



THE FUTURE OF

SINO-U.S. PROXY WAR

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Strategic thought in both the United States and China has focused on the potential for a Sino-U.S. interstate war and downplayed the odds of a clash in a foreign internal conflict. However, great-power military competition is likely to take the form of proxy war in which Washington and Beijing aid rival actors in an intrastate conflict. The battlefield of Sino-U.S. military competition is more likely to be Venezuela or Myanmar than the South China Sea. Proxy war could escalate in unexpected and costly ways as Washington and Beijing try to manipulate civil wars in far-flung lands they do not understand, ratchet up their commitment to avoid the defeat of a favored actor, and respond to local surrogates that pursue their own agendas.

In the 2017 movie *Wolf Warrior II* — the highest-grossing Chinese film of all time — the hero, a veteran of Chinese special operations forces, rescues civilians in Africa who are being held by rebels fighting in a civil war. The nefarious puppet masters, however, are the U.S. mercenaries who control the rebels. The movie ends with the hero defeating his American nemesis and the Chinese Navy obliterating the rebel forces. The scenario may be outlandish, but the idea that foreign civil wars will become an arena for Sino-American competition is highly plausible.

Strategic doctrine in both the United States and China has downplayed the possibility of a clash in a foreign internal conflict and in the U.S. case in particular, focused on the potential for a conventional interstate war. However, the odds that the United States and China will engage in an interstate war are extremely low due to a number of factors, including nuclear deterrence, regime type, trade relations between the two countries, and international institutions. Military competition is much more likely to take the form of a proxy war in which Washington and Beijing aid different actors in an intrastate conflict because of a systemwide shift away from interstate war and toward civil war, continued American hyper-interventionism, and growing Chinese interventionism. In the coming years, internal conflicts in countries like Venezuela, Pakistan, Myanmar, or North Korea could become battlegrounds for great-power rivalry. Such U.S.-Chinese proxy wars will likely be much subtler

than the heavy-handed proxy conflicts of the Cold War and involve diplomatic initiatives, economic aid, cyber war, propaganda, and competition within international institutions. Indeed, Washington and Beijing may compartmentalize a particular proxy campaign — sparring in one civil war while steering clear of each other or even cooperating in another internal conflict.

U.S. analysts often characterize the global system in terms of a shift from the counter-terrorism paradigm of the post-9/11 era, which was focused on insecure states and nonstate actors, to the great-power competition paradigm of today's era, which prioritizes U.S. relations with China and Russia. However, these two paradigms are less distinct than sometimes thought: Future great-power competition, like earlier counter-terrorism efforts, may occur within insecure states and feature alliances with nonstate actors.

The question remains whether a Sino-U.S. proxy war could spiral into an interstate war. The barriers to direct hostilities make this outcome unlikely, but proxy conflicts could still escalate in unexpected and costly ways. The United States and China may try to manipulate civil wars in far-flung lands they do not understand. Washington has a history of wading into strife-torn countries, like Afghanistan and Iraq, with alien cultures and languages, leading to strategic failure. Beijing is even less prepared to comprehend or shape the contours of foreign civil wars due to a lack of capabilities and experience. Because of the psychological dynamic

Table 1: Types of foreign intervention in a civil war.

		Beneficiary		
		State	Nonstate Actor	Neutral
Type of Intervention	Direct (use of armed forces)	Counter-insurgency / Counter-terrorism	Rebel alliance	Peacekeeping
	Indirect (without use of armed forces)	Capacity building	Proxy war	Peacekeeping

of loss aversion, these two great powers may be willing to ratchet up their commitment in a given proxy war to avoid the defeat of a favored actor. In addition, local surrogates could act independently in ways that might escalate a conflict.

One of the major concerns is that proxy war can worsen foreign internal conflicts. Meddling by outside actors tends to make civil wars deadlier, longer, and more likely to reoccur.¹ If the rivalry between the United States and China shifts into foreign internal conflicts, it could also impact global governance and norms such as state sovereignty, human rights, democratization, and the “responsibility to protect.”² And yet, there is surprisingly little scholarship on the potential for Sino-U.S. competition in an intrastate conflict. As Andrew Mumford has noted, proxy wars in general are “historically ubiquitous yet chronically under-analyzed,”³ an inattention that extends to Washington’s relations with Beijing. This paper seeks to offer a corrective to that neglect.

The article is divided into four sections. The first section defines the key terms. The second section explores how strategic thought in both the United States and China deemphasizes intervention

in foreign civil wars. The third section discusses how changing global conflict dynamics diminished interstate war and spurred internationalized civil war, which has encouraged U.S. hyper-interventionism and increasing Chinese intervention in internal conflicts. The fourth section contends that Chinese and U.S. intervention in foreign civil wars is likely to take the form of proxy conflicts rather than great-power partnership and describes the potential for proxy campaigns to escalate.

Definitions of Key Terms

We ought to begin by defining the key terms. First, it is necessary to define two major types of conflict: interstate war and civil war. An interstate war refers to sustained combat between the organized armed forces of members of the interstate system resulting in at least 1,000 combat fatalities per year.⁴ A civil war refers to conflict that reaches the same threshold of violence but is “within the territorial boundaries of a state system member.”⁵

Table 1 offers a basic typology of interventions, or attempts by an outside actor, usually a state, to

1 Christopher Linebarger and Andrew Enterline, “Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcomes of Civil Wars,” in *What Do We Know About Civil Wars*, ed. T. David Mason and Sara McLaughlin Mitchell (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 93–108.

2 G. John Ikenberry, “The Three Faces of Liberal Internationalism,” in *Rising States, Rising Institutions: Challenges for Global Governance*, ed. Alan S. Alexandroff and Andrew F. Cooper (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2010), 17–47; and Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2018).

3 Andrew Mumford, *Proxy Warfare* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013), 1. An exception is Mark O. Yeisley, “Bipolarity, Proxy Wars, and the Rise of China,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (Winter 2011): 75–91, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/SSQ/documents/Volume-05_Is-sue-4/Yeisley.pdf. See also, Thomas J. Wright, *All Measures Short of War: The Contest for the 21st Century and the Future of American Power* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017).

4 Meredith Reid Sarkees, “Inter-state Wars (Version 4.0): Definitions and Variables,” <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/inter-state-wars-codebook>.

5 Meredith Reid Sarkees, “Patterns of Civil Wars in the Twenty-First Century: The Decline of Civil War?” in *Routledge Handbook of Civil Wars*, ed. Edward Newman and Karl DeRouen, Jr. (London: Routledge, 2014), 242. In this paper, “civil war” is used synonymously with “intrastate war” and “internal conflict.” See also Mark Gersovitz and Norma Jean Kriger, “What Is a Civil War? A Critical Review of Its Definition and (Econometric) Consequences,” *The World Bank Research Observer* 28, no. 2 (August 2013): 159–190, <https://doi.org/10.1093/wbro/lkt005>; Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 2000), 9; Karen A. Feste, *Intervention: Shaping the Global Order* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; Andreas Krieg and Jean-Marc Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare: The Transformation of War in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2019); Tyrone L. Groh, *Proxy War: The Least Bad Option* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019); and Geraint Hughes, *My Enemy’s Enemy: Proxy Warfare in International Politics* (Portland, OR: Sussex Academic Press, 2012).

manipulate the course of a civil war. Direct intervention involves the deployment of armed forces and can take the form of counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism efforts (when the intervenor supports a state partner in suppressing a rebellion), a rebel alliance (when the intervenor partners with a politically motivated nonstate actor), or peacekeeping (when the intervenor remains impartial in a conflict). Direct intervention can run the gamut from a brief raid by special forces to a major operation like America's involvement in Vietnam.

Indirect intervention is an attempt to manipulate the course of a civil war without the deployment of armed forces. This can be done by providing weaponry, training, financial support, or other material aid to local actors. Indirect intervention usually takes one of three forms: capacity building, proxy war, or peacemaking. Capacity building is when an external actor backs a regime.⁶ A formal alliance is not required in this scenario, although alliance commitments often spur capacity building.⁷ Proxy war takes place when a state provides material assistance to a politically motivated nonstate actor.⁸ Proxy war implies a hierarchical principal-agent relationship between a more powerful state "principal" and a less powerful nonstate "agent" that are both pursuing a common goal, although conflict could still arise over other diverging interests. States can also intervene indirectly in a neutral manner by, for example, engaging in diplomacy or applying sanctions against all civil war participants to help end the conflict. This is called peacemaking (not to be confused with peacekeeping, which involves direct intervention).

Indirect intervention can range widely in terms

of the type and extent of aid being offered and the degree of control the intervenor seeks to have over local actors. At one end of the scale is donated assistance, whereby patrons hand over resources without any strings attached, hoping for positive results but effectively ceding control to the partner.⁹ A patron may also employ relatively mild diplomatic and economic tools to manipulate an outcome in favor of one side in the conflict. At the other end of the scale are large arms transfers and efforts to exert extensive control over the regime or nonstate actor.¹⁰

Indirect intervention can offer a tempting combination of high strategic impact, low cost, and potential deniability. If a country's rival faces internal rebellion, providing aid to rebels can undermine the rival's control of territory or resources, provoke it to repress its populace and thereby deepen domestic divisions, or punish the rival for its own patronage of insurgents.¹¹ External aid for rebels is one of the strongest predictors of rebel success.¹² Proxy war is not risk free, however. The interests of the principal and the agent likely diverge in some areas, and nonstate actors may be emboldened to act in undesired ways, potentially triggering unwanted escalation.¹³ The principal may expend additional resources trying to keep the agent in line and ultimately be forced to abandon its patronage or intervene directly.¹⁴

As we just saw, a proxy war can refer to an individual patron that aids a nonstate actor in a civil war. For example, the United States would be fighting a proxy war by backing rebels in Syria. A proxy war can also occur between external patrons if they aid opposing sides in a civil war (either the

6 Eli Berman and David A. Lake, eds. *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019).

7 Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, chapter 1.

8 I draw on Groh's definition of proxy war as "directing the use of force by a politically motivated, local actor to indirectly influence political affairs in the target state" as well as his emphasis on nonstate actors. However, Groh's requirement for "directing" or explicitly controlling the use of force narrows the meaning of proxy war and excludes instances of aid without clear strings attached (for example, Groh codes U.S. backing for the mujahadeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s as donated assistance rather than proxy war). I define proxy war as an attempt to influence the course or strategic outcome of a civil war that does not require the patron to direct the recipient's actions. My definition also differs somewhat from that of Hughes, who blurs the line between indirect and direct intervention by defining proxy war as "a supplementary means of waging war or as a substitute for the direct employment of their own armed forces." I define proxy war solely as aid to nonstate actors, whereas Mumford defines the term more broadly to encompass aid to rebels and regimes alike: "indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome." Groh, *Proxy War*, 29; Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*, 2; and Mumford, *Proxy War*, chapter 1. See also Michael A. Innes, ed., *Making Sense of Proxy Wars: States, Surrogates, and the Use of Force* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2012), 11–16.

9 Groh, *Proxy War*.

10 If the patron combines both direct and indirect actions — for example, deploying regular troops and supplying weapons to local rebels — this is coded as direct intervention.

11 Daniel Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); and Idean Salehyan, "The Delegation of War to Rebel Organizations," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 54, no. 3 (June 2010): 493–515, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002709357890>.

12 Daniel Byman, et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001); Idean Salehyan, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and David E. Cunningham, "Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups," *International Organization* 65, no. 4 (Fall 2011): 709–44, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23016231>.

13 Byman, *Deadly Connections*, 36–40; and Paul Staniland, "Organizing Insurgency: Networks, Resources, and Rebellion in South Asia," *International Security* 37, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 142–77, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23280407>.

14 Groh, *Proxy War*.



regime versus the rebels or competing rebel factions). For example, the United States and China would be considered to be fighting a proxy war in Syria if Beijing were to back the regime and Washington were to support the rebels. In this scenario, Washington is engaged in an individual proxy war whereas China is engaged in capacity building. We also refer to the competition between the great powers as proxy war.

U.S. and Chinese Strategic Doctrine: the Primacy of Non-Intervention

China's recent dramatic economic growth has intensified strategic competition between Washington and Beijing. From 2004 to 2018, China's share of global gross domestic product more than tripled, from 4.5 percent to 16.1 percent, whereas America's share fell from 27.9 percent to 23.3 percent.¹⁵ Current trends suggest that China's defense spending could overtake that of the United States by the 2030s.¹⁶ Beijing's newfound economic and military capabilities have translated into increasing Chinese assertiveness in foreign policy, heightening American fears about the fragility of the U.S.-led international order. In 2017, General Secretary Xi Jinping stated that China had entered a "new era" and would move "closer to center stage" in world affairs.¹⁷ Meanwhile, the Trump administration labeled China a "strategic competitor" and a

"revisionist power" that is seeking to rewrite the rules of the global system.¹⁸ In 2018, Vice President Mike Pence described a seemingly irrepressible contest between the democratic United States and an authoritarian China.¹⁹ This heightened Sino-U.S. competition is evident in a variety of areas, from trade and emerging technologies like 5G wireless to the cyber domain and multilateral institutions.²⁰ How will this rivalry play out in terms of military conflict? Strategic thought in both the United States and China tends to downplay all forms of intervention, including a Sino-U.S. proxy war, and focus instead on the potential for interstate war.

U.S. Strategic Thought

U.S. policymakers and analysts prioritize the threat of interstate war with China in both planning and procurement. According to scholars, the traditional American way of war emphasizes interstate war as the U.S. military's true vocation and deemphasizes counter-insurgency, nation building, and other forms of intervention in foreign civil conflicts as peripheral or regrettable activities.²¹ After the Vietnam War, for example, the U.S. Army deliberately avoided thinking about guerrilla war and instead planned for an interstate showdown against the Soviet Union in Europe.²²

The Trump administration underscored this traditional preference by placing the conventional interstate threat from China at the center of U.S.

15 See, for example, Malcolm Scott and Cedric Sam, "Here's How Fast China's Economy is Catching Up to the U.S.," *Bloomberg*, June 25, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2016-us-vs-china-economy/>.

16 David C. Kang, *China Rising: Peace, Power, and Order in East Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001), 360–402; and Arvind Subramanian, "The Inevitable Superpower: Why China's Dominance Is a Sure Thing," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 5 (September/October 2011): 66–78, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23041777>.

17 Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "Xi Jinping's Marathon Speech: Five Takeaways," *New York Times*, Oct. 18, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/18/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-party-congress.html>.

18 *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, The White House, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

19 Mike Pence, "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China," U.S. Embassy and Consulates in China, Oct. 4, 2018, <https://china.usembassy-china.org.cn/remarks-by-vice-president-pence-on-the-administrations-policy-toward-china/>. See also Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011); Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline from Obama to Trump and Beyond* (New York: Other Press, 2016); Robert S. Ross and Øystein Tunsjø, eds., *Strategic Adjustment and the Rise of China: Power and Politics in East Asia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017); and G. John Ikenberry, "Between the Eagle and the Dragon: America, China, and Middle State Strategies in East Asia," *Political Science Quarterly* 131, no. 1 (2016): 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.1002/polq.12430>.

20 Weijian Shan, "The Unwinnable Trade War," *Foreign Affairs* 98, no. 6 (November/December 2019), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/2019-10-08/unwinnable-trade-war>; Nicol Turner Lee, "Navigating the U.S.–China 5G Competition," Brookings Institute, April 2020, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/FP_20200427_5g_competition_turner_lee_v2.pdf; Paul M. Nakasone and Michael Sulmeyer, "How to Compete in Cyberspace," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 25, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-08-25/cybersecurity>; and Kristine Lee, "The United Nations: An Emerging Battleground for Influence," Testimony Before the U.S.–China Economic and Security Review Commission, June 24, 2020, https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2020-06/Lee_Testimony.pdf.

21 Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 36; Colin S. Gray, *Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt*, "Strategic Studies Institute," U.S. Army War College, March 2006, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/irregular-enemies-and-the-essence-of-strategy-can-the-american-way-of-war-adapt/>; Nadia Schadlow, *War and the Art of Governance: Consolidating Combat Success Into Political Victory* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2017); Dominic Tierney, *How We Fight: Crusades, Quagmires, and the American Way of War* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2010); and David H. Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era: Transforming the U.S. Military for Modern Wars* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009).

22 Benjamin Buley, *The New American Way of War: Military Culture and the Political Utility of Force* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 74; and Ucko, *The New Counterinsurgency Era*.

foreign policy and rejecting the U.S. military's involvement in nation building.²³ The 2017 *National Security Strategy* made virtually no reference to foreign insurgency or unconventional warfare. Instead, it highlighted China's aim to displace U.S. influence in East Asia and vowed to "restore the readiness of our forces for major war."²⁴ The following year, in 2018, the *National Defense Strategy* emphasized China's assertion of territorial sovereignty in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and Taiwan; Beijing's rapid military modernization; and the need for high-end U.S. technologies, such as fifth-generation aircraft.²⁵ According to the National Defense Authorization Act, the United States should respond to the Chinese threat by "re-establishing warfighting dominance" in conventional interstate war, requiring "investments in critical equipment, weapons, and missile defense platforms to improve munitions that enhance lethality."²⁶ In 2019, Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper told an audience at the U.S. Naval War College: "Many of you spent most of your career fighting irregular warfare. But times have changed. We are now in an era of great-power competition. Our strategic competitors are Russia and China."²⁷

In recent years, the U.S. military has downplayed planning for counter-insurgency in favor of boosting its readiness for interstate conflict. In 2009, the Defense Department described stability operations as "a core U.S. military mission that the Department of Defense shall be prepared to conduct with proficiency equivalent to combat operations," but

in a 2018 update, this language was excised.²⁸ The Defense Department's budget request for 2020 contended that the focus on "insurgent warfare and the threat posed by the rise of violent extremist organizations ... led the U.S. military to experience damaging trends in readiness and competitiveness," and that the military would henceforth "re-focus on high-intensity conflict to compete against Great Powers."²⁹ In 2017, the Army's "Field Manual 3-0" prioritized large-scale mechanized fighting against a peer adversary such as Russia or China.³⁰ The Department of Defense developed the Air-Sea Battle concept to combat Chinese cyber and anti-access capabilities in the context of interstate naval and air operations, explicitly echoing the Cold War-era AirLand Battle concept for interstate war with the Soviet Union.³¹ Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Paul Selva said, "Any fight with China, if it were to come to blows, would be a largely maritime and air fight."³²

Prominent analysts have also prioritized the danger of a conventional war with China. In 2016, a RAND study concluded that a potential Sino-U.S. war "would be regional and conventional" and "waged mainly by ships on and beneath the sea" based on the assumption "that fighting would start and remain in East Asia, where potential Sino-U.S. flash points and nearly all Chinese forces are located."³³ Elbridge Colby, the former deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, wrote that "the United States must prepare to fight and achieve its political aims in a war with

23 "Full Text: Donald Trump's Speech on Fighting Terrorism," *Politico*, Aug. 15, 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/08/donald-trump-terrorism-speech-227025>.

24 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

25 *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America*, U.S. Department of Defense, <https://www.hssl.org/?abstract&id=807329>; "Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2020," Office of the Secretary of Defense, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

26 "FY 2020 National Defense Authorization Act Executive Summary," United States Senate Committee on Armed Services, May 2019, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/FY%202020%20NDAA%20Executive%20Summary.pdf>.

27 "Secretary of Defense Esper Tells U.S. Naval War College Students His Focus Is Great-Power Competition," *Military News*, Sept. 3, 2019, https://www.militarynews.com/news/secretary-of-defense-esper-tells-u-s-naval-war-college-students-his-focus-is-great/article_ba046c84-ce78-11e9-93a9-2be2d0a609bc.html.

28 "Department of Defense Instruction, 3000.05," Department of Defense, Sept. 16, 2009, <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/300005p.pdf?ver=2019-01-28-141537-720>; and "DoD Directive 3000.05," Department of Defense, Dec. 13, 2018, https://fas.org/irp/doddir/dod/d3000_05.pdf.

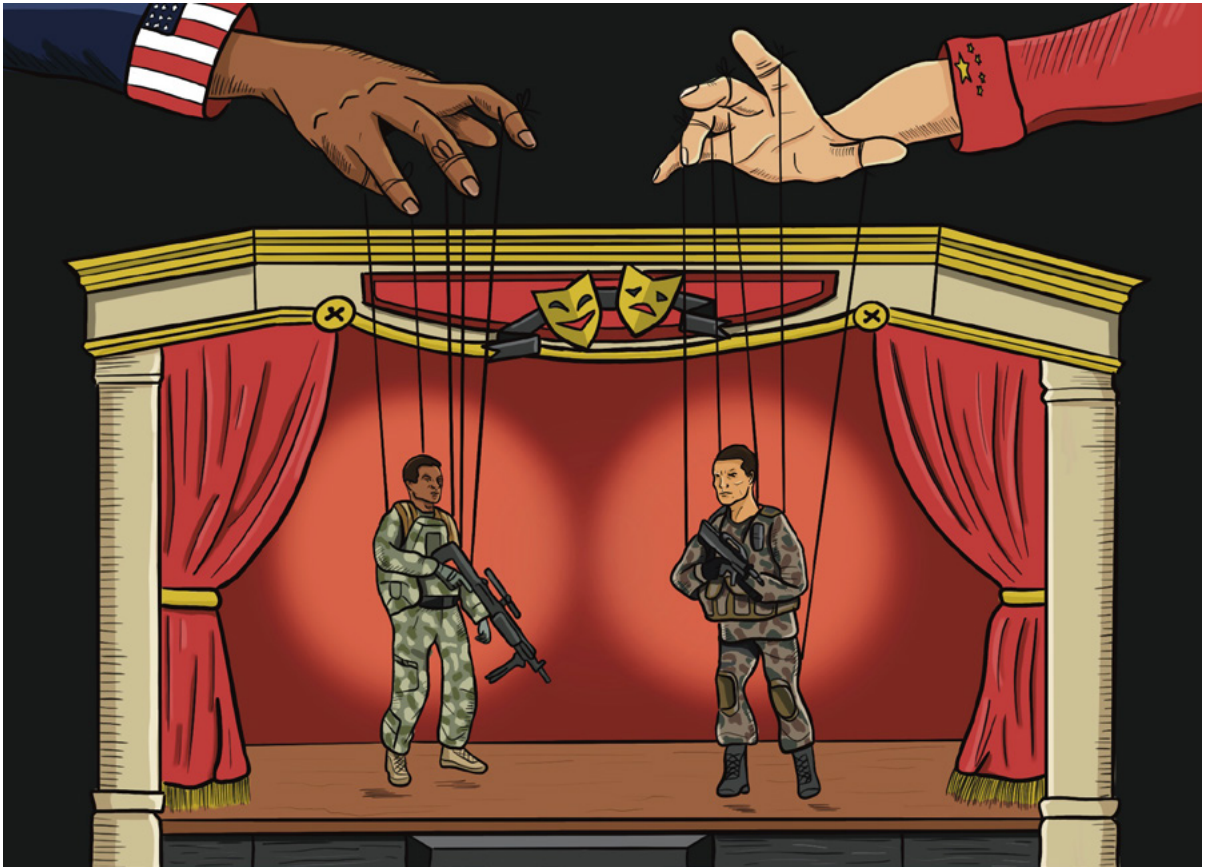
29 "Defense Budget Overview: United States Department of Defense Fiscal Year 2020 Budget Request," The Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller)/Chief Financial Officer, March 2019, http://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/fy2020/fy2020_Budget_Request_Overview_Book.pdf.

30 "Field Manual 3-0, Operations," U.S. Army, Oct. 10, 2017, <https://www.army.mil/standto/2017-10-10>.

31 "Air-Sea Battle: Service Collaboration to Address Anti-Access & Area Denial Challenges," Air-Sea Battle Office, May 2013, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/ASB-ConceptImplementation-Summary-May-2013.pdf>.

32 Aaron Mehta, "The Pentagon Is Planning for War with China and Russia — Can It Handle Both?" *Defense News*, <https://www.defensenews.com/pentagon/2018/01/30/the-pentagon-is-planning-for-war-with-china-and-russia-can-it-handle-both/>.

33 David C. Gompert, Astrid Stuth Cevallos, and Cristina L. Garafola, *War with China: Thinking Through the Unthinkable* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), xi.



a great power,” noting that “the last time it fought one was in the 1940s.”³⁴ In 2018, a survey of U.S. government officials and foreign policy experts found “increasing apprehension over the growing geopolitical rivalry and potential for conflict between the United States and China,” with the most likely scenario for war being “an armed confrontation in the South China Sea.”³⁵

Chinese Strategic Thought

Chinese strategic thought also tends to downplay any involvement in foreign internal conflicts. One of the most fundamental and longstanding Chinese foreign policy principles is that of non-intervention — a promise to stay out of the domestic affairs of other states. The non-intervention doctrine is designed to ward off outside meddling in China’s

affairs, a reaction to what Beijing calls an era of colonial “humiliation” before 1945; signal that China will act with restraint in order to limit balancing behavior by other states; prevent Beijing from getting mired in dangerous foreign crises; and allow the regime to focus on domestic challenges such as economic growth and an aging population.³⁶

Beijing’s doctrine of non-intervention dates back to the Sino-Soviet alliance of 1950 and was enshrined as one of the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence in 1954, reaffirmed at the Bandung Conference in 1955, and formally written into the Chinese constitution in 1982.³⁷ In 2018, Xi announced the Five Nos policy: “no interference with development paths, no interference in internal affairs, no imposing one’s will on others, no attaching political conditions, and no political self-interest in investments and financing.”³⁸ China portrays med-

34 Elbridge Colby, “How to Win America’s Next War,” *Foreign Policy*, May 5, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/05/05/how-to-win-america-next-war-china-russia-military-infrastructure/>.

35 “Preventive Priorities Survey 2019,” Council on Foreign Relations, Dec. 17, 2018, <https://www.cfr.org/report/preventive-priorities-survey-2019>.

36 John Lee, “China’s Economic Slowdown: What Are the Strategic Implications?” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 3 (2015): 123–142, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1099028>.

37 Daniel Large, “China and the Contradictions of ‘Non-interference’ in Sudan,” *Review of African Political Economy* 35, no. 115 (2008), 94. “Constitution of the People’s Republic of China, 1982,” available at USC US-China Institute, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://china.usc.edu/constitution-peoples-republic-china-1982>.

38 “Full Text of Chinese President Xi Jinping’s Speech at Opening Ceremony of 2018 FOCAC Beijing Summit,” *China Daily*, Sept. 3, 2018, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201809/04/WS5b8d5c25a310add14f389592.html>.

dling in foreign civil wars by any outside power, especially to promote human rights and democracy, as liable to spur conflict.³⁹ In 2016, the state-run *China Daily* described the “Pax Americana” as an era of continual “interference in the domestic affairs of countries,” which triggered a “period of incessant warfare.”⁴⁰

Does China also espouse a positive preference for conventional interstate war? Beijing tends to be clearer on what it *will not do* through force of arms — i.e., intervene — rather than what it *will do* in order to protect an image of the country’s peaceful rise. Therefore, China is not as explicit as the United States in prioritizing interstate war. Nevertheless, by downplaying intervention in foreign civil wars, interstate war becomes the main focus almost by default. Beijing does sometimes signal a prioritization of interstate war. A major Chinese strategic priority is fighting and winning a conventional and de facto interstate war with Taiwan.⁴¹ A 2015 Chinese defense white paper outlined an “active defense posture” that emphasized Beijing’s newfound maritime capabilities.⁴² And a 2019 defense white paper stated that China’s military development prioritized “phasing out the outdated, upgrading the old, and developing and procuring the new, such as aircraft carriers, fighters, missiles and main battle tanks, to steadily modernize weaponry and equipment.”⁴³ Moreover, Beijing often casts the military threat from the United States in terms of conventional interstate war. The 2013 version of the People’s Liberation Army’s *The Science of Military Strategy* described how “[t]he U.S. has organized and built a global strike command for unified command of strategic long-range warfare strength ... and has planned to develop a new conventional ‘prompt global strike’ system in the next

decade so as to have the capability to implement conventional strikes anywhere within one hour.”⁴⁴

In summary, both U.S. and Chinese strategic thought downplays intervention in foreign civil wars and, in the U.S. case in particular, prioritizes conventional interstate war. Washington sees intervention as unwise and a deviation from the military’s core mission to fight and win interstate wars, whereas Beijing views intervention as dangerous and illegitimate. Despite seemingly strongly held strategic preferences in both governments, a systemwide shift from interstate war to civil war means that future military competition between China and the United States is likely to involve proxy wars. In the next section, I discuss how global trends in conflict have changed in recent decades and the impact of these trends on U.S.-Chinese competition going forward.

A World of Civil Wars

Following World War II, the incidence of interstate war declined significantly, becoming “relatively rare,” according to one study.⁴⁵ The last interstate war between great powers was the 1950–53 Korean War.⁴⁶ John Gaddis referred to the absence of severe interstate war in this period as “the long peace.”⁴⁷ Scholars have proposed a variety of factors to explain this era of interstate peace. The democratic peace theory contends that elected regimes very rarely fight interstate wars against each other, and therefore the global spread of democracy over the past several decades has created a zone of interstate peace among representative regimes.⁴⁸ Nuclear deterrence has also reduced the odds of direct conflict between states with nuclear arsenals,⁴⁹ while multilateral institutions provide arenas for

39 In 2011, China abstained on U.N. Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force to protect civilians and civilian-populated areas in Libya, but Beijing was later sharply critical of the expanded goals of the intervention, including regime change.

40 Mazarr, Heath, and Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, 98.

41 “Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China,” Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2020, 116, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Sep/01/2002488689/-1/-1/1/2020-DOD-CHINA-MILITARY-POWER-REPORT-FINAL.PDF>.

42 “China’s Military Strategy,” *Xinhua*, May 26, 2015, http://english.chinamil.com.cn/news-channels/2015-05/26/content_6507716.htm.

43 “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” The State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, July 24, 2019, accessed at *Xinhua*, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-07/24/c_138253389.htm.

44 *The Science of Military Strategy*, Academy of Military Sciences, 2013, accessed at Air University, <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/CASI/Display/Article/2485204/plas-science-of-military-strategy-2013/>.

45 Aaron Clauset and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Trends in Conflict: What Do We Know and What Can We Know?” in *The Oxford Handbook of International Security*, ed. Alexandra Ghescu and William C. Wohlforth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 228.

46 Mary Kaldor, *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999); and John Mueller, *Retreat from Doomsday: The Obsolescence of Major War* (New York: Basic Books, 1989).

47 John Lewis Gaddis, *The Long Peace: Inquiries Into the History of the Cold War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

48 Bruce Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principle for a Post-Cold War World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); and Allan Dafoe, John R. O’Neal, and Bruce Russett, “The Democratic Peace: Weighing the Evidence and Cautious Inference,” *International Studies Quarterly* 57, no. 1 (March 2013): 201–214, <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12055>.

49 Kenneth Waltz, “Why Nuclear Proliferation May Be Good,” in *Conflict After the Cold War: Arguments on Causes of War and Peace*, ed. Richard K. Betts, 5th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2017), 418–30.

dispute resolution.⁵⁰ In addition, economic interdependence raises the costs of engaging in interstate war.⁵¹ Moreover, memories of World War II and the spread of norms against territorial conquest have helped to delegitimize interstate war.⁵²

Global conflict is now dominated by civil wars — what David Armitage called “the most widespread, the most destructive, and the most characteristic form of organized human violence.”⁵³ The number of civil wars increased in the 1970s, peaked after the end of the Cold War, declined somewhat, and then ticked upward again after the 2011 Arab Spring.⁵⁴ In the post-Cold War era, almost 90 percent of wars have been civil wars.⁵⁵ In 2019, there were two interstate conflicts and 52 intrastate conflicts.⁵⁶ The factors that inhibit interstate war — such as democracy and nuclear weapons — do not reliably prevent internal violence. Meanwhile, the root causes of civil war — such as poverty, failing governance, and ethno-religious tensions — remain prevalent.⁵⁷ Indeed, the decrease in interstate wars and the increase in civil wars may be related. The norm of territorial integrity, for example, may have diminished interstate war, but it also meant that newly decolonized states were unable to change their borders, fueling internal conflict.⁵⁸

States also routinely intervene in foreign civil wars. According to one study, “foreign military

intervention, not *interstate* military force, is the type of armed force that will be most common in the coming decades among both major powers and less powerful states.”⁵⁹ Consider that during the last two centuries, the likelihood that a rebel group would receive outside assistance has grown from about one-in-five to around four-in-five.⁶⁰ In 2019, 22 out of 52 intrastate wars were internationalized — the highest figure in the post-1946 era.⁶¹ The factors that impede interstate war, such as nuclear weapons, do not effectively prevent external meddling in intrastate conflict. In fact, other dynamics have actually made indirect intervention easier. After World War II, the norm of self-determination helped to legitimize support for rebel groups that were fighting against colonial rule. Meanwhile, globalization and technological change have made it practically easier for civil war participants to communicate messages abroad and recruit supporters and for patrons to transfer weapons and other material aid across borders.⁶² Indeed, the diminishing appeal of interstate war incentivizes states to seek new and cheaper forms of influence. States that in the past might have attacked their rivals directly now pursue their strategic goals by intervening in foreign civil wars.

In summary, global dynamics have reduced interstate war but not civil war or outside meddling

50 Megan Shannon, Daniel Morey, and Frederick J. Boehmke, “The Influence of International Organizations on Militarized Dispute Initiation and Duration,” *International Studies Quarterly* 54, no. 4 (December 2010): 1123–41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40931157>.

51 Richard Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Free Press, 1986); Michael W. Doyle, *Ways of War and Peace: Realism, Liberalism, and Socialism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1997); and Dale C. Copeland, *Economic Interdependence and War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

52 John Mueller, *The Remnants of War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007); and Clauset and Gleditsch, “Trends in Conflict.”

53 David Armitage, *Civil Wars: A History in Ideas* (New York: Vintage, 2018), 5.

54 Gary Goertz, Paul F. Diehl, and Alexandru Balas, *The Puzzle of Peace: The Evolution of Peace in the International System* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

55 Peter Wallensteen, “Future Directions in the Scientific Study of Peace and War,” in *What Do We Know About War?* ed. John A. Vasquez (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 263; and Patrick T. Brandt, “When and How the Fighting Stops: Explaining the Duration and Outcome of Civil Wars,” *Defence and Peace Economics* 19, no. 6 (2008): 415–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10242690701823267>.

56 Thérèse Petterson and Magnus Öberg, “Organized Violence, 1989–2019,” *Journal of Peace Research* 57, no. 4 (June 2020): 597–613, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343320934986>.

57 Thomas F. Homer-Dixon, “On the Threshold: Environmental Changes as Causes of Acute Conflict,” *International Security* 16, no. 2 (Fall 1991): 76–116, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2539061>.

58 Hendrik Spruyt, “Civil Wars as Challenges to the Modern International System,” *Daedalus* 146, no. 4 (Fall 2017): 112–125, https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00463; and Boaz Atzili, “When Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors: Fixed Borders, State Weakness, and International Conflict,” *International Security* 31, no. 3 (Winter 2006/2007): 139–73, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4137510>.

59 Jeffrey Pickering and Emizet F. Kisangani, “The International Military Intervention Dataset: An Updated Resource for Conflict Scholars,” *Journal of Peace Research* 46, no. 4 (July 2009): 592, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25654438>. See also Krieg and Rickli, “Surrogate Warfare,” 127; Candace Rondeaux and David Sterman, “Twenty-First Century Proxy Warfare: Confronting Strategic Innovation in a Multipolar World Since the 2011 NATO Intervention,” *New America*, Feb. 20, 2019, 41, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Proxy_wars_one_pager-v2.pdf; and Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*.

60 Ryan Grauer and Dominic Tierney, “The Arsenal of Insurrection: Explaining Rising Support for Rebels,” *Security Studies* 27, no. 2 (May 2018): 263–95, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2017.1386936>; and Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan, “Non-State Actors in Civil Wars.”

61 Petterson and Öberg, “Organized Violence, 1989–2019”; and Vladimir Rauta, “Proxy Warfare and the Future of Conflict: Take Two,” *RUSI Journal* 165, no. 2 (2020): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071847.2020.1736437>.

62 Grauer and Tierney, “The Arsenal of Insurrection”; David E. Cunningham, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, and Idean Salehyan, “Non-State Actors in Civil Wars: A New Dataset,” *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30, no. 5 (November 2013): 516–531, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2F0738894213499673>; and Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*.

in civil war. Therefore, internal conflicts are now the primary arena in which states compete militarily. These dynamics will channel Sino-U.S. military competition in four respects. First, they will diminish the odds of an interstate war between the two countries. Second, they will encourage continued U.S. hyper-interventionism. Third, they will promote increasing Chinese interventionism. And fourth, they will enhance the odds of China and the United States engaging in a proxy war.

Low Odds of Interstate War

Global dynamics have sharply reduced the chances of a Sino-U.S. interstate war taking place, a trend that is likely to continue. In the last half-century, the United States and China have never even come close to war. In 1996, the Taiwan Strait crisis briefly raised tensions, but it was quickly resolved after presidential elections in Taipei. Crucially, the United States and China may have in place *all* the barriers to interstate war discussed above. Both countries maintain significant nuclear arsenals with second-strike capability,⁶³ are highly interdependent economically,⁶⁴ and are active members of international institutions.⁶⁵ What about regime type? Of course, China is not democratic, which is one of the major impediments to interstate war. However, scholars have found that civilian “machine” autocracies like China are less prone to interstate war than personalist or military dictatorships and may engage in war at similar rates to democracies.⁶⁶ During the Cold War, the United States and the Soviet Union successfully avoided an interstate war. Today, the impediments to an interstate war between China and the United States are even stronger.

The absence of Sino-U.S. interstate war does not mean the absence of military competition. Instead, systemwide dynamics are likely to channel this competition away from interstate war into proxy war. Of course, this requires that Washington and Beijing intervene in the same foreign internal conflict. The question is why the United States and

China would deviate from long-established strategic preferences: the American desire to focus on conventional interstate war over foreign intervention and the Chinese commitment to non-intervention in other countries’ internal affairs.

Continued U.S. Hyper-Interventionism

Since 1945, American foreign policy has been defined by hyper-interventionism in foreign civil wars — and this behavior is only likely to continue in the future. Despite America’s traditional preference in planning and procurement for conventional interstate campaigns, for decades Washington has intervened in intrastate conflicts far more frequently than it has waged interstate war.⁶⁷ Indeed, the United States is the most interventionist great power in modern history.

After World War II, a combination of American power and the changing dynamics of global conflict spurred numerous U.S. attempts to manipulate foreign civil wars. America’s emergence as an economic and military colossus broadened Washington’s view of national interests, emboldened U.S. officials to confront the threat from international communism, and gave American leaders the tools to contemplate military operations across the world. Newfound power also unleashed an idealistic streak in U.S. society and a desire to reshape the world in America’s own image — or in John F. Kennedy’s words, “pay any price” in order “to assure the survival and the success of liberty.”⁶⁸ After the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, American strength reached its zenith and U.S. activism around the globe increased still further. Crucially, the global shift from interstate war to civil war guided American activism into foreign internal conflicts, as Washington saw civil wars in distant lands as vitally important for U.S. security and values.

During and after the Cold War, the United States repeatedly intervened directly in foreign internal conflicts with troops and airpower. The Intervention Project dataset found that the United States engaged in 500 military missions after 1776, with

63 Thomas J. Christensen, “The Meaning of the Nuclear Evolution: China’s Strategic Modernization and US-China Security Relations,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35, no. 4 (2012): 447–87, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2012.714710>.

64 In 2019, Sino-U.S. trade reached \$634.8 billion, China owned over one trillion dollars of U.S. debt, and over 350,000 Chinese students studied at U.S. universities. See, for example, “The People’s Republic of China: U.S.-China Trade Facts,” Office of the United States Trade Representative, accessed March 18, 2021, <https://ustr.gov/countries-regions/china-mongolia-taiwan/peoples-republic-china>.

65 Alastair Iain Johnston, *Social States: China in International Institutions, 1980–2000* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); G. John Ikenberry, “The Rise of China: Power, Institutions and the Western Order,” in *China’s Ascent: Power, Security and the Future of International Politics*, ed. Robert S. Ross and Zhu Feng (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 89–114.

66 Jessica L. P. Weeks, *Dictators at War and Peace* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).

67 Robert B. Scaife, “The Regularity of Irregular Warfare,” *Small Wars Journal*, Oct. 16, 2012, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/the-regularity-of-irregular-warfare>.

68 “Inaugural Address of John F. Kennedy,” The Avalon Project, Yale Law School, Jan. 20, 1961, https://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kennedy.asp.

over half of these operations taking place after 1950 and over one-quarter occurring since the end of the Cold War.⁶⁹ In 2008, Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted:

Think of where our forces have been sent and have been engaged over the last 40-plus years. Vietnam, Lebanon, Grenada, Panama, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Horn of Africa, and more. In fact, the first Gulf War stands alone in over two generations of constant military engagement as a more or less traditional conventional conflict from beginning to end.⁷⁰

During the Trump administration, every major U.S. deployment of troops in a combat zone was in a foreign civil war, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Niger, and Somalia.⁷¹

After 1945, America engaged in indirect intervention with even greater frequency than direct intervention. During the Cold War, the United States launched six overt regime change attempts (defined as a publicly acknowledged use of force to overthrow a state). It also instigated 64 covert regime change attempts, including assassination, backing a coup, or meddling in an election — all of which often occurred in the context of internal conflict.⁷² Washington undertook capacity building by providing extensive military and economic aid to regimes facing perceived communist threats in Greece, South Vietnam, El Salvador, and elsewhere and waged proxy

war by aiding rebels in countries like Guatemala, Cuba, Nicaragua, Angola, and Afghanistan. In 1955, President Dwight D. Eisenhower said that proxy war was “the cheapest insurance in the world.”⁷³

After the Cold War ended, the United States continued to engage in indirect intervention. Capacity building was central to the “War on Terror,” and Washington funneled arms and provided training and intelligence to vulnerable regimes like Iraq and Afghanistan under the guise of “security partnerships.”⁷⁴ According to Security Assistance Monitor, in 2019, the United States spent \$18.81 billion on international security aid and delivered \$26.9 billion worth of arms to friendly governments.⁷⁵ In 2018, the first U.S. Army security force assistance brigade was established to train, advise, and assist allied actors. Washington also engaged in proxy wars by supporting nonstate actors, for example in Syria after 2012.

The era of American hyper-interventionism is set to continue. The high cost of direct U.S. interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan has not ended U.S. manipulation of foreign civil wars, but instead has encouraged Washington to search for cheaper forms of influence through airpower and giving aid to surrogate allies.⁷⁶ In 2005, Sen. Joe Biden expressed regret for his 2002 Senate vote that authorized the Iraq War.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, in February 2021, as president, Biden launched air strikes against Iranian-backed militias fighting in the Syrian civil war in response to rocket attacks on American forces in the region and reportedly considered delaying the

69 Monica D. Toft and Sidita Kushi, "Introducing MIP: A New Dataset on U.S. Interventions, 1776-2017," presented at the 115th American Political Science Association Annual Meeting & Exhibition, Aug. 29–Sept. 1, 2019; and Paul B. Rich, "A Historical Overview of US Counter-insurgency," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 25, no. 1 (2014): 5–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2014.893955>.

70 "Secretary of Defense Robert Gates Speech, September 29, 2008," Speech Given at the National Defense University, Sept. 29, 2008, <http://armchairgeneral.com/secretary-of-defense-robert-m-gates-speech-september-29-2008.htm/8>; and Ann Scott Tyson, "New Pentagon Policy Says Irregular Warfare Will Get Same Attention as Traditional Combat," *Washington Post*, Dec. 4, 2008, https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/12/03/AR2008120303495.html?nav=rss_nation/special.

71 See, for example, Thomas Gibbons-Neff and Eric Schmitt, "Despite Vow to End 'Endless Wars,' Here's Where About 200,000 Troops Remain," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/21/world/middleeast/us-troops-deployments.html>.

72 Lindsey A. O'Rourke, *Covert Regime Change: America's Secret Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018); Odd A. Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 407; and Eric Rittinger, "Arming the Other: American Small Wars, Local Proxies, and the Social Construction of the Principal-Agent Problem," *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 2 (June 2017), 396–409, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqx021>. During the Cold War, the United States intervened in foreign elections over twice as frequently as the Soviet Union. Don H. Levin, "Partisan Electoral Interventions by the Great Powers: Introducing the PEIG Dataset," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 36, no. 1 (2016): 88–106, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0738894216661190>.

73 Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 100; Westad, *The Global Cold War*; and Stathis N. Kalyvas and Laia Balcells, "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 3 (August 2010): 415–29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40863761?seq=1>.

74 Thomas Waldman, "Strategic Narratives and US Surrogate Warfare," *Survival* 61, no. 1 (2019): 161–78, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1568049>.

75 "Security Aid Dashboard," Security Assistance Monitor, Center for International Policy, June 12, 2020, <https://securityassistance.org/content/security-aid-dashboard>; and "Counterterrorism Spending: Protecting America while Promoting Efficiencies and Accountability," Stimson Center, May 16, 2018, <https://www.stimson.org/2018/counterterrorism-spending-protecting-america-while-promoting-efficiencies-and-accountability/>.

76 Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; Berman and Lake, *Proxy Wars*; and Krieg and Rickli, *Surrogate Warfare*.

77 Dominic Tierney, "In Search of the Biden Doctrine," Foreign Policy Research Institute, Nov. 9, 2020, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2020/11/in-search-of-the-biden-doctrine/>.

proposed May 1, 2021, deadline for U.S. withdrawal of troops from the Afghan civil war.⁷⁸

The United States has a clear and well-documented track record of intervening in foreign civil wars. However, for a Sino-U.S. proxy war to take place, China would also have to intervene. This raises a core question: Why would Beijing deviate from a seemingly firm commitment to the principal of non-intervention? To answer this question, we need to look more closely at the nature of Chinese intervention, including its motivations, its tools, and its scope.

GIVEN THE SYSTEMWIDE CONFLICT DYNAMICS DESCRIBED ABOVE, CHINA'S COMMITMENT TO THE DOCTRINE OF NON-INTERVENTION HAS ALWAYS BEEN AMBIVALENT, IF NOT ILLUSORY.

Growing Chinese Interventionism

Given the systemwide conflict dynamics described above, China's commitment to the doctrine of non-intervention has always been ambivalent, if not illusory. In recent decades, this doctrine has steadily eroded and will likely continue to weaken in the future. In a globalized world where civil war is the dominant type of conflict, even a great power that genuinely seeks to avoid intrusion in other states' internal wars will struggle to stay out of the fighting entirely. The concept of "non-intervention"

implies that intervention is binary — that a state either is or isn't intervening. But there are, in reality, degrees of meddling across multiple domains, making some form of interference almost inevitable.⁷⁹ An external country's decisions about trade, investment, and the training of local forces can all impact the course of a civil war. For instance, an external actor can influence a civil war by allowing arms sales to one faction but not others or by permitting (or denying) arms sales to all sides (thereby treating the government and rebel groups alike and legitimizing the insurgents).⁸⁰

The critical problem for the Chinese doctrine of non-intervention is that, oftentimes, Beijing is not neutral when it comes to foreign civil wars. Like other major states, China has interests at stake in foreign conflicts and has sought to manipulate their outcome. From the late 1950s through the 1970s, China pursued a militant anti-imperialist (and anti-Soviet) foreign policy and sponsored a variety of rebel factions engaged in "wars of national liberation."⁸¹ Beijing sent tens of thousands of troops to North Vietnam; backed leftist political groups in Laos,

South Korea, Thailand, and Oman; and armed rebels in approximately 20 African countries, including Algeria, Zimbabwe, Guinea-Bissau, Congo, Angola, and South Africa.⁸² Beijing tried to reconcile this overt interference with its non-intervention doctrine by claiming that imperialist states do not respect non-intervention and therefore socialist states were obliged to assist popular movements.⁸³

In the Deng Xiaoping era of the late 1970s, China focused on economic growth, sought to keep a low profile internationally, and abandoned its patronage of wars of national liberation. Nevertheless, it

78 Eric Schmitt, "Biden Says Withdrawing U.S. Forces from Afghanistan by May Deadline Is Tough," *New York Times*, March 17, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/17/us/politics/biden-us-forces-afghanistan-may.html>.

79 George Lawson and Luca Tardelli, "The Past, Present, and Future of Intervention," *Review of International Studies* 39, no. 5 (December 2013): 1233–53, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210513000247>.

80 Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); and Martha Finnemore, *The Purpose of Intervention: Changing Beliefs About the Use of Force* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003). Non-interventionism by one state can also be an effective form of intervention if other states do not abide by the principle. "The doctrine of non-intervention, to be a legitimate principle of morality, must be accepted by all governments," wrote John Stuart Mill in 1859. "The despot must consent to be bound by it as well as the free States. Unless they do, the profession of it by free countries comes to this miserable issue, that the wrong side may help the wrong, but the right must not help the right." John Stuart Mill, "A Few Words on Non-Intervention," *Fraser's Magazine*, December 1859, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40244870?seq=1>. For example, the U.S., British, and French policies of "non-intervention" in the Spanish Civil War, or the refusal to sell weapons to all sides, effectively harmed the Spanish government because the rebels received assistance from Germany and Italy and Madrid was unable to purchase arms to defend itself.

81 Peter Van Ness, *Revolution and Chinese Foreign Policy: Peking's Support for Wars of National Liberation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1973), 47.

82 David H. Shinn and Joshua Eisenman, *China and Africa: A Century of Engagement* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

83 Jerome A. Cohen, "China and Intervention: Theory and Practice," *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 121, no. 3 (January 1973): 471–505, https://scholarship.law.upenn.edu/penn_law_review/vol121/iss3/9; John F. Copper, *China's Foreign Aid and Investment Diplomacy, Volume III: Strategy Beyond Asia and Challenges to the United States and the International Order* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 30–34; Benjamin Barton, "China's Security Policy in Africa: A New or False Dawn for the Evolution of the Application of China's Non-interference Principle?" *South African Journal of International Affairs* 25, no. 3 (2018): 413–34, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10220461.2018.1526707>.

continued to intervene in foreign civil wars. During the 1980s, for example, China fought a proxy war against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan (in coordination with the United States and Pakistan) by supplying the mujahedeen rebels with everything from AK-47s to donkeys.⁸⁴ China also gave weapons and diplomatic backing to the South West Africa People's Organization, a rebel group in Namibia that was fighting South African forces.⁸⁵

It is true that in the post-Cold War period, China was generally less interventionist than other permanent members of the U.N. Security Council. Beijing avoided large-scale humanitarian missions like the U.S. intervention in Somalia from 1992 to 1994, major nation-building operations like the U.S. campaign in Iraq (2003–2011), or sustained proxy wars like America's backing of Kurdish fighters in Syria (after 2015). Beijing has opposed unilateral interventions and regime change and vetoed numerous U.N. Security Council resolutions that targeted authoritarian regimes for human rights abuses.⁸⁶ When foreign countries experienced internal violence, Beijing often chose flight over fight by withdrawing its nationals — for example, evacuating over 35,000 Chinese people from Libya in 2011.

Nevertheless, during the post-Cold War era, Beijing's doctrine of non-intervention steadily weakened and will probably continue to do so. Chinese analysts engaged in a vigorous debate about the merits of the non-intervention principle, but the debate centered not on *whether* to intervene more, but instead on *how much* additional intervention was appropriate.⁸⁷ In the following sections, I outline the toolbox of Chinese interventionism and the

different motives that have drawn Beijing further into foreign internal conflicts — and, potentially, onto a collision course with the United States.

Tools of Chinese Intervention

Beijing has a diverse set of tools available for intervening both directly and indirectly. As a permanent member of the U.N. Security Council, China has the ability to meddle in an internal conflict by supporting (or declining to veto) a U.N. resolution authorizing intervention or by blocking such a resolution, thereby helping the intended target. In addition, Beijing can shape the course of a civil war through arms sales and capacity building. China provides sophisticated surveillance technology to partner states (including AI-powered facial recognition) and has deployed military trainers in many African countries.⁸⁸ From 2014 to 2018, China was the fifth largest exporter of weapons globally (behind the United States, Russia, France, and Germany).⁸⁹ Chinese weapons manufacturers tend to sell small arms and inexpensive light weaponry to countries in the developing world. By 2010, China was the number one supplier of arms to sub-Saharan Africa.⁹⁰ Data on Beijing's arms exports are considered a state secret, which facilitates the covert supply of weaponry to foreign conflict zones. Chinese light weapons ended up in numerous civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa, and Beijing reportedly tried to block the United Nations from investigating these arms transfers.⁹¹

China also has powerful economic and political tools available to shape the course of a foreign civil war. For example, Beijing can provide investment

84 John W. Garver, *China's Quest: The History of the Foreign Relations of the People's Republic of China* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 418–19; and Mark Urban, *War in Afghanistan* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 123.

85 Ian Taylor, *China and Africa: Engagement and Compromise* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 156–60.

86 Barton, "China's Security Policy in Africa."

87 Chen Zheng, "China Debates the Non-Interference Principle," *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 9, no. 3 (Autumn 2016): 349–74, <https://doi.org/10.1093/cjip/pow010>; and Allen Carlson, "More than Just Saying No: China's Evolving Approach to Sovereignty and Intervention Since Tiananmen," in *New Directions in the Study of China's Foreign Policy*, ed. Alastair Iain Johnston and Robert S. Ross (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

88 Gisela Grieger, "China's Growing Role as a Security Actor in Africa," European Parliamentary Research Service, October 2019, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI\(2019\)642232_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/642232/EPRS_BRI(2019)642232_EN.pdf)

89 "Global Arms Trade: USA Increases Dominance; Arms Flows to the Middle East Surge, says SIPRI," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 11, 2019, <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2019/global-arms-trade-usa-increases-dominance-arms-flows-middle-east-surge-says-sipri>.

90 Pieter D. Wezeman, Siemon T. Wezeman, and Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, *Arms Flows to Sub-Saharan Africa*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Policy Paper No. 30, December 2011, <https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/files/PP/SIPRI30.pdf>; Ian Taylor and Zhengyu Wu, "China's Arms Transfers to Africa and Political Violence," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 25, no. 3 (2013): 458, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2012.664588>; Benjamin Barton, *Political Trust and the Politics of Security Engagement: China and the European Union in Africa* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2018), 38; and Barton, "China's Security Policy in Africa."

91 David Shambaugh, *China Goes Global: The Partial Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 10; Obert Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave, 2019), 129. In 1995, shortly after the Rwandan genocide, Tanzania refused to let a Chinese ship unload 152 tons of weaponry and ammunition which were headed to the Tutsi-dominated army of Burundi. In 2008, a Chinese cargo ship was discovered with 70 tons of small arms destined for Robert Mugabe's repressive regime in Zimbabwe, despite international sanctions on the government. (Following a boycott by South African dock workers, Beijing claimed the ship returned to China). Ian Taylor, *China's New Role in Africa* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2009), 125; Celia W. Dugger, "Zimbabwe Arms Shipped by China Spark an Uproar," *New York Times*, April 19, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/19/world/africa/19zimbabwe.html>; and Shambaugh, *China Goes Global*.

to boost state capacity and construct strategic infrastructure or allow an embattled regime to use Chinese-owned facilities to crush a rebellion. Furthermore, China can utilize political tools in foreign countries, such as encouraging front organizations to propagate pro-Beijing propaganda, punishing scholars and journalists perceived to be unfriendly, or bribing politicians.⁹²

Another instrument China can use to interfere is U.N. peacekeeping. Until the 1980s, China denounced peacekeeping as a form of intervention and typically abstained from voting on U.N. resolutions on peacekeeping missions. Following the end of the Cold War, however, Beijing began to perceive peacekeeping as a means of buttressing China's image as a "responsible power" and gaining experience of military deployments. In 2008, a Chinese white paper emphasized the importance of "military operations other than war," such as peacekeeping, disaster relief, anti-piracy campaigns, and infrastructure development.⁹³ Over time, Chinese peacekeeping operations became steadily more ambitious and muscular. Since 2010, over 15,000 Chinese personnel have been deployed in over a dozen different missions, and the makeup of these contingents evolved from non-combat troops, such as engineers, police, and medical personnel, to combat forces.⁹⁴ By 2020, Beijing was the 10th biggest contributor to peacekeeping missions.⁹⁵

Motivations for Chinese Intervention

In 2013, Li Shaye, an official in the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said that China's interests in Africa were growing larger "so political unrest in

Africa will be affecting China to a much bigger extent."⁹⁶ One Chinese ambassador said, "Of course, we are increasingly involved in the politics of African countries, we are being pulled in, we have no choice."⁹⁷ As these comments indicate, in recent decades, China has become an increasingly active player in foreign civil wars. Historically, rising great powers have tended to meddle in internal conflicts abroad and China is no exception.⁹⁸ So, what specifically is driving Chinese intervention abroad?

First, Beijing manipulates foreign internal conflicts to protect its core interests: maintaining political control and territorial integrity within China and safeguarding the "one China" principle that states that Taiwan is part of China.⁹⁹ Beijing insists that recipients of foreign aid renounce diplomatic ties with Taipei and also discourages criticism of China on other internal issues such as Tibet, the treatment of Muslim minorities, and Hong Kong. Crucially, Beijing is willing to shape the outcome of a foreign conflict to ensure that the winner plays ball. The Liberian civil war from 1989 to 2003 became an effective proxy war between China and Taiwan, waged through aid and diplomatic support. In 1997, Liberia shut down relations with China in exchange for tens of millions of dollars from Taipei. In 2003, Beijing obstructed a nascent peace plan in Liberia and the deployment of a U.N. force until it received assurances that the new regime would abandon Taiwan. China and Liberia subsequently reestablished diplomatic ties, and the United Nations authorized a peacekeeping force, including hundreds of Chinese peacekeepers.¹⁰⁰

Second, China intervenes to protect its border security. For example, the United Wa State Army

92 Anne-Marie Brady, "Magic Weapons: China's Political Influence Activities Under Xi Jinping," Woodrow Wilson Center, Sept. 18, 2017, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/magic-weapons-chinas-political-influence-activities-under-xi-jinping>. On Beijing's use of corruption as a tool, see Philip Zelikow, et al., "The Rise of Strategic Corruption: How States Weaponize Graft," *Foreign Affairs* 99, no. 4 (July/August 2020): 107–20, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-06-09/rise-strategic-corruption>.

93 "China: The White Paper and Military operations Abroad," Stratfor, Jan. 23, 2009, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/china-white-paper-and-military-operations-abroad>. See also "Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019," Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2019, https://media.defense.gov/2019/May/02/2002127082/-1/-1/1/2019_CHINA_MILITARY_POWER_REPORT.pdf; Andrea Ghiselli, "Civil–Military Relations and Organisational Preferences Regarding the Use of the Military in Chinese Foreign Policy: Insights from the Debate on MOOTW," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43, no. 3 (2020): 421–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2018.1438892>.

94 Barton, *Political Trust and the Politics of Security Engagement*, 40; Courtney J. Richardson, "A Responsible Power? China and the UN Peacekeeping Regime," *International Peacekeeping* 18, no. 3 (2011): 286–97, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533312.2011.563082>; Yin He, "China Rising and Its Changing Policy on UN Peacekeeping," in *United Nations Peace Operations in a Changing Global Order*, ed. Cedric De Coning and Mateja Peter (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 261; and "Troop and Police Contributors," United Nations Peacekeeping, <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/troop-and-police-contributors>.

95 Lucy Best, "What Motivates Chinese Peacekeeping?" Council on Foreign Relations, Jan. 7, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/what-motivates-chinese-peacekeeping>.

96 "Lu Talks with Readers of China Daily Website," *China Daily*, Feb. 27, 2013, <http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2013Diplomats/index.html>.

97 Verhoeven, "Is Beijing's Non-interference Policy History?" 56.

98 Michael Mandelbaum, *The Fate of Nations: The Search for National Security in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 132; and Byman et al., *Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements*.

99 Sulmaan Wasif Khan, *Haunted by Chaos: China's Grand Strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

100 Evan S. Medeiros, *China's International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009), 185; and Ching-Chiu Huang and Chih-yu Shih, *Harmonious Intervention: China's Quest for Relational Security* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 146.

in neighboring Myanmar is an effective Chinese proxy. The Wa rebels speak Chinese and use Chinese currency, and Beijing reportedly supplies the group with financial support and heavy weaponry, including missiles and armored vehicles. Although there are a variety of motives for Chinese aid, including economic interests and a desire to maintain influence in Myanmar, the primary aim of supporting the group is to prevent the conflict from spilling over into China.¹⁰¹

Third, China interferes in civil conflicts as part of its strategic rivalry with India. New Delhi has long claimed that China aids insurgents in northeast India, an accusation Beijing denies.¹⁰² China reportedly gave sanctuary to rebel leaders and provided weapons to Indian insurgents, using rebels in Myanmar as intermediaries.¹⁰³ In 2020, an article published in the Chinese state-run *Global Times* warned that Beijing could respond to Indian support for Taiwan by backing rebels inside India: "If India plays the Taiwan card," it stated, "it should be aware that China can also play the Indian separatist card."¹⁰⁴ China also helped the Sri Lankan regime crush Tamil separatists in 2009, partly to tilt the balance of power in South Asia away from India. Beijing was Sri Lanka's biggest donor; its chief supplier of weapons; and its guardian in the U.N. Security Council, where Beijing blocked the chamber from debating the Sri Lankan military strategy. In 2015, China reportedly channeled funds to favorable political candidates in the

Sri Lankan elections.¹⁰⁵

Fourth, economic interests have also driven Chinese involvement in foreign civil wars. At the turn of the century, Beijing encouraged Chinese companies to step up overseas investment, known as the "Going Out" policy.¹⁰⁶ China's direct overseas investment subsequently increased dramatically, from \$2.7 billion in 2002 to \$196 billion in 2016.¹⁰⁷ The centerpiece of Chinese foreign investment is the Belt and Road Initiative, a trillion-dollar program that launched in 2013 and includes financing for bridges, railways, ports, and other infrastructure in Asia, Africa, and Europe.¹⁰⁸

These economic interests give China a direct stake in the outcome of foreign internal conflicts and encourage Beijing to put a thumb — or more than a thumb — on the scale in shaping the course of the fighting. Chinese investments are often in insecure regions, with one-third of China's oil imports coming from Africa. Chinese energy, mining, and construction companies are also more willing to operate in unstable countries than Western corporations.¹⁰⁹ Beijing has a strong incentive to protect regimes that sign economic deals with Chinese companies and stick to the terms. According to China's *Global Times*, "China has always adhered to the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other countries, but that doesn't mean Beijing can turn a deaf ear to the demands of Chinese enterprises in protecting their

101 Daniel Schearf, "With Burma in Mind, China Quietly Supports Wa Rebels," *Voice of America*, Jan. 25, 2013, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/burma-mind-china-quietly-supports-wa-rebels>; Ming Wai Sit and Tin Yau Cheung, "China's Enduring Influence Over Wa State in Myanmar," Nov. 18, 2019, <https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/chinas-enduring-influence-over-wa-state-in-myanmar/>; and Hak Yin Li and Yongnian Zheng, "Re-interpreting China's Non-Intervention Policy Towards Myanmar: Leverage, Interest and Intervention," *Journal of Contemporary China* 18, no. 61 (2009): 617–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670560903033901>.

102 Shishir Gupta, "Ulfa Chief Traced to China, but Beijing Denies His Presence," *Hindustan Times*, Feb. 2, 2014, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/ulfa-chief-traced-to-china-but-beijing-denies-his-presence/story-192KRfWgvsqdl27sCfGxyJ.html>. See also, Kunal Mukherjee, *Conflict in India and China's Contested Borderlands: A Comparative Study* (New York: Routledge, 2019), chap. 5; and Bertil Lintner, *Great Game East: India, China, and the Struggle for Asia's Most Volatile Frontier* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

103 Bibhu Prasad Routray and Mantraya, "China's New Game in India Northeast," *Eurasia Review*, Aug. 9, 2017, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/09082017-chinas-new-game-in-indias-northeast-analysis/>; Prabin Kalita, "UNLFW: The New Name for Terror in NE," *Times of India*, June 5, 2015, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/UNLFW-The-new-name-for-terror-in-NE/articleshow/47547899.cms>; and Avinash Paliwal, "Is China Behind a Recent Insurgent Attack in India's Northeast?" *The Diplomat*, Sept. 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/09/is-china-behind-a-recent-insurgent-attack-in-indias-northeast/>.

104 Long Xingchun, "India to Invite Trouble Playing Taiwan Card," *Global Times*, Oct. 18, 2020, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1203786.shtml>.

105 Maria Abi-Habib, "How China Got Sri Lanka to Cough Up a Port," *New York Times*, June 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/25/world/asia/china-sri-lanka-port.html>; and Kadira Pethiyagoda, "China's Legacy in Sri Lanka's Civil War Gives It a Diplomatic Edge," *National Interest*, Nov. 28, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/chinas-legacy-sri-lankas-civil-war-gives-it-diplomatic-edge-37447>.

106 Hongying Wang and Xueying Hu (2017) "China's 'Going-Out' Strategy and Corporate Social Responsibility: Preliminary Evidence of a 'Boomerang Effect,'" *Journal of Contemporary China*, 25, no. 108 (2017): 820–33, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2017.1337301>.

107 Ken Davies, "China Investment Policy: An Update," OECD Working Papers on International Investment, no. 2013/01 (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k46911hmvt-en>; and "Annual Outflow of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) from China Between 2009 and 2019," Statista, accessed March 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/858019/china-outward-foreign-direct-investment-flows/>.

108 "China's Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan," International Crisis Group, Asia Report No. 288, July 10, 2017, 3, <https://d2071andvip-0wj.cloudfront.net/288-china-s-foreign-policy-experiment-in-south-sudan.pdf>; and Thomas P. Cavanna, "Unlocking the Gates of Eurasia: China's Belt and Road Initiative and Its Implications for U.S. Grand Strategy," *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 3 (May 2019), 13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.26153/tsw/2927>.

109 Harry Verhoeven, "Is Beijing's Non-Interference Policy History? How Africa Is Changing China," *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2014): 55–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2014.926209>.

overseas investments.”¹¹⁰ The 2015 Chinese defense white paper, *China's Military Strategy*, stated that defending overseas interests through “open seas protection” would henceforth share equal billing with “offshore waters defense,” or protecting China’s immediate periphery.¹¹¹ From 2012 to 2018, Beijing deployed peacekeepers in 13 countries, nine of which were locations of significant Chinese economic investment.¹¹²

Economic interests drew China deeper into Pakistani domestic politics. Pakistan is a keystone of the Belt and Road Initiative, with over \$60 billion in projects slated for the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, including a seaport in the Pakistani town of Gwadar and plans for housing half a million Chinese workers.¹¹³ Construction projects often occur in conflict-ridden regions of Pakistan, such as Baluchistan. In 2018, Baluch separatists carried out numerous strikes against Chinese interests, including an attack on the Chinese consulate in Karachi that left seven dead.¹¹⁴ From 2014 to 2018, Pakistan received 37 percent of all China’s arms exports.¹¹⁵ The two states carried out joint counter-terrorism exercises focused on contingencies in Xinjiang, and China pressured Pakistan to crack down on rebel Uighurs in North Waziristan.¹¹⁶

Economic interests also spurred China to engage in capacity building in Sudan.¹¹⁷ From 1983 to 2005, Khartoum fought a civil war in the south of the country against the Sudan People’s Liberation Army and, after 2003, engaged in another internal conflict in Darfur. China is Sudan’s biggest trading partner

and has extensive energy and mineral investments in the country. Beijing backed the regime by constructing oil infrastructure; developing Sudan’s arms manufacturing industry; selling weaponry, including helicopter gunships; allowing the Sudanese air force to use airstrips and repair facilities at Chinese oil installations; and shielding Khartoum in the U.N. Security Council.¹¹⁸ In 2007, China sought to burnish its credentials as a peacemaker by helping to broker a deal for an expanded United Nations-African Union peacekeeping force in Darfur and deploying 4,000 Chinese personnel to Sudan.¹¹⁹

China is also a significant actor in South Sudan, which declared independence from Sudan in 2011 and endured a civil war in 2013. Beijing has invested billions of dollars in South Sudan and purchased almost \$4 billion of oil from the country in 2014.¹²⁰ China pursued a nuanced position in South Sudan, talking to all sides (including rebels) and publicly pressuring the combatants to sign a ceasefire agreement.¹²¹ In 2015, China deployed 1,000 troops to South Sudan as part of the U.N. mission in the country — the first time a Chinese infantry battalion was sent abroad on an external peacekeeping operation. Beijing deliberately shaped the scope of the U.N. mission in South Sudan to safeguard Chinese economic interests — especially oil interests — resulting in U.N. Security Council Resolution 2155 calling for protecting civilians “in areas at high risk of conflict including, as appropriate, schools, places of worship, hospitals and the oil installations.”¹²²

In Mali, China intervened to aid the government

110 Hu Weijia, “China Ready to Play a Greater Role in Resolving Conflicts in South & Southeast Asia,” *Global Times*, May 1, 2017, <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1044849.shtml>.

111 *China's Military Strategy*, The State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, May 2015, <http://eng.mod.gov.cn/Database/WhitePapers/index.htm>. See also, Michael McDevitt, “China’s Far Seas Navy: The Implications of the ‘Open Seas Protection’ Mission,” April 2016, https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/China-Far-Seas-Navy.pdf; M. Taylor Fravel, “China’s New Military Strategy: Winning Informationized Local Wars,” *China Brief* 15, no. 13 (July 2, 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/chinas-new-military-strategy-winning-informationized-local-wars/>; and M. Taylor Fravel, *Active Defense: China's Military Strategy since 1949* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

112 Best, “What Motivates Chinese Peacekeeping?”

113 Mathieu Duchâtel, “The Terrorist Risk and China’s Policy Toward Pakistan: Strategic Reassurance and the ‘United Front,’” *Journal of Contemporary China* 20, no. 71 (2011): 543–561, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10670564.2011.587158>; and Andrew Small, *The China-Pakistan Axis: Asia's New Geopolitics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015).

114 Maham Hameed, “The Politics of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor,” *Palgrave Communications* 4, no. 64 (2018): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-018-0115-7>.

115 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, “Global Arms Trade.”

116 Andrew Small, “The Xinjiangistan Connection,” *Foreign Policy*, July 30, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/07/30/the-xinjiangistan-connection/>.

117 Huang and Shih, *Harmonious Intervention*, 146; and Irene Panozzo, “Asian Players in Sudan: Social and Economic Impacts of ‘New-Old’ Actors,” in *Multidimensional Change in Sudan (1989–2011): Reshaping Livelihoods, Conflicts and Identities*, ed. Barbara Casciarri, Munzoul Assal, and François Ireton (New York: Berghahn Books, 2015), 163–81.

118 Taylor and Wu, “China’s Arms Transfers to Africa and Political Violence,” 465.

119 Large, “China and the Contradictions of ‘Non-interference’ in Sudan”; International Crisis Group, “China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan”; and Jian Junbo, “China in International Conflict Management: Darfur Issue as a Case,” in *China and Africa: Building Peace and Security Cooperation on the Continent*, ed. Chris Alden, et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 147–61.

120 Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, 19.

121 International Crisis Group, “China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan.”

122 “Security Council, Adopting Resolution 2155 (2014), Extends Mandate of Mission in South Sudan, Bolstering Its Strength to Quell Surging Violence,” United Nations, May 27, 2014, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2014/sc11414.doc.htm>.

against rebel groups. Although Beijing does not have extensive investments in Mali, it is concerned about the supply of uranium from northern Mali as well as broader regional economic interests. In 2012, Mali experienced both a rebellion and a coup, and China supported several U.N. resolutions that authorized pro-government intervention, including a major French operation. China deployed a protection unit to the U.N. peacekeeping mission in Mali, which is authorized to take all necessary steps “to prevent the return of armed elements” to northern Mali.¹²³

China typically backs regimes in foreign civil wars but, in the case of Libya, Beijing reluctantly aided the rebels. The civil war that broke out in 2011 between Muammar Gaddafi’s government and the rebels in the National Transitional Council threatened over \$20 billion of Chinese investment in Libya’s oil, construction, and telecommunications sectors.¹²⁴ Beijing voted for U.N. Resolution 1970, which blamed Gaddafi’s forces for the escalating violence; asked the International Criminal Court to investigate war crimes; and imposed an arms embargo, asset freeze, and travel ban on senior Libyan government officials (but not on rebel leaders).¹²⁵ Beijing also recognized the Libyan opposition even while Gaddafi remained in power and abstained on (rather than vetoing) U.N. Resolution 1973, which declared a no-fly zone in Libya and further tilted the war in favor of the rebels. And yet, in 2011, Chinese arms firms reportedly offered to sell \$200 million of weaponry to Gaddafi’s faltering regime, although the extent of official involvement was unclear.¹²⁶

Fifth, China pursues intervention as part of its counter-terrorism strategy. Beijing has become

concerned over Uighur militants — who are mostly Muslim — operating at home and their links to transnational Islamic militants. Since 2017, China has engaged in systematic repression of the Uighur minority in Xinjiang province.¹²⁷ China has also initiated counter-terrorism exercises with numerous countries; helped found the Global Counterterrorism Forum; and backed the Quadrilateral Cooperation and Coordination Mechanism, a counter-terrorism institution for China, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan.¹²⁸ China views the Syrian civil war in part through the lens of counter-terrorism. Beijing displayed growing concern over Uighur fighters in Syria, backing the Syrian government by casting multiple vetoes in the U.N. Security Council to oppose foreign-imposed regime change in Damascus and providing limited aid and training to Syrian regime forces.¹²⁹ In 2016, China introduced a counter-terrorism law that smoothed the path for the People’s Liberation Army to conduct missions overseas, which, according to one study, “has the potential to lead to a dramatic change in the use of Chinese military power abroad.”¹³⁰

Finally, Chinese intervention is part of an effort to safeguard the growing Chinese diaspora. The exhortation for Chinese companies to go out into the world meant that large numbers of Chinese nationals began living and working in insecure states, including an estimated two million Chinese people who live in Africa.¹³¹ Islamic fundamentalists and other rebel groups target Chinese, as well as Western, nationals. In 2012, for example, Chinese private security contractors coordinated with the Sudanese military to rescue 29 Chinese nationals who

123 Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*; David Shinn, “China’s Response to the Islamist Threat in Mali,” *China-US Focus*, June 21, 2013, <http://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/chinas-response-to-the-islamist-threat-in-mali/>; and Frans Paul Van der Putten, “China’s Evolving Role in Peacekeeping and African Security: The Deployment of Chinese Troops for UN Force Protection in Mali,” Clingendael Report, September 2015, <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/chinas-evolving-role-peacekeeping-and-african-security>.

124 Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, 108–09; and Yun Sun, “Africa in China’s Foreign Policy,” Brookings Institute, April 2014, 1–45, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/africa-in-china-web_cmj7.pdf.

125 Hodzi, *The End of China's Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, 123; and Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Diplomacy and the UN Security Council: Beyond the Veto* (London: Routledge, 2013).

126 “Did China Sell Arms to Libya?” *The Diplomat*, Sept. 6, 2011, <https://thediplomat.com/2011/09/did-china-sell-arms-to-libya/>.

127 Sheena Chestnut Greitens, Myunghee Lee, and Emir Yazici, “Counterterrorism and Preventive Repression: China’s Changing Strategy in Xinjiang,” *International Security* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2019/2020): 9–47, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00368.

128 Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019,” 16–17; Zhao Jun and Hu Yu, “On China’s New Era Anti-Terrorism Governance in the Middle East,” *Yonsei Journal of International Studies* 7, no. 2 (2015): 267–83, <http://theyonseijournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Jun-Yu-Chinas-Anti-Terrorism-Governance-1.pdf>; Daniel L. Byman and Israa Saber, “Is China Prepared for Global Terrorism? Xinjiang and Beyond,” September 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/is-china-prepared-for-global-terrorism/>.

129 Liu Zhen, “Chinese Military to Provide ‘Aid and Training Assistance’ to Syrian Government,” *South China Morning Post*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2004676/chinese-military-provide-aid-and-training-assistance>. See also, Courtney J. Fung, “Separating Intervention from Regime Change: China’s Diplomatic Innovations at the UN Security Council Regarding the Syria Crisis,” *The China Quarterly* 235 (September 2018): 693–712, doi:10.1017/S0305741018000851.

130 Mathieu Duchâtel, “Terror Overseas: Understanding China’s Evolving Counter-Terror Strategy,” European Council on Foreign Relations, October 2016, https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR_193_-_TERROR_OVERSEAS_UNDERSTANDING_CHINAS_EVOLVING_COUNTER_TERROR_STRATEGY.pdf.

131 Adams Bodomo, “Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on Inequalities and Well-being of Africans in China,” *Asian Ethnicity* 21, No. 4 (May 2020), 526–541, doi: 10.1080/14631369.2020.1761246.



LOOKING AHEAD, CHINESE INTERVENTION IS SET TO INCREASE. CHINA'S INTERESTS WILL KEEP BROADENING, ITS APPETITE FOR ENERGY AND RAW MATERIALS WILL ENHANCE ITS PERCEIVED STAKE IN THE STABILITY OF OTHER COUNTRIES, AND ITS GROWING CAPABILITIES WILL BOOST THE TEMPTATION TO ACT.

had been kidnapped by rebel forces.¹³² The end of the movie *Wolf Warrior II* shows the cover of a Chinese passport and declares: “Citizens of the PRC [People’s Republic of China]: When you encounter danger in a foreign land, do not give up! Please remember, at your back stands a strong motherland.”

The Scope of Chinese Intervention

There is a growing gap between China’s doctrine of non-intervention and how it behaves in practice. Since the end of the Cold War, China has trended toward greater involvement in foreign civil wars, including a sea change in Beijing’s attitude toward peacekeeping; a broadened view of China’s overseas interests; a loosening of China’s rules for deploying troops in counter-terrorism missions; and the opening, in 2017, of Beijing’s first foreign military base (in Djibouti, where a company of U.S. marines is also deployed).¹³³ Several drivers of Chinese intervention are longstanding, such as protecting core interests, border security, and competition with India. Other drivers have grown in importance in recent years, such as defending overseas economic interests, strengthening counter-terrorism, and assisting Chinese nationals.

Looking ahead, Chinese intervention is set to increase. China’s interests will keep broadening, its appetite for energy and raw materials will enhance its perceived stake in the stability of other countries, and its growing capabilities will boost the temptation to act. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, China’s Marine Corps is not yet ready to perform “expeditionary missions” but ultimately “will be capable of operating from land, sea, and air as the [People’s Liberation Army’s] global military force.”¹³⁴ Meanwhile, Chinese nationalism and domestic politics may encourage a more muscular response when China’s interests are at stake, especially if Chinese nationals are threatened.

In the immediate term, Beijing will likely continue to exercise caution and favor subtler forms of manipulation over heavy-handed coercion. Direct intervention may involve peacekeeping missions and raids by special forces, rather than major

deployments of ground troops. Indirect intervention will likely prioritize security cooperation, cyber warfare, and surveillance rather than large-scale weapons transfers and will primarily favor regimes rather than rebels. Beijing will select less contentious cases to test new forms of involvement, such as multilateral U.N. interventions at the invitation of the target regime or African conflicts that are less salient in Chinese domestic politics compared to crises in Asia.¹³⁵ China’s lack of allies, aside from North Korea and Pakistan, will also act as a constraint on intervention. However, although tools like economic aid and diplomatic maneuvers in the U.N. Security Council may seem relatively mild compared to the use of direct force, they can still have a powerful — and even decisive — effect on the course of a civil war.

A challenge for Beijing is to reconcile this newfound activism with its doctrine of non-intervention. China cannot renounce the doctrine without seeming to embrace meddling. Instead, China may define “intervention” ever more narrowly, for example to exclude multilateral operations or missions that occur with the consent of the target state. Beijing has also suggested that when civil conflicts threaten to spill across borders, they are “no longer internal political affairs but regional security affairs.”¹³⁶ Meanwhile, Chinese analysts and officials have proposed a variety of euphemisms for activist policies that supposedly respect non-intervention, such as “creative involvement,” “constructive involvement,” “proactive non-interference,” “persuasive diplomacy,” and “influence without interference.”¹³⁷

Sino-U.S. Intervention: Partnership or Proxy War?

What will happen when continued American interventionism meets growing Chinese interventionism? Two models for how China and the United States will interact in the context of foreign civil wars are partnership and proxy war.

132 International Crisis Group, “China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan,” 4; Hodzi, *The End of China’s Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, 4; Jonas Parelló-Plesner and Mathieu Duchâtel, *China’s Strong Arm: Protecting Citizens and Assets Abroad* (London: Routledge, 2015).

133 Barton, *Political Trust and the Politics of Security Engagement*, 38.

134 Office of the Secretary of Defense, “Annual Report to Congress: Military and Security Developments Involving the People’s Republic of China 2019,” 60–61; and Martin Andrew, “The Influence of U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations in Afghanistan on the People’s Liberation Army,” in *Chinese Lessons from Other Peoples’ Wars*, ed. Andrew Scobell, David Lai, and Roy Kamphausen (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 2011), 237–75.

135 Verhoeven, “Is Beijing’s Non-interference Policy History?”; and Henrik Stalhane Hiim and Stig Stenslie, “China’s Realism in the Middle East,” *Survival* 61, no. 6 (2019), 153–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2019.1688578>.

136 International Crisis Group, “China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan.”

137 Zeng, “China Debates the Non-Interference Principle.”

Partnership

In the partnership model, China and the United States would cooperate in managing foreign civil wars. Washington and Beijing could, theoretically, form an effective team, either as neutral peacemakers or as confederates backing the same faction in a conflict. China and the United States share significant interests in insecure regions, such as countering terrorism, and bring different assets to the table. U.N. peacekeeping is an area of relatively open communication between the United States and China, and the two countries often consult on security issues in Africa. U.S. and Chinese goals are largely aligned, for instance, in South Sudan, where China worked closely with the troika of the United States, the United Kingdom, and Norway.¹³⁸ Some insecure countries cooperate with both the United States and China. For example, Ethiopia has received major Chinese investment in infrastructure while also hosting CIA facilities, and Kenya is a historic U.S. ally but trades more with Beijing.¹³⁹

In the past, the United States has sometimes pressed China to take a greater role in foreign internal conflicts. In 2005, Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick urged Beijing to become a “responsible stakeholder” in the international system by intervening to resolve civil wars in countries such as Sudan.¹⁴⁰ In the wake of costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, there is a renewed motivation for the United States to share the burden of stabilizing war-torn countries. The Belt and Road Initiative, for example, could help to satisfy the vast need for global infrastructure, which, in the coming decade, will run into the tens of trillions of dollars.¹⁴¹ Meanwhile, China has an incentive to tolerate U.S. intervention because Beijing can free ride on security provided by the American military and prefers U.S. occupation to chaos in countries like Iraq.¹⁴² Whereas, historically, Beijing often opposed U.S. and allied interventions as

“adventurism,” China acquiesced in recent Western-led missions in Mali and Libya.¹⁴³

Proxy War

Another possibility is that the United States and China will oppose each other in a foreign civil war and provide support for different sides in the conflict. Given the significant incentives for the two countries to cooperate in foreign civil wars, why would they choose instead to engage in a proxy war?

Strategic competition in an emerging bipolar system may encourage a zero-sum mindset where both sides seek advantage — where a gain for the United States or China is perceived as a loss for the other side.¹⁴⁴ These great powers could manipulate internal conflicts to protect a sphere of influence, maintain access to strategic resources, or counter the perceived intervention of the rival. Indeed, the shift from counter-terrorism following the 9/11 attacks to an era of great-power rivalry today may fundamentally alter how Washington views foreign civil wars. In the counter-terrorism paradigm, instability abroad is an inherent problem because it spurs violent extremism. In this scenario, Beijing could be a useful ally in countering local militants. By contrast, in the great-power rivalry paradigm, instability abroad may be threatening or it could be potentially useful, depending on its impact on the global strategic balance. China’s efforts to stabilize foreign states under this paradigm are treated with suspicion. For example, Washington does not see the Belt and Road Initiative as a useful mechanism for aiding fragile states and countering terrorism. In 2018, U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson criticized what he called Beijing’s “opaque contracts” and “predatory loan practices.”¹⁴⁵ Former National Security Adviser John Bolton claimed that China seeks to “hold states in Africa captive to Beijing’s wishes and demands.”¹⁴⁶ The 2018 Better Utilization of Investment Leading to Development Act was designed to compete with the Belt and Road

138 International Crisis Group, “China’s Foreign Policy Experiment in South Sudan.”

139 Verhoeven, “Is Beijing’s Non-interference Policy History?”

140 Robert B. Zoellick, “Whither China: From Membership to Responsibility?” U.S. Department of State, Sept. 21, 2005, <http://2001-2009.state.gov/s/d/former/zoellick/rem/53682.htm>.

141 Cavanna, “Unlocking the Gates of Eurasia.”

142 Hiim and Stenslie, “China’s Realism in the Middle East.”

143 Hodzi, *The End of China’s Non-Intervention Policy in Africa*, 222.

144 Groh, *Proxy War*, 50.

145 Aaron Maasho, “Africa Should Avoid Forfeiting Sovereignty to China Over Loans: Tillerson,” *Reuters*, March 8, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-africa/africa-should-avoid-forfeiting-sovereignty-to-china-over-loans-tillerson-idUSKCN1GK114>.

146 John Bolton, “Remarks by National Security Advisor Ambassador John R. Bolton on the Trump Administration’s New Africa Strategy,” Speech Delivered at the Heritage Foundation, Dec. 13, 2018, <https://td.usembassy.gov/remarks-by-national-security-advisor-ambassador-john-r-bolton-on-the-trump-administrations-new-africa-strategy/>.



Initiative by creating a new U.S. agency to facilitate investment in developing countries.¹⁴⁷

Resolving the civil war in Afghanistan might seem to be a natural joint project for Washington and Beijing, given that the United States is eager to wind down its war in the country and China's Xinjiang province borders Afghanistan. Since 2016, U.N. Security Council resolutions authorizing the

model of state-directed capitalism. Nevertheless, Beijing resists Western democracy promotion, treating it as a form of contamination that could infect China itself.¹⁵¹ China has assisted non-democratic actors from Angola to Zimbabwe or shielded them from censure from the United Nations. "Pick a dictator anywhere on the globe," wrote James Mann, "and you'll likely find these days that the Chinese regime is supporting him."¹⁵² The

Trump administration generally downplayed human rights and democracy in foreign policy, but the Biden administration has reemphasized the "creed" of traditional American values.¹⁵³ In 2021, the U.S. secretary of state said, "We will stand firm behind our commitments to human rights, democracy, the rule of law."¹⁵⁴ The greater emphasis on idealism could introduce further tensions in relations with Chi-

na. In the future, Washington may embrace rebels fighting for democratic change or proclaim a responsibility to protect civilians facing mass killing, whereas Beijing may back an authoritarian regime.

In fact, the United States and China have a long history of using different kinds of proxy actors against each other. During the Cold War, the United States and China engaged in proxy war in a number of African countries, including the Congo.¹⁵⁵ The Vietnam War was, in part, a proxy conflict between South Vietnam (backed by the United States) and North Vietnam (aided by China) — although Beijing also viewed Hanoi as a rival and ultimately went to war against Vietnam in 1979. China has even used commercial fishing vessels as proxies to challenge U.S. and other states' access to maritime regions.¹⁵⁶ Taiwan can be considered a U.S. state proxy as well.

AS ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS ARE ELIMINATED, BACKING LOCAL ACTORS MAY BE THE ONLY VIABLE MEANS OF PROTECTING INTERESTS WITHOUT PROVOKING A BACKLASH.

United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan explicitly referred to China's Belt and Road Initiative in the context of encouraging trade in Afghanistan.¹⁴⁸ In 2019, however, Washington wanted the language removed and in 2020, the relevant authorization referred only to "the efforts of all regional and international partners of Afghanistan to support peace, reconciliation, and development in Afghanistan."¹⁴⁹ Political scientist Barnett Rubin wrote that "the Trump administration continued to oppose even perfunctory expressions of support for Afghan-Chinese cooperation."¹⁵⁰

Divergent ideologies may also encourage proxy war. Chinese foreign policy is pragmatic rather than missionary, and Beijing does not seek to export its

147 "Better Utilization of Investments Leading to Development Act of 2018," S. 2463, 115th Congress (2017–2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/2463>.

148 "UN Security Council Resolution 2274," United Nations, March 15, 2016, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12283.doc.htm>.

149 "UN Security Council Resolution 2513," United Nations, March 10, 2020, https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/security_council_resolution_2513_2020.pdf.

150 Barnett R. Rubin, "There Is Only One Way Out of Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, Dec. 9, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/United-States/2020-12-09/there-only-one-way-out-afghanistan>.

151 Hal Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism: How Ideology Shapes Great-Power Conflict," *Survival* 60, no. 5 (2018): 61–114, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1518371>.

152 There are some exceptions: China supported sanctions against Iran and North Korea and pressured the Sudanese regime to negotiate with rebels. James Mann, *The China Fantasy: Why Capitalism Will Not Bring Democracy to China* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2008), 24; Brands, "Democracy vs Authoritarianism"; and Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 7–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1470755>.

153 Ariana Berengaut and Rob Berschinski, "Good Governance Papers No. 9: Building an Effective Human Rights-Based Foreign Policy," *Just Security*, Oct. 26, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/73042/good-governance-papers-no-9-building-an-effective-human-rights-based-foreign-policy/>.

154 Antony J. Blinken, "A Foreign Policy for the American People," U.S. State Department, March 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/a-foreign-policy-for-the-american-people/>.

155 Gregg A. Brazinsky, *Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry During the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

156 Edward Wong, "Chinese Civilian Boats Roil Disputed Waters," *New York Times*, Oct. 5, 2010, <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/06/world/asia/06beijing.html>.

For both the United States and China, indirect intervention may be appealing because of the perceived costs of alternative options. Nuclear weapons and economic interdependence largely foreclose pursuing direct hostilities. Meanwhile, rising security competition and fundamental distrust mean that the partnership model may not be seen as an adequate safeguard of each country's interests. As alternative options are eliminated, backing local actors may be the only viable means of protecting interests without provoking a backlash. Beijing, for example, may conclude that risking direct conflict with the U.S. military is reckless, whereas working indirectly through surrogates offers significant gain at reduced risk. As former National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster has remarked, "There are two ways to fight the United States military: asymmetrically and stupid[ly]."¹⁵⁷

The notion of a Sino-U.S. proxy war may evoke images of an intense and high-stakes military rivalry, in which local actors are mere puppets and the outcome of the civil war is primarily shaped by decisions made in Washington and Beijing. But in reality, a Sino-U.S. proxy war would likely be subtle and deniable and would blur into "normal" international politics. It would involve the use of diplomacy, propaganda, cyber operations, and "weaponized interdependence" or control of key hubs in economic networks.¹⁵⁸ Surrogate actors may seek to influence the great powers, and local dynamics will usually be determinative in shaping the course of the conflict.

As an illustration, a Sino-U.S. proxy war could occur if Venezuela were to collapse into a civil war. In this case, the United States might aid rebel groups and China might support the regime through economic and military aid or diplomacy (at the United Nations or by pressuring regional actors not to cooperate with Washington).¹⁵⁹ Such

a scenario is quite plausible. The two great powers currently recognize different regimes in Venezuela. Beijing backs the Nicolás Maduro government, whereas Washington sees Juan Guaidó as the legitimate leader. In 2014, China elevated relations with Venezuela to a "comprehensive strategic partnership."¹⁶⁰ Beijing renegotiated loans to give Caracas some breathing room and sold significant amounts of military hardware and surveillance technology to Venezuela.¹⁶¹ In 2018, Pence said, "Within our own hemisphere, Beijing has extended a lifeline to the corrupt and incompetent Maduro regime in Venezuela that's been oppressing its own people."¹⁶² And in 2020, the United States indicted Maduro for narco-terrorism.¹⁶³

Could a Sino-U.S. Proxy War Escalate?

Scholars often compare the danger of interstate war between the United States and China today to the Peloponnesian War in ancient Greece. Just as the rise of Athens in the fifth century BCE provoked fear in Sparta, triggering the Peloponnesian War, so too today, the economic and military growth of China could spark alarm in the United States and heighten the risk of conflict — what Graham Allison calls the "Thucydides Trap."¹⁶⁴ It's notable that the Peloponnesian War began when outside powers meddled in a foreign civil war. In 435 BCE, according to Thucydides, the city-state of Epidamnus fell prey to "internal conflicts lasting many years."¹⁶⁵ Competing factions appealed to outside actors for aid, which ultimately transformed a local civil war into a broader conflict between Athens and Sparta. In turn, the campaign between democratic Athens and oligarchic Sparta deepened domestic schisms throughout the Greek world, sparking further brutal civil wars, the erosion of norms, and the desecration of

157 Peter Bergen, "Trump's Brilliant Choice of McMaster," *CNN*, Feb. 21, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/02/20/opinions/trumps-brilliant-choice-of-mcmaster-bergen/index.html>.

158 Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, "Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion," *International Security* 44, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 42–79, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00351. See also, Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; Groh, *Proxy War*; and Hughes, *My Enemy's Enemy*.

159 Adriana Erthal Abdenur and Robert Muggah, "How to Avoid a Venezuelan Civil War: Latin American Solutions for a Latin American Problem," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 9, 2017, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/venezuela/2017-08-09/how-avoid-venezuelan-civil-war>.

160 "China, Venezuela Lift Ties to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," *Xinhua*, July 21, 2014, http://www.china.org.cn/china/2014-07/21/content_33009951.htm.

161 Antulio Rosales, "Deepening Extractivism and Rentierism: China's Role in Venezuela's Bolivarian Developmental Model," *Canadian Journal of Development Studies* 37, no. 4 (2016), 560–77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2016.1208605>; and "China," U.S. Energy Information Administration, <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=CHN>.

162 Pence, "Remarks by Vice President Pence on the Administration's Policy Toward China."

163 "Nicolás Maduro Moros and 14 Current and Former Venezuelan Officials Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Corruption, Drug Trafficking and Other Criminal Charges," U.S. Department of Justice, March 26, 2020, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/nicol-s-maduro-moros-and-14-current-and-former-venezuelan-officials-charged-narco-terrorism>.

164 Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017).

165 Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, trans. and ed. Jeremy Mynott (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 17.



religious sites.¹⁶⁶ “Civil strife inflicted many a terrible blow on the cities,” wrote Thucydides, “as always does and always will happen while human nature remains what it is.”¹⁶⁷

Could a Sino-U.S. proxy war intensify into a larger conflict — or even an interstate war like in ancient Greece?¹⁶⁸ The barriers to interstate war between the United States and China will likely prevent a proxy conflict from escalating to a full-blown conventional showdown. For one thing, most foreign civil wars do not threaten the core interests of the great powers. In addition, indirect intervention is often deniable, such that one, or both, great powers may prefer to ignore the other side’s intervention precisely to control the risk of a crisis spiraling into a broader, unwanted war.¹⁶⁹

Nevertheless, low-level proxy war could potentially escalate in unexpected ways. Scholars have found that foreign backing for rebels is correlated with a heightened chance of militarized interstate disputes.¹⁷⁰ Patrons often end up providing more aid in foreign civil wars than initially planned because of overconfidence about the allied faction’s capabilities. What begins as a minor proxy war can evolve into a much more dangerous situation if one patron decides to step up its involvement and intervene directly with ground forces.

A powerful driver of escalation is simply an aversion to losing. Psychologists have found that “losing hurts twice as bad as winning feels good,” and in the face of potential loss, actors are willing to gamble with an increased commitment in the hope of getting back to even.¹⁷¹ The Vietnam War illustrates the potential for a small-scale proxy conflict to intensify when neither side is willing to accept defeat. Another example is Cuban involvement in Angola. In the 1960s and 1970s, Havana began giving aid to the communist-aligned People’s Movement for the Liberation of Angola

(MPLA) in the form of a relatively small training mission. This escalated into a large-scale and direct intervention with tens of thousands of Cuban ground troops deployed to check South African intervention and ward off the potential defeat of the MPLA.¹⁷² In the context of a potential U.S.-Chinese proxy war, Washington and Beijing may originally envision modestly backing a friendly regime or rebel group. However, if either country’s surrogate faces defeat, the patron may increase its support, including sending in ground or air forces to avoid a strategic, moral, or reputational loss.¹⁷³

Ignorance could also spur unanticipated escalation. In recent decades, the United States has struggled to manipulate foreign civil wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and elsewhere due to a lack of knowledge about local cultures, ethnic tensions, and languages. China is even more likely to blunder out of ignorance because Beijing’s diplomatic corps is not sufficiently trained for complex civil conflicts and China lacks a network of non-governmental organizations. China and the United States may end up stumbling in the fog of proxy war. Intervention in civil conflicts is often complex and covert, making it difficult to accurately perceive a patron’s degree of involvement, resolve, or influence over surrogates. This uncertainty can encourage a rival patron to engage in worst-case-scenario thinking and misperceive — and perhaps overreact to — the adversary’s involvement. In 2017, a U.S. jet shot down a Syrian aircraft that attacked the rebel Syrian Democratic Forces. Russia responded by suspending deconfliction protocols designed to avoid escalation, illustrating how intervention can evolve in unexpected and dangerous ways.¹⁷⁴

In addition, surrogate forces may pursue an agenda that deviates from the patron’s preferences and potentially escalates the conflict.¹⁷⁵ The Obama administration struggled to convince the Shia-dominated

166 Jonathan J. Price, *Thucydides and Internal War* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

167 Thucydides, *The War of the Peloponnesians and the Athenians*, 212.

168 For the wider issue of escalation in international relations, see Barry R. Posen, *Inadvertent Escalation: Conventional War and Nuclear Risks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Caitlin Talmadge, “Would China Go Nuclear? Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States,” *International Security* 41, no. 4 (Spring 2017): 50–92, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00274.

169 Austin Carson, *Secret Wars: Covert Conflict in International Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018).

170 Kenneth A. Schultz, “The Enforcement Problem in Coercive Bargaining: Interstate Conflict Over Rebel Support in Civil Wars,” *International Organization* 64, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 281–312, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40608016>; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (January 2009): 67–106, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818309090031>; and Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2008).

171 Dominic D.P. Johnson and Dominic Tierney, “Bad World: The Negativity Bias in International Politics,” *International Security* 43, no. 3 (Winter 2018/2019): 96–140, https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00336.

172 Groh, *Proxy War*.

173 Deborah Welch Larson and Alexei Shevchenko, *Quest for Status: Chinese and Russian Foreign Policy* (Hartford, CT: Yale University Press, 2019).

174 Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, “Collision Avoidance: Lessons from U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Weiss_Ng_U.S.-Russia_Syria-final1.pdf

175 Byman, *Deadly Connections*; Ryan Clarke, *Crime-Terror Nexus in South Asia: States, Security and Non-State Actors* (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*.

Nouri al Maliki government in Iraq to reach out to Iraqi Sunnis, worsening the Iraqi civil war.¹⁷⁶ In such a situation, the local regime's dependence on the United States does not translate into U.S. control because Washington cannot credibly threaten to end support: A collapse of the government would also be a loss for U.S. interests.¹⁷⁷ Surrogates may also escalate a civil war by mistake, worsening an already tense situation or drawing global condemnation. In 2014, Ukrainian rebels shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17, using a surface-to-air missile provided, and subsequently recovered, by Russia. Ukrainian rebels may have fired the missile in error, believing the target to be a military aircraft.¹⁷⁸ Similar events in a Sino-U.S. proxy war could spur a retaliatory response, particularly given loss aversion, cultural ignorance, and the fog of proxy war.

A U.S.-Chinese proxy war could also deepen the intrastate conflict itself. Scholars have found that external support tends to exacerbate civil wars.¹⁷⁹ Take, for example, recent proxy wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, which have often spilled across borders. In Yemen, direct Saudi intervention and indirect Iranian intervention empowered the Houthis, provided fertile terrain for extremists like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and triggered catastrophic humanitarian consequences.¹⁸⁰

Conclusion

In 2007, Robert Gates said that unconventional wars were “the ones most likely to be fought in the years ahead.”¹⁸¹ This holds true for military competition between the United States and China. Strategic doctrine in both countries downplays intervention in foreign civil wars. And yet, any future military rivalry between China and America is likely to take the form of proxy war because of the systemwide dynamics that inhibit interstate war. The battlefield is more likely to be in Venezuela, Iran, North Korea, or Myanmar than in the South China Sea.

A Sino-U.S. proxy war may be low-level, covert, and deniable. Moreover, even as the United States and China seek to manipulate a particular civil war in contrary directions, they may cooperate in other internal conflicts to achieve shared goals like combatting terrorism. However, there is a significant danger that psychological dynamics, ignorance of local culture, and the independence of local actors could unintentionally deepen the civil war or cause a proxy war to spiral into a larger conflict.

For both the United States and China, formal opposition to intervening in foreign civil wars is a useful myth. America's prioritization of conventional interstate war aligns strategic doctrine with the U.S. military's comfort zone and also aids particular organizational interests in the Army, Navy, and Air Force by facilitating spending on big-ticket hardware.¹⁸² Meanwhile, China's doctrine of non-intervention serves to diminish fears in the international community about Beijing's rise. Despite these well-established principles, however, both states routinely engage in foreign intervention.

What are the policy recommendations for the United States? First, the U.S. military and broader national security community should expand their thinking about military competition with China, going beyond preparing for highly unlikely scenarios of interstate war to thinking through far more probable scenarios of proxy war. This means boosting resources for both direct and indirect interventions, including diplomacy, information operations, foreign aid, training and advisory missions, special forces, and counter-insurgency. The military should institutionalize hard-won lessons learned from prior unconventional campaigns like Iraq. Professional education in the U.S. military should pay greater attention to proxy war specifically in order to better understand how interventions can evolve, sometimes in unexpected ways. The Army's decision in 2014, for example, to close its Irregular Warfare Center is hard to justify when irregular warfare is the dominant kind of global conflict.¹⁸³

176 Marc Lynch, "How Can the U.S. Help Maliki When Maliki's The Problem?" *Washington Post*, June 12, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/06/12/iraq-trapped-between-isis-and-maliki/>.

177 Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

178 Somini Sengupta and Andrew E. Kramer, "Dutch Inquiry Links Russia to 298 Deaths in Explosion of Jetliner Over Ukraine," *New York Times*, Sept. 28, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/29/world/asia/malaysia-air-flight-mh17-russia-ukraine-missile.html>.

179 Linebarger and Enterline, "Third Party Intervention and the Duration and Outcome of Civil Wars."

180 Robert Malley and Stephen Pomper, "Accomplice to Carnage: How America Enables War in Yemen," *Foreign Affairs* 100, no. 2 (March/April 2021): 73–88, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-09/how-america-enables-war-yemen>.

181 Robert Gates, "Speech to the Association of the United States Army," *Small Wars Journal*, Oct. 10, 2007, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/blog/secdef-robert-gates-10-oct-07-ausa-speech>.

182 Tierney, *How We Fight*.

183 "Irregular Warfare Center to Close Oct. 1," *Army Times*, Sept. 1, 2014, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2014/09/01/irregular-warfare-center-to-close-oct-1/>.

One counter-argument might be that a Sino-U.S. interstate war is the most dangerous outcome and therefore deserves the greatest attention, whereas proxy wars are relatively low stakes and the American response to an internal conflict can be improvised, if necessary. However, proxy wars are far more likely to occur than an interstate war and may have significant consequences for U.S. interests and values. Furthermore, the less that the United States prepares for proxy war, the more these campaigns are likely to happen, either because Washington stumbles into a crisis it does not expect or because rational opponents choose to confront America in a scenario where they have the best odds of success. After the Vietnam War, for example, the U.S. military neglected counter-insurgency and pivoted to readying for interstate war with the Soviet Union, leaving America unprepared for later interventions in foreign civil wars.


Second, having developed its toolbox for both direct and indirect interventions, Washington should employ these tools with much greater discretion. The era of American hyper-interventionism has also been an era of military failure in Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. U.S. power can be a double-edged sword because it tempts Washington into unwise adventures. Competition with China makes picking and choosing foreign interventions even more important. Costly U.S. direct interventions like Iraq may only weaken America and strengthen China.

Third, the United States should recognize the dangers of perceiving global conflict through the lens of great-power competition and seeing the instability of foreign states as potentially beneficial because it hurts Beijing more than it hurts Washington. The consequences of instability are notoriously tough to predict. U.S. aid to rebels in Afghanistan in the 1980s, for example, helped force Moscow's retreat from the country, but it may have also facilitated the rise of al-Qaeda.

Fourth, if the United States does intervene in foreign civil wars, emerging Sino-U.S. competition underscores the importance of setting limited and achievable goals. Washington has a track record of fighting for grandiose war aims, such as building a beacon of freedom in Iraq, in part because the U.S. creed of individual rights encourages Americans to see foreign conflicts in moralistic terms as a struggle between good and evil. As U.S. officials balance local dynamics with the consequences for great-power competition, Washington will usually be well served by aiming for ugly stability rather

than true democracy and cutting pragmatic deals with opposing factions in internal conflicts.

Fifth, Washington should make an effort to channel Chinese interventionism toward areas of shared interests. Although a true global partnership to tackle foreign civil wars is unlikely to emerge, there are cases where the great powers' interests overlap and they can cooperate effectively, such as countering terrorism or piracy.

Sixth, if a Sino-U.S. proxy war occurs, it ought to be carefully managed. Decision-makers should recognize how ignorance of the local culture and ethnic dynamics, an aversion to loss, and independent action by surrogates can all spur unplanned or undesired escalation. The United States should develop deconfliction protocols like those used in Syria.¹⁸⁴ Proxy wars are unlikely to involve existential threats to either Washington or Beijing, making it possible to negotiate politically tolerable outcomes and avoid a foreign quagmire from triggering the Thucydides Trap. 

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184 David Shambaugh, "U.S.-China Rivalry in Southeast Asia: Power Shift or Competitive Coexistence?" *International Security*, 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 85–127, muse.jhu.edu/article/693696.