Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2002–2022*, NCHS Data Brief, no. 491 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2024), https://dx.doi.org/10.15620/cdc:135849; Merianne R. Spencer, Arialdi M. Miniño, and Margaret Warner, "Drug Overdose Deaths in the United States, 2001–2021," *NCHS Data Briefs*, December 22, 2022, https://stacks.cdc.gov/view/cdc/122556.

[144] Claire Klobucista and Mariel Ferragamo, "Fentanyl and the U.S. Opioid Epidemic," *Council on Foreign Relations*, last updated December 22, 2023.

[145] Daisy Chung, Laura Gottesdiener, and Drazen Jorgic, "Fentanyl's Deadly Chemistry: How Rogue Labs Make Opioids," *Reuters Investigates*, filed July 25, 2024.

[146] Rachel M. Billock, Aimee L. Steege, and Arialdi Miniño, *Drug Overdose Mortality by Usual Occupation and Industry: 46 U.S. States and New York City, 2020*, National Vital Statistics Reports, vol. 72, no. 7 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, 2023; Melissa R. Spencer, J. Annabelle Cisewski, Arialdi M. Miniño, Farida B. Garnett, Danielle Dodds, Janine Perera, and Farida B. Ahmad, *Estimates of Drug Overdose Deaths Involving Fentanyl, Methamphetamine, Cocaine, Heroin, and Oxycodone: United States, 2021*, Vital Statistics Rapid Release, no. 27 (Hyattsville, MD: National Center for Health Statistics, May 2023).

contributing to higher divorce rates, an increase in single-parent households, and instances of child abuse and neglect.[147] The stigma associated with drug use worsens the impact on housing and employment, creating barriers to individual stability. Those struggling with SUD often face discrimination, hindering their abilities to secure housing and jobs while perpetuating a cycle of instability and displacement.

The escalation in 911 calls for overdose incidents further burdens an already overwhelmed emergency system, diverting resources from critical situations (e.g., heart attacks and strokes) to stabilize and transport overdose patients. Surges in emergency department visits have resulted in substantial financial expenditures on medical care related to opioids. Opioid use has contributed to the broader spread of hepatitis C and HIV, with an increase in the number of newborns experiencing withdrawal due to maternal opioid misuse.[148] Consequently, the crisis is driving up insurance costs to meet the heightened demand for medical resources.[149]

The opioid crisis has imposed severe economic burdens, documented through increased healthcare costs, reduced productivity, and diminished tax revenues. Federal spending on healthcare, child welfare systems, means-tested social programs, and efforts to combat drug trafficking have surged. However, opioid-involved deaths have reduced federal spending on benefits, such as Medicare and Social Security, due to premature death.[150] Factors create a downward economic spiral threatening housing and livelihoods. In 2017, the estimated cost of opioid use disorder and fatal overdoses reached a staggering $1.02 trillion due to reduced quality and loss of life.[151] Beyond these direct costs, the opioid crisis has ripple effects throughout the real economy, impacting the labor market, consumer finance, and municipal finance. The Council of Economic Advisers' 2019 report estimated the annual economic cost at roughly $700 billion. Cumulatively, costing over $2.5 trillion from 2015 to 2018.[152]

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[147] Madhukar Kasarla. "The Opioid Epidemic and Its Impact on the Health Care System."

[148] Congressional Budget Office. "The Opioid Crisis and Recent Federal Policy Response." Nonpartisan Analysis for the US Congress. September 2022. www.cbo.gov/publication/58221.

[149] Madhukar Kasarla, "The Opioid Epidemic and Its Impact on the Health Care System: Hospitalists a Part of Multifaceted Approach to the Crisis," *The Hospitalist*, October 24, 2017.

[150] Congressional Budget Office. "The Opioid Crisis and Recent Federal Policy Response."

[151] Curtis Florence, Feijun Luo, and Ketra Rice, "The Economic Burden of Opioid Use Disorder and Fatal Opioid Overdose in the United States, 2017," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 218 (January 1, 2021): https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2020.108350.

[152] Wenli Li, Raluca Roman, and Nonna Sorokina, "The Economic Impact of the Opioid Epidemic," *Economic Insights, Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia*, Q3 2023.

PRC'S INVOLVEMENT IN THE FENTANYL TRADE

The PRC played a pivotal role as the primary source of fentanyl and its analogs in the initial surge of fentanyl into the U.S.[153] Still today, the PRC remains the principal supplier of fentanyl analogs, and its involvement extends to other synthetic drugs, like methamphetamine, providing analogs to both Mexican cartels and TCOs in Asia.[154] Interestingly, powerful criminal groups, such as the Chinese Triads, are not primary actors in the fentanyl trade.[155] Smaller, loosely organized networks, family or individual broker-operated, dominate the fentanyl analog market. These groups, including the Zheng drug network and Wan Kuok Koi ("Broken Tooth"), play a pivotal role in trafficking. Their operations, less expensive than cartels, focus on the production and distribution of fentanyl analogs as well as newer synthetic opioids like nitazenes. These smaller-scale actors can easily evade detection, leveraging global trade networks while adapting quickly to enforcement pressures.[156]

A recent cryptocurrency analysis revealed that $37.8 million in transactions were linked to China-based chemical analog suppliers from 2018 to 2023. Further investigations in 2015 identified additional IP addresses with $98 million traced back to PRC.[157] Chinese Money Laundering Organizations (CMLOs) have become increasingly dominant, offering lower fees and faster payouts. CMLOs facilitate large money transfers while bypassing currency controls through near real-time mirror transactions. CMLOs are often linked to larger TCOs and engage in minor offenses, such as using counterfeit identification, to support operations. Their activity enables the continued production and trafficking of synthetic drugs, operating as a distinct and highly organized sector separate from smaller networks.[158]

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[153] Vanda Felbab-Brown and Fred Dews, "The Fentanyl Pipeline … Opioid Crisis," Brookings, October 1, 2024.

[154] Brian Mann and Emily Feng, "Report: China Continues to Subsidize Deadly Fentanyl Exports," *NPR: Morning Edition,* April 16, 2024.

[155] Roger J. Chin, "Assessing New Frontiers: Methamphetamines and the Emerging China-Mexico Connection," *Small Wars Journal* (blog), January 15, 2016, https://archive.smallwarsjournal.com/index.php/jrnl/art/assessing-new-frontiers-methamphetamines-and-the-emerging-china-mexico-connection; "Hong Kong Triads Supply Meth Ingredients to Mexican Drug Cartels." South China Morning Post, January 12, 2014, https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/1403433/hong-kong-triads-supply-meth-ingredients-mexican-drug-cartels.

[156] Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. "The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis."; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Fentanyl Pipeline and China's Role in the U.S. Opioid Crisis."; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Sanctions Corrupt Actors in Africa and Asia," press release, December 9, 2020.

[157] Chainalysis Team, "Crypto and the Opioid Crisis: What Blockchain Analysis Reveals About Global Fentanyl Sales," *Chainalysis, May* 24, 2023.

[158] U.S. Department of the Treasury, *National Money Laundering Risk Assessment,* February 2022, 23–24; Homeland Security Investigations (HSI), "HSI, Australian Federal Police and Partners, Announce Takedown of Multi-Million Dollar Chinese Money Laundering Syndicate," October 26, 2023; Vanda

GLOBALIZATION OF THE NARCOTIC SUPPLY CHAIN

Mexico has strong partnerships with Chinese chemical manufacturers, creating a well-established pipeline supplying fentanyl analogs to Mexico.[159] The globalization of the narcotic supply chain has transformed the production, distribution, and consumption of illicit drugs, creating a complex and resilient network. TCOs operate across multiple countries, leveraging advanced logistics and global trade routes, using container ships, private jets, and submarines.[160] Financial innovations, including digital currencies and mobile payments, further complicate efforts to track and intercept the flow of criminal funds.[161]

Suppliers exploit gaps in international regulations and complexities of global shipping networks to operate within a legal gray area, where exports are not explicitly controlled but are essential for producing illicit narcotics.[162] The PRC dominates the de minimis trade with the U.S., sending nearly 60% of all packages that enter the country under the $800 duty-free threshold. Chinese e-commerce giants like Shein and Temu drive this surge, contributing to almost half of all shipments from China. Since the U.S. raised the de minimis limit, shipments from China have skyrocketed, with over one billion packages entering the U.S. in 2023 alone. This flood of inexpensive goods overwhelms U.S. customs enforcement, as many shipments bypass scrutiny, creating opportunities for smuggling and fraudulent declarations.[163] The global reach of this supply chain, involving multiple countries and actors, has made it highly profitable and challenging for law enforcement to dismantle, despite ongoing government efforts. [164]

Felbab-Brown and Fred Dews, "The Fentanyl Pipeline and China's Role in the U.S. Opioid Crisis," *Brookings*, October 1, 2024.

[159] International Crisis Group, *Virus-proof Violence: Crime and COVID-19 in Mexico and the Northern Triangle*, Report, Latin America & Caribbean, November 13, 2020; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Foreign Policies of the Sinaloa Cartel and CJNG – Part II: The Asia-Pacific," Brookings Institute, August 5, 2022.

[160] International Narcotics Control Board, *Illicit Financial Flows Related to Drug Trafficking and Their Impact on Development and Security*, 2021.

[161] International Narcotics Control Board, *Illicit Financial Flows Related to Drug Trafficking and Their Impact on Development and Security*.

[162] Maurice Tamman, "We Bought Everything Needed to Make $3 Million Worth of Fentanyl…".

[163] Daisy Chung, Laura Gottesdiener, and Drazen Jorgic, "Fentanyl's Deadly Chemistry: How Rogue Labs Make Opioids," *Reuters Investigates*, filed July 25, 2024.

[164] Maurice Tamman, "We Bought Everything Needed to Make $3 Million Worth of Fentanyl"; Vanda Felbab-Brown, *China and Synthetic Drugs Control: Fentanyl, Methamphetamines, and Precursors* (Foreign Policy at Brookings Institute, March 2022).

ECONOMIC DRIVERS OF THE PRC'S FENTANYL TRADE

China's Chemical Manufacturers

The PRC's chemical industry, the world's largest by revenue since 2011, continues to experience rapid growth, far outpacing other regions. Historically, the PRC chemical industry was driven by widespread investment, intense competition, and fragmentation across numerous segments, primarily facilitated by accessible raw materials and financing. With approximately $1.5 trillion in sales in 2017, PRC accounted for nearly 40 percent of global chemical revenue. Projections indicate that the PRC will contribute more than half of the global chemical industry's growth over the next decade, solidifying its pivotal role in shaping the sector's trajectory.[165]

Producing a wide array of legal and illicit chemicals, the PRC is instrumental in the production and export of fentanyl and its analogs. RAND research for the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking confirms that the PRC supplies the majority of chemicals essential to fentanyl production. Compared to traditional drugs like heroin, fentanyl can be produced in laboratories with minimal raw materials and equipment.[166] High potency and smaller amounts are increasing profit margins exponentially.

Chemical manufacturers in the PRC continue to find significant economic incentives to produce. The demand has remained high, driven by addictive qualities and ease of mixing with other narcotics to enhance potency.[167] Relative anonymity provided by online markets and international shipping networks allows PRCs suppliers to operate with minimal risk. The Internet of Things and social media have become vital platforms with many suppliers based in the PRC. RAND's research revealed 166 illegal vendors were linked to sales of fentanyl analogs, connecting 58 to chemical or pharmaceutical PRC-based companies. The majority of analyzed websites were both registered and hosted within the PRC. Suppliers frequently utilize business-to-business (B2B) platforms and online classified ads to market fentanyl analogs, often masking offerings by using Chemical Abstracts Service (CAS) numbers and coded language to avoid detection by regulatory agencies.[168]

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[165] Sheng Hong, Yifan Jie, Xiaosong Li, and Nathan Liu, "China's Chemical Industry: New Strategies for a New Era," *McKinsey & Company*, March 20, 2019.[166] Daisy Chung, "Fentanyl's Deadly Chemistry: How Rogue Labs Make Opioids."

[166] Daisy Chung, "Fentanyl's Deadly Chemistry: How Rogue Labs Make Opioids."

[167] Lauren Greenwood and Kevin Fashola. "Illicit Fentanyl from China: An Evolving Global Operation." US-China Economic and Security Review Commission. August 24; U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration. "2020 National Drug Threat Assessment."

[168] David Luckey, *China's Role in Synthetic Opioid Trafficking: Efforts to Reduce Supply of Precursor Chemicals at the Primary Source*, testimony before the U.S. House Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party, April 16, 2024 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2024).

PRC Economic Incentives and Strategic Interests

Between 2011 and 2015, the PRC invested $1.1 billion in new drug development, signaling the CCP's ambition to become a global pharmaceutical industry player. A growing number of overseas returnees who received health and life sciences training outside of the PRC returned with expertise and international perspectives.[169] Before the 2018 U.S.-China agreement to curtail the distribution of fentanyl, the PRC's pharmaceutical sector was generating annual revenues of $122 billion. [170]

The rapid innovation in China's biopharma industry has become a significant narrative, creating remarkable value in global capital markets. The market value of publicly listed Chinese biopharma soared from $3 billion in 2016 to $380 billion by July 2021. Biotechnology firms from the PRC contributed $180 billion to this total. Chinese biopharma led fundraising, accounting for seven of the world's top 10 largest biopharma Initial Public Offerings between 2018 and 2020.[171]

A U.S. Congressional investigation into the PRC's involvement in the global fentanyl trade uncovered evidence implicating the CCP in facilitating and profiting from the illicit drug market. Using data analytics, web scraping of PRC government websites, undercover operations, and expert consultations, the investigation gathered over 37,000 unique data points showing the widespread participation of Chinese companies in narcotics sales.[172] Massive profit margins, combined with weak enforcement, make fentanyl production a lucrative business within the PRC's broader chemical and pharmaceutical sectors.

The PRC heavily monitors domestic drug-related activities, but its online platforms remain a significant hub for international narcotics sales, including thousands of transactions involving chemical analogs tied to drug trafficking. Investigations revealed the PRC censors prioritize domestic suppression of drug-related content, leaving export-focused narcotics trafficking largely untouched. This has allowed the fentanyl trade to thrive, economically benefiting the PRC through bolstering organized crime's money laundering operations and expansion of the PRC's chemical industry. Also, the PRC has consistently failed to cooperate with anti-money laundering (AML) efforts, further complicating international attempts to curb fentanyl production and distribution. Critics argue that the PRC's recent regulatory actions may serve more as public relations gestures

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[169] Yanzhong Huang, "Chinese Pharma: Global Health Game Changer," Council on Foreign Relations, March 31, 2015.

[170] Steven Dudley, Deborah Lopez-Zaranda, Jaime Bernal, Mario Moreno, Tristan Clavel, Bjorn Kjelstad, and Juan Jose Restrepo, "Mexico's Role in the Deadly Rise of Fentanyl," *Wilson Center Mexico Institute & InSight Crime*, 2019; *IBISWorld*, "Pharmaceutical Manufacturing Industry in China: Industry Market Research Report," September 2018.

[171] Kiki Han, Franck Le Deu, Fangning Zhang, and Josie Zhou, "The Dawn of China Biopharma Innovation," McKinsey & Company, October 29, 2021.

[172] Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. "The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis."

than substantive solutions, as reports of government subsidies to firms involved in fentanyl analog exports suggest systemic issues in truly tackling the crisis.

Loopholes in PRC Chemical Regulations

After nearly 20 years of stalled cooperation, the PRC began to impose regulatory controls, or "scheduling," of fentanyl-related substances.[173] According to a Congressional Research Service report, PRC regulation tightened oversight on the production, sale, and export of fentanyl, but not entirely banned due to medical anesthetic use. [174] China's DTOs adapted, shifting from exporting fentanyl to supplying analog chemicals, which Mexican cartels use to synthesize fentanyl for the U.S.[175]

The PRC's regulatory framework for chemicals contains several loopholes that manufacturers exploit to bypass restrictions. China's manufacturers utilize the decentralized chemical industry, which makes it difficult for authorities to monitor and enforce compliance. A significant challenge lies in the rapid development of new fentanyl variants, which are chemically distinct enough to evade classification as controlled substances. Constant innovation outpaces regulatory efforts, allowing manufacturers to continue production legally. [176] Additionally, numerous small-scale chemical plants operate with minimal oversight, enabling these facilities to easily switch to producing unregulated chemicals used in fentanyl production.[177] While the PRC has implemented stricter regulations, enforcement remains inconsistent, prioritizing economic growth over regulatory compliance.[178]

More disturbingly, the PRC subsidizes the manufacturing and export of fentanyl analogs and other synthetic narcotics through tax rebates, with many being illegal under both PRC law and international conventions. Furthermore, certain companies trafficking these substances have received government grants and awards, and PRC officials even publicly praised their economic contributions. Many PRC companies involved in drug trafficking

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[173] The Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China. "China to Include All Fentanyl-Related Substances into Control List Since May 1, 2019;" The Ministry of Public Security of the People's Republic of China. "32 New Psychoactive Substances Are Regulated in China." 2018.

[174] Ricardo Barrios, Susan V. Lawrence, and Liana W. Rosen, "China Primer: Illicit Fentanyl and China's Role," Congressional Research Service, IF10890, accessed August 6, 2024; Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Fentanyl Pipeline and China's Role in the U.S. Opioid Crisis."

[175] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Fentanyl Pipeline and China's Role in the U.S. Opioid Crisis."

[176] Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "What Is China's Role in Combating the Illegal Fentanyl Trade?" Council on Foreign Relations, September 12, 2024.

[177] Zongyuan Zoe Liu, "What Is China's Role in Combating the Illegal Fentanyl Trade?" Council on Foreign Relations, September 12, 2024.

[178] Lauren Greenwood and Kevin Fashola. "Illicit Fentanyl from China: An Evolving Global Operation."

are partially state-owned by the government, including prison-linked enterprises.[179] These regulatory loopholes have allowed the PRC to remain a key player in the global fentanyl trade.

US-CHINA AND US-MEXICO RELATIONS

PRC Diplomatic and Regulatory Challenges

The PRC uses international cooperation on the drug trade as a tool to negotiate with the U.S. CCP officials suspended cooperation with the U.S. on fentanyl regulation for over two years due to escalating diplomatic tensions, particularly surrounding Taiwan and human rights concerns in Xinjiang. The PRC's strategic calculus primarily drove this lack of cooperation, as it subordinated its anti-narcotics efforts to broader geopolitical goals.[180] During this period, the PRC resisted regulatory measures on critical elements of the fentanyl trade (e.g., analogs, pill press) despite mounting evidence of Chinese chemical companies supplying Mexican cartels.[181] Furthermore, CCP officials also denied cooperation on AML measures. However, this evolved in late 2023, when the PRC sought to stabilize U.S.-China relations, prompting a diplomatic breakthrough in counternarcotics cooperation driven by U.S. pressure and strategic interests.[182]

While the PRC has introduced new regulations to tighten control over analog chemicals, many experts remain skeptical. On paper, these new regulations are a positive step.[183] For example, recent announcements, including measures effective September 1, 2024, increased oversight on chemicals integral to illicit fentanyl production.[184] However, critics argue these actions may serve as public-relations gestures rather than substantive crackdowns and highlight ongoing links between China's chemical companies and government officials, suggesting that deeper, systemic issues may undermine

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[179] Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. "The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis."

[180] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "The Limits of Renewed US-China Counternarcotics Cooperation," Brookings, April 16, 2024.

[181] Vanda Felbab-Brown, "China's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis," Brookings, March 31, 2023.

[182] Brian Mann, "Critics Wary as China Promises Tighter Fentanyl Controls," *NPR*, August 29, 2024.

[183] Sean Savett, "Statement from NSC Spokesperson Sean Savett on the PRC's Announcement of Fentanyl Scheduling Actions," The White House, August 6, 2024.

[184] "NEW ANNOUNCEMENT! Since September, These Seven Substances Have Been Included in the Management of Precursor Chemicals," *People's Daily*, August 6, 2024, https://finance.sina.cn/2024-08-06/detail-inchsfmn0287678.d.html?vt=4&cid=76675&node_id=76675; "Seven Substances Including N-phenylpiperidin-4-amine Added to the Administration of Precursor Chemicals in China," *Global PCCS*, September 17, 2024, https://globalpccs.com/2024/09/17/seven-substances-including-n-phenylpiperidin-4-amine-added-to-the-administration-of-precursor-chemicals-in-china/

enforcement efforts.[185] Additionally, reports of PRC government subsidies for firms involved in the export of fentanyl analogs raise further concerns about the extent of the country's commitment to tackling the crisis.[186]

Mexico and US Stalled Efforts

Mexico is confronted with persistent political challenges in effectively collaborating with the U.S. on counternarcotics efforts. The deep-seated corruption runs within Mexico's government, military, and law enforcement is a major obstacle, allowing cartels to infiltrate and undermine any progress toward meaningful collaboration. Mexican leaders often prioritize national sovereignty and resist U.S. pressure, fearing exposure of their complicity. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador exemplified this with his "hugs, not bullets" strategy, which withdrew law enforcement from confronting cartel violence. By pulling back, his administration deepened mistrust and left Mexico's security apparatus vulnerable, allowing criminal organizations to expand their influence unchecked.[187]

CONCLUSION: A GLIMMER OF HOPE IN MEXICO

The U.S. fentanyl crisis, fueled by a complex global network that spans China's chemical industry to Mexico's cartels, has devastated communities, overwhelmed healthcare systems, and imposed severe economic burdens. With over 240,000 lives lost in just two decades, the opioid epidemic continues to pose a dire threat to national security and public health. Despite efforts to curb the flow of fentanyl, weak enforcement and evolving criminal tactics have allowed TCOs to thrive. China's role as the primary supplier of fentanyl analogs and its strategic exploitation of the crisis reveals the deeply intertwined nature of economic interests and criminal activity. As the global fentanyl trade continues to wreak havoc on both Mexican and U.S. societies, Mexico's newly elected president, Claudia Sheinbaum, election offers a potential for a renewed relationship with the U.S. to curb cartel violence. Although she reduced crime in Mexico City during her tenure as mayor, the national scale of cartel operations presents a far more complex challenge.

Sheinbaum has closely aligned herself with López Obrador and committed to continuing many of his policies; she has indicated a willingness to address Mexico's growing security

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[185] John Coyne and Liam Auliciems, "No, China Isn't Really Suppressing Its Production of Fentanyl Precursors," *Australia Strategic Policy Institute: The Strategist*, August 23, 2024, https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/no-china-isnt-really-suppressing-its-production-of-fentanyl-precursors/.

[186] Select Committee on the Strategic Competition Between the United States and the Chinese Communist Party. "The CCP's Role in the Fentanyl Crisis."

[187] Associated Press. "Mexican President Claims that Criminal Groups Are 'Respectful' and 'Respect the Citizenry,'" *Associated Press*, April 25, 2024.

crisis. Sheinbaum's focus on increasing the number of investigators and deploying law enforcement to crime hotspots signals a shift toward tackling cartel violence more aggressively. However, her emphasis on socio-economic programs over direct law enforcement raises doubts about her ability to effectively curb cartel influence.[188] If Sheinbaum fails to move beyond López Obrador's approach, her presidency will likely mirror the ineffective strategies of the past.[189]

If the U.S. hopes to make meaningful progress in its fight against cartel violence, it must shift its approach to Mexico. Washington must demand that Mexico take decisive action to root out corruption and rebuild the integrity of its law enforcement agencies, without which cartels will continue to deepen their grip on the country's political and economic systems. The U.S. can no longer afford to allow Mexico to leverage migration control as a bargaining chip for concessions. Instead, it must apply sustained pressure, linking cooperation on security to tangible, measurable progress in dismantling cartel power structures. Without prioritizing bold reforms, the U.S. risks perpetuating Mexico's failed war on drugs, allowing violence and cartel dominance to persist, with grave consequences for both countries' security.[190]

[188] Patrick J. McDonnell, "No War on Narcos, Mexico's New President Vows as She Outlines Plan to Reduce Violence," *Los Angeles Times*, October 8, 2024.

[189] Associated Press, "Mexico's President Lays Out a Plan to Combat Cartel Violence. But It Looks Like More of the Same," *The Washington Post*, October 8, 2024.

[190] Vanda Felbab-Brown and Fred Dews. "The Fentanyl Pipeline and China's Role in the U.S. Opioid Crisis." Brookings. October 1, 2024.

Chapter 6 – Preparing for PRC Military Actions in Latin America in the Context of a War in the Indo-Pacific

R. Evan Ellis

ABSTRACT

This work examines scenarios for military operations by the People's Republic of China (PRC) in the Western Hemisphere, in the context of a major war with the PRC in the Indopacific. It focuses on PRC options for leveraging commercial activities and military relationships to interdict US deployment and sustainment flows through the Caribbean and Panama Canal and around the tip of South America, even without formal military alliances or basing agreements with governments in the region. It also explores risks for the PRC to use access to space from the Western Hemisphere to locate and target U.S. satellites and conduct offensive space operations against the U.S. homeland. In addition, it identifies the risks for the PRC to use access to bases in the Eastern Pacific, including the port of Chancay in Peru, to conduct naval operations against the U.S. and other targets. It concludes by analyzing possible appropriate U.S. responses to mitigate such risks and prepare for their effects, both alone and working with regional partners.

Perspective and context are critical in assessing the character and risks presented by the activities of the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its agents in Latin America. The dollar volume of PRC commercial activities in the region overshadows its activities in the security domain. By 2021, bilateral PRC trade with the region had reached over $450 billion.[191] By 2023, PRC-based companies had made an estimated $193.2 billion in foreign direct investment in the region.[192] Its two principal policy banks had lent over $120 billion to the region.[193]

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[191] Milton Ezrati, "China's Latin America Move," *Forbes,* November 7, 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/miltonezrati/2022/11/07/chinas-latin-america-move/.

[192] Enrique Dussel Peters, "Monitor of Chinese OFDI in Latin America and the Caribbean 2024," *Red China-ALC*, May 13, 2024, https://www.redalc-china.org/monitor/images/pdfs/menuprincipal/DusselPeters_MonitorOFDI_2024_Eng.pdf#:~:text=Chinese%20OFDI%20in%20LAC:%20General%20Trends.

[193] "China Loan to Latin America and the Caribbean Database," *Interamerican Dialogue*, Accessed October 7, 2024,

By contrast, PRC security sector activities in Latin America have been principally limited to a modest level of arms sales and gifts to militaries and police forces in the region, some professional military education and training exchanges, institutional visits, and a limited number of exercises and trips by People's Liberation Army (PLA) Navy ships to the region.[194] Other PRC security activities include the presence of Chinese personnel in the ELINT facility in Bejucal Cuba and an eight-year presence of PLA military police in the Brazilian-led MINUSTAH peacekeeping force in Haiti.[195]

Although China's space and technology activities in Latin America can sometimes be interpreted in a military context,[196] governments in the region, and even the US government, may characterize PRC activities in the region as predominantly commercial. That does not, however, make PRC security sector activities in the region any less strategically significant.

For the US Defense Department (DoD) and Intelligence Community (IC), which have responsibilities for preparing for and fighting the nation's wars and defending the US homeland against potential dangers, PRC activities in the Western Hemisphere must be interpreted through a lens of the threats that they potentially pose. Nonetheless, with the exception of China's Ministry of State Security (MSS) and other intelligence operatives and PLA personnel in Bejucal,[197] the PRC, to date, has not deployed forces in the hemisphere overtly oriented towards posing a threat to the US. Nor has the PRC established formal military basing agreements or military alliances with the nations of the Western Hemisphere, although it has signed multiple defense cooperation agreements with them, and its companies have secured agreements to operate private ports such as Chancay, in Peru, with clauses that permit some military access,[198] and/or that could be used for military purposes.

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https://www.thedialogue.org/map_list/#:~:text=The%20Chinese%20Loans%20to%20Latin%20America.

[194] See, for example, R. Evan Ellis, "Chinese Military and Police Engagement in Latin America," in *Enabling a More Externally Focused and Operational PLA*, Roger Cliff and Roy Kamphausen, Eds., (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2022), https://press.armywarcollege.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1947&context=monographs, pp. 51-66.

[195] Column Lynch, "In surprise move, China withdraws riot police from Haiti," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2010, https://foreignpolicy.com/2010/03/25/in-surprise-move-china-withdraws-riot-police-from-haiti/#:~:text=China%20has%20decided%20to%20withdraw%20its.

[196] R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Overview," The Diplomat, February 16, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/02/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-overview/.

[197] "Secret Signals: Decoding China's Intelligence Activities in Cuba," Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 1, 2024, https://features.csis.org/hiddenreach/china-cuba-spy-sigint/#:~:text=New%20satellite%20imagery%20offers%20an%20unprecedented.

[198] John Grady, "SOUTHCOM Commander Warns of Risk of Chinese Investment in South America, Caribbean," USNI News, March 12, 2024, https://news.usni.org/2024/03/12/southcom-commander-

From the perspective of the two DoD Regional Combatant Commands responsible for the Western Hemisphere, US Southern Command (SOUTHCOM) and US Northern Command (NORTHCOM), the PRC may not appear to present a standing military threat in their Areas of Responsibility (AOR). Similarly, for US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), where the prospect of war with the PRC is greatest,[199] the relative absence of a large-scale PRC military presence in the Western Hemisphere could be misinterpreted to mean that INDOPACOM can count on mostly uninterrupted flows of US forces and sustainment to support it, in the event of a conflict with the PRC. Similarly, it would suggest that INDOPACOM can assume a relatively low risk of military activities against the US there, that would require the diversion of significant US forces away from what could be provided to the Indo-Pacific in a war against the PRC.

Although logical, such assumptions are likely wrong, creating the risk of "strategic surprise" from PRC military activities in the Western Hemisphere in time of a large-scale conflict with the PRC in the Indo-Pacific. The rest of this work focuses on the scenario of "strategic surprise" in the Western Hemisphere, and what the US and its partners in the region can do to prepare for it, is the focus of the rest of this work.

THE CONFLICT SCENARIO

In analyzing the risks to the US in Latin America from a major war with the PRC in the Indo-Pacific, this work uses the reference year 2027 for such a conflict. The timeframe is close enough to the present to permit reasonable extrapolations from current events, yet far enough in the future to allow for some evolution of PRC capabilities and activities and the situation in the region. Equally importantly, it also allows for the possibility that the US can adjust its own posture to prepare for the postulated events. 2027 also coincides with the 100th anniversary of the PLA,[200] as well as the end of Xi Jinping's unprecedented 3rd term, by which time the PRC President has strong motivations to end Taiwanese autonomy, to cement his legacy alongside Mao Zedong as one of China's most significant leaders.

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warns-of-risk-of-chinese-investment-in-south-america-caribbean#:~:text=%E2%80%9CChina%20is%20exercising%20our%20playbook%E2%80%9D%20of.

[199] "Outgoing U.S. Indo-Pacific commander urges more action to counter China's military power," *PBS News*, May 1, 2024, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/outgoing-u-s-indo-pacific-commander-urges-more-action-to-counter-chinas-military-power#:~:text=The%20U.S.%20military%20officer%20responsible%20for.

[200] Brian Hart, Bonnie S. Glaser, and Matthew P. Funaiole, "China's 2027 Goal Marks the PLA's Centennial, Not an Expedited Military Modernization," China Brief, Volume: 21 Issue: 6, March 26, 2021, https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-2027-goal-marks-the-plas-centennial-not-an-expedited-military-modernization/#:~:text=This%20new%20milestone%2C%20%28hereinafter%20referred%20to%20as%20the,founding%20of%20the%20PLA%20on%20August%201%2C%201927.

For the purposes of the present analysis, it is not necessary to specify how, or precisely where a war pitting the PRC against a US-led Western force might begin. It is likely that it would begin from a PRC attempt to end the autonomy of Taiwan, although such a conflict could begin over other issues, such as PRC military actions against the Philippines or other neighbors as China pressed its claims to their territorial waters in the South or East China Sea.[201]

Whether the war occurred over Taiwan or another matter, the escalation to a major conflict would likely involve miscalculation by the PRC regarding the Western response in pressing China's claims. Similarly, such a conflict might begin with a PRC attempt to blockade Taiwan, that the West militarily challenged.[202] Although such details would shape the participants in the coalition, the length, timing, and perhaps outcome of the war, for the purpose of this work, the key detail is the occurrence of a large-scale conflict between the PRC and a Western coalition, short of a major nuclear exchange.[203] For the purpose of this analysis, the conflict of interest would have a lead-up phase, and a phase of major hostilities involving the US (and perhaps others) seeking to deploy forces from Western Hemisphere and sustain a fight.

In preparing for such a war fought centrally in the Indo-Pacific, the PLA has every incentive to plan for military, intelligence, political, economic, and other forms of engagement in all parts of the world to support the central war effort closer to China.[204] To that end, in its 2015 and 2019 defense strategy white papers,[205] the PRC acknowledged the importance of the PLA developing global defense relationships. In addition, the PRC has long emphasized mutual support between its commercial enterprises and the defense sector, not only in technology development but also in operations. Indeed, a principal

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[201] Ryan Hass, "Avoiding War in the South China Sea," *Foreign Affairs,* July 9, 2024, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/avoiding-war-south-china-sea#:~:text=Chinese%20and%20Philippine%20vessels%20continue%20to%20operate%20close,and%20Chinese%20forces%20to%20the%20brink%20of%20conflict.

[202] Thibalt Spirlet, "China wants Taiwan to make mistakes and is looking for excuses to trigger a blockade, Taiwan's navy commander says," *Business Insider,* https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/world/china-wants-taiwan-to-make-mistakes-and-is-looking-for-excuses-to-trigger-a-blockade-taiwan-s-navy-commander-says/ar-AA1rHpQ7?ocid=BingNewsSerp.

[203] R. Evan Ellis, "The Day After: Planning for China Scenarios that Profoundly Alter the Strategic Environment," *IndraStra*, February 28, 2022, https://books.google.com/books/about?id=pn9hEAAAQBAJ&redir_esc=y.

[204] See R. Evan Ellis, "The Strategic Role of Latin America in a Global Conflict Over Taiwan," *Seguridad y Poder Terrestre*, Vol. 2, No. 1, January-March 2023, https://revistas.ceeep.mil.pe/index.php/seguridad-y-poder-terrestre/article/view/21/35, pp. 113-131.

[205] Anthony H. Cordesman, "China's New 2019 Defense White Paper," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 24, 2019, https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-new-2019-defense-white-paper#:~:text=China%E2%80%99s%20National%20Defense%20in%20the%20New.

example of this was when COSCO commercial ships were used to support the evacuation of Chinese nationals from Libya and later Yemen.[206]

It is unlikely that by 2027, the PRC will have formal military alliances or basing agreements with Latin America. Even without such military alliances, however, the PRC would likely use all instruments of national power in the Western Hemisphere to support the Indo-Pacific war effort.

In the early stages of the 2027 conflict in Latin America (and likely other areas), the PRC would likely attempt to exploit their commercial investment, influence relationships, and other sources of leverage through diplomatic outreach and other forms of influence, to persuade key countries in the region not only to not publicly criticize the PRC's actions, to remain politically neutral, and to abstain from sanctioning the PRC over the conflict. The PRC would also likely seek to use its influence to persuade countries in the region not to allow the US use of their airspace, national waters, logistics, and other facilities to support the war, as well as suspending intelligence and even economic forms of cooperation with the US in the name of "neutrality." Given the significant economic leverage and influence networks that the PRC already has in the region, by the time of the conflict, such Chinese pressure could mean that several states that would otherwise cooperate openly with the US might refrain from doing so during the conflict period, except where their treaty obligations demanded it, such as the case of Panama's obligation to remain neutral in permitting use of the Panama Canal.

In the early phases of the conflict, the PRC would likely use the MSS and other intelligence services, under the cover of, or supported by, China's commercial operations in the region, to observe and perhaps use special forces to disrupt US deployment and sustainment operations from the Continental US. This would logically include the use of PRC port operations and companies in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean to target sensitive US facilities in the southeast US seaboard, from JIATF-South in Key West, Florida, to facilities in the Norfolk, Virginia area. The PRC might similarly use ports and other commercial facilities on the northern Pacific coast of Mexico to target US military bases and infrastructure along the US West Coast, particularly in the target-rich strip of the US coast from San Diego to Los Angeles.

In such targeting, the PRC might employ cyber warfare personnel under the cover of Huawei technicians or directly leverage the PRC government presence in Cuba, Venezuela, and other sympathetic governments, as well as capabilities maintained in

[206] Christopher D. Yung, "China's Expeditionary and Power Projection Capabilities Trajectory: Lessons from Recent Expeditionary Operations," Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, January 21, 2016, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/USCC%20Testimony%202016_Yung.pdf#:~:text=Non-Combatant%20Evacuation%20Operation%20(NEO)%20of%20Chinese.

large Chinese embassy compounds such as that in Antigua and Barbuda,[207] to conduct small-scale offensive operations against US targets.

Such PRC operations from Latin America would likely be complimented by intelligence collection and attacks from within the US, including efforts against critical infrastructure targets and possibly terrorism against population centers and symbolic targets. Such attacks could leverage Chinese and allied foreign nationals who had been smuggled into the US months or even years prior, across the US border without their biometric data being captured.[208]

Returning to PRC actions outside of Mexico, in addition to targeting US facilities directly, PRC agents in Latin America and the Caribbean might also launch attacks on soft targets in the region that would have a significant indirect effect on the US. These might include attacking Mexican or Central American manufacturing infrastructure critical for the supply chains of US-based companies, particularly those the defense sector. The PRC might similarly attack agricultural production in Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean in a deniable fashion, including launching genetically engineered viruses and other forms of biological warfare designed to decimate crops and herds to undercut the ability to supply agricultural goods to the US.

In a similar fashion, PRC agents in the region might attack economic or other targets there to incite crises or panic that would drive an expanded flood of immigrants through the Caribbean and Central America across the US-Mexican border, which would particularly oblige the US in wartime to divert resources to control the border and process those immigrants. Such an expanded wave of migrants would afford the PRC opportunities to smuggle even more of its agents to conduct sabotage and terrorism operations within the US itself. The PRC might also use cyber-attacks of deniable origin to achieve such effects, in the same way that the Conti virus severely harmed the economy of Costa Rica.[209]

While the PRC and aligned anti-US partners might use such attacks to impact the US through manufacturing and food supply chains and to generate an expanded refugee crisis, obligating the US to divert resources to the border, the PRC might also use such operations to harm and send a message to partners in the region who were cooperating with the US in the conflict. Such acts of "intimidation" by the PRC might be directed not only towards those directly contributing military forces but also against those permitting

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[207] Deidre Kirsten Tatlow, "China Building New Outpost on U.S. Doorstep, Leaked Documents Reveal," Newsweek, April 19, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/2024/05/03/china-caribbean-united-states-antigua-belt-road-diplomacy-debt-chinese-xi-jinping-rivalry-1891668.html#:~:text=Opened%20in%20Dec.%202022,%20China's%20very.

[208] "Is China Sneaking Military Personnel into the U.S. Via Border? What We Know," *Newsweek*, June 16, 2023, https://www.newsweek.com/china-military-personnel-us-southern-border-national-security-mark-green-1807287#:~:text=During%20a%20press%20conference,%20Green%20noted.

[209] Christine Murphy and Mehul Srivastava, "How Conti ransomware group crippled Costa Rica – then fell apart," *Financial Times,* July 9, 2022, https://www.ft.com/content/9895f997-5941-445c-9572-9cef66d130f5#:~:text=Conti%E2%80%99s%20most%20impactful%20attack%20turned%20out.

the US access to their airspace, ports, and land facilities or providing the US with intelligence cooperation. Such PRC attacks would induce the targeted regimes to cease such cooperation, and intimidate others engaged in or contemplating such cooperation.

With respect to the Panama Canal, as a strategically vital logistics corridor, contractual commitments and PRC efforts at image management would probably prevent the PRC-based company Hutchinson Port Holdings from overtly shutting down the operations of its port facilities on each side of the Canal.[210] Nonetheless, leveraging detailed knowledge and opportunities from the extensive PRC commercial presence in Panama, PRC agents could deniably shut down the Panama Canal for the duration of the conflict through other means. They might do so, for example, through attacks on the canal's water management system, credible threats of mining the canal zone, or sinking a container ship in a key part of the canal such as "Culebra Cut," just to name a few options.

Beyond the Panama Canal, is likely that by the time of the contemplated scenario, PRC-based companies would have completed their proposed commercial port facility in Tierra del Fuego, Argentina.[211] Through this port, they would have a physical presence near the Straits of Magellan and the nearby Drake passage from which they could observe or disrupt military and commercial shipping transiting the area, whose importance of a route would become even more important following a forced closure of the Panama Canal.

In the context of a major conflict, the PRC would likely leverage its access to the skies and outer space over the Western Hemisphere to help locate and target US and allied satellites, as well as interact with its Space-based weapon systems for attacking US strategic targets,[212] including its Fractional Orbital Bombardment System and associated hypersonic glide vehicles.[213]

The PRC would obtain such access through the Space facilities it operates, the equipment it has installed, and the Space personnel it has trained in the region. It would also likely leverage its data-sharing agreements and relationships it has with friendly governments. For the PRC, such assets and options include the Deep Space Radar, which China Launch

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[210] Ron MacCammon, "Losing strategic control of the Panama Canal to the People's Republic of China," *The Washington Times*, November 2, 2021, https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/nov/2/losing-strategic-control-of-the-panama-canal-to-th/.

[211] Gonzalo Banez, "Avance chino en la Argentina: sus motivos ocultos para construir un puerto en Tierra del Fuego," *Todo Noticias*, June 2, 2023, https://tn.com.ar/internacional/2023/06/02/avance-chino-en-la-argentina-los-motivos-ocultos-de-su-plan-para-para-construir-un-puerto-en-tierra-del-fuego/#:~:text=La%20empresa%20de%20capitales%20chinos%20Tierra.

[212] R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Update," *Dialogo,* February 21, 2024, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-update/.

[213] Zuzanna Gwadera, "Intelligence leak reveals China's successful test of a new hypersonic missile," *IISS*, May 18, 2023, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/05/intelligence-leak-reveals-chinas-successful-test-of-a-new-hypersonic-missile/#:~:text=The%20possible%20development%20by%20China%20of.

and Tracking Control (CLTC) of the PLA operates in Neuquén, Argentina, the radio telescope it is building in San Juan province, Argentina,[214] and the primary and secondary satellite tracking facilities it has built and instrumented in politically sympathetic Venezuela and Bolivia. Additional options for the PRC in this domain would possibly include its relationship with and access to Brazilian space facilities through the relationships it built working with Brazil in the CBERS program.[215] Indeed, its access will probably have expanded under the PRC—friendly Lula administration, potentially allowing the PRC to gain access to the Alcantara equatorial launch facility. The PRC would also likely leverage data sharing and other space collaboration with Peru through the Asia Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO), possible continued access to Chilean space facilities such as the Santiago Space Station and Calan Hill observatories, and possible work with the Mexican Space Agency, which the PRC is currently courting, and which the new science and technology-friendly Claudia Sheinbaum regime in Mexico could be receptive to. [216]

In the later stages of a war with the US, if the PRC had gained the upper hand in the Indo-Pacific and was looking to take the fight to the US, it might leverage commercial maritime facilities under its control, such as the Port of Chancay to support and resupply it's naval vessels and other capabilities, in order to project threats against the US from the Eastern Pacific.[217]

By the postulated time in which the scenario occurs, it is further likely that the PRC would have options to use ports and other logistics facilities in Central America to support its military operations. These might include the port that it is building in San Lorenzo, Honduras,[218] and the facility its companies have discussed building in La Union, El Salvador.[219] From this area, the PRC would have expanded options to move limited

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[214] Carlo J.V. Caro, "The Patagonian Enigma: China's Deep Space Station in Argentina," *The Diplomat*, January 8, 2024, https://thediplomat.com/2024/01/the-patagonian-enigma-chinas-deep-space-station-in-argentina/#:~:text=In%202014,%20Argentina%20and%20China%20entered.

[215] "Experts see broad prospects for China-Brazil aerospace cooperation," *CGTN*, February 7, 2024, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2024-02-07/Experts-see-broad-prospects-for-China-Brazil-aerospace-cooperation-1r0eiI3kjFS/p.html#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%2030%20years,%20China.

[216] R. Evan Ellis, "China-Latin America Space Cooperation – An Update," *Dialogo,* February 21, 2024, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/china-latin-america-space-cooperation-an-update/.

[217] See, for example, Esteban Salazar Herrada, "Megapuerto de Chancay podría ser usado por la marina china para "operaciones contra la costa oeste de EEUU", advierte The Telegraph," *Infobae,* September 28, 2024, https://www.infobae.com/peru/2024/09/25/megapuerto-de-chancay-podria-ser-usado-por-la-marina-china-para-apoyar-operaciones-contra-la-costa-oeste-de-eeuu-advierte-the-telegraph/#:~:text=La%20instalaci%C3%B3n%20del%20Puerto%20de%20Chancay.

[218] Rosa Maria Pastran, "Puerto de San Lorenzo en Honduras será ampliado por una empresa china," El Economista, August 18, 2023, https://www.eleconomista.net/economia/Puerto-de-San-Lorenzo-en-Honduras-sera-ampliado-por-una-empresa-china-20230818-0004.html.

[219] Ken Dilanian, Joel Seidman and Gabriel Sanchez, "A project in El Salvador shows how China is exerting growing power in America's backyard," *NBC News*, September 4, 2021,

quantities of military materials and forces between the Atlantic and Pacific coasts under conditions of some secrecy across the Central American isthmus, using the CA4 "Dry Canal" road (and possibly by then rail) corridor across Honduras, the rail system it has proposed building across Nicaragua from Corinto to Bluefields,[220] or possibly even the Trans-Sismic corridor from Port Salinas Cruz to Veracruz, Mexico. The ability to employ each of these, and the secrecy with which it would do so, would depend on the degree to which the PRC can build out and establish practical control over such infrastructure, as the extent to which it dominates the governments in question through its economic position and influence networks in those countries.

As the PRC seeks favors from governments of the region in support of its military objectives via political sympathy, inducements, or pressure, it would be supported by knowledge of the targeted leadership personnel in question, having brought many of them or those who know them, to the PRC for "people-to-people" diplomacy in the preceding years.[221] The PRC would also be able to leverage digital and other intelligence on those targeted individuals' desires and personal vulnerabilities, which the PRC could use to better target rewarding or extorting them. Its source of such information would be, in part, the web of interpersonal relationships it continues to build in the region, as well as its digital access to them, as a product of its domination of the telecommunications and cloud computing infrastructure of the region, surveillance systems infrastructures, and other possible sources of digital espionage from ZPMC port cranes to Nuctec scanners, to the Didi Chuxing ride-sharing applications, to name a few.[222]

In its military and espionage efforts in the region, the PRC would also likely be complemented by politically sympathetic and economically dependent anti-US partners, including Russia, Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and possibly other regimes that had consolidated anti-US regimes by that time, even though such regimes would not dare to overtly challenge the US in such a fashion outside the context of a major war.

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https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/national-security/project-el-salvador-shows-how-china-exerting-growing-power-america-n1278464.

[220] "Nicaragua firmará con una empresa china la construcción de un ferrocarril," Infobae, October 16, 2023, https://www.infobae.com/america/agencias/2023/10/17/nicaragua-firmara-con-una-empresa-china-la-construccion-de-un-ferrocarril/#:~:text=Tambi%C3%A9n%20firmar%C3%A1n%20%22la%20formulaci%C3%B3n%20del%20plan.

[221] Eduardo Gamarra, "How China uses 'geostrategic corruption' to exert its influence in Latin America," *The Conversation,* May 17, 2023, https://theconversation.com/how-china-uses-geostrategic-corruption-to-exert-its-influence-in-latin-america-201119#:~:text=As%20scholars%20of%20Latin%20American%20politics,

[222] R. Evan Ellis, "El Avance Digital de China en America Latina" *Seguridad y Poder Terrestre*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2022): July-September, https://revistas.ceeep.mil.pe/index.php/seguridad-y-poder-terrestre/article/view/5, pp. 15-39.

The PRC might also be helped by the mercenary participation of organized crime groups such as the Sinaloa and Jalisco Nuevo Generacion cartels, with whom Chinese criminal mafias had possibly cultivated relationships.[223]

RECOMMENDATIONS

To prepare for and counter the risk of PRC wartime activities in Latin America today, it is important for the US to work towards sustaining the health of US-friendly democratic governments in which transparency and the rule of law prevail in their interactions. This is the first line of defense to limiting options for nefarious PRC access. Although not easy, the primary vehicles for advancing such a state include diplomatic efforts involving dialogue and pressure, commercial efforts, security support, and other activities.

In sectors such as digital, where PRC dominance potentially creates unacceptable strategic risks, including potentially undermining the sovereign decisions of partner nations and their leaders, the US and those partners must go beyond transparency and merely seeking a level playing field and actively work to prevent the dominance by PRC-based entities of these sectors. Such US proactivity might include working with like-minded democratic partners, such as Japan, South Korea, and the European Union, to present non-PRC alternatives.

Where possible, the US should conduct conversations today with receptive regimes in the region to identify and prepare to fight back against the major actions the PRC might take to attack or exploit their infrastructure in wartime. This might include plans for cooperation to respond to unauthorized PRC use of their territory, including port and space facilities. US collaborative planning with partners might also include plans to protect them against PRC cyber-attacks, infrastructure attacks, terrorism, or biowarfare. The US and its partners may also wish to have a frank discussion in the near term regarding how to respond if there is a situation of contested government in the region that the Chinese are exploiting to use partner nation port and space facilities during the conflict with the authorization of only some government personnel.

In Asia, INDOPACOM should plan today for possibly significant interruptions in US force projection, deployment, and sustainment flows coming from the continental US through the Western Hemisphere. Reciprocally, SOUTHCOM should revisit plans to not only defend the Panama Canal and respond to the simultaneous closure of both the Panama Canal and the Straits of Magellan.

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[223] Leland Lazarus and Alexander Gocso, "Triads, Snakeheads, and Flying Money: The Underworld of Chinese Criminal Networks in Latin America and the Caribbean," *Dialogo*, September 27, 2023, https://dialogo-americas.com/articles/triads-snakeheads-and-flying-money-the-underworld-of-chinese-criminal-networks-in-latin-america-and-the-caribbean/#:~:text=In%20his%20seminal%202012%20piece,%20Chinese.

Although the Western Hemisphere would not likely be the primary PRC area of operation, NORTHCOM/NORAD, as well as SOUTHCOM, should relook at plans for responding to once unthinkable enemy combat operations in the AOR, whether from Chinese and Russian submarines or strategic aircraft, or even irregular forces. This would include not only military operations directed at the US but possibly also against those helping or cooperating with the US in the fight, possibly from the territory of populist anti-US neighbors. It could include threats from the maritime and land domains in the Pacific, Caribbean, Atlantic, and even the Arctic.

Because of likely penetration by significant numbers of PLA and other forces into the US homeland before and during the early phases of the operation, NORTHCOM, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), and other affected organizations should plan now for significantly increased protection of strategic military, economic, and leadership sites within the US that would likely be targeted. These might include the telecommunications and power grid, as well as population centers and sites of national importance.

In the same spirit, US authorities should expand their protocols for responding to workarounds and for working under conditions of chaos and public panic. They should also focus added attention on political succession planning, with reversion to different secondary national command authorities and sites if protections fail.

All such cooperation may also require the US to revisit protocols for cooperation between the US military, the National Guard, and the state and local authorities and a reexamination of national command response plans against a far greater level of threat than may currently be planned for today.

A war between the US and the PRC will not be confined to the Indo-Pacific. It will confront the nations of Latin America with unprecedented dilemmas and likely involve levels of harm and chaos in the US homeland beyond any war fought in US history to date. While likely to be an unmitigated disaster for all, every effort that the US and its partners can take today to anticipate and prepare for those risks will make what could be, at least, somewhat less tragic.

Chapter 7 – Strategic Surprise in U.S.-India Relations

Philip Hultquist

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the possibility of strategic surprise by examining the assumptions underpinning the role the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy expects India to play in managing the China challenge. Assumptions embedded in the American imagination—about itself, how geopolitics function, and what drives India's behavior in particular—risk strategic surprise in the Indo-Pacific. India may surprise the U.S. by being unable and unwilling to align with U.S. interests in the short and long run despite the U.S.'s preferential investments in India's capabilities. The strategic surprise would have far-reaching operational consequences, including India's likely failure to control the Indian Ocean or protect sea lines of communication, provide regional security, compete with China for regional influence, or provide the U.S. access, basing, or overflight in a contingency in the Pacific.

The U.S. is betting big on India in the Indo-Pacific. Seen as a regional democratic counterweight to a rising, belligerent authoritarian China, India fits Washington's assumptions of a "natural ally."[224] At a time when the U.S. correctly understands it cannot go it alone, U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific is gambling that strategic alignment with India—once famous for its non-aligned foreign policy—is the key to containing China as a regional, rather than global power. To achieve this alignment, the U.S. is willing to give India a more preferential deal than most of its formal allies, especially in technology transfers, co-production, and co-development of existing and new weapons technology.

The Biden administration's declaratory policy stated the intention of strengthening India early in his presidency. The 2021 *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* declares the U.S. will deepen its partnership with India.[225] The 2021 *White House Indo-Pacific*

[224] Richard Fontaine and Richard Armitage, "Natural Allies: A Blueprint for the Future of U.S.-India Relations," CNAS, October 18, 2010, https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/natural-allies-a-blueprint-for-the-future-of-u-s-india-relations.

[225] Joseph Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance" (Washington, D.C: The White House, 2021), https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/03/03/interim-national-security-strategic-guidance/.

Strategy stated that the U.S. will "steadily advance our Major Defense Partnership with India" as a means to "support India's rise and regional leadership," recognizing that India is a "like-minded country."[226] While the Biden administration saw partnerships with a range of countries as the key to securing a "free and open Indo-Pacific," it went further with India, explicitly aiding the rise of India as a regional leader.

Washington's expectations of New Delhi are not new with the Biden administration. They are a snowballing consensus across administrations, at least since the George W. Bush administration's civilian nuclear deal, which legitimized India's nuclear capabilities. The Obama administration increased attempts at courting India, calling the relationship "indispensable" and "one of the defining relationships of the 21st Century."[227] The first Trump administration doubled down on the growing relationship. President Trump and Prime Minister Narendra Modi exchanged high-visibility visits with massive fanfare. After the 2020 Sino-Indian clash in Ladakh and subsequent standoff, the two countries increased cooperation in intelligence sharing.[228] In 2021 before leaving office, the Trump administration declassified its *Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework*, which is more explicit in stating that U.S. strategy is to accelerate India's rise.[229] Consensus in Washington is hard to find—between Republicans and Democrats, bureaucrats and politicians, the Pentagon and Foggy Bottom, realists and liberals—but Washington has found consensus in its expectation (or assumption) that India *will align* with the U.S.

This consensus sets Washington up for a strategic surprise—an event that shatters our assumptions, expectations, or paradigms with strategic consequences. Unlike America's traditional partners, India values its autonomy over its relationship with the U.S., which India views as a means to aid its great power ambitions. India is only likely to act when it serves its own interests, which it defines narrowly, and it is highly unlikely to act if it risks its rise to great power status. India's vital interests do not extend to the Taiwan issue in the Pacific and do not include making China a long-term adversary. A strategic surprise in U.S.-India relations would have far-reaching consequences, notably in military planning assumptions regarding access, basing, and overflight in the Indian Ocean to support a contingency in the Pacific.

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[226] Joseph Biden, "Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States" (The White House, February 2022), 13, 16, INDO- PACIFIC STRATEGY The White House (.gov) https://www.whitehouse.gov › uploads › 2022/02.

[227] Barack Obama, "The U.S. - India Partnership: The Fact Sheets," whitehouse.gov, November 8, 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/us-india-partnership-fact-sheets.

[228] Paul Shinkman, "U.S. Intel Helped India Rout China in 2022 Border Clash," March 20, 2023, https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2023-03-20/u-s-intel-helped-india-rout-china-in-2022-border-clash-sources.

[229] Robert C. O'Brien, "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific" (Washington, DC: National Security Council, January 5, 2021), https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/IPS-Final-Declass.pdf.

THE INDIA GAMBLE

To accelerate India's alignment with the U.S., Washington is investing in India's rise to become a self-sufficient great power, enabling India's long-time ambition for strategic autonomy (discussed in detail below). The U.S. investment in India is part of a long-term improvement in relations since 2000. Despite the current optimism in Washington over U.S.-Indian relations, the history is primarily one of mistrust, often stemming from America's lack of understanding of South Asian dynamics. Although interactions between Indians and Americans have a longer history, [230] the relationship since India's independence has been quite rocky. Is the current strategic environment strong enough to push the two countries together in the long run?

The U.S. Investment in India's Alignment

Since Clinton's visit in March of 2000 signaled the warming of relations after India's 1998 nuclear tests, the U.S. and India have been on a slow but tumultuous road to a strategic partnership. The relationship gained momentum during the Bush administration, which signed a new framework for a U.S.-India Defense Relationship and, most importantly, the Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Initiative.[231] During the Obama administration, the U.S. and India began a strategic dialogue, [232] the U.S. formally backed India's bid for a permanent seat at the UN Security Council,[233] and the U.S. recognized India as a Major Defense Partner. [234] The Trump administration expanded the defense relationship (COMCASA), granted India Strategic Trade Authority status for access to dual-use technologies, and, elevated the name of the relationship to a Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership.[235] Pushing the partnership further, in the wake of the clashes

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[230] Srinath Raghavan, *Fierce Enigmas: A History of the United States in South Asia* (New York: Basic Books, 2018).

[231] Department of State, "U.S.-India Civil Nuclear Cooperation Initiative" (Department of State. The Office of Electronic Information, Bureau of Public Affairs, October 15, 2008), https://2001-2009.state.gov/p/sca/rls/fs/2008/109567.htm.

[232] Indian Embassy USA, "India-US Strategic Dialogue Joint Statement," Indian Embassy USA, July 19, 2011, https://www.indianembassyusa.gov.in/ArchivesDetails?id=1608.

[233] Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the Joint Session of the Indian Parliament in New Delhi, India," whitehouse.gov, November 8, 2010, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/08/remarks-president-joint-session-indian-parliament-new-delhi-india.

[234] The White House and The Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Statement: The United States and India: Enduring Global Partners in the 21st Century," whitehouse.gov, June 7, 2016, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/06/07/joint-statement-united-states-and-india-enduring-global-partners-21st.

[235] The White House and Prime Minister's Office, "Joint Statement: Vision and Principles for the United States-India Comprehensive Global Strategic Partnership – The White House," February 25, 2020,

between Chinese and Indian troops along the Line of Actual Control, the two countries signed an advanced intelligence sharing agreement (BECA).[236]

The Biden administration advanced the relationship to its current heights. The two countries signed a deal to co-produce General Electric's F414 jet engines,[237] transferring proprietary technology to India, which has failed for decades to produce jet engines for the Tejas jets domestically.[238] Notably, the Biden administration signed a deal investing in the Initiative on Critical and Emerging Technologies (iCET) in 2023 which enables increased co-development in defense systems, including INDUS-X, the India-U.S. Defence Accelerator Ecosystem.[239]

The formal relationship has advanced despite numerous diplomatic rows, including the U.S. arrest of an Indian consular worker,[240] Freedom of Navigation Operations inside of India's Exclusive Economic Zone,[241] and dueling accusations of human rights abuses.[242] India continues to object to the U.S. arming of Pakistan,[243] most recently after the 2022 F-16 sustainment package. Most strikingly, the relationship continues despite evidence

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https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-vision-principles-united-states-india-comprehensive-global-strategic-partnership/.

[236] Kashish Parpiani, "Biden, Trump, and India-US Technology Partnership" (Observer Research Foundation, August 29, 2024), https://www.orfonline.org/research/biden-trump-and-india-us-technology-partnership.

[237] GE Press Office, "GE Aerospace Signs MOU with Hindustan Aeronautics Limited to Produce Fighter Jet Engines for Indian Air Force," June 22, 2023, https://www.geaerospace.com/news/press-releases/defense-engines/ge-aerospace-signs-mou-hindustan-aeronautics-limited-produce-fighter.

[238] Antoine Levesques, "US–India Defence and Technology Cooperation," IISS, July 20, 2023, https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/online-analysis/2023/07/us-india-defence-and-technology-cooperation/.

[239] Kumar Ajay and Tejas Bharadwaj, "One Year of the INDUS-X: Defense Innovation Between India and the U.S.," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 18, 2024, https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/06/one-year-of-the-indus-x-defense-innovation-between-india-and-the-us?lang=en.

[240] Jonah Blank, "U.S.-India Dispute: A Diplomat and a Double-Standard Laid Bare," January 9, 2014, https://www.rand.org/pubs/commentary/2014/01/us-india-dispute-a-diplomat-and-a-double-standard.html.

[241] The Associated Press, "India Objects to US Navy Ship's Transit without Consent," *Navy Times,* April 11, 2021, https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2021/04/11/india-objects-to-us-navy-ships-transit-without-consent/.

[242] "India Dismisses US Human Rights Report as 'Deeply Biased,'" *Reuters*, April 25, 2024, sec. India, https://www.reuters.com/world/india/india-says-us-human-rights-report-deeply-biased-2024-04-25/.

[243] "'You're Not Fooling Anybody…' Jaishankar Responds to US F-16 Package for Pakistan," *Hindustan Times,* September 26, 2022, https://www.hindustantimes.com/world-news/youre-not-fooling-anybody-jaishankar-responds-to-us-f-16-package-for-pakistan-101664183691205.html.

that India has sought to assassinate a U.S. citizen on U.S. soil, whom India views as a pro-Khalistan terrorist.[244]

U.S. Expectations for a Return on Investment in India

U.S. strategy believes strengthening India and its ability to indigenize its weapons manufacturing capability will serve U.S. short and long-term interests by 1) reducing India's weapons dependency on Russia, freeing it politically to support the U.S., 2) outsourcing to India the responsibility for South Asian security and control of the Indian Ocean, 3) providing a strategic dilemma on the subcontinent for China, reducing its ability to project naval power, and 4) (though unwritten) provide the U.S. access, basing, and overflight (ABO) in a contingency on the Pacific side of the Indo-Pacific. It's unclear whether India can or will do any of these.

Most U.S. expectations of India's gamble are part of a long-term realignment plan to contain China, but the U.S. also expects India to de-align with Russia. India's weapons dependence on Russia is not just a relic of the Cold War but a symptom of a deep connection and shared vision for the world order.[245] After the 1962 war with China, India's demand for weapons imports spiked, realizing that its own goal of indigenizing its weapons manufacturing capacity would not outpace its demand.[246] India chose to begin importing from the USSR based more on price and an ideological affinity than belief in Soviet beneficence to India.[247] During India's short 1962 war with China, which occurred during the Cuban Missile Crisis, the U.S. was more forthcoming with aid to India than the Soviets, who ignored India's pleas in solidarity with its communist partner in China. Despite this, India's dependence on Russian weapons imports grew as mutual mistrust grew between India and the U.S. under the Nixon administration, largely due to U.S. support for Pakistan, personality affinities between President Nixon and Pakistan military dictator Yahya Khan, and contempt between Nixon and Indian Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.[248] With the U.S. support for Pakistan growing, and the early signs of the

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[244] Cherylann Mollan and Nadine Yousif, "US Charges Ex-India Agent in Sikh Separatist Murder Plot: Gurpatwant Singh Pannu," October 18, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cm2949p14k4o.

[245] Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement Following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit," Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India, July 9, 2024, https://mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/37940/Joint+Statement+following+the+22nd+IndiaRussia+Annual+Summit.

[246] Christophe Jaffrelot and Aadil Sud, "Indian Military Dependence on Russia," Institut Montaigne, July 5, 2022, https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/expressions/indian-military-dependence-russia.

[247] Jaffrelot and Sud.

[248] Kallol Bhattacherjee, "Kissinger, Nixon 'Helped' Pakistan in 1971, Documents from U.S. Archive Reveal," *The Hindu*, November 30, 2023, sec. India, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kissinger-nixon-broke-us-rule-to-help-pakistan-sent-aircraft-from-third-countries-as-they-feared-india-was-about-to-attack-west-pakistan/article67591823.ece.

Sino-Soviet split, India broke with its non-aligned policy and signed the Indo-Soviet Treaty of Peace, Friendship, and Cooperation in 1971. The treaty obligated the USSR to provide security assistance to India in a crisis that was brewing with the West Pakistani genocide of Bengalis in East Pakistan. This strategic context allowed India to align with the USSR, becoming entirely dependent on Soviet arms imports, without fear of the USSR withholding support in a war with China. India's dependence on Russia has deepened since 1971 and has only shown signs of weakening in recent years.

India has been unable to indigenize its weapons manufacturing capabilities. Still, it has redoubled its efforts in an attempt to become a full-fledged great power and hedge against a feared Russian re-alignment with China.[249] The U.S. is investing in India's weapons manufacturing capacity to accelerate this trend, believing that an India not dependent on Russia will de-align from Russia to become more fully in the U.S. camp and be free to support the U.S. politically. The U.S. has doubled down on this bet, even after India refused to denounce Russia's invasion of Ukraine. While India is currently diversifying its arms imports, India's *ability* to de-align from Russia is suspect, given its dependence on Russian resupply for decades, its legacy systems, and the new imports of the Russian S-400s. Given that India and Russia share a vision for a multipolar world order,[250] with each great power dominating a sphere of influence, we should be suspicious of India's willingness to de-align from Russia.

Notably, India's incentive to de-align from Russia is contingent on the closeness of Sino-Russian relations.[251] When China and Russia are aligned—as is the current trend—India must fear whether Russia will provide a resupply to India during an armed conflict with China. When China and Russia are opposed, this fear is abated. Recall that India only signed the security treaty with the Soviet Union during the Sino-Soviet split. Currently, India's goal is to keep Russia and China apart, which would allow India to maintain resupply while it builds its local defense capacity. Indian commentators often express dismay that the U.S. strategy tries to lump them together.[252] While America's European allies worry about President Trump's emerging rapprochement with Russia, India will silently smile.

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[249] Suchitra Karthikeyan, "Make in India: Defence Manufacturing Push, Projects & Need Explained," *The Hindu*, April 26, 2022, sec. India, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/make-in-india-defence-manufacturing-push-projects-need-explained/article65348645.ece.

[250] Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement Following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit."

[251] Tanvi Madan, *Fateful Triangle: How China Shaped U.S.-India Relations During the Cold War* (Brookings Institution Press, 2020), https://www.brookings.edu/books/fateful-triangle/; Nivedita Kapoor and Tanvi Madan, "Why India Cares about China-Russia Relations," accessed February 9, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-india-cares-about-china-russia-relations/.

[252] Raj Kumar Sharma, "Russia-China Alignment: A View from India," https://www.natstrat.org, July 30, 2024, https://www.natstrat.org/articledetail/publications/russia-china-alignment-a-view-from-india-154.html.

In the long run, the bulk of U.S. expectations for India concern China, not Russia. We can best understand U.S. expectations for India regarding China by reviewing the logistics problem currently facing planners trying to regain a favorable balance of power in the Taiwan Strait, which the U.S. is attempting to solve through its regional partners. The U.S. is focused on bringing military capacity inside the second island chain to have a chance at denying China's invasion of Taiwan, seen as a necessary step to deterring China. This focus requires offloading other areas of responsibility to allies and partners, such as the Quad countries: the U.S., Japan, India, and Australia.

The declassified 2021 Indo-Pacific Strategic Framework explicitly states its expectations that by helping India increase its own capacity, it can manage the Indo side of the Indo-Pacific. The strategic framework seeks an India that is a "net security provider" in South Asia, deferring to India's wish to be a regional hegemon.[253] Further, the strategic framework expects that India will control the Indian Ocean, which will become an important maritime theater in a potential contingency with China. This choice may be prudent if the U.S. cannot devote resources to strategic competition in South Asia. Still, it goes against U.S. policy to reject a sphere of influence approach to geopolitics.[254] The U.S. should also be aware that India is losing the strategic competition to China in South Asia on the continent and the maritime states. As China wins the strategic competition for political favor in places like Nepal, the Maldives, and Sri Lanka, it extends its reach into South Asia, its power project capabilities, and its economic resource base.

Although unstated in declaratory policy, the U.S. may expect India to play an active role in a Taiwan contingency. Because Washington is used to buying influence with its investments, it likely expects India will do more than support the U.S. politically. The U.S. may expect India to mobilize its Army near the contested areas in the disputed areas with China along the Line of Actual Control. To do so would create a strategic dilemma for Chinese ground forces, which would not be able to concentrate on the Taiwan mission. In the maritime domain, the U.S. will expect India to provide access, basing, and overflight (ABO), especially safe harbor in its ports in the Bay of Bengal, such as at Chennai or Visakhapatnam. At an extreme, the U.S. may wish to use India's Port Blair, strategically located at the mouth of the Strait of Malacca, or even expect Indian Naval assistance to blockade the Strait.

EXPLAINING U.S. EXPECTATIONS

U.S. expectations of India's alignment and behavior in a crisis fit very well with the strategic culture of elite policymakers in the U.S. Underlying these strategic expectations are often unexamined assumptions about what drives behavior in global politics. The

[253] O'Brien, "US Strategic Framework for the Indo-Pacific."

[254] Robert Kagan, "The United States Must Resist a Return to Spheres of Interest in the International System," Brookings Institute, February 19, 2015, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-united-states-must-resist-a-return-to-spheres-of-interest-in-the-international-system/.

default expectation is that countries want to align with the U.S.; the main barriers to alignment are authoritarian leaders who are unrepresentative of their populations or our own restrictions based on human rights records. Without these barriers, realist policymakers expect India to align to balance a rising China. Since China is an unfriendly neighbor to India with an ongoing border dispute and India is the weaker party to that dyad, the logic of balancing is difficult to deny. Liberal policymakers expect democracies to align based on shared values and ideology. India is a democracy,[255] has become increasingly capitalist since the end of the Cold War, and has an adversarial relationship with the authoritarian and ideologically illiberal regime in Beijing. From a certain distance, Indo-American alignment seems overdetermined. However, a closer look reveals a risk to U.S. investment in India.

U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy believes its investments in India's capabilities will result in its alignment with the U.S. for several reasons stemming from untested assumptions in the American imagination about how the U.S. sees itself, the current context supporting both realist and liberal U.S. foreign policy views, and how experience with previous partners has reinforced a view of allied dependence and reciprocity.

The U.S. sees itself as a benign leader of the world, providing global public goods to the world and ensuring world peace. The belief in one's inherent goodness makes it difficult to imagine why some countries may not wish to join with them. Americans also believe that their country's foreign policy since World War II has been strategically superior, making it difficult to think why an ally or partner might not want to align security policies. Fundamentally, it is difficult for Americans to believe that any country would not want to be closer to the U.S., especially if itis a "like-minded democracy" that shares U.S. adversaries.

Washington policymakers and Americans more broadly tend to see the world through the two often-opposing ideologies of realism and liberalism, drawn from classical political theory and modern international relations theory. Where liberals believe countries will align based on shared ideology, regime type, and economic system, realists stress that countries will align when they have a shared interest in balancing power against a shared adversary.

The current strategic context supports both views, erasing the only serious dividing line among strategic policymakers in the U.S. For liberals, India and the US share co-democracy, co-capitalism, and an ideological belief in a liberal rules-based international order. While the history of U.S.-Indian relations bears out a frustrated relationship, liberals can interpret the current environment as a moment when the barriers of India's socialist economy have eroded, and the two natural allies can finally align. The liberal

[255] If you don't look too closely.

strategic bet is that shared liberal values and economic ties will hold the two together, even while India's liberal democratic credentials are eroding.[256]

For realists, it made sense that India refused to align during the Cold War when the U.S. funded and armed India's sworn enemy, Pakistan. But with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, Pakistan's importance is reduced. Most importantly, the U.S. and India share an adversary in China. India has a long-standing territorial dispute with China, ranging over 4,000 kilometers (over 2,100 miles) since China illegally annexed Tibet in the 1950s. The dispute led to the 1962 Sino-India War. In the war, China invaded India across the neutral zone, pushed India back behind the Chinese claim, and then unilaterally declared a ceasefire, embarrassing India. The war serves as a powerful reminder of Chinese betrayal. India and China were able to cooperate in other areas despite the dispute from the 1980s until 2020, when China once again crossed the Line of Actual Control, leading to violent clashes with nail-studded bats in the Galwan Valley and a standoff through the winter. While US-India cooperation was already growing—and may have been a reason behind China's aggression—the incident spiked U.S. assistance to India during the crisis, notably intelligence sharing. Since the clashes, India has moved from a global fence-sitter to actively accepting U.S. investment. Still, India continued to drive a hard bargain, demanding technology transfers, co-development, and co-production deals to accompany U.S. investment. The realist bet is China's behavior will continue to be belligerent to both the U.S. and India, pushing the two together for the long term.

Beyond realist and liberal worldviews, U.S. policymakers expect investments and aid will buy India's alignment and cooperative behavior in crisis. Skeptics need only look at the U.S. commentariat's reaction to India's refusal to denounce Russia's war in Ukraine for evidence of an expected reciprocity. U.S. expectations have been reinforced by decades of obedient behavior by U.S. allies, partners, protectorates, and clients. In the post-war era, many weaker countries had little choice but to ally or partner with the U.S., given the disparity in power and the need for great power protection in a competitive Cold War environment. Yet India is not like a traditional U.S.-dependent ally.

THE RISK OF UNEXAMINED EXPECTATIONS

U.S. assumptions and expectations risk strategic surprise because the environment has changed. India has clear, explicit, divergent strategic preferences from the U.S. in the long term, and India has learned that the U.S. relationship is and will be transactional.

The current environment differs from the post-war and post-Cold War environments that taught the U.S. it could buy loyalty. The unipolar moment is over, and the emerging competitive international environment is likely to be more of a fragmented multipolar order (even if the U.S. is first among equals) rather than the bipolar order of the Cold War,

[256] Daniel Markey, "The Strategic Implications of India's Illiberalism and Democratic Erosion," *Asia Policy* 17, no. 1 (2022): 77–105.

providing client states more options in their bargaining for protection and security assistance.[257] Further, India is not like many of America's liberal European allies who share a vision for a rules-based order or weak client-states that can easily be bought. India gives only tepid lip service to the rules-based order, implicitly rejecting that it should be U.S.-led.[258] While India is significantly weaker than the U.S. and China, it is a significant middle power with the potential to rise to great power status. More importantly, Indian policymakers believe India's rise is inevitable and that it merits the respect of a great power, or at least a co-equal partner, even before its material power demonstrates it.

What Washington misses with its focus on realist and liberal expectations is the constructed cultural beliefs of New Delhi's strategic elite that have built a long-standing, embedded preference for strategic autonomy and demands respect as equals. Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas K. Gandhi's successor as the head of the Indian National Congress and India's first and longest-serving Prime Minister, successfully connected the widespread anti-colonial and anti-imperialist attitudes of ordinary Indians to a non-aligned foreign policy.[259] Nehru saw the U.S. as an extension of, or at least the same as, British imperialism and held disdain for the nuclear deterrence obsessions of the Americans and Soviets. Nehru established a foreign policy based on principles of mutual respect, territorial integrity, and non-interference in others' affairs, although this was not always upheld in India's neighborhood.[260] While non-alignment can be seen as an expression of foreign policy moralism, it is best seen as an attempt to preserve India's autonomy in the competitive Cold War environment.

Geopolitical conditions required India to betray its non-aligned ideal for alignment with the Soviet Union in the late 1960s through the end of the Cold War. Yet the preference for strategic autonomy has remained a core value—indeed, a strategic end—since Nehru's government. Successive Indian governments have professed non-alignment, or strategic autonomy, since Nehru. Even the current BJP government under Prime Minister Narendra Modi since 2014, which has shifted away from the language of non-alignment, repeatedly states a strategic preference for strategic autonomy and Atmanirbhar Bharat (or self-reliant India).[261]

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[257] Barry R. Posen, "Emerging Multipolarity: Why Should We Care?," *Current History* 108, no. 721 (November 1, 2009): 347–52, https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2009.108.721.347.

[258] Atul Mishra, "India's Policy for a Rules-Based Order: Inconsistency and Incoherence," Center for the Advanced Study of India (CASI), August 19, 2024, https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/atul-mishra; Happymon Jacob, "The 'India Pole' in International Politics," *The Hindu*, November 22, 2022, sec. Lead, https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-india-pole-in-international-politics/article66170757.ece.

[259] P.V. Narasimha Rao, "Nehru and Non-Alignment," *Mainstream Weekly* XLVII (May 30, 2009), https://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article1399.html.

[260] Jawaharlal Nehru, "The Concept of Panchsheel" (Lok Sabha, September 17, 1955).

[261] The BJP insistence on strategic autonomy over non-alignment and Atmanirbhar Bharat over swadeshi both reflect the BJP's rhetorical strategy to distance themselves and India, in general, from the legacy of the Indian National Congress.

While autonomy has been the long-term goal of India's foreign policy, more recently, Indian statesmen and stateswomen have explicitly tied autonomy to India's preference for a multipolar world order, with itself as a self-sufficient, autonomous great power that will manage its neighborhood.[262]

India's challenge in becoming self-sufficient and fully autonomous is its reliance on arms imports, notably from Russia, India's most aligned defense partner. For decades, India has attempted to indigenize its weapons manufacturing capabilities to be less reliant on arms imports, which inherently reduces its autonomy. Two recent events highlight India's dependence on Russia for resupply, demonstrating its lack of autonomy. First, when China crossed the Line of Actual Control in 2020, India's Ministry of Defence scrambled to secure resupply for its Russian legacy weapons systems if the clash with China were to become more serious. With China and Russia getting closer, Indians worried Russia might choose to refuse resupply in conflicts with China, leaving India vulnerable. Second, after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, India bent over backward to avoid denouncing Russia, repeatedly abstaining from UN resolutions condemning the invasion despite its clear violation of international law and the principles of territorial integrity that India professes as a core value.

Even though the current context of Sino-Russian alignment requires India to reduce its dependence on Russian manufacturing, it is not clear that the process will lead to Indo-Russia de-alignment. First, India's attempts at reducing dependence are just that, a reduction, not a reversal. India's legacy systems are Russian, which it cannot afford to replace except in the long run. Instead, India is diversifying its arms imports by increasing weapons imports from Israel, France, and Germany, and accepting American investment in its local capacity. All these combined efforts will still leave Russia as India's greatest source of arms imports for many years to come. The amount of U.S. investment that would be required to completely remove India's dependence on Russia is astronomical because it would require a complete transformation of its Russian legacy systems to U.S. systems, from T-72s to Abrams tanks, and so on. India would likely not be interested in that investment anyway. India has no intention of replacing Russian dependence with U.S. dependence. It seeks *independence* in arms manufacturing.

Even if India's efforts in diversification and indigenization are successful in the long run, India may not fully de-align from Russia politically. Diversification and indigenization may increase India's strategic autonomy from Russia. Still, India and Russia share a common vision for the future world order, which is opposed to the longstanding US liberal vision. Russia and India prefer a multipolar world order, where the poles manage their own neighborhood in a sphere of influence order, which the U.S. rejects.

While the current strategic context points toward India and the U.S. aligning, at least in the orthodox view, the current context is temporary. The U.S. bet on India only makes sense in the long run if America believes an autonomous India as a great power will act in

[262] Jacob, "The 'India Pole' in International Politics"; Indian Ministry of External Affairs and Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Joint Statement Following the 22nd India-Russia Annual Summit."

U.S. interests. India's preferences for a multipolar world order suggest that an autonomous India will attempt to carve out South Asia and the Indian Ocean as its backyard and expect deference in America's interactions in the neighborhood. The U.S. believes that investing in India now can shift those attitudes over time to build a values-based friendship, but this effort will likely fail. India knows that the U.S. does not have long-term friends; it only has interests. India watched closely as U.S. alignment with Pakistan waxed and waned based on U.S. interests of the time. The U.S. may try to build a values-based relationship that can build a shared vision and weather tumultuous times, but India fully understands the transactional nature of relationships in geopolitics.

STRATEGIC SURPRISE

U.S. policymakers expect that its preferential investments in India will buy its support in a contingency in the Pacific, notably with a PRC invasion of Taiwan—the planning scenario de jour. Yet India may surprise U.S. planners and policymakers by refusing to support the U.S. At its core, expending India's blood and treasure or risking its rising position is not in India's interest unless they are directly attacked. India's ties to Taiwan are weak, and taking risks for the transactional deal of U.S. investments is not worth it. The surprise may take the form of one of the following scenarios.

If India did want to support the U.S. in a Taiwan contingency, it would require extreme levels of resolve not to be deterred by China. China can threaten India along its border areas, forcing India to focus its attention on the Himalayas and away from the maritime domain, where the U.S. will want India's help, and away from the plains where Pakistan remains a threat. China's "all-weather friendship" with Pakistan allows for one of India's worst fears of a two-front war with China and Pakistan. Supporting the U.S. in a Taiwan contingency would risk India's economic relations with China, upon which India depends. These fears are well founded because China has shown a willingness to punish its neighbors with violence and economic sanctions, as examples from Vietnam, South Korea, and Australia demonstrate.[263]

Russia may deter India from supporting the U.S., given India still depends on Russian arms and resupply for its legacy systems. As Russia and China align, India must worry that Russia can threaten to withhold that resupply, not just for the contingency in the Pacific but for India's potential land wars with Pakistan and China, leaving India vulnerable.

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[263] Darren Lim and Victor Ferguson, "Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute," *The Asan Forum* (blog), December 28, 2019, https://theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute/; Miles Maochun Yu, "The 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War and Its Consequences," Hoover Institution, accessed March 8, 2025, https://www.hoover.org/research/1979-sino-vietnamese-war-and-its-consequences; Richard McGregor, "Chinese Coercion, Australian Resilience," Lowy Institute, October 20, 2022, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/chinese-coercion-australian-resilience.

The real surprise—entirely possible but unthinkable in the American imagination—would include India's switch from U.S.-aligned to geopolitical fence-sitter or to align with China. Despite India's long-running border disputes with China, a war in 1962, and the resurgence of clashes since 2020, India is capable of switching its alignment toward China or at least ending the antagonism. India would be quite content to settle the border disputes and focus its external energy on Pakistan. Pakistan is the enemy that has continued to be the thorn in India's side and whose rivalry has the benefit of shoring up domestic political support at will. Before the 2020 clashes with China, even after the 2017 Doklam standoff, India was very sensitive not to offend China's sentiments. India had joined and remained a member of several organizations alongside China that share the vision of a multipolar world order: the BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa; the RIC grouping of Russia, India, and China; the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); and is a founding member of the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB). That India sees China as a problem is solely related to China's physical contestation of the border areas and its continued coercion.

Although seemingly at odds with China's modus operandi of punishing those seeking outside alignment, China could settle the border with India, opening the door to a Sino-Indian détente or perhaps even friendship. China has settled all of its land borders with its neighbors except for India, indicating that it is capable of compromise and sees settling land disputes as a strategic means to expanding its projection in the maritime domain.[264] To achieve the settlement, China would likely require that India abandon the Quad and much of its alignment to the U.S. and India might require that China reduce its support to Pakistan, perhaps abandoning the Chinese-Pakistan Economic Corridor that India finds untenable. This deal would be attractive to India, which could remove an active threat on its borders where it is the weaker in the relationship. A deal such as this would also remove the imperative to reduce India's dependence on Russia, which would no longer be a worry if China is no longer a threat. The deal would be highly beneficial to China, taking India out of the anti-China coalition in one fell swoop and removing a giant flank in the U.S. containment strategy.

CONCLUSION

Despite preferential investment in India's great power ambitions, India may not be able to do what the U.S. expects, nor will it be willing to in many cases, given its divergent interests. At an extreme, India could create a strategic surprise in U.S.-India relations by de-aligning with the U.S. or aligning with China. The strategic surprise would have far-reaching operational consequences, including India's likely failure to control the Indian Ocean or protect sea lines of communication, provide regional security, compete with China for regional influence, de-align from Russia, or provide the U.S. access, basing, or

[264] Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation*, Princeton Studies in International History and Politics (Princeton University Press, 2008), https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691136097/strong-borders-secure-nation.

overflight in a contingency in the Pacific. U.S. planners should prepare for the possibility of a strategic surprise by preparing alternative options to solve the logistics challenges in the Indian Ocean. Beyond the operational planning for the Taiwan contingency, the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy to contain China will likely to fail without the India flank. To hedge against that event, Washington should consider dialing down its rhetoric with China and avoid a new cold war focused on U.S.-China rivalry. Without India on its side, the U.S. needs to rethink its entire assumptions about its primacist foreign policy in the Pacific. Rather than aim for a favorable balance of power globally, the U.S. should prepare for the coming multipolar period by prioritizing between vital and peripheral interests and dialing down its widespread ends to match its limited means.

Chapter 8 – Winning at Home: Analysis of Likely Public Support for Military Engagement in Future Conflicts

Jessica Blankshain, Heather Venable, and Bradford Wineman

ABSTRACT

The study analyzes the factors influencing U.S. public support for military engagement. The public generally supports action responding to aggression or safeguarding allies, particularly in conventional wars, but is less supportive of interventions for economic interests or promoting democracy. Historical views on the success and morality of past interventions are also influential. Manpower policies also affect support, with conscription being unpopular and potentially lowering support due to concerns about fairness rather than just personal risk. Policymakers must make a clear case for the necessity of interventions and attend to the distribution of costs to maintain public support. They also must take steps to build public resilience for a variety of scenarios.

It is a muggy August Saturday, and many American families are going about their days filled with youth sports and last-minute back-to-school shopping. A palpable buzz begins to echo through the nation's soccer fields and shopping malls as phones chime with breaking news alerts: China has attacked Taiwan. Pundits immediately start speculating about how the U.S. will respond. Part of this speculation is directed at the American public—will they back U.S. military involvement in the conflict with their votes, tax dollars, and bodies?

As we consider a wide range of future global and regional security challenges, an important question for US policymakers is: under what conditions will the US public support—and be willing to participate in—military action? While not perfectly rational in the social science sense, the domestic public appears to engage in some implicit cost-benefit analysis when considering possible military operations. Perceptions of these costs and benefits are malleable and can be shaped by numerous actors and factors. We draw on the existing scholarly literature, recent public opinion surveys, and lessons learned from contemporary Europe to create policy recommendations to help win the war at home in a form of shaping operations rarely discussed.

INFLUENCE OF CONFLICT TYPE ON PUBLIC SUPPORT

Throughout the study of conflict, scholars have examined the impact of political democratization and mass politics on the application of state violence, particularly through the lens of public support of the population. Naturally, conflicts that demand large deployments of US personnel and potentially high risk of casualties draw most of the analysis from academics to better understand the relationship of a population's sentiment towards the commitment to the conflict. As such, the outcomes of World War II, Vietnam, and the Iraq War, for example, have been inexorably linked to their respective support on the "homefront."[265] Historically, policymakers have had to adeptly monitor popular sentiment when entering a war, during its execution and in assessing when to terminate the conflict. Because of this, researchers believe that perceptions towards previous interventions are a key part of what shapes civilian attitudes about the use of military force overall. A recent 2023 YouGov survey of US citizens focused primarily on their thoughts regarding over a dozen conflicts and interventions of the military over the last 100 years.[266] These current population viewpoints on how US forces have been used and how they have performed in the past can offer useful insight into how they might react to potential troop utilization in the future.

While the study of public opinion and conflict is expansive, some of the most useful questions examine whether the public believes a historical conflict was morally "right or wrong" and if the intervention was "successful or unsuccessful." Of the thirteen interventions in the survey, the findings indicate that the majority of Americans consider military action justifiable when it is in response to aggressive behavior or safeguarding US allies, particularly in conventional conflicts such as the two world wars. However, citizens were least supportive of interventions intended to secure US economic interests or promote democratic values. Conflicts such as the Vietnam War and the ongoing Yemeni War were assessed as the least successful – both perceived as protracted deleterious conflicts with unclear objectives which ultimately did more harm strategically and reputationally to the US/West.[267] Over twice the percentage of Americans surveyed also viewed involvement in both conflicts as "wrong" rather than "right." Also noteworthy is that given the current politically divisive environment, Democratic respondents tended to defend small wars and peacekeeping interventions as both "right" decisions and successful, while Republican respondents were far more dismissive of the rightness and success of these conflicts and showed greater support of the larger conventional wars of the last century.[268]

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[265] Adam J. Berinksy, "Assuming the Costs of War: Events, Elites and American Public Support of Military Conflict," Journal of Politics 69 (November 2007): 357–374.

[266] YouGov Survey, "U.S. Military Interventions," December 5, 2023.

[267] YouGov Survey, "U.S. Military Interventions," December 5, 2023.

[268] YouGov Survey, "U.S. Military Interventions," December 5, 2023; Leonard Wong, Maintaining Public Support for Military Operations. Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2001.

The reaction of the populace to a particular conflict in both the past, present, and future is naturally a product of the context of the time. However, a few key indicators may caution policymakers in their considerations for the future use of military force. The most recent National Security Strategy (2022) places its greatest emphasis on strategic deterrence, especially of China and Russia.[269] This will require a more activist defense policy, with a perennial and increasing commitment of resources overseas to reinforce allies and project resolve against the aforementioned adversaries. The US National Defense Strategy anticipates that military conflict with either nation will most likely occur in the "gray zone" through a proxy or somewhere "across the spectrum of conflict" below direct conventional war.[270] Moreover, the other two points of emphasis in the NSS, investing in industrial capacity and focusing on climate change, lack any real historical precedents to inform future public support. If anything, the perception of the past by the current citizenry portends the need for government to make a compelling case to the nation and the world that the conflict is essential to US security and not a "war of choice."

INFLUENCE OF MANPOWER ON PUBLIC SUPPORT

The type of conflict is not the only factor that shapes public willingness to support military operations. The public also appears to be sensitive to the manpower systems the government uses to mobilize for the conflict and their implications for how the costs of conflict are distributed through society. A large body of evidence suggests that conscription is unpopular with the US public and that knowing conscription will be reinstated lowers support for military action, all else equal.[271]

The effects of conscription on support for conflict do not, however, seem to be a simple consequence of members of the public fearing that they or a loved one will be drafted, the so-called "skin in the game" logic.[272] Rather, one recent study by Benjamin Fordham finds that a decline in support for conscription since World War II "is not explained by an aversion to the costs associated with the draft; during major wars, when the costs of being drafted were greatest, those eligible for the draft were no less likely to support it than were other Americans."[273] Another recent study by Blankshain et. al. finds that the decrease in public support associated with conscription is not fully explained by perceptions of

[269] The White House (2022), National Security Strategy of the United States, 8–9.

[270] Defense Department (2022). National Defense Strategy of the United States of America, 12-13.

[271] Michael C. Horowitz and Matthew S. Levendusky, "Drafting Support for War: Conscription and Mass Support for Warfare," *The Journal of Politics* 73, no. 2 (April 2011): 524–34, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381611000119; Jessica D. Blankshain, Lindsay P. Cohn, and Douglas L. Kriner, "Citizens to Soldiers: Mobilization, Cost Perceptions, and Support for Military Action," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 7, no. 4 (2022).

[272] Dennis Laich, *Skin in the Game: Poor Kids and Patriots* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2013).

[273] Benjamin O. Fordham, "Historical Perspective on Public Support for the Draft: War Costs and Military Service," *Journal of Global Security Studies* 1, no. 4 (2016): 304.

individual-level or aggregate-level costs of war, suggesting a role for norms about voluntarism or equity.[274] Kriner and Shen find further evidence that the public is less tolerant of US military casualties when they perceive them to be distributed inequitably[275] and the effect conscription has on depressing public support for conflict is lessened among Democrats if the draft is portrayed as reducing inequality in the costs of war.[276] In a cross-national context, Max Margulies finds that conscription is not associated with restraint in the use of force.[277]

For the last four decades, the US has not relied on conscription for manpower; instead, it relies on the all-volunteer force. This has increasingly meant a reliance on the Total Force (the integrated active and reserve components) to meet operational demands around the globe.[278] When the Total Force Policy was first implemented after Vietnam, there was a perception (perhaps apocryphally) attributed to General Creighton Abrams that requiring presidents to mobilize the reserve component (service reserves and National Guard forces) for any significant overseas operations would require expending significant political capital to gain the buy-in of the American public.[279] Whatever its origin, there is little evidence reserve component mobilization affects public support for military action today. Recent survey experiments suggest that the public does not perceive reserve component mobilization as more costly (in individual or aggregate terms) than the use of active-duty forces only, and that it does not depress support for military action compared to use of active-duty forces only.[280] There is limited evidence that emphasizing the

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[274] Blankshain, Cohn, and Kriner, "Citizens to Soldiers"; Jessica D. Blankshain and Lindsay P. Cohn, "Modern Day Minutemen? Public Opinion and Reserve Component Mobilization," in Checking the Costs of War: Sources of Accountability in Post-9/11 US Foreign Policy, ed. Sarah E. Kreps and Douglas L. Kriner (The University of Chicago Press, forthcoming).

[275] Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, "Reassessing American Casualty Sensitivity: The Mediating Influence of Inequality," Journal of Conflict Resolution 58, no. 7 (October 1, 2014): 1174–1201, https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002713492638; Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, "Conscription, Inequality, and Partisan Support for War," Journal of Conflict Resolution 60, no. 8 (2016): 1419–45.

[276] Kriner and Shen, "Conscription, Inequality, and Partisan Support for War."

[277] Max Margulies, "Drafting restraint: Are military recruitment policies associated with interstate conflict initiation?" Journal of Peace Research 62, no. 4 (2025): 815 – 8129.

[278] Miranda Summers Lowe, "The Gradual Shift to an Operational Reserve: Reserve Component Mobilizations in the 1990s," Military Review 99, no. 3 (June 2019): 119–26; Jessica D. Blankshain, "Who Has 'Skin in the Game'? The Implications of an Operational Reserve for Civil-Military Relations," in Reconsidering American Civil-Military Relations: The Military, Society, Politics, and Modern War, ed. Lionel Beehner, Risa Brooks, and Daniel Maurer (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 97–114.

[279] Lewis Sorley, "Creighton Abrams and Active-Reserve Integration in Wartime," Parameters 21, no. 2 (1991): 35; Conrad Crane and Gian Gentile, "Understanding the Abrams Doctrine: Myth versus Reality," War on the Rocks, December 9, 2015, https://warontherocks.com/2015/12/understanding-the-abrams-doctrine-myth-versus-reality.

[280] Blankshain, Cohn, and Kriner, "Citizens to Soldiers."

coercive nature of reserve component mobilization rather than the voluntary nature of joining the reserve component somewhat decreases support for the military action.[281]

Of course, manpower policies, in addition to their effects on public opinion, also affect the actual readiness of troops available for operations. Practically, there are many questions about the United States' current ability to mobilize beyond the active force and largely operational reserve, which are already stretched thin by decades of overseas operations. While the available research does not provide an obvious answer to which manpower policies would garner the most public support in a future conflict, it does suggest that policymakers should be attentive to possible effects. In particular, beyond the conventional wisdom that the public is cost-sensitive, policymakers should pay attention to the distribution of likely costs from future conflicts and whether they are likely to accord with public norms of fairness and legitimacy.

LESSONS FROM CONTEMPORARY EUROPE: WILLINGNESS TO FIGHT AND WAYS TO INCREASE IT

In addition to a nation's military is the willingness of those not in uniform to contribute to and support a major war. While the US has not faced an existential threat requiring total societal mobilization since World War II, we can look to European responses to growing Russian hostility for possible lessons.

The most extreme example of such responses has been in Ukraine. By examining Ukrainian citizens' willingness to fight before and after both the 2014 and 2022 invasions, we may learn about the challenges facing sudden and major mobilizations elsewhere. Because Ukraine initiated "compulsory mobilization" from the beginning of the 2022 conflict, it is difficult to estimate how much of the population would willingly serve. It is also important to consider how that willingness changes over time. The poll below shows a vast increase in the willingness to fight with weapons against the Russians (Figure 4).[282] However, what people say they are willing to do is vastly different from what they are willing to do. It is estimated that 650,000 men have fled Ukraine to avoid fighting, with an initial burst of enthusiasm for volunteering to serve after Russia's invasion quickly waning as the war dragged on.[283]

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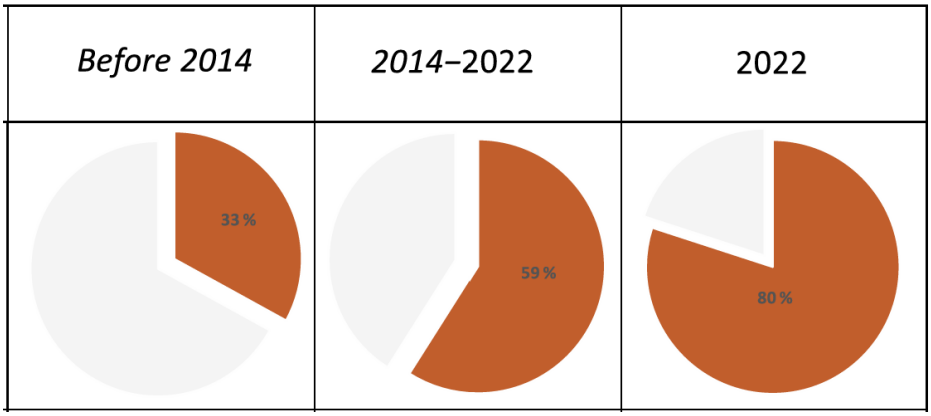
[281] Blankshain and Cohn, "Modern Day Minutemen? Public Opinion and Reserve Component Mobilization."

[282] Tor Bukkvoll and Frank Brundtland Steder, "War and the Willingness to Resist and Fight in Ukraine," *Problems of Post-Communism* 71 (3): 245–58: 246. DOI: 10.1080/10758216.2023.2277767.

[283] Jamie Dettmer, "Draft-dodging plagues Ukraine as Kyiv faces acute soldier shortage," *Politico,* March 25, 2024; https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-faces-an-acute-manpower-shortage-with-young-men-dodging-the-draft/.

Figure 4

Ukrainians Willing to Fight with "Weapons in their Hands"



Independent research elsewhere in Europe has found commonality in several important key factors that can improve willingness to fight. They are strong or increasing civic nationalism, or a sense of pride in one's nation and trust in one's political and military institutions.[284] Researchers have found that the most modern societies tend to be the most resistant to fight.[285] Some current surveys show worrisome numbers that seem to confirm this trend. A poll of British citizens, for example, were asked if they would serve if conscripted if a world war broke out. Thirty-eight percent indicated they would oppose if conscripted, with only 7 percent willing to volunteer. This percentage only slightly increased with the threat of an "imminent" invasion of their nation, with 4 percent more willing to volunteer and eight percent fewer stating they would resist conscription. It is important to note, however, that peacetime statistics do not necessarily have predictive power for how both "positive and negative incentives" can change behavior. [286] Importantly, surveys found that Ukraine was one of Europe's most "pacifist" nations before the 2014 invasion.[287]

There are some notable exceptions to this trend in Europe, particularly the nations of northern Europe that neighbor Russia. [288] Even nations with similar geopolitical situations can be motivated by very different factors. For example, urban men are more

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[284] Bukkvoll and Steder, 245.

[285] Virgilijus Rutkauskas, "Factors Affecting Willingness to Fight for One's Own Country: The Case of Baltic States," *Special Operations Journal*, 4, no. 1 (2018); 48–62: 50. DOI: 10.1080/23296151.2018.1456286

[286] Bukkvoll and Steder, "War and the Willingness," 247.

[287] Bukkvoll and Steder, "War and the Willingness," 256.

[288] Bukkvoll and Steder, "War and the Willingness," 246–7.

likely to want to fight in Latvia and Lithuania, whereas rural men are more likely in Estonia.[289] As such, efforts to improve the volunteerism of individuals of NATO as a whole must pay important attention to context.

Still, there are several issues to consider regarding citizens' will regarding Russia. As Virgilijus Rutkauskas argues, Russia's use of asymmetric grey zone warfare and the unconventional tactics it has designed to target citizens will merit special concern.[290] Studies have found the most likely person to fight has the following characteristics: "man; employed; well educated; younger; lives in bigger cities; married; has children."[291] This may explain why those fighting for Ukraine have mainly been mature men rather than young men; while the age of conscription for Ukraine has been lowered recently, it is only to 25. Another key factor that may bolster morale in Ukraine's case has been the sense of broad-based external support for their nation.[292] Changing political circumstances in the US due to the presidential election thus have the possibility of undercutting European citizens' willingness to fight.

SCENARIO ANALYSIS

What lessons can we learn to identify key lines of effort for increasing societal willingness to resist or respond to major threats, both with and without arms? To further understand the US public's likely response and resilience to various emerging threats, we selected plausible scenarios to analyze using a likelihood/severity construct. We examine a hypothetical physical attack on the US homeland for an unlikely but high-cost scenario. We also examine a physical attack on a US ally for a more likely and high-cost scenario. For a highly likely but lower-cost scenario, we examine domestic disruption in the form of information operations and small-scale terrorist attacks.

Unlikely and High Cost: Public Resilience to an Attack on the Homeland

Perhaps the most strategically effective use of airpower, or at least a strong contender, may have occurred on September 11, 2001, when hijackers took control of four civilian airliners and crashed them into three symbols of American might—the two World Trade Center buildings and the Pentagon. The US subsequently entangled itself in multiple lengthy wars and significantly increased its national debt, leaving it unable to invest in important military modernization. While many analysts anticipated new forms and waves of terrorism, no one envisioned such a creative use of civilian airpower against itself. More

[289] Rutkauskas, 60.

[290] Rutkauskas, 50.

[291] Rutkauskas, 59.

[292] Sławek Zagórski, "Ukraine mandates conscription drive: 150,000 new soldiers needed," Daily Wrap, June 8, 2024; https://dailywrap.ca/ukraine-mandates-conscription-drive-150-000-new-soldiers-needed,7036292407933057a.

recently, Israel's intelligence agency Mossad startled the world when it creatively used vintage technology—the beeper—and the timeless practice of finding moles—to decapitate Hezbollah's leadership network. Taken together, these two events suggest that black swans often marry old and new ideas to have an outsized effect. Given the physical isolation of the US from global threats for so long, its citizens may be particularly unprepared for events that are, by definition, unpredictable.

How, then, can nations best prepare for these stunning events? Since it is impossible to fully anticipate any situation, the optimal solution is to focus on societal resiliency in infrastructure, civilian well-being, and the economy. While some Europeans can remember when these areas were under threat during World War II, almost no Americans can appreciate what happens when these come under constant threat. It is to envision what resilience looks like in advance. While resilience can seek to restore the status quo, there are two other versions of societal resilience. In one, a community evolves and emerges stronger because of the challenges it faces. In the other alternative, it changes in radical ways for the better. Thus, it is not enough to plan for black swan events with the goal of restoration but to also consider how the event's destructive consequences might offer the opportunity for significantly different rebuilding efforts.[293]

Again, we can look to Europe's response to the somewhat unexpected full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine as an example of approaches to strengthening resiliency. European nations threatened by a Russian invasion have taken concrete steps to educate their populations. Sweden has sent pamphlets to every home advising civilians to be prepared to provide for themselves for one week in case of war.[294] One retired Polish general is also educating the public through YouTube videos on strategic culture with almost forty sessions with nearly 180,000 views. [295] European nations also seek to combat misinformation to build psychological resiliency. This step is perhaps more difficult in the US, where misinformation has become a politicized issue between the Republican and Democratic parties. One might argue that disinformation is not a black swan event. However, we can expect one of the oldest forms of propaganda to be used in new, unexpected ways. The best way to combat any form of information warfare is to build resiliency into a society.

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[293] Bert B. Tussing, "Toward a Strategy for National Security Emergencies," Presentation; https://media.defense.gov/2022/Jul/14/2003035172/-1/-1/0/HDAS%202022%20-%20BERT%20TUSSING%20-%20TOWARD%20A%20SNSE.PDF; U.S. White House, "U.S. National Adaptation and Resilience Planning Strategy," January 2025; https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/National-Resilience-Strategy.pdf.

[294] "What's inside Sweden's 'prepare for war' survival manual?" The Week, May 22, 2018; https://theweek.com/93765/what-s-inside-sweden-s-prepare-for-war-survival-manual.

[295] Rajmund Andrzejczak and Ryan Evans, "The Actively Retired Polish General Building a Strategic Culture," June 25, 2024; https://warontherocks.com/2024/06/the-actively-retired-polish-general-building-a-strategic-culture/ and Podcast, "Ground Zero," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvLrA9jH7wQiGJEVwI2ItP0H_qG4t_1JJ#:~:text=Genera%C5%82%20Rajmund%20T.%20Andrzejczak%20i.

It is impossible to predict black swan events. But we can expect creative blends of old and new approaches from the nation's enemies seeking societal devastation. The US is currently identifying many areas of vulnerability that may have a great effect on the homeland if war broke out with a peer competitor. For example, the Biden administration has recently sought to reduce reliance on Chinese cranes in US ports.[296] Rather than seeking to do the possible—anticipating every possible vector of homeland attack—one can start more strategically by considering the desired end state of a resilient society rebuilding itself from devastation. From there, one can work backward to consider what areas offer the most return on investment for a resilient economy, infrastructure, and citizenry.

Likely and High Cost: Public Resilience to an Attack on an Ally

It is difficult to make broad generalizations about American resilience and reaction to a formal military invasion of an ally, as it depends on many factors. The two primary variables, naturally, are how the public broadly perceives both the attacker and the attacked. Other issues include how people would anticipate US involvement escalating the situation or, as we have seen in previous interventions, any perception of the commitment devolving into a long-term quagmire. Citizens intuitively assess the national interest of the US and how those are ultimately threatened. They also calculate how the conflict impacts the nation domestically as well as how it affects their personal lives. The populous also considers the broad spectrum of potential reactions by the national government towards the invasion, judging if the military response is the most effective and prudent option. Polls on both past crises and current polls show remarkable variance in the escalation of different types of US involvement and how it incites differing reactions amongst everyday Americans.[297] But if there is a consistency to this, even with a formal military invasion by an adversary on an ally, there is still an overwhelming majority opinion that is reluctant to have US military forces actively engage in such a conflict.[298]

Unfortunately, present-day examples of this scenario do not offer a clear glimpse into predicting the reaction of the American populous. A poll conducted in March 2022, for example, found that 38 percent of respondents would flee the United States if

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[296] Jenna McLaughlin, "Chinese-made cranes at U.S. ports may pose a national security threat," National Public Radio, February 21, 2024; https://www.npr.org/2024/02/21/1232998691/chinese-made-cranes-at-u-s-ports-may-pose-a-national-security-threat.

[297] YouGov Survey, "U.S. Military Interventions," December 5, 2023 https://d3nkl3psvxxpe9.cloudfront.net/documents/U_S__Military_Interventions_poll_results.pdf.

[298] Benjamin Wittes and Cody Poplin, "Public Opinion and the Making of Wartime Strategies," in Kori Schake and James N. Mattis, eds. *Warriors & Citizens: American Views of Our Military*. Stanford, California: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 2016, 161-64.

experiencing an event similar to that of Russia invading Ukraine.[299] Now, almost three years into the conflict, public opinion about the Ukraine war remains divisive and mixed. While Americans since the Russian invasion have been broadly supportive of the US government supporting Ukraine, that support has been very slowly dwindling. It has become a contentious domestic political issue, with US lawmakers arguing that all support for the Ukrainian government should be stopped.[300] Meanwhile, it is equally unclear as to how the American people would react to the most severe hypothetical of a Chinese military invasion of the US ally Taiwan. While polls over the last few months have indicated a slight increase in support of US military intervention, it is still far from reflecting a broader social consensus demonstrating support for this crucial strategic partner.[301] As such, the wider strategic competition with both Russia and China has not translated either nation to being perceived as an existential threat to the US homeland, so military intervention to counter their military expansions abroad still has low levels of enthusiasm from the general population.[302]

Still, there are some practical steps that the US could take in advance to better prepare for a shocking event. The idea of pre-bunking or anticipating an adversary's information operations by preemptively launching a counter-campaign—could be applied to having a public relations campaign ready to go in case of such a catastrophe.[303] The war in Ukraine provides powerful examples of narratives that deeply resonated with the public, suggesting starting themes for developing a deliberate campaign to strengthen the resilience of US citizens.[304]

Likely and Low Cost: Public Resilience to Domestic Disruption

As discussed elsewhere in this report, domestic disruption can take various forms. Online misinformation can disrupt elections and stir civil unrest. Small-scale terrorist attacks

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[299] Quinnipiac Poll, released on March 7, 2022; https://poll.qu.edu/images/polling/us/us03072022_ujca44.pdf.

[300] "American Views on the War in Ukraine in 6 Charts," Gallup.com, November 23, 2023; https://news.gallup.com/poll/513680/american-views-ukraine-war-charts.aspx.

[301] Russell Hsiao, "Recent Trendlines in American Public Opinion on the Defense of Taiwan," *Global Taiwan Brief*, Vol 8 Issue 20 (1 November 2023): 1–9.

[302] YouGov Survey, "U.S. Military Interventions," December 5, 2023.

[303] P. W. Singer, "How Ukraine Won the #LikeWar," Politico, March 12, 2022.

[304] Tetyana Lokot, "The role of citizens' affective media practices in participatory warfare during Russia's invasion of Ukraine," *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 26, no. 4, 776– 790. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-023-00317-y; Pancheva, G., Ardhelas, A. A., Gil, A. T., & Spencer, A. (2024). 'Russian warship, go fuck yourself': Romantic narratives of the hero in the war of Ukraine. *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 27, no. 1 (2024), 270–291. https://doi.org/10.1177/13691481241303258.

using explosives or firearms can create fear and domestic division. One key feature of such attacks is that they are often difficult to cleanly attribute to an adversary, often allow for plausible deniability, and spur conspiracy theories.

Research suggests that it will be quite difficult to mobilize the public to respond to domestic disruption. While we often think of the aftermath of September 11th as politically unifying, any rally around the flag effect did not last long. Later research found that once links have been formed between threats and policy solutions, the public minimizes cognitive dissonance by discounting threats they perceive as played up to justify a policy they oppose (such as a hawkish response to terrorism).[305] Recent experience with the Covid-19 pandemic suggests that in today's polarized political environment, elite framing does little to galvanize public opinion in support of policy responses once partisan positions have been established. [306] Similarly, Ken Schultz argues that political polarization has made the US more vulnerable to foreign interference in our political system, particularly if that interference creates "partisan winners and losers."[307] Russia's meddling in the 2016 election, for example, "left the country divided over what happened and how to respond to an attack on its sovereignty."[308] " When living under the rule of the other party seems intolerable, foreign support can seem a small price to pay for electoral victory."[309] The public may support an overseas response if the attack can be cleanly attributed, but even on the most supported conflict objective, "responding to acts of aggression toward the U.S.," we see a partisan split, with 75% of Republicans believing the goal justifies military intervention compared to 60% of Democrats and 54% of Independents.[310] In terms of a domestic military response, research suggests that the public accepts the use of the military to respond domestically to a terrorist attack, but is skeptical of military and militarized responses to other types of domestic unrest, particularly political protests.[311]

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[305] Shana Kushner Gadarian, "Beyond the water's edge: threat, partisanship, and media." *The political psychology of terrorism fears* (2014): 67–84.

[306] See, for example, Jessica D. Blankshain, David M. Glick, and Danielle L. Lupton, "War Metaphors (What Are They Good For?): Militarized Rhetoric and Attitudes Toward Essential Workers During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *American Politics Research* 51, no. 2 (2023): 161–73.

[307] Kenneth A. Schultz, "Perils of polarization for US foreign policy." *The Washington Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (2017): 7–28, 22.

[308] Schultz, "Perils of polarization for US foreign policy," 10.

[309] Schultz, 22.

[310] YouGov.

[311] Jessica Blankshain, Lindsay P. Cohn, and Danielle L. Lupton, "I'm from the Government, and I'm Here to Help: Public Perceptions of Coercive State Power," *American Political Science Review* (2024): 1–18.

CONCLUDING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the greater willingness of men to fight than women, it is important to seek to convince women that they have a role to play if war breaks out. Rutkauskas suggests stressing the heritage of women behind the lines in supporting guerrillas, for example. But there is no reason to stop there. Since 2014, women serving in the Ukrainian military have increased by more than thirty percent. With 16,000 women in the ground forces, an estimated 40% have "direct combat on the front lines."[312] Similarly, another way to increase public support for mobilization is to follow the example of retired Polish General Rajmund Andrzejczak, who seeks to socialize Poland's youth and connect them to those who might be in combat.[13] He launched a podcast called "Ground Zero" that educates Polish citizens on national security matters , in part to help with mobilizing national sentiment.

Beyond engaging the general population to secure support, it is also important to consider how military force structure can accommodate and sustain higher levels of mobilization. The first step is to broaden the reserve component to rebuild a true strategic reserve and the currently-stressed operational reserve. Emphasizing the voluntary nature of service in both the active and reserve components may help, but if conscription becomes a necessity due to a large-scale conflict, it will be imperative to portray the system as fair. Recent efforts to require women as well as men to register for selective service are a step in the right direction.

Policymakers must be clear to the citizenry about the necessity of specific military interventions for collective national interests. Previous attempts to keep US military involvement on the periphery of the public consciousness (Iraq and Afghanistan) have contributed to a lack of operational success and strategic goals. If politicians want to use military options in the pursuit of national policy against great power competitors, they need to make a compelling case to the overall populace to ensure their long-term support and commitment.

[312] Sławek Zagórski, "Ukraine mandates conscription drive: 150,000 new soldiers needed," *Daily Wrap,* June 8, 2024. https://dailywrap.ca/ukraine-mandates-conscription-drive-150-000-new-soldiers-needed,7036292407933057a.

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