

# **“A ‘Colder War’ Future in the USCENTCOM AOR? Realpolitik Trajectory of Major Powers and Regional Players”**

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## **Abstract and Methodology**

This paper addresses potential security concerns in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region over the next 5-25 years if a strong Chinese-Russian alliance develops. It also offers the U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM) possible approaches to pre-empt both the formation of a China-Russia Axis and subsequent emergence of a Middle East and North Africa (MENA) periphery.

Methodologically, currently available data do not admit of any mechanical prediction in forecasting for years, much less decades, ahead. Instead, borrowing from cosmologist Robert Spitzer, possible outcomes are based upon carefully aggregated and synthesized evidence. This evidence is reasonable and responsible. It creates a network of informal inference possessing strong probative value deriving from consideration of multiple, converging, independently probable data-sets. In such analysis, any single data-set may change, or indeed be proven incorrect, without necessarily disproving the whole.<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction: Unstable Status Quo: Political Tensions and the Security Crisis in MENA**

The MENA region is of vital importance to the entire world, because it is the world’s largest supplier of conventional energy, and because of its strategic location linking East to West. Any large-scale security unrest in the MENA region will inevitably lead to a global economic crisis, because the economies of most of the major powers depend on the energy resources in the area.

The current security situation in the MENA region is both dangerous and unstable. There are three important factors that will contribute to political tensions and ongoing security crises in the MENA region for the next 5 to 15 years:

First, Turkey continually spreads tension in the region through its support of political Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood.

Second, Iran continues to impose its hegemonic and interventionist policies, triggering tension and instability in the region. Danger lies in Iran’s radical sectarian ideology, spread through its proxies, or directly through sleeper cells. In addition, Iran commits asymmetric military activities and active subversion in the region and elsewhere in the world, including the targeting of oil

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Spitzer, *The Soul’s Upward Yearning: Clues to Our Transcendent Nature from Experience and Reason* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015), 278 – 280.

facilities and tankers, most recently two Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais.

Third, the increased power of the multitude of extremist and terrorist religious groups and organizations (VEOs) in the region (including Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra, whose members broke off from the Muslim Brotherhood (Egypt),<sup>2</sup> Al-Qaeda (Saudi Arabia), and ISIS) cause political tension and security crises. The existence of these groups will remain a source of unrest and instability in the MENA. There is legitimate concern that these groups could form militias and armed organizations their radical ideologies and carry out acts of violence, as demonstrated in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt, and other Arab countries.

### **Power Transition: A Short-, Medium-, and Long-Term Projection**

The deteriorating security situation in the region has posed serious challenges for the United States, China, and Russia. Although there is a general understanding that security and stability should be maintained in this part of the world, disagreements exist over how to realize this objective while preserving and enhancing the interests of each major power.

The current administration has “promised a foreign policy that is nationalist and transactional, focused on securing narrow material gains for the United States.”<sup>3</sup> As noted by Stewart Patrick (2017), these newly adopted policies have raised questions to the extent that the United States has failed to “sen[d] the clear message that the country stood for more than just its own well-being” and has a broader vision of its traditional role “as defender of the free world.” By and large, US foreign policy in the Middle East is gradually coming to be seen as compromising the stability of the Arab countries, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), even as the US combats extremist religious groups and Iran’s hostile policies.

In combating VEOs, Russia has materially supported the Iranian and Syrian regimes since 2015 with expeditionary ground, air, and naval forces. This support may be viewed as following on from Russian aggression and military occupation in Moldova (“Transnistria”) since 1991, Georgia since 2008, and in Ukraine and the Black Sea since 2014. In Syria, a Donbas-style “frozen conflict” facilitated by Russia should not be ruled out.<sup>4</sup> Russia also seeks to build good relations with the rest of the countries in the region, not least with Turkey, though the two countries openly support opposite sides in both Syria and Libya. By at least remaining on working terms with Ankara, and by fiercely defending both Bashar Assad and Iran, Russia seeks to prove its credibility as an ally in the region. Nevertheless, Russia’s declining life expectancy (111<sup>th</sup> in the world in 2012);<sup>5</sup> the debilitating economic effects in Russia of decreased oil revenues if global petroleum price-wars continue; and the potentially devastating effects of COVID-19 could combine to make Russia’s military presence untenable in the short- to medium-term, and perhaps reduce that presence’s political influence in MENA. Affecting all aspects of Russia’s strategic behaviour in MENA and throughout the USCENTCOM area of

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<sup>2</sup> The United States government designates both Hasm and Liwa al-Thawra as terrorist organizations.

<sup>3</sup> Stewart M. Patrick, “Trump and World Order: The Return of Self Help,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2017.

<sup>4</sup> On Moldova, Georgia, and Ukraine, see Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018), 173.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

responsibility (AOR), however, is Vladimir Putin's evident desire to remain in power essentially for life. Assuming approval by (rigged) referendum as scheduled for April 2020—and barring acts of God or popular unrest that might remove him from office beforehand—Putin will in all probability remain in power to 2036. Excepting the factors noted immediately above, one should not anticipate any dramatic changes in Russian policy in MENA before the end of his current term in 2024. His, and consequently Russia's, behaviour in that region, as well as the larger USCENTCOM AOR periphery, after 2024 is more difficult to anticipate.

As it endures the effect of the coronavirus' devastation to its economy, China will continue to focus on its economic interests in the region. China has built commercial partnerships with countries of the region and launched its strategic Belt and Road Initiative to expand its culture and economic influence. Beijing's approaches have begun to change in recent years, as it pays more attention to the security dimension in order to provide protection for its extensive economic interests in the region. However, China's policies remain largely neutral, at both security and political levels, as it works to improve relations with Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and other countries.

Both Russia and China have persistently upheld the Iran nuclear deal<sup>6</sup> and have discouraged the US policy of sanctions and political pressure against Iran, despite the fact that this encourages Iran to implement its destabilizing policies in the region.

Under the assumption that the United States loses its influence and Russia and China emerge as close allies, the political and security landscape in the MENA region will be dramatically different in the future. The following timelines suggest a description of the unstable situation in the MENA region as 1) a short-term *status quo* period; 2) a medium-term transition period characterized by a realistic assessment of the changing dynamics in the region; and 3) a long-term power-rebalancing period acknowledging possible future trends of divergence as well as convergence in the region and beyond.

### **Short Term (2020 to 2025):**

Theme of this 5-year period: From unstable *Status Quo* to the beginning of the changes

Geopolitical Landscape: Alliances of Traditional Relations Revaluated

1. US, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, India (maintaining alliance)
2. Russia, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, China (maintaining close relations)
3. Russia and China (building confidence for mutual ambition)

### **Medium Term (2025 to 2035):**

Theme of this 10-year period: Transition to re-alignment from US-Core to Russia-Core with

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<sup>6</sup> "China says Iran nuclear deal not detailed, pledges constructive role," *Reuter*, January 18, 2018. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-china/china-says-iran-nuclear-deal-not-derailed-pledges-constructive-role-idUSKBN1F20MN>

## China's engagement

### Geopolitical Landscape: Three influential Blocks Emerging

1. Russia, China, Iran and Turkey (Egypt, Pakistan) (furthering and consolidating respective political alliance)
2. Russia, Saudi Arabia, Israel, China and India (increasing economic partnership)
3. US, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey (losing influence due to US withdrawal from global engagement (including ideological, military, and alliance-based)

### **Long Term (2035 to 2045):**

Theme of this 10-year period: Confrontation and rebalancing power structure

### Geopolitical Landscape: Two alliance partnership and its rival relationship to US

1. Russia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, China and Pakistan (with strategic Political/Military objectives)
2. China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, Israel and India (with economic leverage over US' position in the MENA)

## **Foreign Policy Objectives of Key Regional Powers**

### **India:**

Economic diplomacy will be the core element of India's foreign policy. The transition from non-alignment (NAM) to the India, Brazil, South Africa (IBSA), and G-20 captures the change and continuity of India's foreign policy, and it will give more scope to India to play a larger role in global affairs in the medium term. India will continue its Look East Policy and undergo the transition from its long-held principles under the policy of NAM. Therefore, the priorities of its foreign policy will focus on the changing global environment moving forward. After joining global groups, such as G20, IBSA, and Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS), India is emerging as a leading actor in regional and global affairs.

One of the significant aspects of success of India's policy in the post-1990 period has been the development of strategic relations with the US. India will reconsider its relations with the US—the former superpower—and China—the new powerhouse in the region—and move on to develop a strategic partnership with Russia for both political and economic purposes.

For the next 10 to 15 years, India's relationship with Russia will be without significant obstacles in maintaining bi-lateral ties as a "special and privileged strategic partnership." While New Delhi considers the United States a key factor in global affairs and treats India-US relations as crucial, India will strengthen its presence in Eurasia for a more extensive Eurasian partnership involving the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), China, Pakistan, and Iran.

Within the next 25 years, India and China—as the only two major developing countries with a population of over one billion and important representatives of emerging economies—will see

each other as positive factors in the changing international landscape, and explore opportunities for the development of bilateral relations.

Most likely, India will not be part of the alliance of an emerging China-Russia Axis, nor will it be a staunch ally with the US, but it will increase its economic partnership with China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and Israel for its long-term development.

## **Turkey**

Turkey has been facing an array of foreign policy challenges. As a member of NATO and the G20 and as an accession candidate to the EU, Turkey aims to strengthen her existing strategic relationships and establish new ones. Turkey has developed a globally extensive network of cooperation. It has a strategic partnership with the United States, the principal NATO ally, and considers the transatlantic link vital to European security and prosperity. Nevertheless, Ankara's willingness to cooperate with Moscow in some areas (e.g. S-400 SAM acquisition) while occasionally opposing Moscow in others (e.g. Syria and Libya) contributes to instability in NATO's calculus regarding its southeast European and Mediterranean areas of operation.

Turkey recognizes the People's Republic of China (PRC) as the sole legal representative of China and acknowledges that Taiwan is part of China. China maintains its diplomatic relation with Turkey and continues to develop its economic cooperation with the country. With the status as a dialogue partner, Turkey "is looking into joining a Chinese- and Russian-led alliance known as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization."<sup>7</sup>

## **Egypt**

Egypt is the most populous Arab country. Its long-term foreign policy objective is to balance its relations with all countries, protect national borders and the state itself, and promote economic resources through foreign investment, tourism, and trade.

Egypt is one of only five countries in the African continent that have been chosen by the Chinese government to host a special economic zone (SEZ). China has signed 33 investment promotion and protection agreements and 11 double taxation agreements with African countries. Sino-Egyptian economic relations are of long duration and relatively stable, reflecting the strong ties between the two countries.<sup>8</sup>

Starting in 2013, relations between Russia and Egypt improved with the new government following the dismissal of Mohamed Morsi. Both countries have since worked closely to strengthen military and trade ties, among other aspects of bilateral cooperation.

Over the next 25 years, Egypt will remain a highly influential country in the Arab world, and its relationship with Saudi Arabia, another highly influential country and a member of G20, will

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<sup>7</sup> Natasha Bertrand, "NATO's second-largest military power is threatening a dramatic pivot to Russia and China," *business Insider*, Nov. 22, 2016. <https://www.businessinsider.com/turkey-russia-china-shanghai-cooperation-organization-2016-11>

<sup>8</sup> Yasser M. Gadallah, "An Analysis of the Evolution of Sino-Egyptian Economic Relations," Springer, accessed on December 29, 2019 at [https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F9781137539793\\_7.pdf](https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1057%2F9781137539793_7.pdf)

suffer zigzags from time to time considering the changing dynamics on their respective relations with Israel, but neither country will see any change in their hostile relations with Iran.

### **A Colder War Rivalry: US Alone vs. China and Russia Alliance**

In their joint research entitled “How Russia and China View Each Other and America: The Perceptions of Students at Elite Universities,” Eugene John Gregory and Thomas Sherlock of the United States Military Academy at West Point state that “one of the most important potential threats facing US foreign and security policy over the next decade is that of closer cooperation between Russia and China, particularly in opposition to American interests and values.”<sup>9</sup> The White House’s 2017 National Security Strategy (NSS) states that “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests,” describing a zero-sum battle for influence in which the United States should seek to counter Chinese initiatives on every continent. Graham Allison, in his reflection of the warning by Zbigniew Brzezinski, a leading American strategic thinker, foresees the future of a Russia-China alliance as the “the most dangerous scenario.” This scenario would be “a grand coalition of China and Russia...united not by ideology but by complementary grievances.”<sup>10</sup> Allison’s perception of today’s reality that “when Russian or Chinese national security leaders think about current threats, the spectre they see is the United States of America. They believe the United States is not only challenging their interests in Eastern Europe or the South China Sea but is actively seeking to undermine their authoritarian regimes.”<sup>11</sup>

Jim Dator, futurist and author of “The Day ‘America’ Changed for the World,” points out that:

The world we live in is increasingly one in which no one before has ever lived, and about which past rules and institutions are more, and more rapidly, irrelevant and arguably quite harmful. We may try to stretch and analogize past rules and modify past institutions, but they were not originally designed to deal with today--much less tomorrow. *That presents us with a bigger and bigger problem--and opportunity*<sup>12</sup> (emphasis added).

In Dator’s view, “the grand coalition of China and Russia” is rapidly turning today’s theoretical framework into tomorrow’s empirical reality. The same point is emphasized by Allison who thinks that “...fewer today recognize how rapidly this grand alignment of the aggrieved has been moving from the realm of the hypothetical toward what could soon become a geostrategic

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<sup>9</sup> Eugene John Gregory and Thomas Sherlock, “How Russia and China View Each Other and America: The Perceptions of Students at Elite Universities,” *A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, December 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Allison, “China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making,” *The National Interests*, December 14, 2018. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jim Dator’s public talk on “For the Commission on the Future of Virginia’s Judicial System” in Richmond, Virginia on November 4, 1987.

fact.”<sup>13</sup>

It is within this scope that Russia and China pursue their desire to weaken US dominance in the MENA region, and accommodate a new alliance (Russia-China Axis as core) with strategic capacity to rebalance the power structure in the area. In due course, regional powers (as periphery), including India, Turkey, Syria, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iran, and Pakistan, have to introduce fundamental changes in their domestic economic as well as foreign policies in coming decades.

Within the short term (2020 to 2025), medium term (2025 to 2035) and the first half of the long-term period (2035-2040), the current international relations paradigm will make way for a “colder-war” politics. A new superpower rivalry involving China and Russia vs. the United States will start to emerge and dominate the global political landscape. Today, with the cooperation of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS, China and Russia work together to create and strengthen new organizations to rival traditional American-led international organizations. “Chinese and Russian national security documents call their relationship a ‘comprehensive strategic partnership.’”<sup>14</sup> David Dorondo, in his “A Silk Road or a Silk Noose? Chinese Outreach Activities in Europe,” says that “the current revival of active great power competition among the United States, Russia, and China signals a superficial return to international behaviours reminiscent of the period before the World Wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.”<sup>15</sup>

One important consequence of shifting rivalries among major and regional powers during this paradigm-shifting period, is that the world will see more authoritarian regimes than democratic states in global politics and in trade and business. The recent constitutional amendment in China and the upcoming constitutional change in Russia (as noted above) aim to lay the groundwork for Xi and Putin staying in power for life.<sup>16</sup> Against this political background, innovative economic competition through cultured technological revolution gives nation-states no other choice but to become part of the new rivalry.

It is highly likely that if Beijing achieves its global objectives, the future global governance system will be less free, less prosperous, and less safe. However, at the same time, democratic nations realize that China, as the second largest global economy, has both a responsibility and capacity to contribute to the global well-being, and does also deserve a place on the global stage. Nevertheless, the liberal democracies among themselves and with China will fail to work out something to facilitate a flexible framework to deal with China.

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<sup>13</sup> Graham Allison, “China and Russia: A Strategic Alliance in the Making,” *The National Interests*, December 14, 2018. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/china-and-russia-strategic-alliance-making-38727>

<sup>14</sup> IBID

<sup>15</sup> David R. Dorondo, “A Silk Road or a Silk Noose? Chinese Outreach Activities in Europe,” *A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, December 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Partrick Reevel, “Why is Vladimir Putin racing to amend Russia’s constitution?” *ABC News*, January 25, 2020. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/vladimir-putin-racing-amend-russias-constitution/story?id=68510345>

## **Wishful Thinking, CBMs and Pre-emption of Emerging China-Russia Axis**

The different, and sometimes opposing, positions of major powers (especially the United States, Russia, and China) toward the developments in the MENA region are among the factors that lead to instability and security disorder. Each party supports the positions of its allies against the other, protecting them against sanctions and international pressure, as Russia and China do with Iran, encouraging Iran to proceed with policies that undermine regional stability. Although there is a general understanding of the importance of maintaining security and stability in the region, the approach to that goal differs from one country to another. However, considering the fact that there are undoubtedly close interests and opportunities for cooperation between these major powers in the region, wishful thinking might suggest these major powers could make arrangements to protect their interests and sustain regional stability, and by the same token, countries of the MENA region should be involved in these arrangements as to ensure durable regional stability.

According to Anthony Bastardi, wishful thinking describes decision-making and the formation of beliefs based on what might be pleasing to imagine, rather than on evidence, rationality, or reality. It is a product of resolving conflicts between belief and desire.<sup>17</sup>

These questions remain: How to keep the MENA allies on good terms with the United States? More strategically, how to maintain American power and preempt Russia and China from building the Russia-China core alliance in the region and further make the regional powers serve their interests?

Confronted with changing reality, there is little question that some countries in the region are moving closer China for economic reasons. Although these countries do not distance themselves from the United States, China's predatory economic style, unethical business behavior, and secretive, lawless approach to deal-making will lure corrupted hearts and minds of anti-US elements. China's overreaching strategy through the Belt and Road initiative is a multifaceted landmark which serves different directions to global travelers on their journeys. The United States cannot afford to let down its guard in defending its interests and consolidating its long-established relations with countries in the region. Dorondo states, "the diminishment of US relations with states in the referenced regions could result in economic troubles and/or a loss of regional influence, for instance. The US has the ability to counter these Chinese global outreach activities and prevent reliance on trade with China by strengthening its own relationships with these countries and using Chinese regional shortcomings to its advantage."<sup>18</sup>

Realizing our weakest links in the region, and Russia's aggressive collaboration with rogue states, the United States is losing time and space to inspire American ideas and values in the region. American soft-power strength through critical ideals, universal values and humanitarian

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<sup>17</sup> Bastardi, A.; Uhlmann, E. L.; Ross, L. (2011). "Wishful Thinking: Belief, Desire, and the Motivated Evaluation of Scientific Evidence." *Psychological Science*. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0956797611406447>

<sup>18</sup> David R. Dorondo, "A Silk Road or a Silk Noose? Chinese Outreach Activities in Europe," *A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, December 2019.



expectations is the foundation of the world system that secures a rule-based order and free market disciplines. In her book *Friendly Fire: Losing Friends and Making Enemies in the Anti-American Century*, Julia Sweig, CFR's Nelson and David Rockefeller Senior Fellow for Latin America Studies, says there are many ways the United States can begin to turn around the anti-American sentiment sweeping the world. With simultaneous efforts to address the "long-term internally displaced persons and refugees, spread of radical ideologies and extremism, great power competition, disruptive non-state actors, and the potential for black swan scenarios,"<sup>19</sup> a civilian and military joint confidence-building measures (CBMs) must be a priority in planning specific procedures, as stated by the United Nations' Office for Disarmament Affairs, to "prevent hostilities, to avert escalation, to reduce military tension, and to build mutual trust between countries." It continues that CBMs "have been applied since the dawn of civilization, on all continents... Each country is in a unique strategic environment. Military CBMs can be tailored to the security needs of any country or region."<sup>20</sup> Doing it right and doing it on a continuing basis is an effective way to develop and enhance open communication, verification and monitoring programs, and conflict resolution protocols. These incremental steps could ease anti-US popular sentiments, deter anti-US aggression and eradicate anti-US hostility.

Michael O'Hanlon and Adam Twardowski, in their article "Unpacking the China-Russia 'alliance,'" point out that "China and Russia no longer share a common expansionist ideology, but realpolitik considerations are driving them together... Both recognize that to stand up alone against an established alliance system led by the United States is very difficult, as neither has any truly powerful allies of its own." They argue that while Beijing and Moscow have real reasons to be suspicious of each other, Washington needs to keep the fact firmly in mind that "the relationship between Russia and China is not a given. It will continue to evolve largely as a function of United States foreign policy."<sup>21</sup>

The China-Russia core alliance with key players in the MENA region as their periphery will be a geostrategic challenge to the United States. An effective overarching strategy is a must to guide US-China and US-Russia relations moving forward.

Because of China's unique geopolitical situation as an emerging world power, and its close physical proximity to both North Korea and Russia, the US would be wise to adopt a more nuanced, forward-looking, soft-power deterrence strategy on China. To attain that objective, the US must embrace China as a prospective responsible stakeholder and ally, or it risks pushing China more firmly towards Russia, with the potential to form a truly destructive, anti-American alliance. To circumvent that danger, the United States acknowledges China for what it considers important (outward expressions of respect by the US and acknowledgement that China is a world power) while shrewdly applying China's own doctrines and engagement style as a means to specifically channel China's geopolitical influence to serve US needs, as well as substantially

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<sup>19</sup> Memorandum for the Joint Staff J-39 Strategic Multilayer Assessment  
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<sup>20</sup> On "Military Confidence-building," Office for Disarmament Affairs of the United Nations,  
<https://www.un.org/disarmament/cbms/>

<sup>21</sup> Michael O'Hanlon and Adam Twardowski, "Unpacking the China-Russia 'alliance,'" *Brookings*, December 13, 2019.  
<https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/12/13/unpacking-the-china-russia-alliance/>

curtail China's anti-America alliance with Russia.<sup>22</sup> Thus, US' soft- and hard-power approach aims to, first, intentionally and purposefully nurture a developing China with its socialist system under authoritarian rule as a global partner to the United States; second, prevent Russia and China from seeking ways to leverage their combined military and economic clout across the MENA region; and third, keep key regional powers at bay to preempt a shift of power from the US to Russia and China as core partners and the countries in the MENA region as their periphery.

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<sup>22</sup> Maorong Jiang. "A Flexible Framework to Achieve Strategic Objectives in US-China Policy," *A Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) White Paper*, December 2019

