

Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA)

Joint Staff/J39

Assessment of Strategic Implications of Population Dynamics in the Central Region

Integration Report: Great Power Competition

Research Team Reports

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Elder, B. (February 2020). **Interagency and military activities best suited for competition against US great power rivals in the Middle East.** George Mason University [Report](#).

Jiang, M., & Dorondo, D.R. (March 2020). **How will Chinese and Russian relationships with key regional powers play out over the next 5-25 years?** Creighton University and Western Carolina University [Report](#).

Kuznar, E., & Canna, S. (February 2020). **Sino-Russian competition: Self-inflicted competition in Central Asia?** NSI Inc. Reachback [Report](#).

Logan, M., Zimmerman, L., & Ligon, G. (February 2020). **A strategic analysis of violent extremist organizations in the United States Central Command area of responsibility.** University of Nebraska, Omaha [Report](#).

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Disruptive Non-State Actors and Great Power Competition in USCENTCOM's AOR

At the request of United States Central Command (USCENTCOM), SMA initiated a study to understand the strategic implications of destabilizing population dynamics within the Central Region. The effort examined drivers of instability in the region emerging from radicalization, great power competition, state-level instability, and black swan scenarios. This report integrates the research conducted by the teams listed on the front cover in response to USCENTCOM's questions about great power competition.¹ This report is intended to be a succinct, easily navigable representation of the exceptional work by the collective SMA team. Please click on the links embedded in the report to go directly to the research studies.

Russian and Chinese Interests and Goals Within the USCENTCOM AOR

- Competition for regional influence between the US and Russia and China is inevitable.
- Neither Russia nor China are likely to resort to conflict to achieve regional dominance, even in Central Asia. China's overwhelming economic advantage means Russia does not pose an existential threat, and Russia knows it is unlikely to "win" in any direct competition with China.
- Reducing US influence is seen by both Russia and China as a more effective strategy for furthering their own interests than competing with each other.
- There are regional (geopolitical) variations within USCENTCOM AOR countries that are reflected in Russia and China's activities in, and relative leverage over, specific states.
- Globally, MENA is the region where China's interests place it under the most direct pressure to intervene in security matters.
- MENA tends to be the focus of USG policies and resource expenditure, but Central Asia is critical to the economic and power projection goals of both Russia and China.

Both Russia and China see the USCENTCOM region as crucial to their own interests and goals, in particular increasing their global economic and political influence and reputations as great powers (Elder; Kuznar & Canna). Of necessity, this will put them in competition with the US, as decreasing US global influence is itself a central objective for both powers. Russia has long voiced its belief that US global influence and actions are self-serving, destabilizing, and increasingly unreliable, especially in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) and Afghanistan—

¹ USCENTCOM Questions:

[B6] What tensions exist between established and emerging VEOs in the region? How could the USG capitalize on these tensions? Which VEOs could play the role of spoiler vs. amplifier to Russian or Chinese interests?

[B7] Are there emerging and potential VEOs that will take advantage of the new great power competition space, and how will states respond?

[B8] How will Chinese and Russian relationships with key regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Israel, Egypt, and Pakistan (regionally and vis-a-vis India) play out over the next 5-25 years?

[B9] Which interagency and military activities are best suited for competition against our great power rivals in the Middle East (Security Cooperation/KLE/FMF/FMS/SOF/etc.)?

[B10] What are the areas of divergence between Russian and Chinese interests and goals within the USCENTCOM AOR that can be exploited by the USG?

[B11] What are the effects to USG influence, access, and relationships if a reduced military posture in the Central Region is realized? Which governments may align with China/Russia, vice the United States? What balance of interagency capabilities and military forces is most likely to mitigate negative repercussions from a military draw down?

a view increasingly shared by China (Kuznar & Canna; Elder). Although the United States has a much smaller presence in Central Asia, both China and Russia see the region's stability—and thus their own domestic security—as compromised by US policies and actions in the wider USCENTCOM area of responsibility (AOR) (Kuznar & Canna). Although none of the three powers benefit from instability in any region in USCENTCOM's AOR (Jiang & Dorondo; Kuznar & Canna), all have differing views regarding what constitutes stability and security, as well as how it is to be achieved and maintained. This is important to keep in mind when assessing the potential for cooperation or conflict between powers.

USCENTCOM's AOR spans multiple geopolitical regions and, despite consistency in the broader goals and interests Russia and China are pursuing across the AOR, there is variation between regions, in particular between USCENTCOM's MENA states and Central Asian States (Kuznar & Canna). The MENA region stands out as one in which the positions of Russia and China diverge not just in scale of their involvement and influence, but also in how it may test the choices and alternatives each has for pursuing its interests (Kuznar & Canna). Russian activities in MENA, especially in Syria, demonstrate the Kremlin's willingness to use its military capabilities (including strategic basing) directly to pursue its economic and influence interests. It is here too that we see Russia mounting its most direct challenge to the legitimacy of US and Western military and security interventions as well as their status as brokers of regional security. Jiang and Dorondo note that this challenge may be viewed as an extension of Russian activity in the Caucasus, the Black Sea/Crimea, and Ukraine since 2008. It seems likely to continue as Vladimir Putin further consolidates his long-term grip on power through constitutional alterations.

China, in contrast, has maintained its preference for engaging solely through economic and soft power means. Although, as Elder also notes, this will become untenable if the regional security situation worsens and US drawdown creates a security vacuum. As such, MENA highlights a different potential barrier to China's interest than in regions such as Europe and the Asia Pacific. Rather than facing increased resistance from regional states (governments and/or populations), to further Chinese investment and influence China faces potential pressure from its own enterprises and citizens to take a more active role in guaranteeing the security of their investments and personnel in the region. Jiang and Dorondo also note that, while Chinese regional policies remain largely neutral, in recent years China has begun to pay more attention to the security dimension for exactly this reason.

The analysis conducted by Kuznar and Canna² suggests that, although Russia and China are engaged in a greater number of activities in MENA states than those in Central Asia, Central Asia is more important than MENA to Russia's structural interests (economic, security, diplomatic/cultural) than China's. Kuznar and Canna initially propose that this shared importance could create tensions between Russia and China, as Russia attempts to regain its Soviet-era political and economic influence in the face of China's inexorable economic expansionism. However, they ultimately conclude that direct competition, even if the United States took action to stir up friction between the two powers, is unlikely to amount to much; the imbalance of economic power between Russia and China is simply too large for significant competition between the two to be in Russia's interest, especially if China continues to buy Russian compliance by including it in its (China's) most lucrative regional economic deals.

² Kuznar and Canna's analysis draws on two datasets created by NSI for the 2019 SMA Global Competition project to capture separate aspects of great power relations. NSI's Global Indicators Dataset provides metrics for the security, economic, and diplomatic importance of individual countries to the US, Russia, and China, and the potential leverage each actor has across these dimensions in each country. NSI's Interests and Activities Dataset provides a consistent and systematic database of Chinese and Russian activities (ongoing or in past two years), and the interests they support. The indicators of importance and leverage are designed to capture long-term, structural ties, whereas the activities reflect the diversity of current activity; thus, divergence between the two does not necessarily imply contradiction. For more information about this data project, please contact Dr. Belinda Bragg at bbragg@nsiteam.com.

The Role of Regional Powers

- Strengthening ties with regional powers helps Russia and China decrease US regional influence in MENA.
- Uncertainty among regional powers in MENA regarding US commitment to the region will further both Russian and Chinese interests regionally and globally.
- China is likely to rely on its economic power to build influence, while Russia will rely more on direct political and military support.
- Both Russia and China have a strategic advantage over the US when dealing with authoritarian regimes, as they are not constrained by domestic pressure to make cooperation contingent on policy change (e.g., human rights protections).

Just as Russia has realized it has more to gain from cooperating with China than competing, the same appears true for regional powers within USCENTCOM's AOR. Both Russia and China see the region as one where they can project their power and exploit perceived Western policy confusion to undermine US influence (Elder; Kuznar & Canna). Economic, military, and political cooperation with regional powers—both US partners (Turkey and Egypt), and adversaries (Syria and Iran)—is one means by which both seek to increase their influence. Jiang and Dorondo present an incremental breakdown of how regional great power alignment in the USCENTCOM AOR and its periphery might develop. They propose that Russia and China will first focus on deepening their existing closest relationships (Iran, Turkey, and Pakistan). Over time, they will build economic and political partnerships with regional powers (Saudi Arabia, Israel, and India). In the long term, shared strategic objectives between Russia, China, and these regional powers will consolidate, affording them economic leverage over the United States' position in MENA. This again underscores the consistent theme running through all of these analyses: that increasing Chinese and Russian economic investment and political outreach, combined with doubts among regional states concerning US commitment to the region, creates conditions that are conducive to the growth of Chinese and Russian regional influence.

Intersection of Great Power Relations and VEO Activity

- While continued VEO violence in MENA does not directly further either Russian or Chinese interests, to the extent that it undermines US influence it has some indirect utility.
- In Central Asia, VEO presence and activity is seen by both Russia and China as a direct threat to their domestic security.
- Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) opposition to the Syrian regime makes it the most direct potential spoiler of Russian interests in MENA.
- If Jaish al-Adl's actions create instability around the Iran-Pakistan border, Chinese interests could potentially be negatively affected.

None of the great powers benefit from continued violent extremist organization (VEO) violence in MENA, and Russia and the United States have regional interests that are potentially challenged by existing organizations. Logan, Zimmerman, and Ligon's analysis of VEOs in the USCENTCOM AOR identified five high-priority organizations: Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL), Islamic State—Sinai Province (IS-SP), Jaish al-Adl, and Lebanese Hezbollah. Of the five VEOs, Hezbollah is identified as the most operationally capable and greatest direct threat to US interests. The authors argue, however, that direct violence against US

interests is too risky for Hezbollah (or its sponsor, the Iranian regime). Its growing role in the Lebanese government is too integral to Iran's strategy for increasing influence to risk through direct violence against US interests. China and Russia are both building ties with Iran, which they see as a ready-made counter to US-backed regional powers, which may potentially generate advantages for Hezbollah down the line. That being said, neither Russian nor Chinese interests are directly furthered by the continuation of VEO violence in MENA, and even less so, arguably in Central Asia, where it presents a threat to both powers' domestic security (Kuznar & Canna).

Of the five organizations analyzed by Logan et al., HTS is perhaps the most direct spoiler, as its violence focuses on protecting its territorial interests against the Syrian Regime, putting it directly at odds with Russia's interests in Syria. Similarly, Jaish al-Adl's opposition to the Iranian regime and separatist goals could, if they grow to create significant instability in the border region between Iran and Pakistan, impact Chinese and Russian activities in the two countries, although at this time there is no indication this is the case. More generally, the presence and activities of the other three Salafi-Jihadist groups identified by Logan et al. (HTS, ISIL, and IS-IP), seeking as they do the establishment of a new Islamic caliphate, runs counter to the interests of all three powers.

What Can USCENTCOM Do?

- There is not a lot, in the short term, that USCENTCOM can do to contain Russian and Chinese influence in its AOR, as most of the activities in which both are engaged are not military in nature.
- The US government could try to highlight the negative aspects of closer ties to either Russia or China for regional states, but this would be hard to do without being perceived as self-serving.
- In the longer term, by maintaining relationships and continuing all possible activities consistent with USG policy, USCENTCOM can work to shore up trust in US commitment to regional security as our MENA allies consider the impact of US force reductions.
- Low US engagement (diplomatic and economic as well as military) in Central Asia makes it highly unlikely that the US will be effective in influencing the regional narrative against Russia and China.
- Historical suspicion of Russian and Chinese influence may make Central Asian elites resistant to increased ties, but absent any alternative sources of economic investment they have few options but to cooperate.

Elder concludes that there is little USCENTCOM can do directly to counter short-term Chinese and Russian competitive activities in MENA because "both countries primarily conduct political, economic, and social activities, and avoid actions that could lead to US military involvement." This is consistent with the findings from previous SMA studies,³ and Kuznar and Canna's report. In the longer term, however, Elder considers that building and maintaining senior mil-to-mil contacts, military education and training, train and equip activities, National Guard international partnerships, and Special Operations Forces (SOF) nation support programs could be effective long-term counters to Chinese and Russian influence.

Elder also suggests that actions that demonstrate long-term US commitment to the region, such as forward basing, disaster response exercises, Foreign Military Sales (FMS), and US foreign aid and investment, are best

³ See, for example Gray Zone, Great Power Competition, (2019).

suites for competing against Russian and Chinese regional influence. This view is shared by Jiang and Dorondo, who propose military confidence-building efforts as an effective way to develop and enhance open communication, which could ease anti-US popular sentiments, deter anti-US aggression, and eradicate anti-US hostility.

Additionally, as found by Kuznar and Canna, military information support operations (MISO) and public diplomacy activities that highlight the transactional nature of Chinese and Russian activities in USCENTCOM's AOR, while avoiding any appearance of being transactional themselves, may also be effective. Even without such action by the US, Kuznar and Canna note that Russia and China may both find their interests frustrated in Central Asia by regional political elites and populations who are both suspicious of Moscow (especially in light of its actions in Ukraine) and unconvinced by China's charm offensive. However, their findings also suggest that this strategy by the US may be problematic in MENA states, where recent US policy reversals, combined with ongoing Russian and Chinese influence activities, place US shaping activities on the back foot. This is consistent with Elder's caution that tying US support to specific MENA government policies (especially government reform and human rights accountability) adds credibility to Chinese and Russian narratives that present them, rather than the United States, as principled and impartial protectors of state sovereignty. In Central Asian states, where the United States has significantly less presence (economic, political, or military), overcoming such embedded Chinese and Russian narratives is likely to be even harder (Kuznar & Canna).