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The Shape of the Future Operating Environment

Or: How our adversaries have learned to stop worrying and ignore the bomb

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Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Reach-back Study in Support of USSTRATCOM

Strategic Challenges in the 21st Century



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Report Organization [slide 1-2]

In July of this year, at the request of USSTRATCOM, SMA initiated an effort to address eight questions regarding the implications of the increasing numbers, and expanding capabilities, of US nuclear adversaries. This report addresses two of those questions.

Q2: What are US competitors (Russia, China, Iran, DPRK) doing to shape the operational environment for future conflict?

Q4: What are the biggest perceived threat to, and opportunity for, the interests of these US nuclear competitors? And what are the internal and external factors currently constraining them from acting on these?

NSI’s Reachback approach combines written and interview elicitation techniques (ViTTa and SEEK) with additional research and analysis to provide short summary responses to time-sensitive questions. In this instance, we were also able to draw on a wealth of recent SMA research across a number of related areas of concern, including NSI’s Great Power Competition (GPC) Datasets, that provide indicators of Chinese, Russian and US leverage globally, and records of Chinese and Russia activities between 2017-2020 across 197 countries.

Given the close connection between state interests, activities, and threat perception, it makes most sense to combine our responses to Q2 and Q4 into a single, integrated response. Consequently, the report is organized around these three overarching concepts – state interest, perceived threats and opportunities, and international activities. The introduction details a theoretical background for each, and explains how, together, they offer a general framework for understanding the choices and behaviors of states in the international system.

The concepts implicit in these two questions are complex and interdependent – requiring bounding choices. To stay within the scope of this project while providing a comprehensive mapping of the problem space, we have chosen to provide a high-level overview and comparison of all four states. For readers seeking a deeper dive into specific aspects of these questions for individual states, the reference section at the end of the report includes links to other SMA work with this level of detail. In this report we focus on how understanding these concepts provides a framework for expanding our understanding of deterrence strategy to account for the multi-domain as well as multi-actor nature of contemporary deterrence.

Introduction [slides 3-8]

Starting point

Deterrence strategy emerged in response to an international system in which power was heavily weighted toward military capability and “sides” were much clearer. Furthermore, in the Cold War era, the US had unquestionable economic and soft power dominance in addition to its military power, making it the partner of choice for many states within the international system.

In the current international system, things are different. Many states find their economic interests being served by (or dependent on) one major power—China, while their security interests and preferences align more closely to that of a different power—the US. Given the centrality of allies and partners to US strategy, this dual dependency creates a challenge that extends far beyond calculations of nuclear capability.

Long-term US allies such as Australia and South Korea are increasingly finding themselves faced with the choice of incurring significant diplomatic and economic coercion from China or distancing themselves from US regional security activities. In Western Europe, targeted economic investment by China in smaller, more economically vulnerable states (in particular Italy and Greece), and more widespread dependence on Russian oil and gas, complicates EU attempts to impose economic or diplomatic penalties on either power.

In addition, the rise in gray zone activity by dissatisfied powers (Russia and Iran in particular) has demonstrated the limitations of military force to deter actions inconsistent with US interests. Dissatisfied powers are increasingly aware that they can subvert international rules and norms, and use non-military means to achieve their objectives, while staying below the threshold for military retaliation by the US—effectively bypassing US deterrence.

We are increasingly seeing, and acknowledging, that military approaches are simply not sufficient to the challenges the US faces in an international environment where our adversaries are already deploying all levers of state power to achieve their objectives. Consequently, a concept of deterrence that is purely military–nuclear or conventional—will not be effective given the tools US competitors are using to forward their own interests.

Cold War deterrence thinking

Classic deterrence theory and strategy builds from the assumption that the adversary is a rational actor. It assumes that increasing the cost of an action (the path to an objective) sufficiently, will stop an actor from taking undesired action, thus achieving an effective deterrent threat.

This conceptualization of deterrence typically abstracts this calculation from the operational environment as a whole. It treats military threats as the only road into town, and adversaries as actors with only one interest and one tool. Such an approach focuses almost entirely on changing behavior by changing the adversary’s cost-benefit analysis. There is little attention paid to the interests that motivate and drive that behavior, and most often nuclear deterrence strategy was (and still is) considered in isolation from other strategic considerations, such as the prevailing information environment, or economic and political ties between states. In effect, it starts from the assumption that the strategic environment is like Moab, Utah—only one road in.

Why we need to think beyond nuclear

Increasing costs can change an actor’s decision calculus, and thus its behavior. However, this does not imply that the interests motivating that behavior have been changed. Rationality assumes actors are goal-oriented and take actions to secure those goals. If we accept that the decision to follow a particular path to an objective is a cost-benefit calculation, then it should follow that an actor with one or more routes to their objective will not be deterred simply because one route proved too costly. Rather, they will calculate the expected utility of each path (the benefit, minus the probability and magnitude of cost) and choose the greatest utility.

All US nuclear adversaries, even the DPRK, have various forms of power available to them, creating multiple paths they can, and do, take to forward and protect their multiple interests. If our understanding of the strategic environment does not include a clear understanding of all our adversaries’ interests and capabilities, we will not be able to predict how they will perceive and respond to changes in that environment, including US actions. Our map will remain Moab, even though the strategic environment itself is more akin to LA.

The role of interests

Before discussing the interests of Russia, China, Iran, and DPRK specifically, it will help to look at the role of interests in state behavior. Theorists of international relations and sociology have had different perspectives on the concept of national interest and, in particular, its relationship to power and security. Classical Realists like Hans Morgenthau reduce national interest to the continuous quest for the physical and political survival of the

state/regime in an anarchic international system. Others, such as sociologist Michael Mann, allow for a broader definition that also includes higher-order goals that provide meaning and a sense of collective identity.

Most generally we find that the enduring interests of any state will fall into 5 categories:

1. Domestic: Maintaining regime legitimacy, popular support & governing capacity
2. Economic: Sustaining governing capacity and conditions for domestic economic activity
3. International prestige: Exerting influence over other actors & the outcome of international events
4. National security: Ensuring sovereign control of territory, assets, and population
5. Identity/values: Protecting closely held values, ideology, and associated objectives

These enduring national interests are ultimately what motivate the actions of international actors. If we assume that actors are purposeful and do not behave in arbitrary, random, or self-destructive ways, identifying the interests at stake in an issue **from the perspective of the other** provides critical information about which “game” we are playing and, thus, which behaviors we should expect from other players.

The differences between states’ priorities and behaviors are the result of the different ways in which each defines their enduring interests and how they perceive the international environment. For example, while both the US and its adversaries share a national security interest in regional order, they define what this entails quite differently. The US regards its military engagement in the MENA and Asia-Pacific regions as a stabilizing factor, whereas Russia, China, Iran and DPRK, all consider the US to be both a threat to their own security and an aggressive and destabilizing presence regionally. While key national interests are relatively static over time, the ways in which a government conceives of, or defines, these interests can shift as aspects of the internal and external environment change.

How actors choose among actions

Actor interests cross multiple domains and, consequently, their actions in the international system rely on the use of multiple forms of power. Deterrence theory accounts for military power (conventional and nuclear) directly and political power—in this case, the ability to credibly communicate a threat—indirectly. It does not account for soft power—what Joseph Nye refers to as the ability to attract and persuade through the currency of culture, political values and policies, or economic power. The form of power a state uses will be a function of its own capabilities and preferences, given the existing state of the international system. In the current operational environment, for all four US adversaries, economic and soft power are cheaper, safer, quicker to implement, harder for the US or allies to push back against, and, for China and Russia in particular, well suited to their capabilities.

State Interests [slides 9-14]

In addition to states’ interests being conditioned by the domestic and operational environment, they are also interdependent. To fully understand how interests will determine choices and behavior, therefore, you need to consider individual interests as components of a complex system.

For this section, drawing on prior and new research and our ViTTa interviews, we constructed causal loop diagrams representing the subjective interest assessment of all four states (Russia, China, Iran, and DPRK). We linked then these high-level interests to more specific objectives. Before moving to a brief summary of the analysis for each state, it is important to emphasize that these interests assessments are subjective. That is, they represent our understanding of how each state perceives its interests given their own subjective assessment of the strategic environment. As a result, there may be aspects of these models that appear inconsistent with our perception of these actors.

Russia

Russia's core national interests—extending its global reach, defending Russian national security and sovereignty, and strengthening the Russian economy—each support domestic stability in Russia and, as a result, the security of the ruling oligarchy led by Vladimir Putin. The global economic downturn and reduced energy demand triggered by the COVID pandemic hit the Russian economy—already weakened by sanctions and low energy prices—very hard, which saw Putin's approval drop precipitously. It has also further widened the gap between Russia's great power ambitions and its power resources. It is becoming harder and harder for Russia to position itself as a viable alternative to existing (Western-led) institutions for collective action and regional economic and security cooperation.

China

The ultimate interest of the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is to guarantee its own longevity. Four additional strategic interests are both ends in themselves and often serve to buttress the stability of the CCP regime. For Xi and the CCP as a whole, re-establishing China's greatness, following what many Chinese consider a century of humiliation, will be solid evidence of legitimacy. This emphasis means the CCP does not separate domestic from international concerns. Maintaining *domestic* regime security, for example, is contingent on continued economic growth and development, facilitated by increasing China's *global* influence through foreign direct investment.

Iran

Iran seeks to become a regional power capable of challenging the dominance of the Sunni Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and pushing back against US allies more generally. It has worked to establish itself as a key cultural, political, and economic player in the Middle East by strategically engaging Shia populations and supporting proxies to further their strategic interests in the region. Recently, Iran's regional ambitions have been constrained by its increasingly dire economic situation, driven by sanctions and exacerbated by the COVID pandemic. Economic necessity, combined with the desire to decrease US regional influence, has led Iran to deepen ties with Russia and China, and to build networks, through the IRGC, with governments and private enterprises in states that do not trade with the US. US regional presence does, however, provide a buffer to potential threat from Iraq, which has become an important trading partner and stage for building Iranian soft power despite its instability.

DPRK

There is little argument among North Korea experts that Kim Jong Un's principal motivation is the preservation of his regime and its distinctive political philosophy Juche. The various Kim regimes have defined Juche as building economic self-sufficiency and prioritizing spending on the development of a strong modern military and powerful defensive measures, such as a nuclear deterrent. Despite its desire for self-sufficiency, DPRK is dependent on foreign trade for food and material goods. This means it needs to maintain good economic and political relations with China, its largest trading partner and provider of food and energy subsidies. In addition to being its most critical trading relationship, DPRK also benefits from China's diplomatic efforts to minimize the severity of international sanctions. Reunification of the Korean Peninsula is a cornerstone of Juche, frequently referenced by Kim Jong Un. While most experts agree that it is certainly an aspiration with historical and emotional appeal, there is debate as to whether it is a goal for which the North Korean leadership would trade satisfaction on other interests, such as national or regime security.

Adversary interests and associated objectives

Overall, our analysis shows US adversaries have similar high-level interests and face similar constraints.

First and foremost, regime survival emerges as the *sine qua non* for all actions—foreign and domestic

Each regime’s interest in maintaining its own security and legitimacy shapes its other key interests, motivating and directing its behavior in the international system. Knowledge of the domestic constraints and pressures each faces is crucial to understanding each regime’s foreign policy actions and their likely responses to US actions.

Economic interests are regarded by all four as a matter of national security

In the US we tend to silo interests, and the clear distinction between private sector and governmental power further encourages the separation of economic power from military and political power. For all four of these adversaries, however, the line between state economic power and notionally private economic actors is much more blurred. Furthermore, all have yoked their legitimacy to improving the economic wellbeing and security of their people. As regime security is implicitly a matter of national security, so, by extension, are economic interests. This viewpoint has profound implications for how these states interpret US and western sanctions and other forms of economic penalty.

The democratic, rules-based international system is a constraint

To the extent that democratic, pluralist political values & norms dominate the international system, they challenge the legitimacy of each of these regimes. Each has an incentive to support existing authoritarian regimes and promote the activities of revisionist actors in democratic states. China and Russia, in particular, see changing existing international institutions, or establishing their own alternative institutions, as a way of legitimating and protecting their own domestic systems of power and control.

Succession issues have the potential to threaten regime stability

With no impartial, rules-based procedure for succession, all four face political upheaval either before or after their present leader dies or steps down. In Iran, the considerable internal conflict over Khomeini’s successor will create incentives to focus on domestic politics and calm internal relations in the short-term. Both Xi and Putin have taken steps to eliminate potential contenders and charismatic critics, and pushed changes in the law to enable them to retain power. Neither has incentive to name a successor (and be perceived as a lame duck). Putin, it is also suggested, perceives handing over his authority as a personal risk. Kim Jong-un has also worked to consolidate his power, using investigations and purges to identify loyalists and ensure (or elicit) loyalty among elites. While it is expected that his successor will be a family member, more specifically his son, no official statement has been made.

All see influence as a zero-sum game

For all four, regime legitimacy is tied to resisting US and Western efforts to constrain their state’s regional or, in Russia and China’s case, international ambitions. Consequently, decreasing US influence is essential to building their own domestic support and international influence. All see US military presence and economic influence in their regions as a threat to their interests writ large. All leverage demonstrations of US military power to support their common narratives of the US as an aggressive and destabilizing actor. More generally, all believe that undermining US international influence, and reducing US presence, will provide greater opportunity to increase their own influence and further their other interests.

Each state’s interests are not always mutually reinforcing

In particular, actions taken in support of security/sovereignty interests often prove to be detrimental to economic interests. Iran and DPRK’s continuation of nuclear activity has triggered sanctions that undermine

economic growth and resilience. Russian actions in Crimea and Ukraine have similarly led to sanctions and decreased economic opportunities. Fear of disruption to trade, and regional economic activity more generally, is seen to be a strong constraint on China's more overt use of force to settle territorial disputes.

Threats and Opportunities [slides 15-17]

Question four focuses on threats and opportunities for US nuclear adversaries and the internal and external factors that are constraining them from using force. In order to gain a diversity of perspectives on this question we used NSI's SEEK capability to tap into the collective knowledge and wisdom of the SMA community as well as reaching out, through NSI's ViTTa expert elicitation, to country experts. A detailed breakdown of findings by countries is included in Appendix A, but clear patterns also emerge looking across actors.

Threats

Consistent with our interest analysis, which was conducted prior to, and independent of, the SEEK survey, threats to regime security, either political opposition and unrest, or foreign influence over populations, were most frequently cited for all four regimes. Similarly, economic instability was also identified as a threat for all regimes, with the further potential to trigger domestic unrest in all but DPRK. The US and the West, were identified as another perceived threat, both military and political, for all four regimes, but by fewer respondents. Cyber-attacks and information security were the remaining area of shared threat for all but DPRK. The remaining threats respondents identified were actor-specific. Several respondents suggest China perceives territorial disputes (Taiwan, South China Sea) and territorial control (Hong Kong) as a threat, consistent with its interest in state sovereignty. Relatedly, some suggested the uncontrollable nature of the international environment itself is seen by China as a threat. Aspects of the strategic environment were also suggested as perceived threats for DPRK: specifically, the strengthening of the US-South Korea partnership or the interruption of Pyongyang's relationship with China. Finally, Iran was the only actor respondents identified as perceiving nuclear attack to be a threat.

Two things become evident when we looked at responses to the questions regarding constraints on the use of force. First, many of the threats identified cannot be countered effectively using force. Second, particularly in the case of domestic opposition, all four regimes have, in fact, employed at least limited force in response. For threats where force could be effective but has not yet been used, negative economic consequences were identified as an external constraint as frequently as were the fear of military retaliation or the balance of military power more generally. The potential for triggering domestic instability was identified as an internal constraint on the use of force for all states.

Opportunities

There was an odd symmetry between the threats and opportunities respondents identified.

For China and Russia, western economic dependence provides opportunity to exert influence, while for Iran and DPRK, economic stability offsets US/Western influence and, for Iran, the potential for domestic unrest. While domestic opposition is a threat, the ability to exert domestic political control is seen as an opportunity for all four states. Increasing their own influence, through partnerships, economic and diplomatic activity, and involvement in international organizations, is seen as presenting an opportunity for all. Additionally, for Russia and China, the relative decline of the US/Western power is seen as an opportunity in itself. This is consistent with the identification of US/Western influence as a threat, as well as the actors' interest in increasing their own international influence and prestige. Along this line, partnerships, especially with China, are seen as another means of bolstering capability and influence for both Russia and DPRK. For Iran and DPRK, building nuclear capability was identified as an opportunity to increase regime security, while several respondents suggested there are no opportunities for Russia to bolster the security and legitimacy of its regime. Finally, although

territorial disputes (South China Sea, Hong Kong, Taiwan) were regarded by some respondents as a threat for China, others see them as an opportunity.

Looking at constraints on the use of force to exploit opportunities, we found military retaliation was identified as a constraint more often for Russia than the other actors. It was also mentioned more frequently as a constraint on pursuing opportunities, than it was for countering threats. We cannot draw any conclusions about the relative effectiveness of US deterrence from this variation, however, as more of China, Iran, and DPRK's opportunities were economic. Finally, resource constraints were identified as a barrier to multiple Russian and Iranian opportunities.

Activities [slides 18-21]

Question 2 moves away from perceptions of threat and opportunity within the operating environment, and focuses instead on observable behavior. Specifically, how US adversaries are shaping the operational environment for future conflict. The GPC Interests and Activities Dataset provides a powerful tool for exploring this question. It catalogues Chinese and Russian global activities, groups them into 38 distinct activity types, and then codes them to actors' objectives and interests. It was beyond the scope of this current effort to replicate the data collection effort in full for Iran and DPRK. However, we were able to leverage our prior research and our experts to identify which of these 38 activity types Iran and DPRK have engaged in and link those to our interests analysis. Appendix B provides summary tables of soft power, economic, military, and political activities for each of the four actors. For now, I will focus on an overview of what we found for all four with a couple of deeper dives in areas we thought might be of particular interest.

Bottom line: adversary activities

So let's start with the bottom line.

Overall, the range of activities observed is consistent with the assessment that all states are acting to maximize their interests through multiple objectives, within the constraints imposed by their relative power capabilities (be these political, military, economic, soft).

Not surprisingly, this means we find the narrowest range of activities being pursued by DPRK, and China engaging in the widest range of economic activities. What is perhaps less expected is how diverse Iran's political activities were, despite US and Western attempts to isolate Tehran.

Power imbalances lead to opportunistic behaviors

Russia and China are both using economic leverage to further broader interests, especially for increasing their influence. All four are employing gray strategies to pursue security and influence interests while limiting the risk of direct military confrontation with the US and West. Both the DPRK and Iranian regimes are involved in sanctions evasion and a variety of illicit economic activities, including drug trafficking, cybercrime, arms and tech transfers, and smuggling, to generate revenue. And of course, all are engaging in mis- and disinformation campaigns, many targeted at undermining US prestige and influence.

Targeting private entities & US allies can offset the US's power advantage

US influence is intrinsically tied to its promise to extend its deterrence umbrella over its allies. Cross-domain activities against private entities and US allies, that stay below the threshold for a US military response, undermine the credibility and effectiveness of US deterrence. A little later on we're going to look at a case study that really exemplifies this strategy.

Opportunism leads to transactional cooperation

Historical animosity and contemporary sources of conflict provide scant potential for enduring cooperation between any of these actors. Their shared desire to undermine US influence and interests, however, provides a foundation for short-term, limited cooperation on specific issues. For this reason it should not be ignored, as it can predict cooperative action where examination of actor's interests alone would not.

Relative to the US, all have limited soft power capabilities

US popular culture and media content still dominate the international market, and its educational and research institutions offer greater opportunities than those of its adversaries. The US also remains a powerful diplomatic player in most international institutions and fora.

...But Russia and China are actively working to redress this imbalance

Following the US example, both are increasing distribution of their media content and offering more opportunities for cultural and educational exchange. China is also increasing its funding of research in US and western universities, and using the power of its box office to influence the portrayal of China in foreign media.

Finally, the activities of all four actors reflect their common interest in building influence

All are engaged to some degree in diplomacy and gov-to-gov cooperation. All are engaging in military/security and economic cooperation both bilaterally and through regional organizations, and have also spoken out in support of non-democratic regimes facing censure from the US and the West.

As well as mis- and disinformation efforts to subvert domestic political processes within other states, all four actors engage in information manipulation and propaganda efforts aimed at the populations of other states. With more resources at their disposal, Russia and China are actively attempting to directly influence foreign media in a variety of ways, including providing media content, training journalists, investing in local media providers, and control of information and security tech.

Deeper dive: Chinese infrastructure & resource extraction activities

Discussions of China's rise often focus on economic factors: its need to maintain domestic economic growth to ensure popular support and its use of the BRI as a vehicle not only for that economic growth, but as a tool of influence as well. By mapping China's global infrastructure investment and resource extraction activities, we can put systematic data to anecdotal or regionally specific observations. Doing just that, what we see—activity in every region of the world— is consistent with the prevailing narrative of Chinese economic expansion.

China infrastructure and resource extraction investment remains greatest in its near abroad, and includes substantial investment in port facilities in the South China Sea and Indian Ocean that have logistical implications for its global activities. Its increased activity in Central Asia challenges Russia's interests, and may become a source of conflict between the two, especially if US withdrawal from Afghanistan results in less regional engagement overall and, thus, less common ground for Russia and China in pushing back against the US.

Further afield, although its investment and extraction activities in Africa are low relative to other regions, it is more active—both in terms of number of countries and value of activity—than the US or Russia. What has greater potential to impinge on US influence and interests, however, is China's presence in Central and South America. China is increasingly looking to the region to expand its share of global resources. As we will see next, China and Russia are both engaged in a wide variety of activities in countries the US has traditionally regarded as its sole domain.

Deeper dive: Chinese & Russian activities in Central & South America

We can also use the GPC Interests and Activities dataset to look in more detail at the scope of Russian and Chinese activities in a specific region. In this analysis we have focused on Central and South America as this is a region where the US is used to being largely unchallenged.

As you can see, this is no longer the case. Both China and Russia are engaged in a wide range of activities in all regional states. Although both focus on their areas of strength (economic for China, energy for Russia), their activities do include gov-to-gov diplomacy and regional cooperation designed to undercut US influence.

This is particularly the case in Mexico, where deteriorating relations between US and Mexico over immigration created a window of opportunity for China to position itself as an alternative to dependence on the US, building its economic and soft power. US policy has also contributed to strengthening relations between Venezuela and both Russia and China. As Venezuela's political and economic situation continues to deteriorate, both Russia and China have deepened economic, military, and diplomatic engagement, reducing US leverage over the Venezuelan regime. Iran, which has long-term ties to Venezuela has also promoted its support of the government and the economic aid it has provided to offset the impact of US sanctions.

Perhaps of most concern for US interests is the uptick in media and information activities we see across the region. Russia's activities have been focused on helping a handful of governments with information control, rather than technology. China, on the other hand, has expanded its investment in regional media and ICT to almost all regional states and provides surveillance tech to the governments of Venezuela, Brazil, Ecuador, Chile, and Argentina.

Implications [slides 22-26]

By examining the interests, threat and opportunity perceptions, and activities of these four US adversaries, we have created a more complete map of the operating environment; to go back to the earlier analogy, we are looking at a map of LA now, rather than Moab. So now we want to bring this back to the US. Specifically, what are the implications of all this for US interests?

Bottom line for the US

Drawing on speeches, analysis, and official documents such as the NSS, we created a loop diagram of US interests, just as we did for US adversaries. A national security focus on the protection of US borders and citizens, and an economic focus on prosperity and strength are both either directly or indirectly supported by alliances and partnerships with likeminded states supporting the existing rules-based international order. Combined, these four interests both support and are supported by the dominant status of US values and norms. When considered in light of adversary activities and interests, one key implication emerges.

Adversaries' activities are too varied, and US interests too interdependent, for a single approach to deterrence to be sufficient.

Actors, especially those who are not status quo powers, simply do not thrive in the international system unless they are agile, creative, patient, and, at some level, sneaky about how they protect and pursue their interests. All of these actors have spent decades learning how to fly under the US's threshold for military force. All have needed to find ways to offset their relative power disadvantages and respond to any small opportunity the strategic environment presents.

Although US attention has, until recently, been focused on the threat of violent extremism and non-state actors, Russia, China, Iran, and DPRK have never lost sight of the US. Each has been working to build ties and influence: Russia and China on a global scale. This leads to our second implication

The US must address adversary soft power and influence activities

All US interests are intrinsically bound up in maintaining the status quo international system. Consequently, as the loop diagram shows, decreases in US influence and economic power will trigger a series of negative feedback loops. Many of the soft power and political activities of US adversaries are motivated by an interest in decreasing the influence of the US. As such, even when there is no specifically revisionist motive, such activities will erode the existing rules, norms, and institutions that structure the existing international system. Unless the US can adjust its own interest so that the negative effects of changes to the nature of the international system are eliminated, failure to counter soft power and influence activities by adversaries will remain a threat to all US interests. Such activities also undermine the strength of US alliances and partnerships.

Allies' dual dependency undermines US deterrence

Dependence on Chinese trade and investment, and Russian energy, puts many of the US's allies in a position where their economic interests are at odds with their security interests and preferences. This vulnerability provides greater scope for a cross-domain response by adversaries; one that puts significant pressure on the target state, while avoiding the potential for military escalation with the US.

Reducing dual dependency can strengthen US alliances and partnerships

Most of the economic activities these states engage in have implications for the US's interest in building up alliances and partnerships. At the moment, most of these implications are negative, but, if cross-domain strategies have proved successful for US adversaries, this suggests they could also be successful for the US. Specifically, targeting US trade and investment, as well as development funds, to allies and partner states that are currently economically dependent on US adversaries could reduce their [adversaries'] economic leverage. This would in turn reduce the potential economic cost of "siding" with the US on security issues. Calling out adversary behavior that violates international rules and norms would also be less costly for allies and partners if they were less economically vulnerable to economic reprisals (informal sanctioning) by adversaries. This in turn would facilitate the strengthening of the existing rules-based international order.

Case study: US THAAD deployment

This cross-domain strategy—countering the threat of military force by leveraging political, economic, or soft power— is illustrated most clearly in China's response to the stationing of a US THAAD system in South Korea. Chinese observers claim the THAAD deployment signaled the expansion of the US- allied ballistic missile defense architecture in the Asia Pacific, weakening China's nuclear deterrent, and confirming longstanding fears of US containment of China.

After initial diplomatic objections were ineffective, China chose to retaliate economically, rather than militarily. It began an aggressive and targeted public campaign of economic retaliation to compel a change of South Korean policy. It targeted the South Korean tourist trade with an informal ban on organized tours, reducing the number of Chinese tourists to South Korea by nearly 50% in 2017. Import of South Korean television dramas and music was also frozen, and not a single South Korean video game received permission to enter the massive Chinese video game market between March 2017 and December 2020. The Chinese game market accounted for about 40%, or \$6.4bn, of South Korea's game exports prior to the ban. South Korean companies in China also reported cyber-attacks and China directly targeted South Korea's Lotte Group, which had owned the land where the THAAD system was installed, forcing closure of 75 Lotte stores throughout China in March 2017 on account of "inspections failures". In 2019, the Lotte conglomerate sold all its stores in China to Chinese rivals, and halted a project to build a theme park in northeastern China, despite a \$2.5 billion investment. The financial toll on Lotte

alone from the THAAD retaliation is estimated to be around \$1.7 billion. According to the Bank of Korea, China's actions reduced South Korea's expected economic growth for 2017 by 0.4 percent.

In response to China's actions, South Korea attempted to set up direct discussions between the two countries' finance ministers, which were declined by the Chinese. However, by late October 2017, South Korean Foreign Minister Kang Kyung-wha, under a progressive administration, confirmed that South Korea was not considering any additional THAAD deployments, would not participate in the United States' BMD network, and would not consider joining an alliance with the US and Japan. These assurances to China—“the three no's”—were ultimately the product of punitive measures, economic pressure that inflicted real costs on the South Korean economy, as well as behind-the-scenes South Korea-China diplomacy that apparently excluded the US. A few months later, in December 2017, Presidents Moon and Xi agreed on “four principles” to maintain stability on the Korean Peninsula:

1. war on the Korean Peninsula can never be tolerated;
2. the principle of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula will be firmly maintained;
3. all issues, including the denuclearization of North Korea, will be peacefully resolved through dialogue and negotiations; and
4. improvement in inter-Korean relations will be ultimately helpful in resolving issues involving the Korean Peninsula.

The leaders also agreed to expand bilateral cooperation in politics and security and to “revitalize,” or reinstitute, senior level strategic dialogues that had been cancelled.

The THAAD deployment presented China with an opportunity to further its key interests more broadly. It provided another salient and shared issue—decreasing IS regional influence—for diplomatic and military cooperation with Russia, against the US. It enabled them, by accepting a discrete potential cost (the continued deployment of a single THAAD system), to constrain South Korea's alliance behavior with the US and the US's future regional BMD plans. And it demonstrated to other regional actors—and the US—that it is willing and able to use its economic leverage to further its political and security interests.

In this sense the THAAD dispute highlights a fundamental weakness of the US position in the Asia Pacific—the dual dependence of its allies and partners. As economic dependence on China deepens, the potential costs of remaining firmly in the US camp on security issues increases too, even for close allies like South Korea and Australia.

Case studies provide valuable insight into how and why cross-domain strategies can be effective, and anecdotal comparisons indicate this is not an isolated instance. However, if we want to get an evidence-based assessment of how widespread this phenomenon actually is, or could become, we need to move to a large-n study.

Large-N: Chinese and Russian leverage globally

The Global Indicators dataset NSI built for the SMA Great Power Competition project can help here, as it provides measure of the importance of 197 countries to Russia, China, and the US, as well as the leverage each power has within these countries across three dimensions—security, economic, and diplomatic/cultural.

The map here highlights the top 10 countries—those of greatest security, economic, and diplomatic/cultural importance to the US. The legend next to South America explains the color coding, so I'll focus on some general take-aways.

- While the US has greater overall leverage than China and Russia in all US top 10 countries, there are several states, across most regions, where Russia or China have greater leverage than the US on a specific dimension.
- Russia has some security leverage in almost ½ the US high importance states (not top 10 but next step down); China only in Qatar.
- China has economic leverage in every one of the US top 10, and greater economic leverage than Russia in half of these.

- Russia and China have considerable economic leverage in European states important to the US, and China is increasingly augmenting this with greater diplomatic/cultural leverage.
- China's economic and diplomatic/cultural leverage over close US allies in the Asia-Pacific reflects the wider pattern of dual dependency that challenges US interest in strengthening alliances and partnerships.

Looking more closely, we see that Turkey is vulnerable to economic pressure from China and more so from Russia. Russian security and diplomatic/cultural leverage over Turkey also provides it with opportunities to challenge US influence and security interests in both MENA and Europe.

Consistent with the case study, this large-n analysis identifies Asia-Pacific allies Japan, South Korea, and Australia as venues for increased economic competition from both China and Russia. All three are also vulnerable to Chinese influence campaigns, as we have seen most recently with Australia.

Large N: Chinese and Russian influence activities

So can a large-n approach shed light on China and Russia's pursuit of their influence objectives more broadly? Returning to the GPC Interests and Activities Dataset, we can extract those activities associated with influence building and map them to see what is going on globally. When we do, as you see here, it becomes clear that both China and Russia are engaged in a wide range of activities consistent with increasing their influence globally. China is engaged in influence related activities in 195 countries world-wide. Russia is less active in Sub-Saharan Africa and the Asia Pacific than China, although it does have a presence in those regions as well. It is also important to note that both China and Russia are active in most North, Central, and South American states.

Given both states consider influence to be a zero-sum game with the US, these activities have implications for US influence. Returning to the Question 2, this analysis highlights the way in which adversaries' non-military and even non-government activities can shape the operating environment in ways that potentially disadvantage the US in future conflict. By increasing ties with foreign governments and populations, building economic dependencies, and offering an alternative to Western institutions, US adversaries can begin to erode the ease and certainty with which the US has been used to functioning with allies and partners and within international institutions.

Concluding thoughts [slides 27-28]

We have covered a lot of ground in this analysis, and moved far afield from the territory nuclear deterrence typically works within, so what have we learned in the process? Put most simply, what this analysis suggests is that

[Adversaries' cross domain strategies work to counter US deterrence, and US adversaries know it](#)

China and Russia have both demonstrated that the strength of US alliances, and the credibility and capability of US deterrence can be limited by using economic leverage against US allies and private entities. The US has not found a way to effectively counter the rise of adversarial influence campaigns that have been further boosted by the say-do gap in US foreign policy.

Focusing on nuclear deterrence alone will not prevent US adversaries from pursuing interests and objectives detrimental to US interests. At best it will send those adversaries down a different, albeit less immediately dangerous path.

This raises a question: maybe we are focused on the wrong multiple. Much attention has been paid in recent years to the multiplayer, three body deterrence problem, but perhaps this attention is misplaced, or at least too narrowly focused. The real challenge for 21st century deterrence may be multidomain, rather than multiplayer, games.

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