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U.S.-China Rivalry in a Neomedieval World

Security in an Age of Weakening States



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About This Report

This report considers how U.S.-China rivalry might unfold under conditions characterized by a blend of some aspects of modern life and a much more substantial attenuation or regression of many other aspects, a period we label the *neomedieval era*.

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Summary

This report considers how U.S.-China rivalry might unfold under conditions characterized by a blend of some aspects of modern life and a much more substantial attenuation or regression of other aspects, which we label *neomedievalism*. Although the term has been used in various contexts for decades, we define the *neomedieval era* as a historical period, beginning around 2000, characterized by weakening states, fragmenting societies, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and the informalization of warfare.

The report outlines key trends that collectively suggest that the future of the U.S.-China rivalry will bear little resemblance to the titanic struggles of the past two centuries. U.S.-China peacetime competition appears headed to unfold under conditions featuring a high degree of international disorder, diminishing state legitimacy and capacity, pervasive and acute domestic challenges, and severe constraints imposed by economic and social factors that are vastly different from those that industrial nation-states experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Despite apparent continuity with the recent past in terms of technological and other features of modern life, the current U.S.-China rivalry differs so fundamentally from the great-power contests of the past two centuries that comparisons with recent precedents are more likely to be misleading than informative. As this report will show, U.S.-China rivalry is likely to be more profoundly shaped by a general attenuation or regression of key political, societal, economic, and security-related aspects of modern life. These trends extend beyond the experiences of individual countries or leaders. As trends that define the general arc of human experience, they are unlikely to be reversed and might, at best, be delayed or mitigated to some extent. Their effects are also likely to overshadow the impact of particular technologies and weapons because technologies, no matter how advanced or sophisticated, cannot solve problems that are fundamentally political, societal, and economic. The limits of advanced technology were well illustrated by the humbling experience of the U.S. retreat from Afghanistan. American forces deployed with the most sophisticated equipment available, but these proved inadequate against the realities of a perpetually weak Kabul regime, an

impoverished and fragmented Afghan society, a tenuous U.S. commitment, and a poorly equipped yet resolute Taliban-led insurgency.

These trends are not theoretical and do not await some distant future. They are well underway, and the discerning may observe many symptoms in daily headlines. This report explores these trends in more detail, but they can be briefly summarized as follows. Politically, the centralized nation-state is in steep decline, although what might succeed it remains intensely disputed. Decline of the nation-state has already spurred severe political crises in many countries, and the problems of a weakened state will persist even if a new basis of legitimacy can be consolidated. The relatively high level of social solidarity that predominated in nation-states has atrophied, and competing sets of identities have grown more salient. Economically, neomedieval states are experiencing slowing and imbalanced growth that primarily benefits a small minority. Neomedieval economies are also experiencing disparate growth rates, entrenched inequalities, and expanding illicit economies. The nature of security threats has also changed significantly. Reversing trends that predominated in the past two centuries, non-state dangers could rival or outpace traditional state militaries as principal security concerns. While many of the nonstate threats are not new, they are especially menacing because of the weakened legitimacy and capacity of neomedieval states. Warfare in the neomedieval age has experienced a revival of preindustrial practices, including the privatization of militaries, the prevalence of siege warfare, irregular and protracted conflict, the prominence of intrastate war, and the formation of informal coalitions consisting of diverse state and nonstate actors.

To be clear, these trends do not imply a complete return to feudalistic life. Conveniences of modern life and relevant technological achievements, such as modern forms of transportation, medicine, and communication, will persist. New technologies, values, and ideals will emerge and change societies in ways that have no historical precedent. But the impact of modern and postmodern change is likely to pale next to the overall trajectory toward regression. Accordingly, the neomedieval era will be characterized by a blend of some modern features but, more profoundly, by the resurgence of preindustrial features.

These trends will render many of the strategies that great powers have employed against one another in the past two centuries less relevant. New

theories and ideas will be required to cope with problems largely unknown to the great-power rivals of the recent past. Adaptation is likely to be painful and wrenching for all countries but perhaps none more so than for the United States. As the greatest of nation-states, no country has benefited more from the developments of the past two centuries. Moreover, the entire history of the United States as an independent nation has unfolded within the modern industrial era. It will be difficult to turn from a history that has served the country so well and defined its national identity. But adaptation will be both imperative and, in the end, unavoidable. The trends outlined in this report have just gotten underway—many scarcely two decades old—and are poised to intensify in coming years. Adaptation can come either through intelligent and adept adjustment or can be forced unwillingly and incomprehendingly. The former could minimize hazards and perhaps bring a lasting competitive advantage over less-prepared rivals. The latter risks disastrous misjudgment and potential catastrophe.

The following are among the conclusions of the research described in this report:

- The realities of state weakness and societal fragmentation should become central considerations in all defense work. Coping with domestic and transnational threats and deterrence of attacks that threaten political legitimacy should have a priority equal to or higher than deterrence of conventional military attack.
- The goal and logic of warfare could change accordingly. As the pursuit of total victory over flashpoints, such as Taiwan, becomes infeasible, targeting the fragile political legitimacy of the rival could become more attractive as a direct way of gaining leverage in negotiations on proximate disputes. Around the world, sieges are likely to return as a key characteristic of neomedieval warfare.
- The conservation of military resources and the avoidance of major war will become critical to national success. Both militaries are likely to experience nearly overwhelming demands as forces are required to respond to transnational dangers, assist embattled allies and partners, augment law enforcement to ensure domestic security, and deter attacks on the homeland from adversaries.

- The transition from an industrial to a neomedieval era may carry more dangers than a potential power transition between China and the United States because of the proliferation of hazards, the perpetual weakness of states, and the inadequacy of resources to address both.
- A perpetually tenuous level of popular support for the government will likely deepen the military's dependence on mercenaries, unmanned systems, and coalition partners for combat operations.

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Introduction: The Neomedieval Era

The research described in this report considered how U.S.-China rivalry might unfold under conditions characterized by a blend of some aspects of modern life with a much more substantial attenuation or regression of other aspects. We label this set of conditions *neomedievalism*. Although the term has been used in various contexts for decades, we define the *neomedieval era*, for the purposes of this report, as a historical period, beginning around 2000, characterized by weakening states, fragmenting societies, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and the informalization of warfare.

The report outlines key trends that collectively suggest that the future of the U.S.-China rivalry will bear little resemblance to the titanic struggles of the past two centuries. As we will show in subsequent chapters, U.S.-China peacetime competition appears headed to unfold under conditions featuring a high degree of international disorder, decaying state capacity, pervasive and acute domestic challenges, and severe constraints imposed by economic and social factors vastly different from those that industrial nation-states experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries. These trends interact with and compound the effects of one another and are unlikely to be reversed. The net effect will be to considerably weaken virtually all states, including the United States and China. At the same time, severe resource constraints and a nearly overwhelming array of threats will stress the two militaries and impair their ability to contend with one another. Many of theories and ideas of why and how great powers compete may need to be reconsidered.

We will also present evidence that suggests that total war between the two militaries will become improbable. However, some sort of conflict cannot be ruled out. Should the U.S.-China rivalry escalate to hostilities, the weakness of the states will seriously constrain their options. Incapable of mobilizing their societies for total war, the two sides might instead fight

through proxy conflicts or by provoking political unrest in the rival's homeland. Amid such conflict, the two may find their contest frequently interrupted by the imperative to reallocate scarce resources to address a variety of domestic and transnational threats, resulting in a long-lasting, chronic state of intermittent low-intensity conflict. Under such conditions, conventional combat between U.S. and Chinese forces, if it occurs at all, could consist of sporadic clashes between relatively modest-sized formations. As ambitions of total victory over the adversary prove infeasible, political goals may instead focus on securing minor gains through temporary settlements while leaving broader issues unresolved.

Context: The Spread of Domestic and International Disorder

In recent years, the United States has designated great-power competition, especially with China, as a top national security priority.¹ The reasons for the designation are well known and compelling. Chinese success in realizing its goals of becoming a world leader could leave the United States with even fewer resources to maintain its security and prosperity. Moreover, an increasingly powerful China could wield its military might in ways that directly threaten U.S. allies and partners. China's increasing prestige could also erode U.S. international influence, leaving the United States with a weakening ability to influence global events.

Russia's conventional invasion of Ukraine in 2021 has added impetus to the notion that great-power competition remains the top threat to the United States.² Experts argue that Russia may pose a greater near-term menace but that only China possesses the durability and resources to pose a long-term challenge.³ By contrast, nonstate dangers have generally been

¹ White House, *National Security Strategy*, October 2022.

² Thomas F. Lynch III, *Strategic Assessment 2020: Into a New Era of Great Power Competition*, National Defense University Press, November 4, 2020.

³ James Dobbins, Howard J. Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue: Different Challenges, Different Responses*, RAND Corporation, PE-310-A, 2019.

regarded as minor hazards at best. The staggering amounts of resources expended on the war on terror and the disappointing outcomes in Iraq and Afghanistan have understandably sapped enthusiasm for operations against transnational terror groups. Similarly, defense experts have often dismissed international criminal organizations, cyberthreats, and nuclear proliferation as manageable distractions compared to the formidable challenges that China and Russia pose. The U.S. military, experts argue, should accordingly prioritize deterrence of major war above all other responsibilities.⁴

Despite the apparently sound strategic logic, this approach is not without risk. A fundamental responsibility of any government is to protect its citizenry. But governments worldwide are failing to ensure public safety against a multiplying and nearly overwhelming array of mostly nonstate threats that have little to do with the great-power rivalry. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic provided the starkest example of the potency of such dangers. By early 2023, the disease had already claimed more than 1 million lives in the United States and more than 6.6 million worldwide.⁵ But other dangers abound. Climate change has aggravated natural disasters, contributing to the devastation of tropical storms, such as hurricanes Ian and Katrina; massive forest fires on the west coast; floods; and other extreme weather events that are costing the United States trillions of dollars and many lives.⁶ Far from a trivial nuisance, violent nonstate actors have achieved astonishing successes. The U.S. retreat from Afghanistan demonstrated the formidable power that irregular armed groups can wield.⁷ Drug cartels have metastasized, amassing an astounding amount of wealth and political influence in such countries as Honduras, Guinea-Bissau, and Myanmar. These armed groups occasionally battle conventional militaries

⁴ Raphael S. Cohen, "The False Choice Between China and Russia," *The Hill*, February 21, 2022.

⁵ World Health Organization, "WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard," January 2023.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Natural Disasters: Economic Effects of Hurricanes Katrina, Sandy, Harvey, and Irma*, GAO-20-633R, September 10, 2020.

⁷ Tanya Mehra and Julie Coleman, "The Fall of Afghanistan: A Blow to Counter-Terrorism and Rule of Law Efforts," International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 23, 2021.

and control significant territory in such countries as Mexico and Colombia.⁸ Cybercrime, human trafficking, and other forms of criminal predation have spread unabated as criminals exploit a globalized trading infrastructure for illicit ends.⁹ Although these dangers have long ravaged developing countries, their impact has been felt even in the richest countries.¹⁰

Domestic political challenges have intensified as well. The apparent inability of prosperous countries to reverse systemic inequalities and deliver equitable social services has fueled widespread discontent and political upheaval. Failures to protect citizens from transnational dangers, criminal predation, or abuses at the hands of authorities have further eroded the legitimacy of national governments, which paradoxically hampers the ability of the same states to respond. In the United States, arguments over mandates related to COVID-19, police misconduct, immigration, elections, and other issues have led to levels of violence and unrest not seen in over a century. Political gridlock arising from such disputes has, in turn, impaired efforts to address such concerns.¹¹ Evidence that the most consolidated democracies may be experiencing a general deconsolidation of their political institutions has only added to alarm about the health and vitality of liberal democracies.¹²

Although the troubles afflicting Western democracies are well known, China faces its own debilitating challenges. Beijing's ambitions for national revival, also known as the "China Dream," are checked by the reality of continued unrest and threats of instability. Corruption, malfeasance, and the failure to reverse destabilizing levels of inequality pose the greatest threat to Chinese Communist Party (CCP) rule. In a stunning admission of the

⁸ Angel Rabasa, Christopher M. Schnaubelt, Peter Chalk, Douglas Farah, Gregory Midgett, and Howard Shatz, *Counternetwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks*, RAND Corporation, RR-1481-A, 2017.

⁹ Global Initiative, *The Global Illicit Economy*, March 2021.

¹⁰ Jurgen Dahlkamp, Jorg Diehl, and Roman Lehberger, "The Slippery Dutch Slope from Drug Tolerance to Drug Terror," *Der Spiegel*, October 20, 2021.

¹¹ Kevin Drew, "Amid Unrest, America Is Unrecognizable to Its Allies," *US News and World Report*, August 28, 2020.

¹² Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 27, No. 3, July 2016.

limits of CCP power, Xi Jinping acknowledged the government's inability to satisfy the demands of the people. At the 20th Party Congress, in 2022, Xi Jinping defined the "main contradiction" confronting the nation in the "new era" as the "ever growing needs of the people for a better life" and the country's "unbalanced and inadequate development."¹³ Notably, Xi made no promise to overcome this contradiction by creating the resources to meet the needs of the people but instead has stepped up the country's repression. China also faces threats from extreme weather events; calamitous natural disasters; and outright defiance of CCP rule in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang.¹⁴ As discontent simmers, China's internal security budget has ballooned and has exceeded the defense budget since 2011.¹⁵ Alarmed by the public's disaffection, the government has complemented an extensive crackdown with relentless political indoctrination.¹⁶

Both the United States and China are confronting these concurrent challenges with diminishing resources. Since the 1970s, the United States has experienced decelerating growth rates and expanding government debt.¹⁷ China faces its own economic woes. Its growth rates have slowed from an annual average of 10 percent in the 1990s to around 6 percent in 2019.¹⁸ China's mounting debt owes in large part to its inability to adopt a more sustainable form of growth.¹⁹ The problem is compounded by severe demographic challenges. Some experts now suggest the country's growth rate

¹³ Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at 20th Party Congress," Xinhua, October 16, 2022.

¹⁴ Dexter Tiff Roberts, *The Domestic Challenges That Threaten China's Superpower Future*, Atlantic Council, December 20, 2021.

¹⁵ Chris Buckley, "China Internal Security Spending Jumps Past Army Budget," Reuters, March 4, 2011.

¹⁶ Qiao Long and Gigi Lee, "Chinese Communist Party to Boost Political Indoctrination of Schoolchildren," Radio Free Asia, February 4, 2021.

¹⁷ World Bank, "GDP Growth (annual %)—United States," 2021b; U.S. Department of the Treasury, "What Is the National Debt?" webpage, undated.

¹⁸ World Bank, "GDP Growth (annual %)—China," 2021a.

¹⁹ Amanda Lee, "China Debt: How Big Is It and Who Owns It?" *South China Morning Post*, May 19, 2020.

could slow sharply and will likely average below 2 percent to 3 percent annually through midcentury.²⁰

Given the complex threat picture and severe resource constraints, both Washington and Beijing have, not surprisingly, signaled their desire to scale back the intensity of the rivalry. President Joe Biden has tempered the previous administration's more confrontational approach with calls for a "responsible" competition that accepts cooperation on shared threats.²¹ Chinese commentators have similarly called for a "constructive" competition that balances cooperation with competition.²² Chinese senior officials have resisted even using the term *competition* and have instead urged greater cooperation on shared concerns even as they carry out a variety of competitive practices.²³ Beijing's ambivalence is driven in part by its awareness of a formidable array of dangers. Chinese authorities have defined the security challenges the country faces in "holistic" or "comprehensive" terms, explaining that dangers have grown in the economic, information, and cultural domains even as long-standing concerns over territory and regime security persist.²⁴ The country's official defense white papers similarly characterize the country's threats in broad terms, noting that they come from "all directions," of which tensions with the United States represent merely one of many hazards.²⁵ For both countries, a mutual acceptance of restrained competition and willingness to engage in cooperation, however reluctantly, offers a desperately needed reprieve to cope with a daunting set of challenges.

²⁰ Roland Rajah and Alyssa Leng, *Revising Down the Rise of China*, Lowy Institute, March 14, 2022.

²¹ Ma Qian, "Xinhua Commentary: Keep U.S.-China Competition 'Constructive,'" Xinhua, March 12, 2021; Jamey Keaten and Aamer Madhani, "U.S. Presses for 'Responsible Competition' in Talks with China," AP National News, October 6, 2021.

²² Ma Qian, 2021

²³ Lu Xin and Yang Sheng, "Yang-Sullivan Meeting Showcases Positive Signals, Major Divergence," Xinhua, October 7, 2021; Ma Qian, 2021.

²⁴ Xi Jinping, "A Holistic View of National Security," *Seeking Truth* [求是], December 4, 2020.

²⁵ State Council Information Office, *Full Text: China's National Defense in the New Era*, July 24, 2019.

A Different Type of Rivalry

The recognition that the current U.S.-China competition differs dramatically from that of the Cold War is hardly novel. It has become commonplace to observe that the degree of interdependence and the necessity of cooperation on shared threats and concerns, such as climate change, make Cold War-era strategies of containment inappropriate.²⁶ Chinese officials similarly criticize the United States for maintaining a “Cold War mentality,” which they suggest impairs Washington’s ability to respond to China’s rise in a measured way.²⁷

But what is less often pointed out are the ways in which the current rivalry differs from *all* great-power rivalries *over the past two centuries*. The Cold War featured its own distinctive dynamics but also shared important features with the two world wars and even the wars of the Napoleonic era. The state of technologies differed dramatically, of course, but the similarities in social, political, and economic features are striking. Those epic contests involved centralized, unitary states with high degrees of internal cohesion and robust patriotic popular support.²⁸ Governments enjoyed strong legitimacy in part because they oversaw an expansion of opportunities for political participation and economic self-betterment.²⁹ Broad popular support for the governments also owed to industrialization, which took off in the late 1700s and yielded dramatic gains in the material standard of living for many people, especially after 1850.³⁰ Wars of this period typically centered on strategies of mass mobilization that permitted the fielding of vast armies consisting of citizen-soldiers equipped with standardized uniforms

²⁶ Joseph Nye, “With China, a ‘Cold War’ Analogy Is Lazy and Dangerous,” *New York Times*, November 2, 2021.

²⁷ “China Urges U.S. to Discard Cold War Mentality,” Xinhua, July 21, 2020.

²⁸ Lars-Erik Cederman, T. Camber Warren, and Didier Sornette, “Testing Clausewitz: Nationalism, Mass Mobilization, and the Severity of War,” *International Organization*, Vol. 65, No. 4, Fall 2011.

²⁹ Carles Boix, *Democracy and Redistribution*, Cambridge University Press, 2003.

³⁰ “Did Living Standards Improve During the Industrial Revolution?” *The Economist*, September 13, 2013.

and equipment.³¹ When these nation-states fought, they demonstrated an impressive ability to mobilize resources, involve populations, and sustain a war footing for years on end. Their militaries frequently engaged in blood-soaked set-piece battles that generated staggering casualties. The wars often wrought immense destruction and typically ended only with the unconditional surrender of one side or the other.

The current U.S.-China rivalry contrasts sharply with these historical experiences. Unlike their predecessors, the two countries contend amid a complex and overlapping array of threats, labor under severe resource constraints, and manifest disturbing signs of domestic weakness. As the ability to meet the needs of their citizens diminishes, the U.S. and Chinese governments have inspired little patriotic enthusiasm. Neither side has mobilized its citizenry against the other, and strategies of mass mobilization do not appear plausible for the foreseeable future. Instead, military recruitment consists primarily of professional volunteers and contractors. It is true that China continues to rely on conscription for perhaps one-third of its military manpower, but that is because it cannot attract enough qualified volunteers.³² Far from a minor hindrance, transnational threats and episodes of domestic upheaval appear highly menacing and routinely vie with traditional threats for the attention of policymakers. U.S. military forces have struggled to eliminate violent nonstate actors in the Middle East and to control outbursts of domestic turmoil, for example. Meanwhile, the People's Liberation Army (PLA) has scrambled to protect Chinese citizens abroad from serious harm, and the country's security forces have strained to ensure domestic tranquility in Hong Kong, Tibet, and Xinjiang.³³ Indeed, Chinese defense white papers list preparation for conventional war as merely one of many "diversified tasks" for which the PLA must be prepared.³⁴ In sum,

³¹ Kalevi Holsti, *Peace and War: Armed Conflicts and International Order, 1648–1989*, Cambridge University Press, 1991.

³² Riccardo Cociani, "China's New 'Military Service Law' Aims to Address Recruitment Difficulties," *Janes*, August 26, 2021.

³³ "China Demands Swift Action Against Killers of Its Citizens in Pakistan," *Voice of America*, April 27, 2022; Christian Gobel and Lynette H. Ong, "Social Unrest in China," *Europe China Research and Advice Network*, 2012.

³⁴ State Council Information Office, 2019.

both countries have approached the competition with a mix of apprehension, divided attention, and ambivalence that contrasts sharply with the singular focus and national resolve that great-power rivals exhibited in the preceding two centuries.

These developments run counter to the general experiences of great-power rivalries and have baffled many observers accordingly. Grasping that the current situation bears little resemblance to 20th century precedents, experts have struggled to explain its novel features. Some have proposed that the two countries are on the path to “power transition warfare.” This is also known as the *Thucydides Trap*, and advocates of this view argue that rising and status quo world powers fight to decide issues of global primacy.³⁵ Others reject the notion that such a war is inevitable or even likely.³⁶ Experts debate whether the rivalry is really about economics, technology, or ideology.³⁷ Still others question why the two compete at all and advocate for greater cooperation against common dangers.³⁸

Neomedievalism

A starting point for making sense of the U.S.-China rivalry’s unusual features is to recognize that the world is experiencing a historic period of transformation. Elements of modern life are so pervasive and familiar that they continue to dominate understanding of the world and, in many ways, hinder the ability to recognize the passing of the modern industrial era. For example, today’s political institutions and economic arrangements all share

³⁵ Graham Allison, *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape the Thucydides Trap?* Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017.

³⁶ Charles C. Krulak and Alex Friedman, “The U.S. and China Are Not Destined for War,” Project Syndicate, August 17, 2021.

³⁷ Hal Brands and Zack Cooper, “U.S.-China Rivalry Is a Battle Over Values,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 16, 2021; Oriana Skylar Mastro, “Military Competition with China: Harder Than the Cold War?” *FSI Policy Brief*, September 30, 2021; Matt Field, “Are the U.S. and China Fighting a ‘Tech War’ Over Semiconductors and Other Advanced Technology?” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, October 21, 2022.

³⁸ Michael Swaine, “Inflating China’s Threat Risks Disaster for the United States,” Quincy Institute, July 15, 2022.

continuity with the modern period, in which they were born. Prominent international relations theories, such as realism and liberalism, continue to be state-centric.³⁹ Similarly, U.S. military thought remains indebted to the insights of scholars of modern warfare, such as Karl von Clausewitz. Our understanding of interstate warfare is also informed by databases that have drawn almost exclusively from the past two centuries.⁴⁰ It is thus not surprising that many top experts point to experiences in the Cold War and the world wars for insights about the current U.S.-China contest.⁴¹ Even efforts to expound on the possibilities of the future suffer from severe nation-state bias. The National Intelligence Council's *Global Trends 2040* report, for example, envisioned several possible futures.⁴² That report noted several of the trends that we analyzed, and the scenarios share some features in common with our analysis. However, the National Intelligence Council report showed an unspoken commitment to the primacy of nation-states. The scenarios presumed nation-states would remain the principal actors and upheld the hopeful possibility that the strength of industrial nation-states could be restored. The report did not consider how trends of political weakening and societal fragmentation could afflict all countries, not just a few. It also did not consider the possibility that subnational governments and actors could rival national governments for power and influence or that the nation-state might transition to a different form of state with a new basis of legitimacy.

In short, patterns that typified the recent past do not necessarily provide an accurate guide to the future. A danger of presuming past trends will continue is possibly being ill-prepared for surprises that do not conform to such patterns. The shocking level of casualties inflicted by the COVID-19

³⁹ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Waveland Press, 2010, is just one example.

⁴⁰ David Singer, *The Wages of War, 1816–1965: A Statistical Handbook*, Wiley Press, 1972.

⁴¹ Yu Sui, "China and U.S. Should Draw Lessons from World War II," China-US Focus website, July 8, 2015; Stephen Walt, "Yesterday's Cold War Shows How to Beat China Today," *Foreign Policy*, July 29, 2019.

⁴² National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends 2040*, 2022.

pandemic provides a painful illustration of the way unanticipated developments can yield devastating results.

In this report, we will present evidence that suggests that the world entered a new era beginning around 2000. This new era is characterized by the persistence of some features of modern life but also a much more fundamental attenuation or regression of political, societal, and economic dimensions of the modern industrial era. By *attenuation*, we mean the general weakening or deterioration of relevant aspects of modern life. By *regression*, we mean a general reversal of features associated with the modern industrial age and toward patterns more commonly seen in preindustrial societies. The trends we describe represent structural changes beyond the specific experiences of individual countries and, indeed, affect every country in the world.

We did not invent the term we use to describe this new era; *neomedievalism* has been used in various academic disciplines since at least the 1970s. For example, historians have used it to describe new approaches to the study of the Middle Ages.⁴³ However, we are particularly inspired by the work of international relations theorist Hedley Bull, who introduced the term into the political science literature in the 1970s to posit a future international order that evolved into patterns reminiscent of medieval Europe.⁴⁴

Because our analysis borrows ideas from Bull, we have retained the term but assigned a different meaning. We define the *neomedieval era* as having begun around 2000; it is characterized by weakening states, fragmenting societies, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and the informalization of warfare. *Weakening states* refers to the decay in the political legitimacy of states because of their declining ability to maintain legitimacy; ensure domestic security; and provide levels of goods, services, and opportunities satisfactory to the populace. *Fragmenting societies* refers to the erosion of national spirit and the increasing salience of competing group identities, such as diverse sub- and transnational communities that prioritize loyalty to something other than the nation-state. We use the term *imbalanced economies* to refer to the disparate growth patterns of neomedieval econo-

⁴³ Karl Fugelso, *Studies in Medievalism: Defining Neomedievalism(s) II*, Boydell & Brewer, 2011.

⁴⁴ Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 3rd ed., Columbia University Press, 2002.

mies, in which rapid growth is concentrated in a few sectors, while the rest experience marginal growth at best. It also includes the related problems of entrenched inequality, stagnant social mobility, and a large illicit economy. *Pervasive threats* refers to the proliferation of dangers from both military and nonmilitary sources, such as natural disasters, infectious disease, and violent nonstate actors, underscoring the increasing salience of domestic and transnational dangers even as the possibility of conflict with rival state militaries persists. The *informalization of warfare* refers to the shift away from warfare conducted exclusively by national militaries toward diverse forces consisting of professional troops; contractors or mercenaries;⁴⁵ and sympathetic armed groups, such as militias, as well as the revival of older methods of fighting, such as intrastate conflicts, sieges, and irregular conflict.

These trends dynamically interact with and compound one another, magnifying their collective impact. Weak state capacity and societal fragmentation, for example, make it difficult for economies to grow rapidly and in an equitable manner. Similarly, acute nonstate threats and the informalization of warfare compound weaknesses in state capacity and aggravate societal fragmentation. These developments have reached their most acute form in developing countries in which industrialization and modernization never advanced very far. However, the neomedieval trends are so pervasive that even the most powerful and wealthiest states are experiencing them in intensifying form.

These historical developments collectively signify the resurgence of political, social, and economic features commonly seen in preindustrial societies, such as that of medieval Europe. After the collapse of the Roman

⁴⁵ In this report, we use the term *contractor* to refer primarily to personnel who perform noncombat military-related services under terms of a contract. We use the term *mercenary* to refer to personnel who perform combat services under terms of a contract. The distinction helps illuminate how the nature of contracted military work has changed between the modern industrial and the neomedieval eras. The term *mercenary* has earned a pejorative meaning: one who fights purely for pay. However, we regard this as an unjustified prejudice born of nation-state expectations. Preindustrial societies did not generally hold this prejudice. Moreover, Sean McFate has argued persuasively that motives for mercenaries and professional volunteers in contemporary militaries share more in common than they differ, as both involve a mix of self-interest and other motives. See Sean McFate, *The Modern Mercenary: Private Armies and What They Mean for World Order*, Oxford University Press, 2017.

Empire, Europe entered what is generally referred to as the *medieval* period. Lasting roughly from around 500 CE to approximately the Renaissance in the 1400s CE, this period featured a decentralized political landscape with a variety of political actors. Rulers exerted little authority beyond the individual cities or castles in which they were based. Even the most powerful kings found their power mediated and contested by a complex array of nobles, religious authorities, and outlaws. These actors frequently waged conflict against one another. Economic output was low and frequently disrupted by warfare, disease, and natural disasters. Medieval society generally featured stratified classes and high levels of inequality.⁴⁶

As we will show, the contemporary world displays patterns reminiscent of medieval Europe. However, the trends we characterize as *neomedieval* are relative and analogous, not absolute or literal. We do not, for example, anticipate an abandonment of modern technologies and modes of organization in favor of simpler tools and feudalistic arrangements. The process of attenuation and regression will occur alongside the persistence of some features of modern life, such as modern transportation, medicine, and communication technologies. Also, the trends are not inconsistent with the emergence of norms and values unheard of in preindustrial societies or with technological breakthroughs. Moreover, although the term evokes European history, many of the features occurred throughout all preindustrial societies. Societies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America prior to 1800 generally exhibited similar patterns of dispersed authority, fragmented societies, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and informalized warfare. These features are not exclusively confined to preindustrial historical periods. They persisted in many countries for decades or centuries after 1800, even to the present. In many ways, the unfolding story is one of a return to the historical norm of human experience. The modern period, as impressive and unique as it has been, ultimately represents a historical anomaly.

Proximity to the recent past and the pervasiveness of institutions, ideas, and technologies from the industrial age can impair appreciation of the remarkable ways in which modern societies defied the general experience of humankind. Modern economies have, for example, generated astonishing

⁴⁶ George Holmes, *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, Oxford University Press, 1988.

levels of wealth and conveniences that far exceed what the richest preindustrial societies experienced.⁴⁷ The average citizen in a prosperous industrialized state has access to luxuries unfathomable to premodern peoples, not the least of which include indoor plumbing, refrigeration, and climate control. Similarly, citizens in liberal democracies enjoy civic and political rights alien to common people outside modern nation-states, most of whom have endured oppressive rule with little hope of bettering their situation. Modern hygiene, health, and nutrition have tripled average lifespans over those of preindustrial societies and have helped conquer diseases that have plagued mankind for millennia.⁴⁸ These accomplishments have been so striking that thinkers have sometimes been tempted to believe modern civilization has secured a permanent betterment of the human condition. Auguste Comte, writing in the 1800s, was merely one of the first to propose the hope that modern civilization might experience an irreversible progress toward greater prosperity, enlightenment, peace, and technological achievement.⁴⁹ The catastrophes of the world wars shook the faith in human progress of many people, but the idea continued to resonate deeply. As late as the 1990s, scholars continued to hail as “inevitable” the progressive triumph of Western liberal democracies in such celebrated books as Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History*.⁵⁰

Yet recent developments have considerably eroded faith in modern progress. Pessimism has spread as pervasive economic, social, and political problems have undermined confidence in the future.⁵¹ Since at least the late 1990s, scholars in virtually every field of social science have charted

⁴⁷ Paola Malanima, “Past Growths: Pre-Modern and Modern,” *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2021.

⁴⁸ J. R. Wilmoth, “Demography of Longevity: Past, Present, and Future Trends,” *Experimental Gerontology*, Vol. 35, 2000.

⁴⁹ George S. Painter, “The Idea of Progress,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 28, No. 3, 1922.

⁵⁰ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*, Free Press, 1992.

⁵¹ Laura Clancey, Rosaline Gray, and Bao Vu, “Large Shares in Many Countries Are Pessimistic About the Next Generation’s Future,” Pew Research Center, August 11, 2022. See also such books as Ross Douthat, *The Decadent Society: How We Became Victims of Our Own Success*, Simon and Shuster, 2020.

signs of decline and decay. Academic writings that detailed the symptoms of deteriorating conditions for modern nation-states flourished in the 2000s, especially in the wake of the global financial crisis in 2008. Some observers coined the phrase *great regression* to describe the signs of institutional breakdown and political upheaval that followed the financial crisis of the late 2000s.⁵² Others expanded the meaning of *great regression* to describe trends in resurgent nationalism, declines in liberal democratic practices, and the spread of social disorder.⁵³ Experts noted with dismay that earlier hopes that the developing world would converge with the richest economies to create a more broadly shared prosperity have proven wrong. In fact, the reverse appeared to be taking place. Many of the most advanced economies have manifested unsettling signs of regression toward conditions more commonly seen among developing countries, such as the increasingly insecure, vulnerable, and volatile conditions of employment; the entrenchment of inequality; and the acceleration of societal fragmentation.⁵⁴ In 2018, a group of scholars across multiple disciplines published a volume that described pervasive trends that the authors characterized as *demodernization*. The book marshaled empirical evidence from diverse social sciences to describe a general reversion in “civilized” states around the world to conditions more commonly seen in preindustrial societies.⁵⁵

Specialists in security topics and military affairs have reported similar trends. In the early 2000s, Mary Kaldor, a professor at the London School of Economics, noted that the decline in interstate wars masked a troubling rise in “new wars” that resembled preindustrial conflicts in their violence against civilians, focus on group identity as a driver of conflict, and involvement of nonuniformed armed groups and nonstate actors.⁵⁶ Renowned

⁵² Paul Taylor, “After the Great Recession, the Great Regression,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2011.

⁵³ Heinrich Geiselberger, ed., *The Great Regression*, Wiley Publishing, 2017.

⁵⁴ Yakov Rabkin and Mikhail Minakov, eds., *Neomedievalism: A Future in the Past*, Ibidem Press, 2018; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Touchstone Books, 2001.

⁵⁵ Yakov Rabkin and Mikhail Minakov, *Demodernization: A Future in the Past*, Columbia University Press, 2018.

⁵⁶ Mary Kaldor, *New Wars and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, Stanford University Press, 2012.

military scholar Martin van Creveld and others have described how current trends have rendered conventional wars between great powers nearly obsolete and, instead, have revived older, preindustrial forms of organized violence.⁵⁷ Sean McFate highlighted parallels between the extensive reliance on mercenaries in contemporary conflicts and their prevalence in medieval Europe.⁵⁸

International relations theorists have also detected trends that suggested a resurgence of tendencies not seen since the Middle Ages. At the geopolitical level, foreign policy specialist Robert Kaplan described parallels between the resurgence of China and the developing world and the structure of preindustrial global politics.⁵⁹ Although *neomedievalism* had been used in other contexts, international relations theorists began using the term after Australian scholar Hedley Bull speculated, in 1977, that global politics might someday return to a “new medievalism” characterized by the following features: (1) the regional integration of states, (2) the disintegration of states, (3) the restoration of private international violence, (4) the rise of transnational organizations, and (5) the technological unification of the world.⁶⁰ Although dismissed at the time, his insights have gained wider support in recent years.⁶¹ Others have built on the idea that the international order that has predominated in the modern period may be transforming into something that shares more in common with medieval history. Philip Bobbitt has argued that the nation-states may be transitioning into new state forms to accommodate a more disordered international system that, in some ways, parallels patterns seen in medieval Europe.⁶² These scholars disagree on many points and do not subscribe to any single label but do

⁵⁷ Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, Free Press, 1991; Robert Bunker, “The Transition to Fourth Epoch War,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, Vol. 78, No. 9, 1994.

⁵⁸ McFate, 2017.

⁵⁹ Robert Kaplan, *The Return of Marco Polo’s World: War, Strategy, and American Interests in the 21st Century*, Random House Publishing, 2018.

⁶⁰ Bull, 2002.

⁶¹ Jorg Friedrichs, “The Meaning of New Medievalism,” *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 7, No. 4, 2001.

⁶² Philip Bobbitt, *Terror and Consent: The Wars for the Twenty First Century*, Knopf Double Day Publishing, 2009.

share in common the view that the industrial age is ending and that aspects of the future may have more in common with the preindustrial period than the recent past.

Like the proverbial blind men feeling the elephant, specialists in diverse disciplines describe trends of regression in their respective fields, but few have put these together to illuminate what these collectively imply for national security, still less what they might mean for U.S. efforts to contend with China. The fact that there is no agreed-on term to describe these overarching trends underscores this point. The trends may be difficult to make sense of individually but present a clearer picture collectively. Patterns commonly seen in preindustrial societies are reemerging. The same trends will inevitably shape the trajectory of U.S.-China competition. It is thus imperative to understand these trends to develop appropriate and well-informed policies that adapt, accommodate, and selectively resist these trends.

Why is the world experiencing such attenuation and regression? The most fundamental driver is the declining strength of the advanced industrial economies that created the modern industrial era in the first place. Before 1800, no industrial nation-state existed. As Western countries developed into industrial nation-states, their immense concentration of power and wealth excited admiration, resentment, and envy in states around the world. Although scholars continue to debate the precise relationships, the process of modernization has long been understood to rest in the combined effects of economic industrialization and social and political reorganization. But coordinating the modernization of all sectors has historically proven an arduous and often elusive process.⁶³ Activists from colonized and dominated countries carefully studied Western industrial nations in hopes of learning the secret to their immense strength and, eventually, to liberate their own countries from imperial rule.⁶⁴ The appeal and influence of Western nation-states reached an apogee in the 1950s and 1960s, when these economies experienced a golden age of prosperity that fueled rising incomes rose across virtually all social classes. Noting the wealth generated and the

⁶³ J. P. Nettl and Roland Robertson, "Industrialization, Development or Modernization," *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 17, No. 3, September 1966.

⁶⁴ Pankaj Mishra, *From the Ruins of Empire: The Intellectuals Who Remade Asia*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2012.

impressive strength and vigor of the political and social institutions, American political scientists of the time confidently prescribed Western modernization as a model for all countries to follow.⁶⁵ However, the situation began to change in the 1970s when the same economies deindustrialized as rising wages rendered manufacturing less competitive. Growth rates slowed, economies experienced stagnation, and inequality grew. Analysts noted a concomitant decay in key economic and political institutions dating from this period.⁶⁶ In short, the strength of modern civilization has always depended on the vigor of its foremost examples. As the strongest examples weakened, the institutions, structures, and norms underpinned by the same nations inevitably decayed. Nature abhors a vacuum, however. Competitors inevitably emerged in forms that often mimicked preindustrial forebears.⁶⁷

These trends render many of the strategies employed by great powers against one another in the past two centuries less relevant. New strategies and policies will be required to cope with problems largely unknown to industrial-age rivalries. Adaptation is likely to be painful and wrenching for all countries but perhaps none more so than for the United States. As the greatest of nation-states, no country has benefited more from modernization. Moreover, it is almost the only historical era that the United States of America has directly experienced. The entire history of the country has unfolded as a nation-state. It will be difficult to turn from experiences that have served the country so well and defined its national identity. But adaptation will be both imperative and, in the end, unavoidable. The trends outlined in this report have just gotten underway, many scarcely two decades old, and are poised to intensify in coming years. These trends cannot be reversed and a world of industrial nation-states restored. Structural changes beyond the reach of policymakers, such as automation, the globalization of markets, and demographic aging, have rendered the old prescriptions of

⁶⁵ Seymour Martin Lipset, *Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics*, Doubleday and Company, 1960.

⁶⁶ Niall Ferguson, *The Great Degeneration: How Institutions Decay and Economies Die*, Penguin Books, 2014.

⁶⁷ Sergei Ordenev, "Demodernization as a Hybrid Form of Modernization of Traditionalist Society in the Globalized World," *Humanities and Social Sciences Reviews*, Vol. 74, No. 4, 2019.

economic industrialization and societal mobilization nonviable.⁶⁸ Adaptation can come through intelligent and adept adjustment or can be forced unwillingly and uncomprehendingly. The former could minimize hazards and perhaps bring a lasting competitive advantage over less-prepared rivals. The latter risks disastrous misjudgment and potential catastrophe.

Methodology and Outline

To carry out this research, we reviewed academic and social scientific findings regarding key overarching trends. We studied the theoretical insights of scholars who have documented and analyzed the historical trends that suggest a general attenuation or regression in key aspects of modernity. One priority was to understand how Chinese thinkers might interpret similar trends. Chinese writers do not use such terms to describe the same trends. However, Chinese writers have, indeed, commented on many of the same developments that Western scholars have noted. To illustrate the Chinese perspective, we reviewed writings and analyses of relevant trends by scholars, experts, and officials.

Our principal methodology was comparison of five key factors across multiple geographic regions and historical eras: politics and government, culture and society, economics, security issues, and military affairs. The subsequent chapters will explain these factors in greater detail. In the remainder of this section, we will describe the historical eras across which we carried out the comparative analysis:

- preindustrial Europe (1300–1800)
- preindustrial China (1300–1900)
- the industrial nation-state (1800–2000)
- neomedievalism (2000–present).

⁶⁸ Daron Acemoglu, “Automation and New Tasks: How Technology Displaces and Reinstates Labor,” *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring 2019; Ronald Lee and Andrew Mason, “Cost of Aging,” *Finance and Development*, International Monetary Fund, Vol. 54, No. 1, March 2017.

Preindustrial Europe (1300–1800)

As a point of contrast, we reviewed developments in select preindustrial societies. Preindustrial history could, theoretically, include any society prior to 1800 and could stretch to the start of human civilization. The variety and diversity of preindustrial experiences is so vast as to defy all but the most basic generalizations. To bound the comparison, we defined the Western preindustrial period as extending roughly from the 1300s through the late 1770s. The dates selected are, admittedly, somewhat arbitrary but generally correlate with a period of late medieval history in which nascent forms of modern government began to form, starting in Italian city-states, such as Florence. However, many of the features we describe could well apply to polities even before this period.

Geographically, we focused on developments in Europe. Note, however, that many of these features of preindustrial Europe apply to the premodern histories of the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. Also, the label does not apply exclusively to past eras. In parts of the developing world where modernization never advanced very far, the line between preindustrial and neomedieval life may be so tenuous that it may well be nonexistent. Even if we confine our analysis to Europe, changes in political organization, borders, and economies over time are considerable. Any generalization admittedly risks considerable oversimplification. Accordingly, we will focus on the broadest features that appeared in the great majority of polities during that time frame, such as structure of states, modes of economic production, and the organization of society.

Preindustrial China: 1300–Early 1900s

We also examined an analogous preindustrial historical period for China. In many ways, political, economic, and social developments in Chinese history are as varied and complex as those in Europe. To bound a period for comparison, we focused on the Ming (1368–1644) and Qing (1644–1912) dynasties. A key difference between China and Europe is the fact that the former was a centralized empire while the latter consisted of many contending polities. The difference in political organization has some important consequences for our comparison of how government and society operated in China and Europe. However, we will show that, despite important differ-

ences, the two preindustrial civilizations nonetheless shared many features in common.

In this period, China experienced periods of consolidation and breakdown as imperial dynasties rose and fell. We chose the early 1900s to mark the close of preindustrial China to correspond with the collapse of the Qing empire and the end of the system of imperial dynastic rule in 1912 that had governed China for millennia. The nature of politics and society underwent significant changes over the span of these years. Generalizations must, therefore, be undertaken carefully, and the risk of oversimplification must again be acknowledged. But, as with preindustrial Europe, we will aim to focus on the broadest general trends.

The Modern Industrial Era: 1800–2000

Modern history has been defined in many ways, with some definitions focusing on the centralization of European states beginning in the 1500s and 1600s. However, for the purposes of this report, we will focus on a roughly 200-year period defined by the advent of the *industrial nation-state*, which we will occasionally shorten to *nation-state*. We refer here to the primarily economic process of industrialization and the accompanying political-societal process of nation-state formation that arose in the late 1770s with the creation of the United States and revolutionary France. These features became more widespread in the subsequent two centuries, first in Europe and North America, then spreading to other parts of the world. We chose the year 2000 as the end point of this period, when observers across multiple disciplines reported signs of attenuation and regression of the same features.

Economically, the industrial nation-state experienced a shift from a largely agricultural to a more diverse economy characterized by considerable industrialization. Industrialization is a key driver of the modern nation-state, generally requiring the mobilization of labor, a more efficient state administration, and the creation of modern financial systems and markets.⁶⁹ In terms of politics and society, the archetypical form in this

⁶⁹ Jeff Horn, Leonard N. Rosenband, and Merritt Roe Smith, *Reconceptualizing the Industrial Revolution*, MIT Press, 2010.

era was that of the nation-state. If the nation is the dominant ethnocultural group of people and if the state comprises the centralized political organizations of a polity, the nation-state fuses the two. In a nation-state, the people prioritize loyalty to both the nation and state (often expressed ideologically as a form of patriotism) over other forms of identity and authority, and the state, in turn, prioritizes the well-being and welfare of the citizens of the nation. Moreover, the nation-state is territorially consolidated, centralized, and sovereign.⁷⁰ It tends to feature a developed administrative bureaucracy that penetrates society, extracts taxes, ensures domestic order, and furnishes basic social welfare services. Such a state also exercises authority over the breadth of its territorial boundaries. A nation-state's military can usually be described as a nation in arms, characterized by widespread participation of the citizenry, often through conscription or voluntary service. A nation-state can mobilize its population and the country's resources partly because of the close bonds between people and state.⁷¹ Napoleonic France and its wars exemplified an early form many of these characteristics. The large-scale world wars of the 20th century epitomized these characteristics in peak form, and the Cold War largely continued to reflect many of these trends, albeit in attenuated form.

Historically, this process began in Europe and North America in the late 1700s and early 1800s and reached the apex of its development in the mid-20th century. Industrial nations formed at later dates in other countries and sometimes to a lesser extent. Japan experienced this process the late 1800s with the Meiji reforms and achieved a similarly high level of industrial nation-state formation.⁷² China maintained an imperial political system inherited from previous centuries until its overthrow in 1912. Even then, China did not experience political mobilization and modernization until

⁷⁰ Roland Axtmann, "The State of the State: The Model of the Modern State and Its Contemporary Transformation," *International Political Science Review*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2004.

⁷¹ Andreas Wimmer and Brian Min, "From Empire to Nation-State: Explaining Wars in the Modern World, 1816–2001," *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 71, No. 6, December 1, 2006.

⁷² Marion J. Levy, Jr., "Contrasting Factors in the Modernization of China and Japan," *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1954.

well after the CCP gained control of the country in 1949. Even through the 1980s, China experienced a lower level of industrialization than its Western counterparts. We have chosen to date an analogous industrial nation-state period from 1912, with the rise of the country's republic and the end of the Qing dynastic political system, but we acknowledge up front that the designation is imperfect, given the disaggregated sequences of state formation; political mobilization; and, at a much later date, economic industrialization. Much of South Asia, Southeast Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East experienced significant political consolidation, nation-state formation, and economic modernization from the 1920s through the 1970s at differing rates as well.⁷³

After World War II, the industrial state became a universal norm, and many international institutions, such as the United Nations (UN), continue to be based on them. Although the pace of modernization proved uneven around the world, the nation-state became paradigmatic, and its form continues to dominate thinking about international politics, especially in the wealthiest and most powerful examples, such as the United States and China.

Neomedieval Era: 2000–Present

When the era of the modern industrial state transitioned into a neomedieval era is subject to debate, and the distinction is admittedly subjective. The seeds of this period were planted in the 1970s, when Western nations began to experience economic deindustrialization and the demobilization of their politics and societies from the world wars.⁷⁴ By the 1990s, scholars in multiple specialties began reporting developments and trends that defied expectations of continued progress and instead resembled regressions toward earlier modes of development. Key events that fed this perception included the Bosnia War in the 1990s and onset of other “new wars”; the rise of novel forms of nonstate terror following Al Qaeda’s attacks of September 11, 2001;

⁷³ Lorenzo Kamel, ed., *The Frailty of Authority: Borders, Non-State Actors and Power*, IAI Press, 2017.

⁷⁴ Stephen Nickell, Stephen Redding, and Joanna Swaffield, “The Uneven Pace of Deindustrialization in the OECD,” *The World Economy*, Vol. 31, No. 9, September 2008.

and the soaring rates of inequality and social unrest following the global financial crisis of the late 2000s.⁷⁵ We have chosen the year 2000 as a convenient marker for the start of this period because this corresponds with the general findings of these scholars regarding the trends.

Organization of This Report

In Chapter 2, we review the trends in politics and government, comparing developments in the preindustrial and modern periods with the neomedieval era. We follow a similar methodology in the subsequent four chapters. In Chapter 3, we review the relevant developments related to societies and cultures. In Chapter 4, we review related trends in economics. In Chapter 5, we consider relevant trends in security issues, focusing on the changing nature of threat and the organization of security forces. In Chapter 6, we analyze trends relevant to military affairs. We conclude in Chapter 7 with observations about the implication for the future of U.S.-China rivalry.

⁷⁵ Kaldor, 2012.

Politics and Government: Weakening States

In this chapter, we review developments across eras related to politics and government. While we characterize *weakening states* as the most prominent overarching feature of politics and government in the neomedieval era, we will explore four interrelated aspects in more detail: (1) political authority, (2) state type, (3) popular role in politics, and (4) the international order. We will characterize these aspects in the preindustrial Europe, preindustrial China, industrial nation-state, and neomedieval eras. We will also show how trends in the neomedieval era signal a resurgence of many preindustrial features, such as decaying state capacity and legitimacy, increasingly porous borders, declines in mass politics, and a more complex international system (Table 2.1). We will also explore what these developments might mean for the U.S.-China rivalry.

Political Authority: The Erosion of National Sovereignty

Political authority refers to the jurisdiction and legitimate power of the governing leadership. This includes both the geographic extent of a ruler's authority and the relative comprehensiveness or exclusivity of power the ruler exercises over a domain. Authority may be unitary or divided, depending on the polity in question.

Preindustrial societies held a contested and layered view of political authority. In preindustrial Europe and China, as well as much of antiquity, rulers mediated their authority through powerful nobles and elites

TABLE 2.1
Summary of Political and Government Aspects Between Eras

Aspect	Preindustrial Europe	Preindustrial China	Industrial Nation-State	Neomedieval
Political authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak centralized states • Multiple levels of authority • Porous borders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weak centralized • Multilevel, fragmented authority • Porous borders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unitary, centralized authority • Exclusive control of territorial boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weakening centralized states coexist with multiple levels of authority • Increasingly porous borders
State type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse forms (kingdoms, city-states, principalities, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse forms (empire, tribes, kingdoms) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nation-state is the norm 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nation-states compete with novel nonstate, subnational entities
Role of the populace	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited • Generally not integrated into political system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited • Generally not integrated into political system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive • Integrated into political system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited • Poorly integrated into political system
International order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlapping network of royal, aristocratic relationships • Universal authority of the Catholic Church, especially before the Reformation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlapping network of imperial and aristocratic ties • Chinese emperor asserted universal authority 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nation-state-based organizations and formal state-to-state diplomacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overlapping network of legacy nation-state intergovernmental organizations (IGOs), nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), nonstate hybrid diplomacy, paradiplomacy

who often exercised de facto control over large parts of the polity. Power may have been centralized to some degree, but it was rarely unitary in the modern sense. Subnational elites may have had obligations to their kings, rulers, and emperors, but many also enjoyed considerable autonomy from their overlords. The supreme ruler rarely exercised a complete monopoly on military power even within his domain but rather depended on subnational elites to maintain order, pay taxes, and furnish conscripted labor. In medieval Europe, kings and nobles also contended with the universal claims of the Catholic Church, which asserted authority over Christian realms. Borders in general were neither clearly nor consistently demarcated and were often porous. A medieval ruler did not exercise a monopoly on violence, which sociologist Max Weber regarded as one of the most defining features of a state.¹ The countryside and roads were often infested with bandits and highwaymen. Merchants traveling by sea faced attacks from pirates and raiders.²

Preindustrial China experienced a higher degree of centralization and unified control than its fragmented European counterparts. Authorities regarded China as the center of civilization and would have rejected out of hand the notion of an “equality of states.” The emperor viewed himself as the “supreme authority under heaven” and, accordingly, asserted his dominion over all land that was “under heaven” (天下).³ Imperial China instead adhered to a concept of suzerainty in which the emperor of China held a theoretical control over a loosely joined tributary system, although in practice he seldom exercised much control over neighboring polities. The Chinese conception emphasized cultural over political features of dominance and superiority. Indeed, in many dynasties, the ministry of rituals was responsible for managing diplomatic relations. Within China’s orbit, subordinate tribes and kingdoms ran their day-to-day affairs with little interference from the Chinese government, so long as they paid tribute and adhered to established rituals and codes of conduct. Moreover, the extent to

¹ Max Weber, *Politics as Vocation* (1919), Hackett Publishing, 2004.

² William Bain, ed., *Medieval Foundations of International Relations*, Routledge Publishing, 2017.

³ Suzanne Ogden, “Sovereignty and International Law: The Perspective of the People’s Republic of China,” *Journal of International Law and Politics*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1974.

which other states accepted the Chinese emperor's control varied according to time and place.⁴

In industrial nation-states, political authority was closely associated with the concept of sovereignty. *Sovereignty*, a concept that gained currency in the 1600s, refers to the supreme power of a state to govern itself free from interference from other states. The concept underwent many refinements over time, but by the 1800s, its connotations included the notion of equality among states.⁵ Industrial nation-states also understood sovereignty to entail a unitary government with supreme authority over the breadth of a country's territory and a monopoly on violence within its borders.⁶ China's government has highly esteemed sovereignty in these terms. When the CCP established the People's Republic of China (PRC), officials proposed "five principles of peaceful coexistence," which enshrined respect for national sovereignty as a key element of the country's foreign policy.⁷

To be clear, not all states in the 20th century exercised sovereignty in these terms. Weak states, found among the poorest and most politically troubled regions of the world, often lacked centralized and unitary governments. Their control over borders may have been partial, and they often failed to secure a monopoly on violence within their borders.⁸ The republic that China established in 1912 aspired to a modern form of government but failed to exercise sovereignty as understood by Western nation-states. Through its short, troubled lifespan, the republic experienced acute inter-

⁴ Jo-Anne Pemberton, *Sovereignty: Interpretations*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2008, pp. 96–99.

⁵ Ronald A. Brand, "Sovereignty: The State, the Individual and the International Legal System in the Twenty First Century," *Hastings International and Comparative Law Review*, No. 25, 2002.

⁶ Philip Bobbitt, *The Shield of Achilles: War, Peace, and the Course of History*, Knopf Publishing, 2002.

⁷ Xi Jinping, "Carry Forward the Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence to Build a Better World Through Win-Win Cooperation," Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, July 1, 2014.

⁸ Rami G. Khouri, "Early Warning Signs in the Arab World That We Ignored—And Still Ignore," in Kamel, 2017, p. 19.

necine violence, and its inability to fend off Western and Japanese imperial predations contributed to its fall.⁹

In the post-2000 neomedieval era, political authority has become contested and layered once again. The globalization of trade and production is widely understood to have posed severe challenges to the exercise of state authority. The rapid movement of goods, capital, services, individuals, and information across borders has hampered a state's ability to regulate all the activity within its territory—a fundamental responsibility of states.¹⁰ Moreover, globalization has occurred at a time of decelerating growth in many advanced economies, resulting in resource constraints that impair the state's ability to secure its borders and control transnational dangers.¹¹

Supranational, subnational, and translocal authorities have also expanded their authority into areas once monopolized by central governments.¹² Supranational and multilateral institutions, such as the European Union, World Trade Organization, and International Monetary Fund, have encroached on the sovereignty of member states through their trade rules, influence over the fiscal policy of indebted states, and regulatory powers. Subnational actors, such as provincial leaders in European countries and China and state governments in the United States, have defied their central governments in ways that would have shocked their counterparts in the 1950s and 1960s. Subnational leaders in China have, for example, exercised routine noncompliance and defied central directives on regulatory affairs, earning fervent denunciations and periodic crackdowns, neither of which appears to have significantly changed the situation.¹³ In the United States, state governors have, in the highly polarized political environment of the 2010s and 2020s, threatened noncompliance with federal laws and regula-

⁹ Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, W. W. Norton, 2013.

¹⁰ Julian G. Ku and John Yoo, "Globalization and Sovereignty," Vol. 31, *Berkeley Journal of International Law*, 2013.

¹¹ Strobe Talbott, "Globalization and Diplomacy: A Practitioner's Perspective," *Foreign Policy*, 1997.

¹² Axtmann, 2004.

¹³ Tucker Van Aken and Orion A. Lewis, "The Political Economy of Noncompliance in China: The Case of Industrial Energy Policy," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 24, No. 95, 2015.

tions that they oppose, such as those related to elections, COVID-19 public health measures, health care, and other issues. One 2020 study found that the U.S. federal government has increased its reliance on threats and punishments to suppress state and local actions that oppose its preferences.¹⁴ Regional governments have, in some cases, demanded greater autonomy and seen increasing conflict in their relationships with central governments as a result. Examples include the relationship between Quebec and the Canadian government, Scotland and the United Kingdom's government, the Basque region and the Spanish government, and Hong Kong and the Chinese government.

Scholars have also noted the increasing prevalence of *paradiplomacy*, in which subnational governments carry out transactions once monopolized by central governments. For example, Chinese provincial governments spearheaded many of the construction projects that Beijing eventually designated as Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects.¹⁵ Around the world, mayors in cities have played a notable role in negotiations related to climate change.¹⁶ While it was a marginal phenomenon in the 1970s, experts describe the practice of paradiplomacy in all its forms as “large, intensive, extensive, and permanent,” especially since the 2008 global financial crisis.¹⁷

Central governments have also seen their authority decay across the breadth of national territory, especially in the developing world. The spread of ungoverned or poorly governed regions, in which the state's laws and authority appear absent or irrelevant to inhabitants, exemplifies these trends. In Somalia, for example, the central government does not exercise authority outside the capital. The rest of the country is governed by a patch-

¹⁴ Greg Goelzhauser and David M. Konisky, “The State of American Federalism 2019–2020: Polarized and Punitive Intergovernmental Relations,” *Publius*, Vol. 50, No. 3, Summer 2020.

¹⁵ Zenel Garcia and Phillip Guerrero, “Provincial Players in China's Belt and Road Initiative,” *Asia & the Pacific Policy Society Policy Forum*, May 9, 2022.

¹⁶ Matthew Mingus, “Transnationalism and Subnational Paradiplomacy: Are Governance Networks Perforating Sovereignty?” *International Journal of Public Administration*, Vol. 29, No. 8, 2006.

¹⁷ Stephane Paquin, “Paradiplomacy,” in Theodore Balzac, Frederic Charillon, and Frederic Ramel, eds., *Global Diplomacy: An Introduction to Theory and Practice*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

work of tribal, religious, and other actors.¹⁸ In some cases, violent armed groups exercise de facto control over parts of the territory, as in Colombia and Mexico, where the central government must negotiate access through drug cartels. In other cases, nonstate actors, such as urban gangs, and religious or other ethnic social organizations, such as the Islamic State and the Palestinian Authority, have taken on government-like responsibilities in the absence of effective state rule.¹⁹

Chinese sources regard the erosion of political authority with alarm. To assert its authority in Xinjiang, Tibet, and Hong Kong, Beijing has carried out brutal and ruthless repression. Taiwan's assertion of autonomy poses an especially vexing problem.²⁰ Despite a stated commitment to achieve national unification, Chinese commentators acknowledge that prospects of the island's voluntary subordination appear more remote than ever as the island bolsters its engagement with the United States, Japan, and many other countries.²¹ Unnerved by the trends, Xi Jinping has stressed that China "will never allow any forces to violate or separate its sacred territory," yet he has proven no more successful than his predecessors in advancing peaceful unification.²² Exasperated by the persistent defiance in these regions, Chinese officials and commentators routinely blame the U.S. government for internal interference.²³

U.S. and other Western officials have levied similar accusations of internal interference against China. Western countries have criticized Chinese efforts to cultivate influence and control discourse through propaganda

¹⁸ Ken Menkhaus, "Governance Without Government in Somalia: Spoilers, State Building, and the Politics of Coping," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 3, 2006/2007.

¹⁹ Anne E. Clunan and Harold A. Trinkunas, *Ungoverned Spaces*, Stanford University Press, 2010.

²⁰ Kenneth Roth, "China Events of 2020," Human Rights Watch, 2020.

²¹ "Peaceful Unification with Taiwan Unlikely Without Pressure: Experts," *Global Times*, December 5, 2020.

²² "China Never Allows Sovereignty, Security and Development Interests to Be Harmed: Xi," Xinhua, October 23, 2020.

²³ Wang Jisi [王缉思], "Anti-China Conspiracy: The New 'Washington Consensus' in Beijing's Eyes" [反华阴谋: 北京眼中的“新华盛顿共识”], China-US Focus website, June 23, 2021.

and Confucius Institutes, calling these *influence operations*. Washington has also denounced PRC officials' political harassment of diaspora citizens in the United States.²⁴

Borders have become more porous as well, especially for rich countries that have become the prime destination for desperate migrants. Instability generated by drought and war in the Middle East in 2015 spurred the largest migration of refugees in a single year since World War II. Migrants sought refuge in countries across the continent, spurring acute political turmoil.²⁵ Great Britain exited the European Union in part because of frustration over issues related to border control.²⁶ Migration has also become an acute political issue in the United States as the volume of refugees has surged in recent years, reflecting the deterioration of conditions in some Latin American countries.²⁷

The interactions of these various subnational and nonstate actors has constrained and eroded the unitary and centralized control that national governments once exercised. In the neomedieval era, political authority has changed as the unitary, centralized state has faced a growing array of challenges from multiple levels of authority, increasingly porous borders, and a declining ability to control violence within its borders. As states weaken, they have manifested symptoms that evoke patterns seen in preindustrial societies.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

These trends carry important implications for great-power competition. First, the weakening of state capacity facilitates interference in their domestic affairs from rival states. Subnational groups are capable of acting with more

²⁴ "U.S. Counterintelligence Warns of China Stepping Up Influence Operations," Reuters, July 6, 2022.

²⁵ William Spindler, "2015: That Year of Europe's Refugee Crisis," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, December 8, 2015.

²⁶ Mark Easton, "The UK Migrant Dilemma—It's All About Brexit," BBC, November 22, 2021.

²⁷ "U.S. Arrests 210,000 Migrants at Mexican Border in March, Rivaling Record Highs," Reuters, April 18, 2022.

autonomy because their loyalty to the central government has declined. On the other hand, central governments have sufficient resources to coordinate with disaffected populations in other countries. Already, both Washington and Beijing have traded accusations over mutual interference while carrying out actions to coordinate with sympathetic individuals and groups in the other country. This has, in turn, fueled resentment because the interference is viewed as especially threatening, given the state's weakened legitimacy. Efforts to restrict a rival power's access to a population are likely to further inflame tensions, as can be seen in Beijing's response to U.S. efforts to limit the ability of Chinese media and Confucius Institutes to carry out political activities in support of the CCP and in the U.S. response to Chinese efforts to suppress dissidents and minorities while intimidating Taiwan.²⁸

Second, rising intrastate violence, weakening government legitimacy, and the porosity of borders in partner states raise opportunities for indirect confrontation. Partners could appeal to both Washington and Beijing for help to cope with domestic troubles or encroachments by their own rivals. Eager to bolster their own legitimacy both domestically and with potential partners, the United States and China could find growing incentives to aid sympathetic troubled governments or subnational actors. The result may be a deepening competition for influence and potential for indirect conflict around the world. A precedent may be seen in Syria or Ukraine, for example, both of which have led to indirect conflict between the United States and Russia.²⁹ Another example of this might be how China and the United States opposed one another over how to handle the nuclear ambitions of Iran and North Korea.³⁰

The decay in political authority matters not only for peacetime competition but also in the event of a U.S.-China war. There are two important implications. First, vulnerability to external interference raises the possibil-

²⁸ Thomas Lun and Hannah Fischer, "Confucius Institutes in the United States: Selected Issues," Congressional Research Service, IF11180, May 20, 2022.

²⁹ Anna Mulrine Grobe, "Proxy War or Not, U.S. and NATO Allies Get Creative in Aid for Ukraine" *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2022.

³⁰ Michael Crowley, "U.S. Penalizes Chinese Companies for Aiding Iran's Oil Exports," *New York Times*, September 29, 2022; Michael Nichols, "U.S. Accuses China, Russia of Enabling North Korea's Kim Jong Un," Reuters, October 5, 2022.

ity that conflict could extend to the home fronts. In the event of conflict, the U.S. government may need to step up coordination of military and law enforcement assets to monitor and counter potential Chinese threats in the information, cyber, and other domains. Second, stressed partner countries could become key battlegrounds for an indirect conflict. Problems associated with weakening political authority are likely to be more acute in developing countries, some of which might hold important resources or sit astride strategic locations. The ability of the U.S. and Chinese governments to coordinate with different subnational or nonstate actors in the same country raises the possibility that they could wage a proxy war.

State Type: Transformation of the Nation-State

History illustrates the enormous variety of forms in which political leaders may govern communities. Many factors influence the form a state takes, including geography, economics, society, and the state of technology. The form the state takes can, in turn, shape the options rulers have for managing economic growth, ensuring social stability, and waging war. Charles Tilly showed, for example, that the demand for resources to fund wars provided a powerful impetus for the centralization and modernization of European states. A more efficient, modern state bureaucracy, in turn, enabled rulers to field larger armies, fight more-destructive wars, and furnish more-generous benefits to citizens.³¹

The preindustrial world tended to have a diverse set of political arrangements. In medieval Europe, kingdoms coexisted with city-states, principalities, dukedoms, and territories held by the Catholic Church. Rulers often oversaw multiethnic and diverse religious communities in which individuals held allegiances to the authorities, including the church, king, village elder, and local lord. Rulers felt little obligation toward the well-being of the general populace beyond controlling threats that could interfere with the ability to extract taxes. When state centralization accelerated in the 1500s,

³¹ Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States AD 990–1990*, Basil Blackwell, 1990.

war often broke out between contending government types until a norm of political legitimacy prevailed.³²

Preindustrial China conceived of political communities in terms of civilization and regarded non-Chinese peoples as uncivilized.³³ The Chinese empire featured a central bureaucracy but lacked many of the other features associated with modern states, such as deep bureaucratic penetration of society, nationalist sentiment, and the ability to mobilize society. Moreover, preindustrial China coexisted with a variety of tribes, minor kingdoms, and other polities. Reflecting the primacy of culture in the Chinese conception, the emperor and local officials governed in a ritualized manner, emphasizing ceremonies and reciprocating actions. As in Europe, the people held loyalties to numerous authorities, including the emperor, village elders, religious leaders, and local officials.

In the modern industrial period, the paradigmatic political entity was the nation-state, which typically featured a populace that shared a common culture, values, and sense of national purpose. The populace's social solidarity included a sense of obligation to the state. This sentiment manifested in the form of a widely shared and intensely felt patriotic or nationalist ideology. The government of the nation-state often enjoyed a high degree of legitimacy, partly because it provided avenues for political participation and furnished generous social welfare goods or economic opportunities. In exchange, the state gained the right to thoroughly levy taxes and labor. Although the exact political arrangements varied between liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes, countries around the world in the 19th and, especially, the 20th centuries generally sought to bolster ties between the state and people through industrial mobilization, conscription, and the promotion of nationalist sentiment.³⁴

³² Tilly, 1990.

³³ Guang Xia, "China as a 'Civilizational-State': A Historical and Comparative Interpretation," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Vol. 140, August 2014.

³⁴ Bobbitt, 2002.

In the neomedieval era, the nation-state has decayed considerably, although experts debate what might come next.³⁵ Many have noted that the nation-state appears to be in crisis in part because of declining governance capacity and competition from nonstate groups. Years of slow and imbalanced growth have left nation-states with the resources to ensure a high standard of living only for a privileged minority.³⁶ As the nation-state's ability to furnish goods and opportunity declines, citizens have become more critical of its shortcomings.³⁷ In the developing world, the central government's authority may be so diminished by its inability to control such dangers that it exerts little power outside the capital.³⁸ Ethnic, religious, and other minority groups provide goods and benefits to their respective populations, which can help offset the declining capacity of the central government. However, the same trends also bolster loyalties to the subnational community at the expense of the nation-state.³⁹

China remains far more ethnically homogeneous, with more than 90 percent of the population of a Han background. However, the weakening ties between the people and the state have not escaped China. Declining loyalty to the state partly explains the growing salience of religious and ethnic identity in such regions as Xinjiang and Tibet, as well as the refusal of the populace of Hong Kong to submit willingly to Beijing's rule. The brutal and violent measures Beijing has undertaken to eliminate competing identi-

³⁵ Rana Dasgupta, "The Demise of the Nation-State," *The Guardian*, April 5, 2018; Michael Mann, "Has Globalization Ended the Rise and Rise of the Nation State?" *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1997.

³⁶ Juliana Horowitz, Ruth Igielnik, and Rakesh Kochhar, "Trends in Income and Wealth Inequality," Pew Research Center, January 9, 2020.

³⁷ Phil Williams, *From the New Middle Ages to a New Dark Age: The Decline of the State*, Strategic Studies Institute, 2008.

³⁸ Susan E. Rice and Stewart Patrick, *Index of State Weakness in the Developing World*, Brookings Institution, 2008.

³⁹ Shawn T. Flanigan, "Motivations and Implications of Community Service Provision by La Familia Michoacana/Knights Templar and Other Mexican Drug Cartels," *Journal of Strategic Security*, Vol. 7, No. 3, Fall 2014.

ties underscore the fragility of popular support.⁴⁰ Similarly, authorities have expressed dismay at the population's apathy and lack of zeal for the CCP's ideology. Officials have, accordingly, cracked down on elements of popular culture that command more enthusiasm.⁴¹ The CCP's intensification of ideological indoctrination aims to counter the fragmenting effects of consumer culture and build a more cohesive national political identity. Yet authorities tacitly concede that these efforts are unlikely to succeed on their own and that material incentives are required to extract at least the semblance of compliance.⁴²

China, which never attained the high level of consolidated rule and expansive social welfare services enjoyed by wealthy Western industrial powers, is experiencing attenuation in its governance capacity as well. This directly implicates its ability to command the loyalty and support of the people. Perhaps the clearest sign of the party's recognition of this problem lies in Xi Jinping's articulation of the "new era," which defines the central problem confronting the party in terms of a "contradiction" between the expectations of the people for a better life and the country's "unbalanced and inadequate development."⁴³ Notably, authorities have not promised to generate the resources to overcome the gap. They have instead opted to temper the public's expectations with repression and extensive indoctrination. Authorities also recognize that the party's inability to stamp out official corruption and reduce inequality have further sapped public support. Xi called corruption the "greatest threat" to CCP rule and acknowledged "large disparities" in income distribution as among the "many areas" where the government has "fallen short."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Austin Ramzy, "China's Oppression of Muslims in Xinjiang, Explained," *New York Times*, January 20, 2021.

⁴¹ "China Clamps Down on Pop Culture to 'Control' Youth," Agence France Presse, September 29, 2021.

⁴² Minxin Pei, "Ideological Indoctrination Under Xi Jinping," *China Leadership Monitor*, December 1, 2019.

⁴³ Xi Jinping, 2022; Xi Jinping, "Full Text of Xi Jinping's Report at the 19th Party Congress, Xinhua, November 3, 2017.

⁴⁴ Xi Jinping, 2017.

In sum, the norm of the nation-state that dominated much of modern history, especially in Europe, the Americas, and east Asia, is breaking down. Despite unsettling trends, there is little evidence that the most-advanced industrial states are in imminent danger of disintegration. However, they do appear to be evolving or searching for new forms of legitimacy as the old basis has proven unsustainable. Some scholars have suggested that nation-states might enter a period of contention between competing possible successors. Philip Bobbitt has proposed that the modern state is already abandoning the old premise of the nation-state in favor of a new “market state” bargain that is more focused on providing individual opportunity as a basis of legitimacy but that China, Russia, and others may be developing an alternative.⁴⁵ In other parts of the world, however, the nation-state has deteriorated even more precipitously. In the more-fragile and -unstable countries, the state may exist only on paper. A weak central government, such as those in Syria and the Democratic Republic of Congo, means that real control is exercised by a complex array of national, subnational, and nonstate actors, such as religious groups, insurgencies, and tribal elders. The result is a patchwork of layered and competing authorities over which the central government may exercise little to no control. This situation echoes the complex and diverse forms of governance and overlapping claims that typified the medieval landscape.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The nation-state’s decline carries several key implications for the U.S.-China rivalry. The declining political legitimacy of the nation-state is likely to result in a more volatile and unpredictable situation. Both countries will manifest state weakness in different ways. In the United States, competition among domestic political leaders has already resulted in acute polarization, gridlock, and erratic decisionmaking. In China, pervasive corruption and slowing growth prospects have undermined the authority of the government. Chinese leaders have intensified repression to control discontent and bolster the regime’s flagging legitimacy. The state’s political weakness could invite interference from the rival state, which might, in turn, further aggra-

⁴⁵ Bobbitt, 2002, p. 2.

vate tensions. Evidence that China might be interfering in U.S. domestic politics through social media is one illustration.⁴⁶ Political crises stemming from restive regions and discontented populations could become more common. The heightened tensions stemming from Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taiwan might be an example of such a dynamic.⁴⁷

Plans and strategies that assume nation-states will behave as they did last century may need to be rethought. It is possible, for example, that ideological competition will take a dramatically different form from the mighty contests involving rival global ideologies that pervaded the 20th century. Instead, the war for ideas could consist of splintered and highly tailored messages that address specific populations around the world and pay less regard to national constituencies. The main divide may consist of advocates for the power of social and political stability, as defined by a country's majority population and the rights of minority groups. The United States and China could find themselves advocating for one or the other, depending on the situation. For example, the United States has advocated for the rights of minorities in Xinjiang and Tibet on the one hand, while denouncing Beijing's advocacy of the rights of ethnic Chinese citizens in other countries as interference.⁴⁸ Neither will both governments consistently adhere to one view or the other. Advocates of either position or other ideologies could find supporters within each country. Ideological competition may thus require less of the Cold War strategy of mobilizing nation-states and their publics than an artful construction of focused and changeable coalitions involving disparate subnational and transnational communities across borders and around the world.

International cooperation with states and subnational groups that have common political values could become an important part of the competition. Given the weakening domestic foundations for a state's legitimacy,

⁴⁶ Ken Dilanian, "Facebook Says It Took Down China-Based Accounts That Tried to Interfere in the U.S. Midterms," NBC News, September 27, 2022.

⁴⁷ Lily Kuo, Erin Cunningham, Yasmeen Abutaleb, Rachel Pannett, and Annabelle Timsit, "Nancy Pelosi Departs Taiwan, Ending Contentious Visit That Angered China," *Washington Post*, August 3, 2022.

⁴⁸ Fergus Hanson, Emilia Currey, and Tracy Beattie, "The Chinese Communist Party's Coercive Diplomacy," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, August 2020.

external sources of validation could become more salient. Failure of or harm to partners could affect a state's own legitimacy as well, providing a strong incentive for cooperation with entities that share common values. Examples might be seen in the strengthening of ties between the United States and other liberal democracies, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, as well as Taiwan. The bolstering of ties between China, Russia, and Iran may also reflect such a logic. This trend is likely to both raise both the incentive to coordinate with state and nonstate partners and aggravate perceptions of threat by the rival country.

The breakdown of nation-states around the world also suggests that opportunities for recruiting capital, labor, and technology are increasing. Responding to the same trends in their own countries, individuals may prioritize opportunities for self-advancement over patriotic obligation, opening opportunities for international recruitment but also potentially expanding the risks of espionage and foreign influence operations as adversaries exploit the loosened talent market for their own ends.

The changing basis of legitimacy would carry important implications in the event of a U.S.-China war. On the one hand, the decay of the nation-state is likely to render strategies of mass mobilization unviable, a point underscored by the political turmoil engendered by Russia's efforts to partially mobilize in September 2022.⁴⁹ Instead, governments might need to replicate the strategies of preindustrial empires and kingdoms, which relied on modest numbers of professional forces, augmented by mercenaries, limited troop levies, and contributions of troops and resources from a diverse array of state and nonstate partners. Such an eclectic mode of fighting permitted rulers to wage war without demanding much of their populations.

On the other hand, the possibility that disputes over state legitimacy will escalate into major conflict cannot be discounted either. Already, both China and the United States regard each other as far more threatening to their domestic politics than was the case a mere ten or 20 years ago. Chinese authorities have denounced the United States for purportedly fomenting a "color revolution," while the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Christopher Wray, has accused China of seeking to "undermine our

⁴⁹ Kareem Fahim, Zeynep Karatas, and Robyn Dixon, "The Russian Men Fleeing Mobilization and Leaving Everything Behind," *Washington Post*, September 28, 2022.

democratic process.”⁵⁰ As the fabric of the nation-state continues to unravel, sensitivity over issues of domestic legitimacy will likely intensify. Tensions over such issues are aggravated by the ease with which national governments can communicate and coordinate with subnational governments and aggrieved individuals, a point underscored by the bitterly acrimonious feuding between Beijing and Washington over warming U.S. ties with Taiwan and China’s cultivation of support with American business, academic, and political elites.

At the same time, the deepening of tensions is tempered by a lack of compelling options to resolve the differences. Total war is too risky, given the states’ vulnerabilities and inability to carry out national mobilization as well as the persistent dangers of nuclear weapons. Given these realities, the most appealing response might simply be to retaliate. Weakening states have many options for imposing burdens on their rivals. For example, the governments could cooperate with partner states and subnational individuals and groups that share antipathy toward the rival or could foment discontent in the rival state. The result could be a mutually reinforcing cycle of recrimination and resentment as the two governments build coalitions and carry out acts that interfere in the domestic affairs of the rival state but that the states are too weak to prevent or prevail against.

Popular Role: The End of Mass Politics

The role of the populace can affect the stability and strength of a state’s politics. Integrating the populace into the state’s political decisionmaking could incentivize people to support the state and risk their lives in service of the state’s causes. A high level of support can facilitate the state’s mobilization of the nation’s resources for war, while a low level of support might impede such efforts or render them infeasible. Liberal democracies have shown an impressive ability to mobilize for major wars, for example, in part because

⁵⁰ “National Security Officer of Central Government Says U.S. Plotting to Wage ‘Color Revolution’ in Hong Kong,” *Xinhua*, September 25, 2021; FBI, “China’s Quest for Economic, Political Domination Threatens America’s Security,” press release, February 1, 2022.

of the strong support citizens have shown for governments that they participate in.⁵¹

For much of human history, societies regarded politics as the affair of elites. Privileged religious, economic, and military elites have often vied for power and determined public affairs. In medieval Europe, commoners had few rights and virtually no role in politics. They expressed their political preferences through appeals to their lords and the occasional peasant rebellion, nearly all of which were promptly crushed.⁵² In China, as well, the emperor regarded political affairs as the domain of the royal family and select local elites, which often featured intrigues and infighting among privileged individuals and their families.⁵³ In times of exceptional turmoil, oppressed Chinese peasants might form rebellions, and obscure commoners might even ascend to the highest level of political power. But these incidents were the exception, not the norm. In neither medieval Europe nor preindustrial China did the respective political systems provide an institutionalized means for common people to participate in politics.

One of the most distinctive features of the modern industrial state has been its reliance on mass politics as a basis of legitimacy. The United States and Europe experienced a significant expansion of democratic institutions in the 1700s and 1800s, with the franchise expanding to most minority groups by the 20th century.⁵⁴ Even nondemocratic states, such as the communist bloc and fascist Germany and Italy, carried out political mobilization through rallies and meetings led by authoritarian political parties. In the 1950s and 1960s, the CCP under Mao Zedong mobilized the people to achieve its goals and cow its political enemies.⁵⁵

⁵¹ Michael E. Brown, ed., *Do Democracies Win Their Wars?* Princeton University Press, 2011.

⁵² Martha Ellis Francois, "Revolts in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe: A Spiral Model," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1974.

⁵³ Yuri Pines, *The Everlasting Empire: The Political Culture of Ancient China and Its Imperial Legacy*, Princeton University Press, 2012.

⁵⁴ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratic Revolution in the Late 20th Century*, University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

⁵⁵ Spence, 2013.

In the post-2000 era, the role of average citizens in politics has diminished. Liberal democracies have generally maintained formal opportunities for popular participation through elections and the preservation of civil liberties, but widening inequality, the entrenchment of elites, and the stagnation of living standards have left large numbers of citizens disillusioned and frustrated at what they perceive to be an unresponsive system. Political scientists have noted declines in trust in institutions in recent years, resulting in generally lower rates of political participation.⁵⁶ Civil rights groups have charted a steady deterioration in the quality of democratic practice and individual liberties across much of the developed world, which has in turn spurred a rise in extremist politics and a decline in confidence in liberal democratic governance.⁵⁷

The decline of mass politics is even starker in authoritarian states. Communist countries, such as China and Vietnam, have abandoned political mobilization in favor of an emphasis on economic self-improvement. Although Chinese authorities in theory espouse the principal of mass politics, they insist on the CCP's absolute control and have, in recent years, tightened control.⁵⁸ Popular frustrations over corruption, official malfeasance, and inadequate government services have persisted. But in response to these demands, a resource-constrained Beijing has increasingly resorted to repression to uphold its rule. In the poorest countries, of course, people have virtually no opportunities to get involved in national politics outside armed rebellions and insurgencies, just like their preindustrial forbears.

In sum, the political mobilization of the populace stood as one of the most distinctive and significant achievements of the modern industrial period. The ability of states to meaningfully involve the people in national politics provided a critical source of legitimacy. In part because of the public's participation in politics, governments could levy taxes and demand levels of sacrifice for national endeavors far beyond what preindustrial soci-

⁵⁶ Phil Parvin, "Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era," *Res Publica*, Vol. 24, 2018; Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone*, Touchstone Books, 2001.

⁵⁷ Foa and Mounk, 2016.

⁵⁸ Qi Biao [齐彪], "A System That Puts the Interests of the People First" [把人民利益摆在至高无上地位的制度], *Xinhua*, May 8, 2020.

eties could hope to achieve. The decline of mass politics raises questions about core issues of political legitimacy in all nation-states and their ability to extract taxes and political support for difficult national endeavors. These trends echo a common situation in preindustrial societies in which the populace was less involved in politics and in which elites dominated public affairs.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The decline of the nation-state carries important implications for the ability of the United States and China to compete with each other. Governments in both countries may need to devise new strategies beyond those of the large-scale mobilizations characteristic of 19th and 20th century struggles. More useful for the current era may be strategies that minimize demands on the public while aggravating discontent in a rival state's population. Information operations could become more effective if they abandon Cold War-era strategies of national appeal in favor of highly targeted, specific messages focused on subnational individuals and groups, especially given the availability of new digital and information technologies that allow more precisely focused messages.

As disillusioned populations disengage from politics, warfare may once again return to the domain of leaders and elites. The public's support may become passive, but that does not make it irrelevant. The public's tenuous support is likely to become a powerful constraint on war-making leaders and elites because of a persistent threat of unrest and mass protest. In a modern twist on peasant rebellions, popular outbursts over poor economic performance, abuse by authorities, or other signs of malfeasance could pressure leaders in the future, as in the preindustrial past, to curtail conflict to reallocate scarce resources to ease domestic unrest and bolster the state's perpetually fragile authority.

In a war, both sides are thus likely to face strong incentives to avoid total war because such a mobilization exceeds weakened nation-states' capacities. Defense planners may instead need to consider options that feature, at most, partial mobilizations and that assume a more tenuous level of public support throughout the duration of a more limited conflict. The goal of limited war in the neomedieval age may shift to the pursuit of concessions on proximate

disputes by targeting the adversary's political legitimacy. Given the extensive domestic vulnerabilities and inability to confidently prevail in total war against a peer, conflict may instead consist of proxy wars abroad and direct actions against the rival's homeland in the cyber, economic, and information domains. Greater effort may be required to ensure a secure domestic home front as part of any military operation. For example, decisionmakers need to prepare policies that assume a tolerable tax burden, stable economic activity, and social order as essential components of any major war plan. Scaling military operations to match available resources and relying on unmanned systems and contractors to wage limited war could also minimize military casualties and help ease the challenge of maintaining a perpetually fragile public support.

International Order: Breakdown of the State-Based System

The *international order* consists of the structured relationships and interactions between governments and other nongovernmental actors. These may consist of bilateral interactions between heads of state or multilateral interactions. The international order may consist of highly institutionalized venues for the management of diplomatic affairs or could consist primarily of informal interactions between leading heads of state.

In the preindustrial era, international relations tended to involve multiple types of political actors with overlapping jurisdictions. Through much of this period, but especially prior to the 1700s, relations between rulers tended to be informal, characterized by interactions between royal families and their associated dukes, princes, and other magnates. The Catholic Church asserted its authority over all of Christendom and supervised its own network of bishops and clergy throughout Europe. Church officials conducted diplomacy with secular rulers and managed their own militaries through the 1500s.⁵⁹ The Holy Roman Empire also asserted its authority over much of Europe and contended with both religious groups and rival

⁵⁹ G. P. Cuttino, *English Medieval Diplomacy*, Indiana University Press, 1985.

secular rulers. Religious and ethnic minorities often appealed to such powerful patrons for protection against their nominal rulers, resulting in wars. For example, such issues contributed to the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), the conclusion of which established the principle of sovereignty as one means of reducing such conflicts.⁶⁰

In China, the emperor exercised a similar informal but highly ritualized interaction with rulers of “barbarian” tribes. In the Ming dynasty, China exercised a loose suzerainty over a diverse set of foreign peoples, including aboriginal tribes in south and southwest China. Foreign rulers were expected to pay homage to the Chinese emperor and accept nominal appointments to the Ming nobility or military establishment. Indeed, diplomacy on behalf of the emperor was carried out by the Ministry of Rites.⁶¹ Chinese culture, most essentially defined by a written language and Confucian values and teachings, provided an international influence across the area. However, it was not as institutionalized as the Catholic Church was.

In the age of the industrial nation-state, the international order reflected the primacy of nation-states. The order consisted of a highly institutionalized set of government-to-government organizations that complemented the bilateral and multilateral diplomatic activities of states. The liberal international order established by the United States enshrined principles of free trade, sovereignty, and political liberties in the practice and principles of key institutions, such as the UN, NATO, and others. Diplomacy generally consisted of formal interactions between states on a nominally equal basis.⁶²

In the neomedieval era, nation-state-based institutions appear to be in decline. International institutions established after World War II, such as the UN, World Trade Organization, and Group of Seven, have incurred sharp criticism for their failure to respond effectively to intractable global problems, such as slow growth, pandemics, and civil wars.⁶³ In recent

⁶⁰ Peter Wilson, *The Thirty Years War: Europe's Tragedy*, Harvard University Press, 2011.

⁶¹ Gazi Islam and Macabe Keliher, “Leading Through Ritual: Ceremony and Emperors in Early Modern China,” *Leadership*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 2018.

⁶² John Baylis, Steve Smithson, and Patricia Owens, *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, Oxford University Press, 2016.

⁶³ Karen DeYoung and Liz Sly, “Our Global Institutions Are Failing in the Face of the Pandemic,” *Washington Post*, April 15, 2020; Giulio M. Gallarotti, “The Limits of Inter-

decades, new forms of transnational activity have appeared, consisting of coordinated actions by corporations; NGOs; and criminal and other unlawful entities, such as drug cartels and terror groups. Subnational governments have also taken the initiative to carry out paradiplomatic activities that mimic or complement diplomacy undertaken by national governments, especially since around 2000.⁶⁴ Such changes in the international order have dismayed government officials and scholars in China. Fu Ying, a former Chinese vice minister of foreign affairs, lamented in 2018 that “global political power is more fragmented than ever before National power is being eroded by the emergence of international organizations and other non-state entities.”⁶⁵ Yuan Peng, a scholar with the China Institutes of International Relations, similarly observed that “globalization has encountered a whirlpool of countercurrents” and “global governance is facing an unprecedented crisis.”⁶⁶

In sum, the international order is moving from a nation-state–dominated arrangement featuring formal institutions and government-to-government diplomacy to a more complex arrangement in which government-to-government diplomacy coexists alongside informal and novel varieties of international activity and actors. Although the newer organizations are modern, they echo the complex and overlapping authorities and reliance on informal transactions that characterized medieval diplomacy.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

In the postindustrial era, the international order has grown more complex, with an array of supranational institutions, subnational governments, private actors, and other nongovernmental institutions interacting with each other and with national governments. Already, both China and the United

national Organization: Systemic Failure in the Management of International Relations,” *International Organization*, Vol. 45, No. 2, 1991.

⁶⁴ Paquin, 2020.

⁶⁵ Fu Ying, “Discussing Changes in the International Order,” *China-US Focus*, July 31, 2018.

⁶⁶ Yuan Peng [袁鹏], “Coronavirus Pandemic and a Century of Change” [新冠疫情与百年变局], *Aisixiang*, June 17, 2020.

States have recognized the importance of coordinating their competitive policies with key private-sector and subnational actors, including technology companies, NGOs, and IGOs. China has also sought to coopt and influence foreign media, academics, intellectuals, civil society groups, and other actors as part of its quest to extend its influence on global governance. The U.S. government, in turn, has stepped up its engagement with Taiwan, which China regards as a renegade province, as well as global media sources, corporations, and NGOs. The more complex and overlapping set of international engagements has both aggravated and constrained tensions between rival states. On the one hand, the deeper reach of national governments into the rival's domestic situation has fueled resentment and hostility. On the other hand, the fractured and divided nature of these states leaves them considerably weaker and less capable of marshaling resources against the rival. Amid a stalemated situation, frustrated but weakened rivals have had little ability to prevent the intrusive acts of their opponents. Underscoring their weakness, the two rivals have generally responded by retaliating with reciprocal interference that exploits the rival's weakness.

Should U.S.-China tensions escalate to war, the contending governments might need to think through how to coordinate with and counter a broad set of actors. Subnational actors and NGOs could pressure their national governments to collaborate with other states or seek peace. Major multinational corporations could play a role, either accelerating or restraining the impulse to wage war. IGOs based on the premise of equality between nation-states, such as the UN, are less likely to be effective or useful for resolving disputes or marshaling coalitions than smaller groupings of states with similar values and interests.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we reviewed four government- and political-related elements of the contemporary world that have experienced significant signs of neomedievalism. The overarching trend has been one of *weakening states*. A centralized, consolidated, and strong political authority has long been regarded as a cornerstone of modern political life. Yet changes since at least the 1990s have eroded the state's legitimacy and capacity. The state's weak-

ening will add further demands on government spending and open new vulnerabilities. The decline of popular involvement in mass politics suggests that states may need to manage competition and wage conflict in part by minimizing disruptions to daily life that could erode a persistently fragile base of popular support. The breakdown of an international order defined primarily by bilateral and multilateral interactions between states into a more fractured order featuring overlapping interactions between nonstate actors, subnational governments, states, and others raises new possibilities for both coalitions and security threats.

The neomedievalism trends carry important implications for U.S.-China competition and potential conflict (Table 2.2). The effects could, paradoxically, both constrain the ability to compete and aggravate perceptions of threat. The weakening of state linkages with the populace, waning sense of secure borders, and growing power of nonstate actors render industrial modernist strategies of total mobilization infeasible. At most, both the United States and China are likely to be able to muster partial mobilizations and will rely increasingly on professional volunteers, unmanned systems, and contractors. Moreover, the ability of nonstate groups to coordinate with outside governments and for governments to encourage nonstate supporters in other countries raises the prospect of persistent bilateral tensions between the United States and China. This could aggravate a rival power's perception of threat, in part because of sensitivities around a faltering sense of political legitimacy. The same trends affect many allies and partners of both rivals more severely, raising the possibility of proxy conflicts in partner nations.

However, the same forces will constrain escalation. The United States and China are likely to find themselves too weak to wage total war. Instead, they are likely to find more-appealing indirect and lower-cost methods of damaging the political legitimacy of the rival state through operations in the information, cyber, and economic domains. States alarmed at the deterioration of political legitimacy will, in turn, face pressure to commit more resources to battling domestic and transnational threats, which could further constrain options for military action.

TABLE 2.2

Implications of Neomedieval Political and Government Aspects for U.S.-China Rivalry

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Competition	Implications for a U.S.-China Conflict
Political authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authority is contested and multilayered • Borders are semiporous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The state will have to commit more resources to policing borders and ensuring domestic order • Increased opportunities for interference in rival state 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Governments may need to commit more military resources to ensure domestic security and aid stressed allies • New warfighting strategies may center on issues of domestic vulnerability
State type	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Various • The nation-state is changing into new forms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideological competition may become highly targeted to subnational groups • Increased opportunities for recruitment of talent worldwide 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weakened state legitimacy aggravates tensions but constrains the ability to wage war • Issues of political legitimacy could feature more prominently in conflicts • Proxy conflicts in partner states are possible
Popular role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of the populace is limited and poorly integrated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The populace is unlikely to be easily mobilized • Popular disaffection is a vulnerability for all states • Popular support may shift from active to passive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fragile public support is likely to endure throughout a war • Conflict is likely to involve homelands • The cyber and information domains are becoming increasingly salient in warfare
International order	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diverse • The order includes nation-states plus IGOs, corporations, NGOs, and criminal and terror groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • State-based forums are less likely to be useful • The ability of states to interfere with rival populations could aggravate tensions, but transnational companies could have a restraining effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • NGOs and subnational actors could coordinate with a rival or attempt to disrupt the war effort • IGOs that are coalitions of the like-minded are more useful than nation-state-based IGOs

Culture and Society: Fragmenting Societies

In this chapter, we review cultural and societal aspects of the neomedieval world. We characterize the overarching feature to be *fragmenting societies*, which refers to the decline in national spirit and the growing salience of competing identities. We will explore in detail four interrelated aspects: national culture, media and communication, social cohesion, and equity. For each of the aspects, we will contrast changes from the preindustrial Europe, preindustrial China, industrial nation-state, and neomedieval eras. As we will show, neomedieval states are experiencing a segmentation of culture and media, weakening ties between the state and populace, and entrenched inequality (Table 3.1). We will also explore implications of these developments for the U.S.-China rivalry.

National Culture: The Waning Appeal of Patriotism

National culture refers to the relative sense of solidarity and shared purpose among a country's population. This can be seen by how much the elites and the public share a common set of values, norms, and ideals. A *strong* national culture is one in which a mainstream set of values, norms, and ideals predominates over other identities. A strong national culture is compatible with multiple subnational communities and identities but does require a populace that prioritizes the national or patriotic culture above other loyalties and identities. A population with a strong national culture is more likely to provide sustained, committed support to a national cause. By contrast, a society with communities divided into competing and often

TABLE 3.1
Summary of Cultural and Societal Aspects Between Eras

Aspect	Preindustrial Europe	Preindustrial China	Industrial Nation-State	Neomedieval
National culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared elite culture • Cultural fragmentation along social, regional, religious, and cultural lines among the populace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared elite culture • Cultural fragmentation along social and regional lines among the populace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared “national” culture among elites and the people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared elite culture • Cultural fragmentation along class, religious, and ethnic and other identities lines among the populace
Mass communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transregional for literate elites (church) • Limited for populace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transregional for literate elites • Limited for populace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively concentrated within nation-state • Largely coextensive with national boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Globally available • Transregional for literate elites • Segmented among populace
State-society cohesion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong elite-state links • Weak people-state links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong elite-state links • Weak people-state links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong citizen-state links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong elite-state links • Weak people-state links
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High inequality • Entrenched elites • Low social mobility • Mostly rural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High inequality • Semientrenched elites • Some social mobility • Mostly rural 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low inequality • Relatively high social mobility • Balanced rural-urban 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High inequality • Entrenched elites • Low social mobility • Mostly urban

incompatible subgroups and identities may struggle to build a sense of common purpose. Such scholars as Joel Migdal have pointed out how societal fragmentation has often undermined the efforts of developing countries to mobilize national resources in pursuit of ambitious military, economic, and other endeavors. Deep societal fragmentation can also empower local strongmen, who may hold more authority over their respective subgroups than the national government.¹

In preindustrial societies, countries lacked a strong national culture. These polities often featured a diverse mix of subcultures and overlapping loyalties. Cities in medieval Europe had a high degree of coexisting communities with various distinct religious, ethnic, and cultural identities. Cultural fragmentation was often the norm in much of medieval Europe.² People owed loyalty to a wide variety of secular and religious institutions and individuals—including emperors, kings, princes, and nobility; bishops, abbots, and the papacy; guilds and cities; agrarian landlords; and merchants and artisans, to name but the most important ones.³

As an empire, China's preindustrial history featured a more homogeneous ethnicity, with most of the population being of Han background. The Chinese empire was distinguished principally by its distinctive culture, i.e., its unique written language and Confucian ideals. However, this culture was based on literacy and, accordingly, was shared largely by imperial and subnational elites, which constituted a tiny minority of the population. Neither was the classical culture widely shared. In many periods, the government enforced a strict stratification of society.⁴ In this period, China experienced large influxes of migrations following imperial conquests. And despite the homogeneity of elite culture, preindustrial China included considerable diversity in terms of religious identities and distinct regional cultures. Ethnic minority groups thrived in many parts of the empire as well.

¹ Joel Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States*, Princeton University Press, 1989.

² Andrew T. Young, "The Political Economy of Feudalism in Medieval Europe," *Constitutional Political Economy*, Vol. 32, November 2021.

³ Axtmann, 2004.

⁴ Li Yi, *The Structure and Evolution of Chinese Social Stratification*, University Press of America, 2005, pp. 1–55.

Chinese communities lacked a common tongue and featured an enormous variety of often mutually unintelligible regional dialects.⁵ Thus, preindustrial China may have had more of a common culture than was the case in Europe, but there was still considerable variation, and the concept of nationalism did not exist then.⁶

One of the most distinctive features of the industrialized nation-state was its strong national culture. Governments often deliberately encouraged patriotism; national myths; and shared values, norms, and ideals. A strong national culture helped form an *imagined community* in which people felt a sense of solidarity with others of different backgrounds.⁷ A strong national culture and patriotic ideology underpinned the legitimacy of the nation-state, which in turn both facilitated and benefited from the economic and political mobilization of the society.⁸ The industrialized nation-state showed an impressive ability to summon a spirit of self-sacrifice from its population, a tendency shown most clearly in the 20th-century world wars. The dominance of the national culture was not without its downsides, of course. It entailed the repression of all types of minorities. In the United States, the rights of women and minorities were subordinated to those of the majority population until the 20th century.⁹ Similar patterns occurred in Europe, Japan, and elsewhere. Western and Japanese governments also often attempted to spread their language and culture among colonized peoples, often through ruthless methods.¹⁰ Once colonies in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and elsewhere overthrew their overlords, many promoted nationalist and patriotic movements to help build their own national strength. They

⁵ Robert Ramsey, *The Languages of China*, Princeton University Press, 1987.

⁶ Harry Miller, *State Versus Gentry in Early Qing Dynasty China, 1644–1699*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Verso Books, 2016.

⁸ Carol C. Gould, ed., *Cultural Identity and the Nation State*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.

⁹ William Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II*, Oxford University Press, 2006.

¹⁰ Woodruff Smith, *European Imperialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, Burnham Press, 1982.

sometimes experienced their own tragedies when suppressing rival minority groups.¹¹ China under CCP rule experienced a similar deliberate effort to forge a homogeneous national culture, albeit one of a highly politicized type. The CCP's ideological dominance coincided with a brutal suppression of ethnic, religious, and other minorities.¹²

In the neomedieval era, many developed countries have experienced a decline in shared national culture as the state has weakened and as competitor groups have grown more attractive. The rapid transmission of media and culture has resulted in the formation of an international culture consumed primarily by elites around the world. Scholars have noted how elites in many countries often seem to share more in common with elites in other countries than with their own poorer countrymen, at least in terms of preferences for food, education, entertainment, and consumption habits.¹³ Meanwhile, popular culture has splintered, in part because of the proliferation of cultural products.¹⁴ Moreover, nonelite culture remains more strongly tied to traditional and folk religions and culture. Observers have noted an apparent bifurcation between elite and nonelite culture, which evokes preindustrial patterns.¹⁵

Some of the cultural fragmentation owes to variation in demographic preferences. Immigration to offset the effects of aging populations has led Western societies to become more diverse in their racial and ethnic makeup. As pluralism has taken hold, minority communities have demanded recognition and institutionalization of group rights to preserve their cultur-

¹¹ Gifford Prosser, and William Roger Louis, *Decolonization and African Independence: The Transfers of Power, 1960–1980*, Yale University Press, 1988.

¹² Jerome Cohen, “Communist China’s Painful Human Rights Story,” Council for Foreign Relations, September 26, 2019.

¹³ Chrystia Freeland, “The Rise of the New Global Elite,” *The Atlantic*, January/ February 2011; Christopher Lasch, *Revolt of the Elites and the Betrayal of Democracy*, W. W. Norton, 1996.

¹⁴ Don Aucoin, “As Pop Culture Expands, Shared Culture Shrinks,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 1, 2006.

¹⁵ Richard Reeves, “The Dangerous Separation of the American Upper Middle Class,” Brookings Institution, September 3, 2015; Joan C. Williams, “Democratic Elites Don’t Understand the Class Culture Gap,” *New Republic*, April 19, 2022.

ally and morally distinct ways of life.¹⁶ The breakdown of a shared national culture is partly due to the weakening economic and social standing of the dominant ethnic group that benefited most from, and identified most closely with, the nation-state. In the United States, this can be seen in the epidemics of opioid abuse, suicide, and gun violence, sometimes called “deaths of despair,” among demographic groups that experienced a precipitous drop in their economic and social position.¹⁷ The fragmentation of the national culture is also partly due to the rise of a consumption-based economy, which has elevated the pursuit of personal satisfaction and self-realization over older ideals of self-sacrifice for the sake of the nation. Scholars have documented a nearly universal tendency in postindustrial societies to favor of values of self-realization over those of self-sacrifice for collective goals.¹⁸

China’s population may have a large ethnic Han population but still contains considerable diversity in terms of differences between regions, rural and urban populations, and ethnic minorities. These differences have persisted through much of China’s history, but the declining legitimacy of the state has made the differences more salient. Moreover, the postindustrial evolution in personal values has not escaped China. The spread of consumer culture and the CCP’s political atrophy have encouraged younger generations to diversity their outlooks and cultural identities. Several studies have tried to capture the change in values and worldviews. As one example, a 2019 marketing survey posited four broad groupings of worldviews among Chinese youths, characterizing these as the “global-local citizen” (37 percent of the population), “explorers” (26 percent), the “extremely nationalist” (19 percent), and the “global-viewed adaptor” (17 percent).¹⁹ If one accepts such distinctions, about 80 percent of Chinese youths have a worldview that prioritizes cosmopolitan or individual-focused values.

¹⁶ Axtmann, 2004.

¹⁷ David DiSalvo, “Deaths of Despair from Drugs, Alcohol and Suicide Have Reached a New High, Warns New Report,” *Forbes*, June 14, 2019.

¹⁸ Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization: Cultural, Economic, and Political Change in 43 Societies*, Princeton University Press, 1997.

¹⁹ Chunling Yu and Lily Dong, “Segmentation of Young Adult Consumers in China: A Global-Local Cultural Identity Perspective,” *International Journal of Marketing Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2019.

The government's own behavior confirms the reality of a population with diverse outlooks. Authorities have become distressed by the population's disinterest in Marxist orthodoxy and apparent preference for alternative values and ideals. In 2019, for example, authorities published guidelines to promote a "new 'morality'" through flag-raising ceremonies, traditional cultural events, and patriotic teachings.²⁰ Officials have also sought to suppress competing sources of identities and worldviews. As internet use exploded in the 2000s, authorities cracked down on political dissidents, liberal intellectuals, and activists who promoted ideas at odds with CCP orthodoxy.²¹ In 2022, officials shut down thousands of social media accounts for "vulgarity" and "negativity" and banned popular celebrities for "effeminate" personas.²² Even video games have become viewed as a threat to the government's effort to maintain national unity and morality. In 2021, authorities directed extensive restrictions on the amount of time children and teenagers can access video games online.²³

Despite these measures, Chinese commentators and officials note disturbing signs of accelerating moral decay. China's public discourse is rife with criticisms of immorality in areas including the literature and entertainment industries.²⁴ Observers and government officials have decried corruption, scandals involving tainted medicines and food, and a general breakdown in norms of good behavior.²⁵ They also note signs of social demoralization, such as the fact that the number of drug users has contin-

²⁰ Lily Kuo, "'Defend China's Honor': Beijing Releases New Morality Guidelines for Citizens," *The Guardian*, October 29, 2019.

²¹ Stanley Lubman, "Document No. 9: The Party Attacks Western Democratic Ideals," *Wall Street Journal*, August 27, 2013.

²² Emily Feng, "China Erases Thousands of Social Media Accounts for Vulgarity, Negativity and More," NPR, March 3, 2022.

²³ Chris Buckley, "China Tightens Limits for Young Online Gamers and Bans School Night Play," *New York Times*, October 1, 2021.

²⁴ Amber Wang, "Xi Jinping Tells China's Writers and Artists to 'Practise Morality and Decency,'" *South China Morning Post*, December 15, 2021; Beth Timmins, "China's Media Cracks Down on 'Effeminate' Styles," BBC News, September 2, 2021.

²⁵ Yunxiang Yan, "The Politics of Moral Crisis in Contemporary China," *China Journal*, Vol. 85, January 2021.

ued to increase annually since the government began publishing reports on the topic in 1998.²⁶

The breakdown in national unity threatens a core strength of nation-states and suggests that states are evolving in a direction reminiscent of the fragmented polities of preindustrial societies. Without a shared sense of collective identity and common culture that emphasizes ideals of self-sacrifice, the state finds it more difficult to mobilize the people. The ruthless suppression of minority groups in Xinjiang and Tibet illustrates the lengths that China's government is willing to go to retain its political advantages. But the fact that China's government must rely increasingly on repression to sustain national unity and cohesion raises questions about the sustainability of such an approach.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

In the neomedieval era, societies have become more pluralistic and culturally fragmented. Aging Western democracies have grown multicultural in part because of an influx of immigrants to offset population decline. China has maintained a large ethnic Han population, but popular disenchantment with CCP orthodoxy, increasing salience of regional and ethnic identities, entrenchment of inequality, and appeal of consumer values have spurred a pluralization of perspectives and identities. These developments carry important implications for U.S.-China peacetime competition and potential conflict scenarios.

For the peacetime competition, U.S. decisionmakers are likely to face greater difficulties in mobilizing popular support for costly initiatives than in the Cold War. The surprising consensus among political parties in policies regarding China scarcely obscures the fragility of that consensus.²⁷ A revealing sign of the reality of the weak support for competitive policies may be seen in the governments' disinterest in mobilizing popular support for relevant initiatives. Populations in the United States and China view each

²⁶ Sheldon X. Zhang and Ko-Lin Chang, "A People's War: China's Struggle to Contain Its Illicit Drug Problem," Brookings Institution, 2016.

²⁷ Benjy Sarlin and Sahil Kapur, "Why China May Be the Last Bipartisan Issue in Washington," NBC News, March 21, 2021.

other negatively, yet their respective governments have made little effort to demand painful sacrifices to outcompete the rival. Both countries instead rely primarily on volunteers for military service and promote lower taxes. U.S. defense budgets have stagnated; China's military spending increases, which are still hefty compared to those of the United States, have slowed since the 2000s.²⁸ By contrast, during the Cold War, the U.S. government drafted large numbers of service members, funded its efforts in part through elevated tax rates, and sustained major increases in defense spending.²⁹

Societal and cultural fragmentation also opens new risks for militaries but also possibilities for competition. Political extremism has spread in Western societies and may well continue to grow as individuals feel alienated. Militaries reflect the societies they serve and, thus, are likely to experience similar trends. Indeed, the U.S. military has already experienced an increase in political extremism since 2018.³⁰ China's more homogeneous population and repressive politics make this less of a risk for the PLA outside regions with large minority populations, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. However, such trends do require Beijing to rely ever more heavily on repression to maintain the veneer of national unity. The limits of this approach can be seen in the outbreak of antigovernment protests over the government's stifling "zero Covid" policy restrictions in 2022.³¹

The same trends that impede the mobilization of national support open opportunities to elicit support among subnational groups and attract top talent from around the world. The porosity of borders and the increased strength of subnational actors suggests coalition-building with state and nonstate actors could be a main feature of U.S.-China competition. Already, each government has condemned the other for interfering in their internal affairs by soliciting support from subnational actors while carrying out

²⁸ Courtney Kube and Molly Boigon, "Every Branch of the Military Is Struggling to Make Its 2022 Recruiting Goals, Officials Say," NBC News, June 27, 2022; Rebecca Kheel, "Battle Heats Up Over Pentagon Spending Plans," *The Hill*, March 21, 2021.

²⁹ John Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, Penguin Books, 2006.

³⁰ Todd C. Helmus, Hannah Jane Byrne, and King Mallory, *Countering Violent Extremism in the U.S. Military*, RAND Corporation, RR-A1226-1, 2021.

³¹ Keith Bradsher, Chang Che, and Amy Chang Chien, "China Eases 'Zero Covid' Restrictions in Victory for Protestors," *New York Times*, December 7, 2022.

policies to interfere themselves.³² Recruiting the best talent from around the world and building coalitions of sympathetic state and subnational partners may prove more effective than attempting to rebuild a national culture.

In the event of war, the fragmentation of societies could pose an insurmountable political obstacle to total mobilization. A lack of shared purpose or unity could also reduce popular tolerance for casualties in both countries. This is most evident in the diverse United States, but China may face its own challenges in persuading urban educated populations habituated to consumer life to sacrifice their lives for the national good. Chinese media report instances in which young people have refused to serve as conscripted soldiers, despite the possible heavy penalties of noncompliance.³³ Resistance to conscription has grown to such an extent that the State Council issued regulations in 2016 outlining penalties for individuals who refuse to serve.³⁴ Although China's youth have expressed nationalist views, much of the pride appears to center on the country's technological, cultural, and economic achievements.³⁵ Surveys have found little to no support for military aggression or war as a means of achieving the country's national interests.³⁶ Low support for the values the CCP advocates suggests an unsteady base of support, at best, in the event of a war, especially one exposing large numbers of people to harm. The fragmentation of societies may also open vulnerabilities for rival states to foment discontent and political opposition. Conflict could elevate the importance of espionage, influence, and cyber operations in the rival's homeland.

³² "U.S. Counterintelligence Warns of China Stepping Up Influence Operations," 2022; "China Focus: China Refutes Human Rights Accusations by Western Countries," Xinhua, June 23, 2021.

³³ Brad Lendon, "Here's What Happens When You Quit the Chinese Military," CNN, December 16, 2019.

³⁴ "Penalizing Refusal to Do the Military Service," *China Daily*, August 10, 2016.

³⁵ Brian Wong, "The Complex Nationalism of China's Gen-Z," *The Diplomat*, June 19, 2022.

³⁶ Ilaria Mazzacco and Scott Kennedy, "Public Opinion in China: A Liberal Silent Majority," Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 9, 2022.

Mass Communication: A Global but Segmented Media

How a population shares information and ideas can help facilitate a nation's sense of shared identity and culture or aggravate divisions and societal fragmentation. Information control is a widely employed method of political control; thus, the state of media and available means of communication can both facilitate and reflect changes in the politics and society of a state. The available means of communication can also open avenues for conflict and competition. The ability to share information widely and influence disparate audiences arose with the printed word near the close of the medieval era. However, subsequent technological advances have expanded the potential speed, breadth, and types of communication through electronic media, such as radio, television, and digital information systems.

The preindustrial era featured relatively cohesive elite but segmented popular cultures. Literacy rates were far lower, and, generally, only elites could read. In medieval Europe, clergy educated in Latin shared knowledge with an international community of fellow church leaders. Common people, such as peasants and craftsmen, generally lacked formal education and did not participate in the clerical world of knowledge. Moreover, the lack of a common, unified vernacular resulted in a greater diversity of local cultures, many of which might appear impenetrable to visitors from other villages or regions. In the early modern period, printing technologies facilitated the spread of vernacular Bibles and other books. This facilitated the consolidation of Christian identities but also encouraged the creation of communities around distinct ethnic and regional identities.³⁷

Preindustrial China featured a largely illiterate peasantry and a relatively small number of educated elites among the country gentry and imperial government. The Chinese elites shared a classical written language but made up a tiny percentage of the population. The localization of spoken dia-

³⁷ Tom Wheeler, *From Gutenberg to Google*, Brookings Institution, 2019.

lects made regions largely unintelligible to each other.³⁸ Low literacy rates among the peasantry meant village life remained relatively insular.

Media and communication played an important role in the formation of industrial nation-states. Literacy rates and the standardization of language rose in the 1800s, expanding the potential impact of the printed word. An early leader in the formation of nation-states, Napoleon Bonaparte cultivated propaganda through a wide range of media, including theater, newspapers, art, and news bulletins. He also relied on censorship to control opposing views.³⁹ In the United States, newspapers proliferated in the 1800s and early 1900s as a major means of mass communication. The largest and most influential newspapers tended to be associated with national political parties and helped promote awareness of local and national political issues. The rise of radio, television, and film coincided with mass culture in the 20th century. In the 1930s and 1940s, totalitarian states, such as Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, deliberately exploited these trends by fusing art and propaganda to form a unified, political national culture. Through the middle of the 20th century, these new media technologies tended to be dominated by the government in communist and fascist states and a few large companies in democracies.⁴⁰ Government censorship and oversight aimed in part to ensure media technologies promoted messages that strengthened the unity of the nation-state, at the cost of repressing minority and divergent viewpoints.

Since the 2000s, the possibilities for communication have accelerated dramatically. Powerful media companies no longer maintain near monopolies as a group. The development of digital information technologies has permitted information to be shared with unprecedented speed and richness of detail. Images, audio, video, and text can be transmitted nearly instantaneously to virtually anywhere in the world. Global elites may share a common source of information, such as prominent Western news sources.

³⁸ Feng Wang, Yaching Tsai, and William Wang, "Chinese Literacy," in David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance, eds., *The Cambridge Handbook of Literacy*, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

³⁹ Wayne Hanley, *The Genesis of Napoleonic Propaganda 1796–1799*, Columbia University Press, 2005.

⁴⁰ Sian Nicholas and Tom O'Malley, *Newspapers, War and Society in the 20th Century*, Routledge, 2019.

But nonelites have turned to more diverse news sources and communication options that cater to the worldviews and values of their communities. The reach and effectiveness of digital technologies have, in some cases, permitted the formation of diaspora and other virtual communities based on common perspectives.⁴¹ The same communication trends permit individuals and subnational groups to coordinate with external actors, including nonstate actors and rival states.

Chinese authorities have also noted the impact of growing media and communication channels.⁴² Crackdowns and intensified media controls in China reflect long-standing official anxiety over the diverse sources of information and worldviews available via digital technologies.⁴³ Officials have also noted the importance of international media in global competition, highlighting the importance of communication strategies and the power of ideological discourse in particular.⁴⁴ Chinese scholars have called for effective media strategies to bolster the country's ability to shape international discourse.⁴⁵

In sum, the spread and diversification of mass communication technologies have facilitated the spread of sub- and transnational identities and cultures. The segmentation of communication technologies into communities typical of postindustrial societies has encouraged broader trends of elite formation and popular disengagement. Low public trust, skepticism about government authority, and access to competing media sources make the

⁴¹ Wheeler, 2019.

⁴² For an example, see Wang Junsai [王俊赛] and Zhang Julian [张菊兰], "Analyzing Characteristics of Online News Commentary in the New Media Era" [新媒体时代网络新闻评论特征分析], *People's Daily* [人民日报], May 15, 2019. Also see Ding Yunliang [丁云亮], "The Construction of National Discourse Ability in the Age of Social Media" [社交媒体时代国家话语能力的建构逻辑], *Aisixiang*, November 25, 2020.

⁴³ Vincent Ni and Helen Davidson, "Cultural Crackdown: Few Areas Untouched as Xi Reshapes Society," *The Guardian*, September 10, 2021.

⁴⁴ Chen Zhiyong [陈志勇], "Firmly Grasp the Ideological Discourse Power in the All-Media Era" [牢牢掌握全媒体时代意识形态话语权], *Xinhua*, November 27, 2019.

⁴⁵ Xiong Guangqing [熊光清], "The Change and Influence of Discourse Power in the Internet Age—An Analysis Based on the Dual Perspectives of Power and Rights" [网络时代话语权的变革及其影响—基于权力与权利双重视角的分析], *Aisixiang*, September 28, 2021.

public less amenable to demands for national sacrifice. The fragmentation of information sources also leaves people vulnerable to manipulation by foreign actors, who might infiltrate niche media environments. Although mass literacy has no precedent in preindustrial societies, the bifurcation of culture and media into those used by elites and those used by the public echoes the bifurcated culture that commonly existed in societies outside the modern historical period.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

These developments carry important implications for the U.S.-China rivalry. In peacetime competition, a fragmented media environment imposes constraints on the ability of the national government to mobilize popular support. The diversity of available media venues also raises the possibility of diverse narratives and viewpoints that could undermine the efforts of a national government to sustain national unity and purpose. This raises the possibility that either country could attempt to influence or manipulate subnational populations in other countries. Indeed, observers have already noted that the CCP's United Front and related influence operations have already targeted Taiwan and diaspora communities in other countries.⁴⁶ Extremist groups have also sought to exploit the fragmented media environment to recruit or foment unrest. Partly because of fears of Western influence, China has also increased its crackdown on competing media voices and consolidated the CCP's control over the country's information environment. The reach and effectiveness of digital information technologies opens vulnerabilities in domestic politics that other states could exploit. Nonstate actors can reach *out* to external states, and states can reach *into* other countries to build relations with subnational communities and nonstate actors.

In war, the fragmented media environment suggests that information operations could become more targeted and specialized. A potentially persistent level of popular disaffection may offer more opportunities to solicit support among target populations in the rival state, even in war. There may also be opportunities to build support among sympathetic groups in third-

⁴⁶ Timothy R. Heath, "Chinese Influence Operations Target Diaspora Media," *War on the Rocks*, March 1, 2018.

party countries, further increasing the possibility that a U.S.-China conflict could become multilateral. Management of the information domain could become more important in war, since China could step up information operations to sow discontent, foment opposition to a war, and cultivate sympathizers. China might also aim to exploit the information domain for *cognitive domain operations*, which would aim to defeat an adversary by manipulating perceptions, altering paradigms, and undermining the will to fight.⁴⁷

State-Society Ties: The Decline in State-Public Ties

A government's relationship with its people can strongly influence its ability to prosecute a major interstate competition or wage war. Such experts as Charles Tilly have shown how the modern state's willingness to provide material benefits and political rights helped forge strong links between citizens and the modern nation-state. The state, in turn, leveraged its enhanced legitimacy to extract higher taxes, conscript labor for its armed forces, and summon a spirit of national sacrifice in its wars.⁴⁸

In medieval Europe, rulers and elites maintained a close relationship through a dense network of reciprocating relationships. The people had far weaker links to the highest levels of government, partly because their well-being depended on local elites. Commoners received fairly meager benefits from their overlords. Education, health, and sanitation were barely attended to, resulting in low literacy and high mortality rates. The generally poor state of social welfare meant that kings and central leaders had limited direct access to the populace and, instead, relied on nobles and other elites to extract taxes and conscript labor.⁴⁹ The link between the state and the people was further attenuated by the disproportionate importance of cities. The medieval and early modern economy was predominantly agricultural, but the importance of cities as centers of social activity and hubs of commerce began to rise. The rise of banking in Italy, in particular, led to a rapid

⁴⁷ Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, "Cognitive Domain Operations: The PLA's New Holistic Security Concept for Influence Operations," *China Brief*, September 6, 2019.

⁴⁸ Tilly, 1990.

⁴⁹ Tilly, 1990, p. 3.

rise in the wealth and prosperity of urban areas.⁵⁰ Intellectual, financial, and political elites began to congregate in prosperous, sometimes walled, cities, although urban populations remained small relative to rural populations.

In China, the links between the emperor and the populace were also fairly limited. The imperial bureaucracy was thinly distributed and lacked the administrative penetration of modern bureaucracies. Local gentry provided some tax income to the imperial government. However, neither the imperial government nor local officials provided much in the way of social welfare benefits to the populace. Although China, like its European counterparts, was overwhelmingly agricultural, it did have a significant urban population. Throughout the Ming dynasty, China experienced significant urbanization. During the Qing dynasty, however, urbanization declined from 11 percent to 7 percent of the population.⁵¹ Despite that, cities played an important role in the country's economy and cultural and intellectual development. Culture became less dominated by the imperial court and featured more scholarly contributions from local gentry. Through the Ming and Qing dynasties, scholarly production shifted back and forth between the imperial court and town-based local gentry and benefited from interactions between the two.⁵²

Industrial nation-states experienced unusually strong ties between governments and people. This was in part because the nation-state improved standards of living through industrialization and rapid economic growth. Liberal democratic, fascist, and communist nation-states in the 20th century all sought to deliver relatively generous social welfare benefits to the populace.⁵³ Industrialization sped the rise of urban areas, with the popula-

⁵⁰ Michele Frantianni, "Italian City States and Financial Evolution," *European Review of Economic History*, Vol. 10, No. 3, 2006.

⁵¹ Xu Yi, Bas van Leeuwen, and Jan Luiten van Zanden, *Urbanization in China, ca. 1100–1900*, working paper, Utrecht University, Center for Global Economic History, 2015.

⁵² Joseph W. Esherick and Mary B. Rankin, eds., *Chinese Local Elites and Patterns of Dominance*, University of California Press, 2018.

⁵³ Francis G. Castles, "Whatever Happened to the Communist Welfare State?" *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. 19, No. 3, Autumn/Winter 1986; Maria Sophia Quine, *Italy's Social Revolution*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

tions in cities reaching the majority in the 1920s, although some regions, such as the south, achieved urban majorities only in the 1950s.⁵⁴ However, industrializing nation-states continued to have a large agricultural sector, which helped balance the influence of urban areas. In the United States, farms employed at least one-half of the work force until the 1900s. The nation-state also expanded political and civil rights and opened new opportunities for participation in politics to common citizens. Civic rights, opportunities for political expression, employment, and other social welfare benefits became available only with enormous struggle and sacrifice but proved to be critical ingredients in building links between a state and all its citizens. The strong sense of solidarity and cohesion most citizens of a nation-state shared provided a sturdy basis for the state's legitimacy and expanded opportunities for mobilization.⁵⁵

In China, the CCP's activities led to stronger links between the state and the people. Party cadres penetrated and secured control of power networks stretching down to the rural areas in part by organizing violent rebellions against the ruling local gentry.⁵⁶ Although the country experienced some industrialization following the establishment of the PRC in 1949, the country remained overwhelmingly rural well into the 21st century. Moreover, the rapid growth of urban areas in 20th-century China was balanced by the predominance of rural areas. Many CCP leaders came from rural areas; indeed, Mao prioritized the mobilization of peasants after efforts to lead a revolution in the cities failed. Deng Xiaoping's promarket reforms started in the rural areas, which still constituted more than 80 percent of the population in 1979.⁵⁷

Echoing patterns from the preindustrial age, governments since 2000 have experienced a significant attenuation of their relationships with their

⁵⁴ Campbell Gibson and Kay Jung, *Historical Census Statistics on Population Totals by Race, 1790 to 1990, and by Hispanic Origin, 1970 to 1990, for Large Cities and Other Urban Places in the United States*, working paper, U.S. Census Bureau, February 2005.

⁵⁵ Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nations and States: An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism*, Westview Press, 1977.

⁵⁶ Elizabeth Perry, "Moving the Masses: Emotion Work in the Chinese Revolution," *Mobilization*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2002.

⁵⁷ World Bank, "Rural Population (% of Total Population of China)," 2021c.

publics. The weakening of state ties to the public is due, in part, to a diminution of goods and services provided to the common people. In response to years of slowing growth rates, states have rolled back social welfare benefits.⁵⁸ In many countries, governments have tightened eligibility for benefits, reduced payments, or recruited private companies to help manage pensions and other social welfare goods more affordably. In some cases, private companies, religious groups, and other social groups have offset the decline in government spending with benefits for group members.⁵⁹ The decline in the government's ability to furnish benefits has weakened the sense of obligation citizens might feel toward the state. This may be measured in part by surveys that show persistently low levels of trust between citizens and their governments in Western countries, especially since the 2000s, and persistently strong opposition to taxes and conscription.⁶⁰ Private actors and social groups have, in part, stepped up their provision of social welfare benefits to affiliated workers and qualifying members, but this only intensifies the division of loyalties and identity that citizens may feel.

The increasing prominence of urban areas in the global economy has aggravated these trends. City-based elites have deepened their relationships with the state as economic growth has increasingly come to depend on the revenue generated by goods and services furnished in urban areas. Meanwhile, rural areas continue to fall further behind. Moreover, government services to common people in many cities have atrophied, especially in the developing world. One-half of the world's population lives in cities, which account for 80 percent of world gross domestic product (GDP). A large number of megacities (cities with more than 10 million people) have become ungovernable because of the inadequacy of infrastructure to sup-

⁵⁸ Christine Corlet Walker, Angela Druckman, and Tim Jackson, "Welfare Systems Without Economic Growth: A Review of the Challenges and Next Steps for the Field," *Ecological Economics*, Vol. 186, August 2021.

⁵⁹ Demetra Smith Nightingale and Nancy M. Pindus, "Privatization of Public Social Services," Urban Institute, October 15, 1997.

⁶⁰ Pew Research Center, "Public Trust in Government: 1958–2022," webpage, June 6, 2022.

port such populations. In the poorer parts of such cities, the government's rule may be scarcely felt at all.⁶¹

The links between citizens and the state have atrophied in China as well. Since downsizing its massive state-owned-enterprise sector in the 1990s, China's social welfare system has remained threadbare at best, with much of the population lacking basic affordable benefits. Unemployment and retirement benefits remain meager for the vast majority of workers, and quality health care is unaffordable for many.⁶² Local government officials are responsible for more than 85 percent of social welfare spending but lack adequate revenue to fund their obligations.⁶³ As demand outstrips available resources, China's government has followed practices in the West of contracting out many social services.⁶⁴ For the first time in its history, the majority of China's population lives in cities, although 35 percent still live in rural areas as of 2022.⁶⁵ However, since the state shed millions of jobs in the 1980s and 1990s, the majority of jobs in urban areas has shifted to the informal sector.⁶⁶

In sum, the diminishing ability of states to furnish opportunity and generous social welfare benefits has eroded the sense of collective unity and patriotic sentiment. The increasing importance of urban areas to the national economy has contributed to the trend. As the state's relationship with urban-based elites deepens, its links with rural and impoverished urban populations weaken. The stagnation in standards of living for the populace can exacerbate social instability. Individuals may rely more on private-sector

⁶¹ Williams, 2008.

⁶² Ken Wills, *Seeking Balance*, International Monetary Fund, December 2018.

⁶³ Philippe Wingender, *Intergovernmental Fiscal Reform in China*, working paper, International Monetary Fund, 2018.

⁶⁴ Jie Lei and Chak Kwan Chan, *China's Social Welfare Revolution: Contracting Out Social Services*, Routledge, 2018.

⁶⁵ Richard Dobbs, Sven Smit, Jaana Remes, James Manyika, Charles Roxburgh, and Alejandra Restrepo, *Urban World: Mapping the Economic Power of Cities*, Kinsey Institute, March 2011; World Bank, "Urban Population (% of Total Population): China," 2022a.

⁶⁶ Zhe Liang, Simon Appleton, and Lina Song, "Informal Employment in China: Trends, Patterns, and Determinants of Entry," IZA Institute of Labor Economics, August 2016.

actors to provide the goods and services that the government once offered. This can help shore up standards of living, but at the cost of further weakening the attachments citizens may feel toward the nation-state. Moreover, well-off workers are most likely to benefit from generous benefits from employers. The vast majority of workers in most countries, including the United States and China, face diminishing prospects and increasingly meager benefits from the state. In the United States, workers have not seen a meaningful increase in wages in four decades, with most wage gains accruing to the top 10 percent of earners.⁶⁷ In China, over 600 million people live on less than U.S. \$140 per month.⁶⁸ The wealth and intellectual and cultural dominance of urban areas, stagnant prospects for nonelites, strong links between ruling authorities and elites, and weakening ties between the populace and the government mimic patterns commonly seen in preindustrial societies.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

For the U.S.-China rivalry, the severe weakening of links between central rulers and much of the population carries important implications for competition and any potential conflict. Although elites have always played a dominant role in foreign policy, this is likely to intensify in coming years as ties between the state and the public erode. These trends will likely constrain available spending for major competitive efforts. Popular support may become more conditional, depending on how much the state demands of the populace. A more fragile sense of social stability could result in a persistently unsettled domestic political situation. Intense political scrutiny emerging from an acutely polarized political environment could spur leaders to adopt cautious decisionmaking in a crisis or pursue competitive policies that demand little in terms of taxes or conscription.

In a war, the increasing dominance of elites and leaders in government will likely change the goal and methods of warfighting. The disengagement of the population renders mobilization of a nation's resources ever more dif-

⁶⁷ Drew Desilver, "For Most U.S. Workers, Real Wages Have Barely Budged in Decades," Pew Research, August 7, 2018.

⁶⁸ Li Qiaoyi, "600m with \$140 Monthly Income Worries Top," *Global Times*, May 29, 2020.

ficult, which makes total war infeasible. This tendency may be strengthened by the low public tolerance for casualties that is due to the general lack of trust in the government. This could impose hard constraints on how long and how much the contending governments can afford to lose in a conflict before seeking a respite to replenish losses and rebuild forces. Governments will likely face strong incentives to limit mobilization and attempt to fight wars “on the cheap” through the use of volunteer irregular forces, mercenaries, and unmanned systems.

With the population largely disengaged and perpetually prone to discontent, combatants might also attempt to target the domestic stability of the rival state through operations in the cyber, economic, and information domains. The goal of conflict might be to aggravate enough discontent to pressure the enemy leader to negotiate on proximate disputes while leaving broader problems unresolved.

Equity: The Entrenchment of Inequality

The distribution of wealth and goods in a society can affect a country’s political stability and economic prospects. In addition to moral issues of fairness, a society featuring yawning inequality can signal a lack of mobility and opportunity, resulting in persistent disadvantage for some segments of society. High inequality can also result in a suboptimal use of human resources, spark economic and political instability, and raise the risk of a crisis.⁶⁹ It can also affect the ability of a state to marshal public support for major endeavors, including costly competitive strategies or war.

Historically, human civilizations have tended toward steep inequalities. Significant reverses in inequality have only been achieved through war, pestilence, revolution, or civilizational collapse.⁷⁰ For example, inequality in wealth and income grew steadily in Europe from 1300 to 1800, with the

⁶⁹ Era Dabla-Norris, Kalpana Kochhar, Nujin Suphaphiphat, Frantisek Ricka, and Evridiki Tsounta, *Causes and Consequences of Income Inequality: A Global Perspective*, International Monetary Fund, June 2015.

⁷⁰ Walter Scheidel, *The Great Leveler: Violence and the History of Inequality*, Princeton University Press, 2018.

exception of the century-long decline in inequality spurred by the Black Death plague from 1347 to 1352.⁷¹ Economic inequality also tended to correspond with stark social and political inequality. Feudalistic Europe, for example, tended to feature fairly static social class structures with low mobility. Nobles and other elites held virtually all the wealth and political power, while commoners had little wealth and few rights.⁷² This inequality affected the performance of medieval militaries. The military aristocracy of highly trained knights served as the core of medieval armies. The reluctant participation and poor training of peasant infantry led many armies to rely heavily on professionally trained mercenaries to augment the knights.⁷³

In the Ming and Qing dynasties, China experienced severe income and wealth inequality. In the Ming dynasty, the government cut official salaries, but this only spurred officials to rely on corruption to bolster their incomes. The practice contributed to a steep rise in inequality. Officials in the Ming and Qing dynasties accrued about 22 percent of agricultural output despite constituting less than 0.4 percent of the population.⁷⁴ The severity of inequality and maltreatment of peasants led to several uprisings in both dynasties, including the Taiping Rebellion in the 1860s, in which 20 to 30 million people may have died.⁷⁵

The industrialization of modern states coincided with an impressive growth in wealth and opportunities for social mobility. In the 20th century, developed countries experienced an unprecedented simultaneous growth in wealth and shrinking of inequality that has virtually no precedent in human history. Scholars have proposed the term *the Great Compression* to describe this unique and large-scale expansion of the middle classes, elevation in

⁷¹ Guido Alfani, “Economic Inequality in Preindustrial Times: Europe and Beyond,” *Journal of Economic Literature*, Vol. 59, No. 1, 2021.

⁷² Juan Antonio Quirós Castillo, ed., *Social Inequality in Early Medieval Europe*, Brepols, 2020.

⁷³ Charles River Editors, *Medieval Europe’s Mercenaries: The History of Hired Soldiers Across Europe and the Byzantine Empire in the Middle Ages*, 2020.

⁷⁴ Shawn Ni and Pham Hoang Nam, “High Corruption Income in Ming and Qing China,” *Journal of Development Economics*, Vol. 81, No. 2, 2018.

⁷⁵ Jonathan Spence, *God’s Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*, W. W. Norton, 1996.

the standard of living for entire populations, and reduction of inequality from the 1930s through the 1970s.⁷⁶ In addition to a dramatic reduction in income inequality, industrial nation-states also experienced significant advances in political and civil rights for women and minorities. Western democracies extended the right to vote and participate in politics to most all men, regardless of class or wealth, in the 19th century. Women gained the right to vote in Western democracies in the 20th century, and civil rights were expanded to African Americans in the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁷⁷ Although they did not always live up to their ideals and although their efforts often ended disastrously, communist nation-states claimed that they intended to reduce income equality and establish equal political rights for men, women, and minorities.⁷⁸

Since 2000, the world has seen a return to the high levels of inequality, low social mobility, and dominance of elites that typified much of preindustrial history.⁷⁹ In the United States, the bottom 80 percent of income earners have experienced stagnant wages since the 1980s, especially among those with only a high school education. Most gains in income and wealth have accrued to the top 20 percent of income earners.⁸⁰ Social mobility has declined compared with the modern industrial era as well.⁸¹

Despite the ambitious goals of national prosperity set forth in the China Dream, Chinese authorities have reluctantly conceded that they may not be able to satisfy the public's demands. Top leaders have frequently stressed the

⁷⁶ Claudia Goldin and Robert A. Margo, *The Great Compression: The Wage Structure in the United States at Mid-Century*, working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, August 1991.

⁷⁷ Michael Lemay, *Civil Rights and Civil Liberties in America*, ABC CLIO Publishing, 2020.

⁷⁸ Thomas Piketty, Gabriel Zucman, and Filip Novokmet, "From Soviets to Oligarchs: Inequality and Property in Russia, 1905–2016," *Vox EU CEPR*, November 9, 2017.

⁷⁹ Scheidel, 2018.

⁸⁰ Congressional Budget Office, *The Distribution of Household Income, 2018*, August 2021.

⁸¹ Xi Song, Catherine G. Massey, Karen A. Rolf, and Yu Xie, "Long-Term Decline in Intergenerational Mobility in the United States Since the 1850s," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 117, No. 1, 2019, November 25, 2019.

importance of lowering expectations and setting feasible policy goals consistent with the increasing constraints on the country's finances. In a 2021 speech, for example, Xi Jinping reportedly stressed that officials "cannot set too high goals" and warned against spending too much on social welfare, which might result in "raising idlers."⁸² Inequality is at near historic highs in both China and the United States, with the United States being among the most unequal among developed countries and China among the most unequal in the world.⁸³

In sum, many societies are experiencing a dramatic reversal of the equalizing trends that characterized the experience of many industrial nation-states. The period of the Great Compression after World War II, which saw an astounding increase in wealth for many income earners and a dramatic narrowing of inequality in many developed countries, has given way to a shift back toward the historical norm of persistent inequality. Inequality carries important implications for contemporary militaries. Scholars have noted that, in countries with high levels of inequality, the well-off tended to be more averse to fighting for their country. When there is greater equality, higher- and lower-income individuals show little difference in their willingness to fight.⁸⁴

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

Postindustrial society's reversion to patterns of economic inequality typical of preindustrial societies and the erosion of the meaning and substance of guaranteed political and civil rights suggest that the future of U.S.-China competition may share aspects in common with preindustrial great-power struggles. In those struggles, elites managed the affairs of the state, including foreign relations. The people, lacking resources and opportunities for

⁸² Xi Jinping, "Solidly Promote Common Prosperity" [扎实推动共同富裕], *Seeking Truth* [求是], October 15, 2021.

⁸³ Thomas Piketty, Li Yang, and Gabriel Zucman, "Income Inequality Is Growing Fast in China and Making It Look More Like the U.S.," blog post, LSE Phelan Center, 2015.

⁸⁴ Christopher J. Anderson, Anna Getmansky, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, "Burden Sharing: Income, Inequality, and Willingness to Fight," *British Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 50, No. 1, July 2018.

political involvement, often remained largely disengaged. Inequality will also affect U.S. and Chinese partner states. In weaker and poorer countries, civil conflict could become more common, raising demand for assistance from wealthy patron states.

The persistence of inequality also carries important implications for the military in both competition and a hypothetical conflict. Scholars have noted that severe social inequality could impair the effectiveness of militaries in combat. Ethnic divisions and the mistreatment of minorities could have historically correlated with higher rates of desertion and poor battlefield performance.⁸⁵ Some experts have warned of the potential social divide between a military populated by lower-income earners and the civilian population.⁸⁶ However, other scholars have pointed out that the militaries of technologically advanced nations recruit mostly from lower- to middle-average income households. Both the poorest and wealthiest households are underrepresented in the U.S. military.⁸⁷ One implication may be that the state will need to spend more resources to attract and recruit educated youths. Already, both China and the United States have made clear both their intent to recruit from urban educated youths and the difficulties in attracting sufficient numbers of those target populations.⁸⁸

In wartime, patterns seen in preindustrial societies and in poorer countries may provide a more useful guide to how such a war might unfold than more recent conflict would. The reliance on mercenaries and coalition partners could return as a way to ease demand for highly skilled professional troops, who are difficult to recruit and retain. Public disengagement from a war effort could constrain the availability of resources to fund the war and could make support highly susceptible to shocks, such as high casualties.

⁸⁵ Jason Lyall, *Divided Armies: Inequality and Battlefield Performance in Modern War*, Princeton University Press, 2020.

⁸⁶ Douglas L. Kriner and Francis X. Shen, "Invisible Inequality: The Two Americas of Military Sacrifice," *University of Memphis Law Review*, Vol. 46, 2016.

⁸⁷ Andrea Asoni and Tino Sanandaji, *Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight? Socioeconomic Representativeness in the Modern Military*, working paper, Research Institute of Industrial Economics, 2013.

⁸⁸ Larry Wortzel, *A Comparison of Recruitment and Training Problems in the U.S. Army and China's People's Liberation Army*, Association of the U.S. Army, August 21, 2021.

Conclusion

Modern industrial societies, especially in Europe and the United States, experienced an exceptional degree of societal and cultural cohesion during the 1800s and 1900s. A stronger sense of collective purpose, shared culture, and common values coincided with expanded civil rights and opportunities for political participation. The cohesive mainstream culture came at the expense of gender, sexual, and ethnic minorities who experienced considerable repression in this period. However, the relatively cohesive societies both facilitated and benefited from economic strategies of industrialization, especially after World War II. Societal and cultural unity also facilitated sentiments of patriotic enthusiasm and enabled the political and military mobilization required to prevail in industrial-age warfare.

Since at least the turn of the 21st century, countries worldwide have been experiencing fragmentation along social, regional, and ethnic lines. In poorer countries, the fragmentation has, in some cases, intensified to an even more extreme degree, resulting in considerable violence between contending religious, ethnic, and other groups. In China and the United States, social disorder has grown, to which governments have struggled to respond. The result has been a further erosion in state legitimacy.

The contemporary scene echoes the fragmented societies of preindustrial societies in many ways. The lack of mass communication and limitations on travel left many villages and communities insular and segmented. Feudalistic bonds exacerbated the fragmentation of society. As Table 3.2 shows, these features carry profound implications for the U.S. competition with China. For both capitals, societal fragmentation renders older strategies of mass mobilization unlikely. To sustain competition and wage war, leaders may instead need to rely on partial mobilizations to levy key industrial products or talents. The weakening of governments and strengthening of subnational identities also opens opportunities for collaboration between governments and nonstate actors or subnational actors, even in the country of the rival. The potential for hybrid diplomacy further raises the importance of law enforcement to control potential subversive threats.

The net effect of the reversion toward preindustrial societal structures suggests a persistent state of resource constraints, unsettled domestic politics, and the return of political legitimacy as a contested issue. Militaries

TABLE 3.2

Implications of Neomedieval Societal and Cultural Aspects of the U.S.-China Rivalry

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Competition	Implications for U.S.-China Conflict
National culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared elite culture • Fragmented culture along class, religious, ethnic, other identities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coalition-building with diverse groups abroad is easier, but aggravates tensions • The risk that extremism in society could spread in military is higher • The potential exists for international recruitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fragmentation impairs national war mobilization • Cross-border coordination is easier but raises the risk of intervention in partner states
Mass communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Globally available • Transregional for literate elites • Segmented among populace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Segmentation of media exacerbates state dependence on elites • Public disengagement is a risk • Opportunities exist for partnership building in sympathetic third-party states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordination across borders is easier • Information segmentation raises the risk of adversary information operations
State-people relations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong elite-state links • Weak people-state links 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Elites are the most motivated and prepared to carry out foreign policies • A fragmented populace is vulnerable to targeting by adversary in the information and cyber domains 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Popular disengagement makes total war infeasible • Militaries may target cyber, information, and economic domains to foment unrest and build coalitions

Table 3.2—Continued

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Competition	Implications for U.S.-China Conflict
Equity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High inequality • Entrenched elites • Low social mobility • Mostly urban 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A disaffected populace raises the potential for adversary cyber and information operations • Governments less likely to rely on high taxes and conscription to back competition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warfare is mainly an affair of leaders, elites • Contractors and unmanned systems are favored • Cities are likely to be targeted in war • A war effort may be vulnerable to shocks, such as high casualties

are likely to face growing incentives to rely on automated, mercenary, and coalition or proxy forces to reduce their reliance on scarce citizen volunteers and to reduce the risks of military casualties. Competition and the management of war could return to being primarily elite-based affairs, as in much of the preindustrial age. The information and cyber domains could become attractive venues for military operations as a means of fomenting unrest and pressuring adversary states to offer concessions as a means of halting hostilities.

Economics: Imbalanced Economies

This chapter reviews significant trends and developments related to economics. We use the term *imbalanced economies* to generalize neomedieval economies but will explore four interrelated aspects in more detail: (1) growth rates, (2) transnational economic activity, (3) the illicit economy, and (4) labor capital and mobility. For each aspect, we will analyze how the factor applies to the preindustrial Europe, preindustrial China, the industrial nation-state, and the neomedieval eras. As we will show, neomedieval economies are experiencing slowing growth and imbalances that evoke features of preindustrial societies. However, distinctive features of modern economics and finance persist, including globalized production and high levels of capital and labor mobility (Table 4.1). We then examine what these features might mean for the contemporary U.S.-China rivalry.

Growth Rates: Deindustrialization and Deceleration

The nature of economic activity exerts a strong influence on its politics, society, and military. Sustained high growth rates provide the material resources with which states can provide for their citizens and equip their militaries. Slow-growing or impoverished societies, by contrast, lack the resources to carry out the same tasks and, therefore, are more likely to suffer disadvantages than their wealthier counterparts.

With rare, short-lived exceptions, preindustrial societies grew extremely slowly. From 1400 to 1800, for example, per capita GDP growth did not exceed 0.2 percent per year for any country in the world throughout any half

TABLE 4.1
Comparison of Economic Aspects Between Eras

Aspect	Preindustrial Europe	Preindustrial China	Industrial Nation-State	Neomedieval
Growth rates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowing growth
Transnational economic activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited trade, mainly along Eurasian trade routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited trade, mainly along Eurasian trade routes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nation-based trade, investment, mainly cross-Atlantic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Global market, increasingly along Eurasian trade routes
Illicit economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spans domestic and international • Banditry, privateers, pirates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spans domestic and international • Banditry, piracy, raiders common 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primarily domestic problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spans domestic and international • Cybercrime, piracy, cartels
Labor and capital mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considerable labor, capital mobility 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive and fast • Ineffective controls

century period.¹ Much of the reason lies in the low productivity of agricultural economies that predominated in most preindustrial regions, including feudal Europe.

In the Middle Ages, manors run by European lords and officials were the primary economic unit, and these estates relied on human and animal labor-intensive methods. In the early modern period, from the 1500s through the 1700s, innovations in finance and credit facilitated the rise of global trade, but the rapid growth that these moments of efflorescence generated rarely lasted more than a few years.²

China experienced slow growth rates similar to those of preindustrial Europe.³ Economic activities in preindustrial China focused primarily on human and animal labor-intensive small-scale farming. Chinese cities also featured handicrafts and trade, and the country produced steel and other metals on a limited scale. However, in general, agriculture remained the dominant form of economic activity.⁴

Industrial nation-states enjoyed unusually high growth rates, beginning around 1800, principally due to the widespread adoption of industrial manufacturing and to rapid technological change.⁵ The high rate of economic growth coincided with the advent of the nation-state. The timing is not coincidental. Scholars have pointed out how both processes required the mobilization of populations to work in factories and form new communities.⁶ The U.S. industrial revolution accelerated in the late 1800s when the labor force migrated from agriculture to manufacturing. The widespread use of machinery and the electrification of power provided significant

¹ Jack Goldstone, "Dating the Great Divergence," *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2021.

² Freddie Wilkinson, "Industrialization, Labor, and Life," *National Geographic*, January 27, 2020.

³ Goldstone, 2021.

⁴ Kent Deng, "Economic History of Premodern China (from 221 BC to c. 1800 AD)," webpage, Economic History Association, undated.

⁵ Goldstone, 2021.

⁶ Julian Hoppit, "The Nation, the State, and the First Industrial Revolution," *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 2011.

advantages to larger firms, which could use economies of scale.⁷ This meant that many industries were dominated by a few players—such as Andrew Carnegie in the steel industry in the late 19th century.⁸ U.S. dominance in new technologies, including automobiles, aircraft, and information technology, strengthened the nation's lead in manufacturing throughout much of 20th century. The United States began to deindustrialize only in the 1970s, when the proportion of workers in industrial jobs began to fall from around 22 percent in 1980 to less than 9 percent by 2020.⁹

China experienced industrialization on a limited scale beginning in the 1950s. The CCP developed five-year plans to rapidly modernize the economy and raise industrial output. Most of these efforts, especially the Great Leap Forward in the late 1950s, proved to have been poorly conceived and ended disastrously.¹⁰ The country's turn toward reform and opening up policies in 1979 spurred a new phase of rapid industrialization driven by market incentives. Concentrated on the eastern coast, major commercial and industrial centers grew rapidly in the subsequent decades, powering China's rise as an export juggernaut. Only in 2012 did the industrial sector begin to decline after reaching a peak of about 19 percent of the nation's employment.¹¹

In the neomedieval era, modern economies have experienced decelerating growth, averaging between 1 and 3 percent GDP growth per year since the 1980s.¹² This contrasts with the post-World War II expansion from the 1950s through the 1970s, when developed industrial economies averaged

⁷ Wilkinson, 2020.

⁸ Joel Mokyr, *The Lever of Riches: Technological Creativity and Economic Progress*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

⁹ Derek Thompson, "Where Did All the Workers Go? 60 Years of Economic Change in 1 Graph," *The Atlantic*, January 26, 2012; National Association of Manufacturers, "2021 United States Manufacturing Facts," webpage, 2021.

¹⁰ Xin Meng, "The Institutional Causes of China's Great Famine, 1959–1961," *Review of Economic Studies*, Vol. 82, 2015.

¹¹ Robert Z. Lawrence, "China, Like the U.S., Faces Challenges in Achieving Inclusive Growth Through Manufacturing," Policy Brief, Peterson Institute for International Economics, August 2019.

¹² World Bank, 2021b.

above 4 percent annual growth.¹³ Neomedieval economies are also imbalanced, with a small sector driving much of the growth. For example, services now account for more than 80 percent of GDP activity in the United States, and rates are similar in other Western countries.¹⁴ The service sector includes a relatively small number of high-paying jobs that require education and professional knowledge, such as information technology specialists, lawyers, and bankers. However, the vast majority of the service sector consists of relatively low-skilled and low-paying jobs in such areas as retail, delivery, and food services.¹⁵ In the 1990s, U.S. workers in the highest decile experienced strong income gains, while everyone else experienced relatively little gain.¹⁶ As industries continue to shed jobs, automate, and migrate to low-wage countries, postindustrial economies will continue to experience imbalanced, slow growth for the foreseeable future.¹⁷

China's mounting debt, inability to adopt a more productive form of growth, and severe demographic challenges suggest that the country's growth rate could slow to between 2 and 3 percent through midcentury.¹⁸ China has shifted toward a greater reliance on services and consumption as its inefficient and debt-fueled mode of industrial export proved unsustainable.¹⁹ In 2013, the service sector surpassed the manufacturing sector in terms of contributions to GDP, being driven by the financial, real estate, information technology, and health care services. However, the service sector suffers many of the same low productivity and imbalanced growth

¹³ Stephen A. Marglin and Juliet B. Schor, *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience*, Oxford University Press, 1992.

¹⁴ World Bank, "Services, Value Added (% GDP)," 2021d.

¹⁵ Joel Nelson, "Work and Benefits: The Multiple Problems of Service Sector Employment," *Social Problems*, Vol. 41, No. 2, 1994.

¹⁶ Randy Ilg and Steven E. Haugen, "Earnings and Employment Trends in the 1990s," *Monthly Labor Review*, March 2000.

¹⁷ Teresa C. Fort, Justin R. Pierce, and Peter K. Schott, "New Perspectives on the Decline of US Manufacturing Employment," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 32, No. 2, Spring 2018.

¹⁸ Rajah and Leng, 2022.

¹⁹ "China's Gigantic Consumer Market to Steam Ahead at a Quickened Pace in 2022," *People's Daily*, February 22, 2022.

that have afflicted other countries.²⁰ Moreover, services remain vulnerable to shocks of reduced consumer demand, as happened during the COVID-19 pandemic.²¹ Beijing has accordingly continued lending to the manufacturing and construction industries to drive higher growth, at the cost of worsening the country's financial position and structural imbalances.²²

The experiences of the United States and China represent a broader global trend in deindustrialization. Over the past 25 years, employment in manufacturing as a share of total employment has fallen in the world's most-advanced economies. Many developing countries have also experienced a premature form of deindustrialization in which employment in the industrial sector declines well before the country has attained a high per capita income.²³

In sum, the deindustrialization of the developed world has corresponded with lower productivity, decelerating growth, and structural imbalances that fuel income and wealth inequality. Low productivity, slow growth, and imbalanced economies were common in most preindustrial societies. Neomedieval economies grow faster than their preindustrial counterparts. However, the imbalanced nature of these economies has compounded some of the political and societal trends mentioned in previous chapters, such as societal fragmentation, inequality, and decay of the nation-state.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

Deindustrialization and decelerating growth carry important implications for the U.S.-China rivalry. The United States and China are competing under severe resource constraints, which raises questions about the rele-

²⁰ Max J. Zenglein, "China's Overrated Service Sector," Mercator Institute for China Studies, October 13, 2016.

²¹ Jason Douglas, "China's Service Sector Posts Steepest Decline Since Pandemic's Start," *Wall Street Journal*, April 6, 2022.

²² "China's Debt to Climb to Record in 2022, Government Advisor Says," Bloomberg News, July 5, 2022.

²³ Robert Rowthorn and Ramana Ramaswamy, *Deindustrialization: Its Causes and Implications*, International Monetary Fund, September 1997; Dani Rodrik, *Premature Deindustrialization*, working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, February 2015.

vance of industrial-age strategies premised on rapid growth and plentiful resources. In the contemporary competition, access to technology, scientific and professional expertise, and capital may become focuses of contention. This could incentivize both countries to compete aggressively for the world's best technologies and talents. To gain an advantage, competitors might try to tarnish and diminish the rival through policy restrictions and information operations.²⁴ U.S. and Chinese accusations over the security of digital and computer technologies serve many purposes, one of which could be to limit defection of key technical expertise to the rival. Decoupling in the technological domains may be another way to retain advantages in the face of stiff competition. The competition for talent, capital, and technology could also incentivize both sides to cultivate ties with sympathetic groups and states that possess such resources, even if this antagonizes the rival. U.S. efforts to strengthen its relationship with Taiwan and China's efforts to recruit overseas Chinese students, scientists, and scholars have both bolstered access to needed technology and expertise on both sides and exacerbated threat perceptions.²⁵

Decelerating and imbalanced growth also makes high-end war increasingly hard to sustain. The staggering cost of advanced ships, aircraft, missile defenses, and other weapons makes it burdensome to maintain large inventories of such systems in peacetime and extremely difficult to replenish in wartime. A thorough mobilization of society could expand the available set of resources to fund total war, but this is politically unlikely, given the weakened legitimacy of states. The problem is well exemplified in Russia's rapid depletion of munitions and platforms and its struggles to replace losses in its war in Ukraine. To maintain their legitimacy, states will instead have a strong incentive to avoid disruptions to the supply of consumer goods and services that their populations value.²⁶

²⁴ Mo Jingxi, "U.S. Accused of Technological Terrorism," *China Daily*, July 7, 2022; Ana Swanson, "Biden Administration Clamps Down on China's Access to Technology," *New York Times*, October 7, 2022.

²⁵ Ken Dilanian, "American Universities Are a Soft Target for China's Spies, Say U.S. Intelligence Officials," NBC News, February 2, 2020.

²⁶ Wang Ning [王宁], "Consumption Institutions, Incentives to Labor, and Legitimacy Resources: The Change of Institutional Arrangements Regarding Consumer Lives and

Thus, rather than try to replicate obsolete strategies of mass industrial mobilization, decisionmakers might find it more useful to plan for partial mobilizations and to scale combat operations to a level that can be sustained by a reduced resource base. Relying more on mercenaries could be a more sustainable way to manage operations, as these costs could be ended when no longer needed. Recruitment of talented professionals around the world through financial incentives could be important for warfare in technical domains, such as cyberspace.²⁷

Transnational Economic Activity: The Global Market

Trade has provided a major source of wealth to human civilizations since ancient times. Trade not only has provided opportunities for diverse peoples to gain scarce goods but has also facilitated cultural exchange. In more recent times, transnational economic activity may include the exchange of goods and services but also of investment.

Preindustrial China and Europe traded with distant realms, but the volume of goods transmitted was relatively modest. Medieval economies were largely self-sufficient and, thus, had less need for imported goods. Inadequate infrastructure for long-distance trade had an impact as well. European trading powers gained fabulous wealth in part because of their dominance of seaborne trade, which proved faster, more reliable, and cheaper than overland trade routes along the Silk Road.²⁸ But this made for a small portion of economic activity. The World Economic Forum estimates that exports accounted for less than 5 percent of the world's GDP from the 15th

Laborer Motivations in Urban China” [消费制度、劳动激励与合法性资源], *Sociological Studies* [社会学研究], Vol. 3, 2007.

²⁷ Christiane Kuptsch and Eng Fong Pang, *Competing for Global Talent*, International Labour Organization, 2006.

²⁸ Stephan Barisitz, *Central Asia and the Silk Road: Economic Rise and Decline Over Several Millennia*, Springer, 2017.

to 18th centuries. The trade consisted mostly of the sale of raw materials and basic goods, such as silk, potatoes, coffee, and spices.²⁹

In addition to industrialization, the nation-state realized incredible levels of wealth in part because of a significant expansion of international trade. Technological innovations, such as steamships, automobiles, and railroads, meant goods could be transported faster and over much longer distances. These innovations also made it easier to transport heavier manufactured goods, such as iron and textiles. From the 1870s through 1939, the world experienced an explosion in trade, when the volume of goods exchanged increased by a factor of 20. Some have labeled this period the “first era of trade globalization.”³⁰ Trade surged again after World War II when demand for imported goods soared among shattered societies seeking to rebuild. However, throughout the 1800s and 1900s, much of the trade involved raw materials and finished goods was between American and European nation-based companies.³¹ Manufacturing processes were largely concentrated within the same country.³²

In the neomedieval era, since 2000, the globalization of production has accelerated. Technological innovations have increased the ease and rate of financial flows between countries, as well as the transfer of labor, technology, and information.³³ China’s economy surged amid such structural changes, as companies relocated the production of intermediary goods to take advantage of the country’s low-cost labor.³⁴ Between 2002 and 2007,

²⁹ Peter Vanham, “A Brief History of Globalization,” World Economic Forum, January 17, 2019.

³⁰ Antoni Esteveordal, Brian Frantz, and Alan M. Taylor, “The Rise and Fall of World Trade, 1870–1939,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 118, No. 2, 2003.

³¹ C[harles] Cooper, J[ames] Steinberg, and M[ichael] Shires, *The Evolution of the European Economy: Implications for Transatlantic Relations*, RAND Corporation, N-3432-FF, 1992.

³² Alex Klein and Nicholas Crafts, “Moving Around: The Changing Geography of U.S. Manufacturing During the 20th Century,” Vox EU, December 12, 2017.

³³ International Monetary Fund, “Globalization: Threat or Opportunity?” January 2002.

³⁴ Yeling Tan, “How the WTO Changed China: The Mixed Legacy of Economic Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2021.

China's export growth rate and import growth rate rose by 13.2 percent and 18.89 percent, respectively, much of it driven by foreign direct investment.³⁵ The globalization of production weakened the ability of states to regulate economic activity within their borders. As companies moved production abroad, violations of labor, environmental, and other laws increased in the distant factories. Despite media coverage of exploitative practices, companies continue to operate factories in countries with weak regulatory oversight.³⁶ The globalization of production has also contributed to a worsening of inequality in both developed and developing countries as companies shed good-paying jobs to relocate production to low-wage countries and as countries competed in a "race to the bottom" to secure foreign investment.³⁷

Two other striking developments in transnational economic activity since 2000 are worth noting. First is the increasing importance of digital and financial technology. The globalization of trade was possible in part because of the rapid electronic communication systems and availability of powerful computers that could assist in managing inventories, trade, and manufacturing processes in distant locations.³⁸ The 2010s also saw the rise of important digital technologies, such as e-commerce, online payment platforms, and financial technology applications. These technologies have facilitated the globalization of production.³⁹

³⁵ Steve Ching, Cheng Hsiao, Shui Ki Wan, and Tongsan Wang, "Economic Benefits of Globalization: The Impact of Entry to the WTO on China's Growth," *Pacific Economy Review*, August 5, 2011.

³⁶ Amelia Pang, "The China Challenge: The Stain of Forced Labor on Nike Shoes," *Discourse*, January 5, 2022; Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, Danielle Cave, James Leibold, Kelsey Munro, and Nathan Ruser, "Uyghurs for Sale," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, March 1, 2020.

³⁷ Philipp Heimberger, "Does Economic Globalisation Affect Income Inequality? A Meta-Analysis," *World Economy*, November 2020.

³⁸ Patricia A. Glenn, "Information Technology in a Global Economy," *Computational Economics*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 1993.

³⁹ Erik Feyen, Jon Frost, Leonardo Gambacorta, Harish Natarajan, and Matthew Saal, "Fintech and the Digital Transformation of Financial Services: Implications for Market Structure and Public Policy," Bank for International Settlements, BIS Papers No. 117, July 2021.

A second important trend has been the increasing role of developing countries in the global economy. Economic stagnation in the developed world along with the rapid growth of China and other developing countries has shaped the character of the global economy. Experts anticipate, for example, that Asia will become the center of the future global economy. China has promoted the vision of the BRI to take advantage of such trends. The BRI is an ambitious infrastructure initiative that aims to connect the economies of Eurasia, Africa, and Latin America.⁴⁰ Officials have argued that China should assert a greater leadership role in global governance as developing countries play a larger role in the global economy.⁴¹

Developments in both the United States and China since 2000 both herald new features and evoke some features of preindustrial societies. On the one hand, trade, investment and production have truly globalized to an extent never before experienced in any era. Moreover, new technologies have enabled commerce in cyberspace. On the other hand, the global market has compounded the problem of weakening states by eroding the state's capacity to regulate transborder economic activity. Evoking patterns in preindustrial history, the same trends have also elevated the importance of Eurasian trade routes for the future global economy.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

There are several implications both for peacetime competition between the United States and China and for a potential conflict that might involve both. In terms of competition, the globalization of production could raise the importance of security in distant partner countries that hold important investments and workers. China has already designated the protection of overseas interests as a top national security priority and has expanded

⁴⁰ Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China [中华人民共和国中央人民政府], "High-Quality Joint Construction of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' Has Achieved Remarkable Results" [高质量共建“一带一路”成绩斐然], January 25, 2022.

⁴¹ Zhao Zuoxiang [赵祚翔], "'The Belt and Road Initiative': A New Engine Driving Economic Globalization" ["一带一路": 拉动经济全球化的新引擎], *Seeking Truth* [求是], March 2019.

its military presence abroad to better protect them.⁴² The dispersal of economic production could also impose a restraining influence on the competition, as both countries depend on supplies and goods produced in the rival country. Although there has been some effort to disentangle supply chains, the complexity of globalized production makes a complete decoupling improbable.⁴³

The shift in the geography of world trade could affect U.S.-China competition as well. Both countries have competed for influence in regions that hold important strategic and economic value for both, such as in eastern and southern Europe, Southeast Asia, Africa, the Pacific islands, and elsewhere.⁴⁴ Tension over issues related to digital technology and financial technology can also be expected to play a key role in U.S.-China competition.⁴⁵

In conflict, both the United States and China face a risk that mutual interdependence could be weaponized. Because social stability will depend on the ability of states to ensure consumer goods, jobs, and such basic goods as affordable food and energy, states could easily harm an adversary's political legitimacy by acting to disrupt such access. Russia has already pioneered the weaponization of access to energy by both destroying power plants in Ukraine and threatening Europe's access to energy imports. The ease with which such disruptions could be carried out, especially against U.S. partners, also raises the prospect of proxy war. U.S. involvement with partner nations could help fend off threats to state legitimacy but also requires costly commitments that further drain scarce resources.

⁴² Monica Wang, "China's Strategy in Djibouti; Mixing Commercial and Military Interests," Council for Foreign Relations, April 13, 2018.

⁴³ Rhodium Group and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, *Understanding U.S.-China Decoupling: Macro Trends and Industry Impacts*, 2020.

⁴⁴ Minghao Zhao, "The Belt and Road Initiative and China-U.S. Strategic Competition," *China International Strategic Review*, Vol. 3, 2021.

⁴⁵ Tom Wheeler, "Digital Competition with China Starts with Competition at Home," Brookings Institution, April 2020.

Illicit Economy: Bandits, Warlords, and Pirates

Illegal economic transactions are present in some form in all societies. Such transactions tend to offer high profit margins because governments and legitimate businesses cannot openly participate in them. Because of their nature, criminal or outsider groups, such as insurgents, can conduct such transactions. Because of the negative effects of outlawed commercial activity, governments thus frequently feel obliged to suppress or destroy the illicit economy.⁴⁶ The type of transaction involved has varied over time and has often reflected the characteristics of the legitimate economy and relevant political arrangements.

In preindustrial Europe and China, porous borders and inadequate domestic security resulted in a mobile form of criminal predation. Bandits operated in ungoverned spaces, pirates menaced oceans and ports around the world, and nomadic tribes carried out cross-border raids against China in both the Ming and Qing eras.⁴⁷ The distinction between legal and illegal activity was also more ambiguous. In the medieval period, mercenary companies often resorted to pillaging and raiding when not employed by a king or prince. Sometimes, mercenaries would engage in looting even when employed by a state.⁴⁸ In the early modern period, European governments occasionally sanctioned pirates, labeled *privateers*, to raid rival navies.⁴⁹ In the 1700s and 1800s, private companies, such as the British East India Company, earned government backing for the trafficking of opium to China and fielded their own armies.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Rules and Regulations in Ungoverned Spaces: Illicit Economies, Criminals and Belligerents,” in Harold Trinkunas and Anne Clunnam, eds., *Ungoverned Spaces: Alternatives to State Authority in an Era of Softened Sovereignty*, Stanford University Press, 2010.

⁴⁷ John C. Appleby, *Under the Bloody Flag: Pirates of the Tudor Age*, The History Press, 2009; Diana Lary, *The Chinese State at the Borders*, University of British Columbia Press, 2008.

⁴⁸ McFate, 2017.

⁴⁹ Jennifer Gonzalez, “Pirates, Privateers, and Civil War Maritime Laws,” Library of Congress blog, May 28, 2020.

⁵⁰ Soutik Biswas, “How Britain’s Opium Trade Impoverished Indians,” BBC, September 5, 2019.

In the era of the industrial nation-state, organized crime networks sometimes became powerful and wealthy, but they mainly operated in one country with little international presence. The American mafia, for example, operated protection rackets, controlled labor unions, and established cartels to exploit pension and welfare funds. These criminals also profited from gambling, illicit drugs, loan-sharking, and prostitution. Although they may have occasionally traveled to secure illicit goods, such organized criminal groups tended to be based in the country that they operated in.⁵¹ In the early 20th century, prior to the CCP gaining control, China experienced considerable turmoil at the hands of warlords, who frequently oversaw many criminal activities, including prostitution, kidnapping, looting, drugs, and gambling.⁵² These entities also operated principally within China.

In the neomedieval era, the illicit economy has become pervasive. According to the World Economic Forum, the illicit economy was worth U.S. \$2.2 trillion, amounting to about 3 percent of world GDP.⁵³ The illicit economy includes human trafficking and the sale of illegal goods, such as narcotics, weapons, counterfeit goods, and wildlife. It also includes smuggling legitimate goods to avoid taxes. Criminal entities have globalized their operations just as legitimate businesses have done. The U.S. opioid crisis is a prominent example. The most recent wave of the opioid crisis began in 2014 and involves fentanyl and other synthetic opioids.⁵⁴ Mexico is the main source of synthetic opioids, but these cartels rely on precursor chemicals from China.⁵⁵

⁵¹ James B. Jacobs, “The Rise and Fall of Organized Crime in the United States,” *Crime and Justice*, Vol. 49, 2020.

⁵² Arthur Waldron, “The Warlord: Twentieth-Century Chinese Understandings of Violence, Militarism, and Imperialism,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 4, 1991.

⁵³ Pamela Coke-Hamilton and Jeffrey Hardy, “Illicit Trade Endangers the Environment, the Law, and SDGs,” World Economic Forum, July 18, 2019.

⁵⁴ U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, “Fentanyl Flow to the United States,” brochure, January 2020.

⁵⁵ Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking, *Final Report*, February 2022.

Other parts of the illicit economy include the return of maritime piracy after a near absence of several centuries. In Somalia, between 2007 and 2012, more than 300 ships were held hostage and ransomed. These attacks involved both Somalis and other nationalities.⁵⁶ A subsequent combined international effort helped suppress the piracy along the horn of Africa, but the scourge persists in other parts of the world.⁵⁷ The postindustrial global economy has also given rise to novel forms of criminal enterprise, such as cybercrime. Experts have estimated that cybercrime cost the global economy close to U.S. \$600 billion in 2018, which was nearly 1 percent of the world's GDP at the time.⁵⁸

Chinese sources have recognized the problem of drug trafficking and other forms of criminal predation. For example, media reports discuss the problem of drug trafficking that spans China's borders with Southeast Asian countries.⁵⁹ A 2017 white paper published on China's policies on Asia-Pacific security cooperation labeled "transnational crimes" among nonstate threats that have become "more prominent."⁶⁰ Chinese sources have also emphasized the need to enhance cybersecurity.⁶¹

Another danger posed by the illicit economy is corruption. The resources available to criminal entities could embolden them to penetrate and capture offices in government, law enforcement, and the military. In the Russia-Ukraine conflict, the role of organized crime gained international attention when corruption resulted in debilitating shortfalls in Russia's military's logistics system. Organized criminal groups appear to operate on both sides

⁵⁶ Jatin Dua, "Hijacked: Piracy and Economies of Protection in the Western Indian Ocean," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 61, No. 3, June 28, 2019.

⁵⁷ International Chamber of Commerce Commercial Crime Services, "IMB Piracy & Armed Robbery Map 2022," 2023.

⁵⁸ James Andrew Lewis, *Economic Impact of Cybercrime*, Center for Strategic & International Studies, February 21, 2018.

⁵⁹ "Chinese Boats Patrol Mekong River," *People's Daily*, December 20, 2016.

⁶⁰ "Full Text: China's Policies on Asia-Pacific Security Cooperation," Xinhua, January 11, 2017.

⁶¹ Xi Jinping, "Translation: Xi Jinping's April 20 Speech at the National Cybersecurity and Informatization Work Conference," New America website, April 30, 2018.

of the conflict, profiting from trade in the war zone.⁶² There is evidence of criminal elements gaining control of some military forces as well. In the Donbas region, powerful criminal warlords have penetrated local militaries and recruited supporters; in other cases, warlords have funded their own armed groups.⁶³ Involvement in corruption-related activities may be more likely for armed forces in the poorer, developing world, but militaries in the wealthy West are not immune to the menace. During the Afghanistan and Iraq wars, at least 115 U.S. military personnel were convicted of crimes worth \$50 million, including stealing, rigging of contracts, and bribery.⁶⁴ The U.S. Navy also experienced a major scandal in the 2000s and 2010s, when U.S. naval officials accepted bribes in cash, prostitutes, and gifts from a contractor nicknamed “Fat Leonard” to direct naval ships in Asia to contractors who defrauded the U.S. government.⁶⁵

The problem of collusion between government officials and criminal actors has become pervasive in China. Both Chinese leaders Hu Jintao and Xi Jinping have identified corruption as the single biggest threat to CCP rule.⁶⁶ Politburo member Bo Xilai’s downfall brought to light lurid details about the robbing and exploiting of rich citizens through collusive activities between the police and mobsters.⁶⁷ Corruption has grown pervasive enough in the PLA that Xi Jinping ordered an extensive crackdown, rounding up hundreds of senior officers, including two former vice chairs of the Central

⁶² Scott Benowitz, “Organized Crime: An Overlooked Angle on the Current Conflict in Ukraine,” *Pavlovic Today*, April 4, 2022.

⁶³ David Klein, “Report: In Crimea and the Donbas, Organized Crime Reigns Supreme,” *Organized Crime and Reporting Project*, July 15, 2022.

⁶⁴ Julia Harte, “U.S. Military Personnel Have Been Convicted of \$50 Million Worth of Crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan,” *Public Integrity*, May 5, 2015.

⁶⁵ Craig Whitlock, “‘Fat Leonard’ Scandal Swells; Three More Navy Figures Charged,” *Washington Post*, May 27, 2016.

⁶⁶ Xi Jinping, 2017; Hu Jintao, “Full Text of Hu Jintao’s Report at the 18th Party Congress,” November 14, 2012.

⁶⁷ Minxin Pei, “In Bed with the Mafia: Collusion Between Law Enforcement and Organized Crime,” in Minxin Pei, *China’s Crony Capitalism*, Harvard University Press, 2016.

Military Commission. Yet despite these measures, corruption has persisted in China's government.⁶⁸

In sum, the illicit economy appears to be well entrenched, and its eradication could prove difficult, much as was the case in most preindustrial societies. The challenge is amplified by the weakened condition of nation-states, which suffer resource constraints and declining state legitimacy. The reach and strength of organized crime actors suggests that they could become relevant forces in confrontations between states, a point underscored by the role played by organized crime in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The threats that the illicit economy and criminal networks carry have several implications for U.S. competition with China and any potential conflict involving the two. In peacetime, the predations of international criminal organizations could exacerbate domestic discontent because of the negative effects of crime, narcotic abuse, human trafficking, and other forms of criminal predation. Both the United States and China may find that they must allocate more resources to combat myriad forms of crime and disorder. These problems may restrain competition by providing an incentive for the two countries to cooperate on specific issues, such as cybercrime,⁶⁹ human trafficking, illegal arms proliferation, and narcotics trafficking.⁷⁰ More resources may also need to be allocated to monitor the dangers of corruption in the government, law enforcement, and military of both countries, especially in China.

Finding ways to control the illicit economy could, at the same time, exacerbate competition by highlighting the divergent approaches favored

⁶⁸ Wang Xinjun, "Xi Calls for Coordinated Efforts Against Corruption," *China Military Online*, June 19, 2022; "China Party Says Nearly 5 Million Probed for Graft," Associated Press, October 17, 2022.

⁶⁹ Cuihong Cai [蔡翠红], "Sino-U.S. Relations in Cyberspace: Competition, Conflict, and Cooperation" [网络空间的中美关系: 竞争、冲突与合作], *American Studies Quarterly* [美国研究], Vol. 3, 2012.

⁷⁰ Yongan Zhang [张勇安], "Sino-U.S. Cooperation Against Narcotics: Process, Limits, and Strategic Options" [中美禁毒合作: 过程、限度及战略选择], *Modern International Relations* [现代国际关系], Vol. 12, 2013.

by the two rivals. While the United States regards a free press, rule of law, democratic accountability, and other institutional features as important for combating crime, China may promote approaches more consistent with its authoritarian politics, including extensive digital surveillance.⁷¹ This competition could play out most intensely in countries that hold economic or strategic importance yet experience a variety of domestic and transnational challenges, such as in the resource-rich Middle East.⁷²

In wartime, both countries could find themselves distracted by the need to combat organized criminal actors who seek to profit from the conflict through a variety of illegal activities.⁷³ Criminal activity could corrupt military forces, and military forces might be tempted to engage in criminal activities in at least some partner countries.⁷⁴ Enterprising criminals might play a role in a conflict providing such services as cyber operations, logistics, or even armed groups, as has happened in the Russia-Ukraine conflict.⁷⁵ This could mean that the U.S. and Chinese militaries would need to commit resources to help stabilize and bolster allies and partners or to control corruption and criminality in their own or their partners' militaries.

Capital and Labor Mobility: Rapid Money Flows and Mass Migration

The mobility of capital and labor affects prospects for both economic and political development. Economic theory typically posits that labor mobility

⁷¹ Chuanyin Lu [鲁传颖], *The Theoretical and Practical Studies on Cyberspace Global Governance and Multi-Stakeholder* [网络空间全球治理与多利益攸关方的理论与实践探索], dissertation, East China Normal University [华东师范大学—博士论文], 2016.

⁷² David A. Lake, "Economic Openness and Great Power Competition: Lessons for China and the United States," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2018.

⁷³ John De Boer and Louise Bosetti, "The Crime-Conflict 'Nexus': State of the Evidence," United Nations University, July 2015.

⁷⁴ Peng Wang, "Military Corruption in China: The Role of Guanxi in the Buying and Selling of Military Positions," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 228, 2016.

⁷⁵ Joshua P. Mulford, "Non-State Actors in the Russo-Ukrainian War," *Connections*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2016.

increases welfare because labor can shift to more-profitable ventures. However, migration of labor can also have negative effects on the areas that the labor emigrates from. This can include weakening the availability of skilled labor (also known as *brain drain*). High levels of migration from poorer to wealthier regions can also have political impacts, such as spurring resentment from displaced laborers.⁷⁶ Similarly, capital mobility is often linked with higher growth. Countries with weaker capital controls typically outperform those with stricter controls. However, the benefits of capital controls may vary, depending in part on the level of a country's development. Capital controls may also have political implications. The liberalization of capital controls could permit a higher level of investment because of the greater access provided to foreign savings but might also exacerbate the effects of an economic or political crisis by enabling large volumes of money to quickly flow out.⁷⁷

In preindustrial Europe and China, labor mobility was relatively low because of technological limitations and the self-contained nature of agriculture-based economies. Movement by sea took months; on land, people could only walk or use pack animals to carry goods. Moreover, the relatively insular nature of the manor economy in Europe and the small-farm economy in China limited demand for labor mobility.⁷⁸ Itinerant labor played a useful, although limited, role in the diffusion of skills in medieval urban economies.⁷⁹ However, migration across borders could be accomplished more easily because of the weak ability of states to fend off incursions. Examples include the mass movement of nomadic tribes along

⁷⁶ Maurice Schiff, "Social Capital, Labor Mobility, and Welfare," *Rationality and Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2, April 1992.

⁷⁷ Sebastian Edwards, *Capital Mobility and Economic Performance: Are Emerging Economies Different?* working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, January 2001.

⁷⁸ Zhang Qingwu [张庆五], "The Evolution of the Household Registration System in Ancient China" [中国古代户籍制度的演变], *Development of Small Cities & Towns* [小城镇建设], Vol. 11, 2001, p. 20.

⁷⁹ Stephen Epstein, *The Technician in West European Cities*, Routledge, 2004.

China's northern and western borders and European efforts to colonize the Americas and other parts of the world.⁸⁰

Industrial nation-states had higher levels of both capital and labor mobility, but these were constrained by both technology and the states' relatively strong control of borders. Travel across oceans became faster in the 1800s with the advent of steam- and gas-turbine-powered ships. The invention of railways and automobiles in the 1800s and 1900s sped up movement across land.⁸¹ However, governments tended to exercise fairly firm control over borders. Immigration could be substantial, but it was usually the result of permissive policies, as when the United States encouraged immigration from Europe in the early 1900s.⁸² In the mid-1800s, much of the world adopted a common gold standard, which became the basis of international currency markets. However, central banks routinely coordinated with other central banks to maintain their currencies. After World War II, countries imposed currency controls as part of the Bretton Woods Agreement. These controls eased as trends in economic globalization accelerated, especially after the 1970s.⁸³

In the neomedieval era, capital and labor mobility have become even more pronounced because of the effects of technology, weakened border controls, and increased instability in some regions. Digital technologies and the adoption of free-floating currencies have sped up the movement of capital. While this may have the desirable effect of providing adequate funds for investment, it can also exacerbate crises through the destabilizing effects of rapid influxes and withdrawals of capital, as happened in the Asian financial crisis of 1997.⁸⁴ Chinese authorities have generally expressed concern

⁸⁰ Victor Lieberman, "The Qing Dynasty and Its Neighbors: Early Modern China in World History," *Social Sciences History*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2008.

⁸¹ Kenneth John Button and Henry Vega, "The Effects of Air Transportation on the Movement of Labor," *GeoJournal*, Vol. 71, No. 1, 2008.

⁸² Charles Hirschman and Elizabeth Mogford, "Immigration and the American Industrial Revolution from 1880 to 1920," *Social Science Research*, Vol. 38, No. 4, 2009.

⁸³ Eric Helleiner, *States and the Reemergence of Global Finance*, Cornell University Press, 1994.

⁸⁴ Chiarra Cordelli and Jonathan Levy, "The Ethics of Global Capital Mobility," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 116, No. 2, May 2022.

about the potentially destabilizing effects of high capital mobility. Authorities have called for stronger controls on international capital, in part because corrupt officials have moved large volumes of money away in foreign countries.⁸⁵ Following the recent congressional legislation targeting foreign companies whose stock is listed in U.S. markets, Chinese media outlets have also pledged to tighten control of foreign money in capital markets.⁸⁶

In the United States, labor mobility has slowed as opportunities for advancement have shrunk.⁸⁷ Other countries have had higher rates of labor mobility, however. In 2004, the European Union granted EU citizens freedom of movement and residence within member countries. Immigration from outside Europe increased significantly beginning in 2013 because of the effects of war in the Middle East and Africa.⁸⁸ Labor mobility has also increased significantly in China, which is experiencing the largest migration in centuries as rural workers flock to the cities.⁸⁹ China's experience reflects the migration of rural workers to large cities that has appeared throughout the global south.⁹⁰ Migration has proven highly beneficial for some countries, such as Lebanon, where remittances make up 54 percent of GDP, and Tajikistan, where remittances make up 34 percent of GDP.⁹¹

⁸⁵ "240 Corruption Cases Uncovered in Banks," China Daily, October 24, 2005; "China Needs 'Orderly Development' of Capital—People's Daily," Reuters, February 8, 2022.

⁸⁶ Wang Tianyu and Huo Li, "China's Securities Regulator Vows to Prevent Dramatic Foreign Inflow and Outflow," CGTN, April 19, 2021.

⁸⁷ Damien Azzopardi, Fozan Fareed, Mikkel Hermansen, Patrick Lenain, and Douglas Sutherland, *The Decline in Labor Mobility in the United States: Insights from New Administrative Data*, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, December 14, 2020.

⁸⁸ Maissaa Almustafa, "Reframing Refugee Crisis: A 'European Crisis of Migration' or a 'Crisis of Protection?'" *Politics and Space*, Vol 1, No. 1, 2020.

⁸⁹ Cai Fang, Du Yang, and Wang Meiyang, *Migration and Labor Mobility in China*, United Nations Human Development Report, 2009.

⁹⁰ Mathias Lerch, "International Migration and City Growth in the Global South: An Analysis of IPUMS Data for Seven Countries, 1992–2013," *Population and Development Review*, Vol. 46, No. 3, 2020.

⁹¹ World Bank, "Remittances to Reach \$630 Billion in 2022 with Record Flows into Ukraine," press release, May 11, 2022b.

In sum, labor mobility and migration have largely increased in much of the world, which evokes trends not seen since preindustrial times. In preindustrial societies, labor and capital lacked mobility and were often tied to local manor-based economies. The net effect, however, was to impair the formation of a national market and economy coextensive with the authority of a national government. In the neomedieval era, the mobility of labor and capital compounds other trends that collectively erode the authority of the nation-state.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The mobility of labor and capital carries important implications for the U.S. rivalry with China. The sensitivity of international capital to shocks suggests that capital mobility could exert a restraining influence on potential U.S. tensions with China.⁹² At the same time, both China and the United States could seek to limit capital to the other side if tensions worsened.⁹³ The West's imposition of sanctions on Russia following its invasion of Ukraine is an example of how economic punishments could be wielded in a crisis.

The acceleration of migration in Europe and the Middle East could stress U.S. partners and exacerbate conflict situations in the region. Crisis situations that erupt could, accordingly, invite the involvement of great powers, such as the United States and China. A possible example is the involvement of many countries.⁹⁴ China's migration flows could have a dampening effect on the competition as its urban populations overwhelm existing social welfare networks, exacerbating tensions between urban and rural populations, and further straining budgets for social spending.⁹⁵

⁹² Jeffrey M. Chwieroth and Timothy J. Sinclair, "How You Stand Depends on How We See: International Capital Mobility as Social Fact," *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 2013.

⁹³ Dong Jung Kim, "Economic Containment as a Strategy of Great Power Competition," *International Affairs*, Vol. 95, No. 6, 2019.

⁹⁴ Muharrem Ekşi, "The Syrian Crisis as a Proxy War and the Return of the Realist Great Power Politics," *Uluslararası Kriz ve Siyaset Araştırmaları Dergisi*, 2017.

⁹⁵ Alex Jingwei He, "The Welfare Is Ours: Rural-to-Urban Migration and Domestic Welfare Chauvinism in Urban China," *Journal of Contemporary China*, Vol. 31, No. 134, 2022.

In a war, combatants could seek to weaponize capital flows to harm the other economy through manipulation of capital or cyberattacks. The goal of such attacks would be to harm the economy of the rival state. Mass migration as a result of conflict could also complicate military operations and could itself become weaponized as a means of disruption.⁹⁶ Military planners might need to consider the effects of mass migration that could arise from the onset of conflict in distant lands.

Conclusion

Although the rate of growth is slower than during the heyday of the modern industrial era, economies in the neomedieval era face enormous resource demands from populations habituated to a basic level of government services and protection from an array of dangers and threats. Slow economic growth rates are compounded by extensive transnational activity that weakens the state's authority to regulate affairs within its borders. As the legitimate economy loses appeal because of its limited ability to generate attractive jobs and wages, criminal activity is likely to become more appealing to the desperate. Extensive labor and capital mobility will further stress the ability of states to respond effectively to these developments.

For the U.S.-China rivalry, these trends carry important implications (see Table 4.2). In the peacetime competition, slowing growth rates will likely constrain defense spending for the foreseeable future, especially in light of competing domestic demands. Both countries will also continue to require power-projection capabilities to protect distant but vital inputs to the economy, such as energy supplies and access to markets and raw materials. The danger of corruption in the military, which has plagued the PLA for years, will warrant closer scrutiny in Western militaries as well.

In the event of a U.S.-China war, slow and imbalanced growth will constrain options for resourcing major war. U.S. decisionmakers may rely on contractors as the most cost-effective way to scale up and sustain warfighting forces, as they have in the Iraq and Afghan wars. The importance of eco-

⁹⁶ Kelly M. Greenhill, "Migration as a Weapon in Theory and in Practice," *Military Review*, Vol. 96, No. 6, 2016.

TABLE 4.2

Implications of Neomedieval Economic Aspects for U.S.-China Rivalry

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Rivalry	Implications for U.S.-China Conflict
Economic growth patterns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slowing growth rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fewer resources are available • Eliciting popular support is more difficult • Competition over technology, capital, and talent will increase 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High-end war is infeasible • Militaries will rely more on contracts to sustain warfare • Resource constraints will limit the scale and scope of war
Transnational activity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive integration into global economy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Militaries may need to deploy far afield to protect important economic interests • Threats to economic activity abroad may be pervasive and persistent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Energy, trade, investment, communication, and other forms of interconnectivity may be weaponized • The prospect of proxy war to help partners fend off such challenges will be higher
Illicit economy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive—spans domestic and international—cybercrime, piracy, cartels 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Military budgets may be pressured by need to improve domestic security at home and among partners • Militaries may need to step up efforts to control corruption 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corruption and criminal profiteering could plague warfighting • Corruption and criminality may spread in militaries
Capital and labor mobility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extensive and fast 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fear of capital flight could have a restraining effect • Tensions could result in tighter capital controls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finance could be weaponized to harm the rival economy • Mass migration could complicate military operations

conomic growth to maintaining public order will raise incentives for defense planners to consider ways of disrupting an adversary's economy while minimizing vulnerabilities to the country's own economy. The globalization of production and trade raises the possibility that economic ties could be weaponized in conflict through embargoes, trade disruption, and other measures. And military forces may encounter criminality and corruption even in war.

Security Issues: Pervasive Threats

In this chapter, we review neomedieval developments related to security issues. While we regard *pervasive threats* as the overarching feature, we will explore four interrelated aspects: (1) organized violence, (2) nonstate threats, (3) political security, and (4) security force organization. We will consider how each aspect manifested in the preindustrial Europe, preindustrial China, industrial nation-state, and neomedieval eras. We will argue that the increasing salience of nonmilitary threats combined with the weakening capacity of states to cope with them has resulted in a situation that resembles preindustrial societies in key ways, such as the prevalence of intrastate war, increased salience of nonstate threats, serious political security challenges, and increased cooperation between military and law enforcement forces (Table 5.1). We will then analyze implications for the U.S.-China rivalry.

Organized Violence: Armed Conflict in Weakening States

Organized violence consists of groups of people carrying out coordinated acts of violence against a specific target. Organized violence can endanger a state's security and survival, depending on the nature and severity of the challenge. *Interstate conflict* consists of violence between the militaries of rival states. *Intrastate conflict* consists of violence between contending armed groups within the borders of one state. Both types of wars have occurred throughout history. The types of organized violence that predominate, however, have varied over time.

TABLE 5.1

Summary of Security Issue Aspects Between Eras

Aspect	Preindustrial Europe	Preindustrial China	Industrial Nation-State	Neomedieval
Organized violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily intrastate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily intrastate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily interstate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily intrastate
Nonstate threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive, including pandemics, banditry, natural disaster 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive, including pandemics, banditry, natural disasters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited, occasional 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive, including pandemics, crime, natural disasters
Political security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often insecure, with frequent challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Often insecure with frequent challenges 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Generally secure with few challenges to rule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trending toward insecure, with increasing challenges
Security force organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military: internal and external duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military: internal and external duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military: external duties Police: internal duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military: trending toward both internal and external duties Police: both internal and external duties

Both types of violence occurred in medieval Europe, although intrastate conflict predominated, partly because of the contested nature of political power. Major medieval conflicts included the Crusades, the Hundred Years' War, and numerous wars and rebellions in virtually all medieval kingdoms. These conflicts involved a complex mix of interstate and intrastate wars.¹ However, much of the organized violence occurred within and across polities over issues of succession, control of territory, and suppression of various nonstate actors.² Military forces also fought against rebellious peasants, aggrieved mercenaries, and marauding bandits. Medieval armies often targeted civilian populations to loot or to terrorize enemies.³

Ming- and Qing-era warfare also included both intrastate and interstate wars. Imperial armies repeatedly invaded and subjugated neighboring countries. Ming armies invaded Vietnam and fought Dutch troops, for example. Both Ming and Qing forces fought Mongol and other nomadic tribes, primarily along the northern and western frontiers, as happened in the three Dzungar-Qing wars. But as much or more of the fighting took place against subnational actors, especially during periods of dynastic decline. When imperial rule weakened, rebellions frequently broke out across the empire, such as in the Ming-Mong Mao War. Both Ming and Qing armies also contended with major pirate infestations along the eastern coast.⁴ Indeed, the largest and most devastating wars in the Ming and Qing dynasties involved large-scale insurrections. The White Lotus Rebellion, which occurred in the early 1800s, resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In

¹ Jonathan Sumption, *The Hundred Years War: Trial by Battle*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999.

² Warren C. Brown, *Violence in Medieval Europe*, Routledge, 2011.

³ John Withington, "Infamous Assassins of the Middle Ages," *Lapham Quarterly*, December 3, 2020.

⁴ Liew Foon Ming, "The Luchuan-Pingmian Campaigns (1436-1449) in the Light of Official Chinese Historiography," *Oriens Extremus*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1996; Yang Hongying [杨鸿英], "From Beginning to End on Qianlong's Two Conquest of Dzungar" [乾隆朝两次平定准噶尔始末], *Journal of the Palace Museum* [故宫博物院院刊], No. 4, 1988.

the mid-1800s, the Taiping Rebellion, one of the bloodiest wars in history, cost perhaps more than 30 million lives.⁵

In the industrial nation-state era, countries experienced some intrastate conflict but mainly fought against one another. Warfare both between and within states was common from the medieval period through the 1700s. However, once the states became centralized and unified, in the 1800s to the 1900s, intrastate wars became less common. Even major exceptions, such as the American Civil War and the Spanish Civil War, resembled interstate wars in their strategies of mobilization and fielding of mass armies consisting of uniformed conscripted soldiers.⁶ Other forms of organized domestic violence in the period included infrequent riots, such as the New York City draft riots in 1863, and insurrections, such as the Paris Commune in 1870.⁷

The predominance of interstate conflict reflected, in part, the consolidated and unitary nature of nation-states.⁸ Interstate wars between nation-states were often large and devastating. Some conflicts lasted months or years, involving large numbers of citizen-soldiers conscripted and equipped by the state. The scale of industrial-age warfare could reach truly epic proportions. During the Napoleonic Wars and World War I, for example, battles sometimes involved hundreds of thousands of troops. Millions of soldiers were deployed for years on end along the Eastern Front in World War II.⁹

In the neomedieval era, the world has seen a general decline in the incidence of interstate wars between nation-state militaries, although the Russia-Ukraine war shows that it has not disappeared entirely. Although the exact reasons remain debated, scholars have posited a number of reasons, including the proliferation of nuclear weapons, norms against state aggression, economic interdependence, and the changing nature of postin-

⁵ Spence, 2013, pp. 111–112.

⁶ Tilly, 1990.

⁷ Iver Bernstein, *The New York City Draft Riots: Their Significance for American Society and Politics in the Age of the Civil War*, Oxford University Press, 1991; Stewart Edwards, *The Paris Commune 1871*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971.

⁸ Bobbit, 2002; “Correlates of War,” website, 2022.

⁹ William H. McNeil, “The Industrialization of War,” *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, July 1982.

dustrial economies.¹⁰ However, this has not meant the end of war. Rather, scholars have noted that conflict has taken a different form. Resurrecting patterns commonly seen in preindustrial Europe and imperial China in the periods of dynastic decline, the most common form of organized violence in the past few decades has consisted of intrastate conflict. Contemporary intrastate conflicts tend to prominently feature irregular operations, attacks on civilians, protracted conflict, and a blurring of the distinction between *crime* and *war*, such as efforts to carry out ethnic cleansing.¹¹ Examples include the civil wars in Bosnia-Herzegovina (1992–1995), Rwanda (1990–1994), Yemen (2015–present), and South Sudan (2016–2020).

Chinese military analysts tend to focus on conventional war and pay less attention to intrastate conflict in their writings. Authors frequently discuss the potential military applications of emerging technologies and focus almost exclusively on threats from conventional militaries.¹² Chinese strategists have extensively analyzed U.S. military capabilities and foreign policy intentions.¹³ Some experts have, in particular, highlighted territorial disputes in the first island chain as “the biggest cost-imposing challenge to China’s effort to maintain perimeter security and to a certain extent an existential threat.”¹⁴ When Chinese experts discuss intrastate conflict, they often attempt to examine its causes and advocate for peacekeeping operations, such as those led by the UN.¹⁵

¹⁰ Thomas S. Szayna, Stephen Watts, Angela O’Mahoney, Bryan Frederick, and Jennifer Kavanagh, *What Are the Trends in Armed Conflicts, and What Do They Mean for U.S. Defense Policy?* RAND Corporation, RR-1904-A, 2017; Nils Petter Gleditsch, Steven Pinker, Bradley A. Thayer, Jack S. Levy, and William R. Thompson, “The Decline of War,” *International Studies Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3, September 2013.

¹¹ Kaldor, 2012.

¹² Bing Liu [刘斌], *New Technological Revolution and International Politics* [新科技革命与国际政治], Party School of the Central Committee of CCP [中共中央党校], 2004.

¹³ Yuan Ming [袁明], “Post-Cold War U.S.-China Policy American Strategic Elites and Sino-U.S. Relations” [冷战后美国对华政策探源——兼论美国“战略精英”和中美关系], *American Studies* [美国研究], Vol. 2, 1998.

¹⁴ He Maochun [何茂春] and Bin Tian [田斌], “Basic Evaluation of China’s National Security and the Threats” [当前中国国家安全的基本评估与威胁因素], *Frontiers* [人民论坛·学术前沿], Vol. 11, 2014.

¹⁵ “Ethiopia’s ‘Civil War’” [埃塞俄比亚“内战外打”], *Xinhua*, December 23, 2021.

In sum, the nature of organized violence appears to be in retreat from the modern period's nearly exclusive focus on interstate war. Echoing the fragile and perilous state of preindustrial societies, organized violence appears to take the form of intrastate conflict involving irregular forces, violence against civilians, and protracted conflict.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The changing nature of armed threats carries important implications for the U.S.-China rivalry. In peacetime competition, the increasing prevalence of intrastate conflict could either open opportunities for cooperation or aggravate a sense of rivalry, depending on the situation.¹⁶ The risks of war, migration, and crime that arise from failed and failing states could drive both countries to collaborate to promote stability in key regions. The breakdowns of some states could also become occasions for confrontation, if the two rivals offer contrasting solutions that support other policy goals. A hint of this possibility can be seen in Iran and Ethiopia, where the U.S. and Chinese governments backed different actors and solutions in the past few years.¹⁷ Demand for assistance to cope with intrastate conflict could also draw resources away from preparations for conventional combat. In Pakistan, for example, persistent internal turmoil has spurred China to fund a 12,000-man security force to protect Chinese workers and investments.¹⁸

These trends also suggest that any potential U.S.-China war would bear little resemblance to the titanic clashes of the industrial age. It could consist of an overlap of interstate and intrastate conflict, perhaps unfolding in some of the fragile countries along the BRI.¹⁹ It is possible that both countries

¹⁶ Thomas J. Christensen, "Fostering Stability or Creating a Monster? The Rise of China and U.S. Policy Toward East Asia," *International Security*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 2006.

¹⁷ Samuel Gebre, "China Opposes U.S. Threat to Impose Sanctions on Ethiopia," Bloomberg, September 23, 2021.

¹⁸ Zahid Gishkori, "Economic Corridor: 12,000 Strong Force to Guard Chinese Workers," *Express Tribune*, March 30, 2015.

¹⁹ Heng Jiang [蒋姮], "Assessment and Management of Geopolitical Risks Associated with 'One Belt One Road'" ["一带一路" 地缘政治风险的评估与管理], *Intertrade* [国际贸易], Vol. 8, 2015; Joel Wuthnow, *Chinese Perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative: Strategic Rationales, Risks, and Implications*, National Defense University Press, 2017.

could find their efforts to contend with another frequently distracted by the need to attend to the needs of partner states under pressure from domestic strife and other threats.²⁰ Moreover, both countries could become more vulnerable to information operations and other activities designed to foment trouble and impose economic hardship on their respective populations.

Nonstate Threats: The Proliferation of Dangers

In addition to threats from adversary militaries, societies may face a variety of nonstate threats. Violent nonstate actors could foment unrest, prey on citizens, and/or carry out illegal activities. Examples include bandits, criminal organizations, terrorists, and insurgents. Societies may also face dangers from infectious diseases; industrial accidents; ecological disasters, such as oil spills and radiation leaks; and natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and storms. Scholars have noted a strong correlation between natural disasters and armed conflict because of a dynamic systemic process in which resource depletion and violent disputes reinforce one another.²¹

In the preindustrial period, nonstate threats were common and deadly. Famines and pestilence afflicted medieval Europeans so consistently as to be considered features of daily life.²² Europe also suffered from extensive predation by armed gangs of bandits, pirates, highwaymen, and rebellious peasants. Mercenaries, when out of work, often plundered the countryside as well, sometimes in the territories of their erstwhile employers.²³ Preindustrial China also suffered extensively from famine and natural disasters, including drought, hail, frost, floods, landslides, and earthquakes. Accord-

²⁰ Wen Zha, "Great Power Rivalry and the Agency of Secondary States: a Study Based on China's Relations with Southeast Asian Countries," *International Relations of the Asia-Pacific*, Vol. 22, No. 1, 2022.

²¹ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Ecological Threat Register 2021: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace*, 2021, p. 4.

²² Guido Alfani and Cormac Ó Gráda, eds., *Famine in European History*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

²³ Alejandro Colas, *Mercenaries, Bandits, Pirates, and Empires: Private Violence in Historical Perspective*, Oxford University Press, 2010.

ing to one study, 783 disasters during the Ming and Qing dynasties resulted in more than 57,626,000 deaths.²⁴ Natural disasters and famine exacerbated social instability, spurring uprisings and rebellions. Imperial China regarded the effects of wars and natural disasters as direct threats to the legitimacy of the ruler. Evidence of government failure to respond effectively to a natural disaster implied a loss of the “mandate of heaven,” which could imperil the emperor’s rule.²⁵

In the modern industrial era, natural disasters continued to affect humanity as they have since the dawn of time, although human actions, such as war, industrial accidents, and misguided economic policies, have occasionally produced devastation rivaling that of natural disasters.²⁶ In terms of infectious disease, the world experienced a devastating pandemic in the Spanish Flu (1918–1920), which killed an estimated 25–50 million people worldwide. However, key advances in vaccines and medicine in the 20th century dramatically reduced the number of pandemics and deaths.²⁷ Violence by nonstate actors in the industrialized West during this period remained relatively low. This was, in part, due to consolidated nature of nation-states, which were generally more secure than their preindustrial counterparts.²⁸ Intrastate armed conflict remained at a generally low level,

²⁴ Xiaohua Zhao, “Natural Disasters and the Development of Chinese History,” *Journal of Cultural Interaction in East Asia*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2021, p. 30.

²⁵ Shiwen Yang [杨世文], “Theories of Natural Disasters During the Han Dynasty and the Confucian Theory of the Emperor and the Way” [汉代灾异学说与儒家君道论], *Social Sciences in China* [中国社会科学], Vol. 3, 1991.

²⁶ Institute for Economics & Peace, *Ecological Threat Register 2020: Understanding Ecological Threats, Resilience and Peace*, 2020, p. 49.

²⁷ Rachel Baker, Ayesha S. Mahmud, Ian F. Miller, Malavika Rajeev, Fidisoa Rasambainarivo, Benjamin L. Rice, Saki Takahashi, Andrew J. Tatem, Caroline E. Wagner, Lin-Fa Wang, et al., “Infectious Disease in an Era of Global Change,” *Nature Reviews Microbiology*, Vol. 20, 2020.

²⁸ John T. Picarelli, “Responding to Transnational Organized Crime—Supporting Research, Improving Practice,” *National Institute of Justice Journal*, September 30, 2011.

with most armed violence occurring between states.²⁹ By contrast, World Wars I and II killed perhaps as many as 70 million people or more.³⁰

Similar trends occurred in China. The CCP's consolidation of its control of China after 1949 reduced the pervasive societal violence that plagued the nation during the tumultuous period of civil war, warlords, and Japanese invasion from the 1900s through the 1940s.³¹ Famine and deaths from infectious disease also declined in modern China as the government adopted modern medicine and sanitation measures. However, the CCP's misguided economic policies and state-directed violence killed far more people than dangers from nonstate sources. For example, the man-made famine created by Mao Zedong's Great Leap Forward killed an estimated 30 million people.³²

Since 2000, nonstate threats have been more dangerous than interstate or interstate war, partly because of the decline in the incidence of interstate war and partly because of the decline in state capacity we discussed previously. Natural disasters continue to inflict damage and cause casualties, but the number of deaths remains relatively low.³³ However, looming dangers associated with climate change could aggravate various natural disasters and could potentially result in major increases in damage and loss of life.³⁴ Modern medicine has largely succeeded in controlling the death toll from infectious diseases, although new patterns in demographics and modern transportation are escalating the risk of disease. There have been several

²⁹ Karen Dupuy and Siri Aas Rustad, "Trends in Armed Conflict, 1946–2017," Peace Research Institute in Oslo, 2018.

³⁰ John Keegan, *The First World War*, Random House, 2019; Anthony Beever, *The Second World War*, Little, Brown and Co., 2012.

³¹ Fengli Deng [邓礼峰], "The Suppression of Bandits at the Beginning of P.R.C. (Part 1)" [建国之初的大剿匪 (上)], *Outlook* [瞭望], No. 29, 1999a; Fengli Deng [邓礼峰], "The Suppression of Bandits at the Beginning of P.R.C. (Part 2)" [建国之初的大剿匪 (下)], *Outlook* [瞭望], No. 30, 1999b.

³² David Hipgrave, "Communicable Disease Control in China from Mao to Now," *Journal of Global Health*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2011; Valerie Straus and Daniel Southeri, "How Many Died? New Evidence Suggests Far Higher Numbers for the Victims of Mao Zedong's Era," *Washington Post*, July 17, 1994.

³³ Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020, p. 49.

³⁴ Environmental Protection Agency, "The Future of Climate Change," webpage, undated.

international outbreaks, such as Zika, severe acute respiratory syndrome, and swine flu, but COVID-19 represents the deadliest pandemic in 100 years, killing 6 million people from 2019–2022.³⁵ Scientists believe that such outbreaks will become more common as the world’s population and ease of travel grow.³⁶ Airline flights have doubled since 2000, and, since 2007, more people live in urban than rural areas.³⁷

Threats from nonstate actors have increased from the industrial nation-state era. Since the 1970s, organized crime has become increasingly transnational. In 1995, the U.S. government first recognized transnational crime as a national security threat. In the 2000s, the threat has continued to evolve as these criminal groups capture legitimate businesses and penetrate financial, commodity, and other markets.³⁸ An intensification of natural disasters, owing in part to the effects of climate change, has aggravated problems of intrastate conflict. Countries with the lowest environmental resilience and highest level of stress, concentrated in Africa and the Middle East, are also experiencing some of the highest levels of armed conflict.³⁹

The challenges nonstate threats pose have gained attention in the Chinese military. Since at least 2006, China’s defense white papers have designated “nonwar missions” to tackle nonstate threats a major responsibility for the PLA.⁴⁰ The *Outline for Army’s Nonwar Military Operations (Trial)*, promulgated in 2022, underscores the growing importance with which the PLA regards nonstate threats.⁴¹ The latest edition of the *Science of Military Strategy*, which serves as a capstone document in Chinese military strat-

³⁵ Marie Rosenthal, “Fauci: COVID-19 Worst Pandemic in 100 Years,” *Infectious Disease Special Edition*, October 21, 2020.

³⁶ World Meteorological Organization, “Weather-Related Disasters Increase Over Past 50 Years, Causing More Damage but Fewer Deaths,” August 31, 2021.

³⁷ Baker et al., 2020.

³⁸ Picarrelly, 2011.

³⁹ Institute for Economics & Peace, 2020, p. 4.

⁴⁰ State Council Information Office, “China’s National Defense,” December 29, 2006.

⁴¹ “Chairman of the Central Military Committee Xi Jinping Signs the Order, Announcing the Outline for Army’s Nonwar Military Operations (Trial)” [中央军委主席习近平签署命令，发布《军队非战争军事行动纲要（试行）》], *People’s Daily* [人民日报], June 14, 2022.

egy, similarly underscores the importance of nonstate threats.⁴² The text listed antiterrorism as a priority for the PLA's nonwar military operations.⁴³ Military analysts have also considered the dangers pandemics pose. Scholars associated with the China's National Defense University have described the COVID-19 pandemic as a test of the PLA's responsiveness and ability to manage such perils.⁴⁴ Another study, conducted by PLA Rehabilitation Center, called for the establishment of regulations and procedures at the institutional level to respond more effectively to future pandemics.⁴⁵

These dangers are especially menacing to neomedieval states because of their weakened legitimacy and capacity. Moreover, the very weaknesses of these states limit their ability to respond effectively to the same perils. Political gridlock, civil conflict, and atrophied institutions hamstring the efforts of government officials to ensure domestic security and control nonstate dangers. The uneven success of states in countering myriad threats, in turn, only exacerbates the weakening of state legitimacy.

In sum, the increasing salience of nonstate threats stands out as a distinctive feature of the postindustrial age. Yet the fact that, in many ways, these dangers surpass those of interstate wars evokes patterns more commonly seen in preindustrial societies. As in the past, security and stability in the 21st century have less to do with military conflict between states and issues of grand strategy and more to do with issues of public safety, inequality, violent nonstate actors, and the disruptive consequences of natural disasters.⁴⁶

⁴² Xiao Tianliang [肖天亮], *The Science of Military Strategy* [战略学], PLA National Defense University [中国人民解放军国防大学], 2020.

⁴³ Xiao Tianliang, 2020.

⁴⁴ Liu Zhibing [刘志兵] and Jingjing Zhang [张菁菁], "Revelation of People's Army in Carrying out COVID Pandemic Related Duties" [人民军队执行新冠肺炎疫情防控任务的启示], *Party Lecture Reference* [党课参考], Vol. 10, 2020.

⁴⁵ Peng Xiaoxin [彭晓欣], Jun Wang [王俊], et al., "Practice Review and Reflection of Prevention and Control of COVID-19 in Military Rehabilitation Institutions" [军队疗养机构防控COVID-19的实践回顾与思考], *Military Medical Journal of South China* [华南国防医学杂志], Vol. 8, 2021.

⁴⁶ Williams, 2008.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The intensifying threat from nonstate threats raises several implications for the U.S.-China competition and potential conflict scenarios. In peacetime competition, these dangers could dampen the rivalry dynamic. China's ambitions for the BRI are already threatened by a variety of primarily nonstate threats. Insurgents and criminal gangs have kidnapped and killed Chinese workers in Iraq, Pakistan, and other countries. An intensification of attacks could stress the PLA's limited ability to project power abroad.⁴⁷ Indeed, to date, Chinese companies and citizens abroad have relied primarily on host-nation-provided and private security forces in the absence of PLA support.⁴⁸ If China assesses that the likelihood of war with the United States remains low, it could allocate more military assets to cope with the nonstate threats. China might establish units within the PLA to handle future pandemics and expand the military's role in counterterrorism operations. Moreover, because many nonwar duties are decentralized and civilian-centered, they are likely to stress the military culture and centralized command structure of the PLA. Chinese military forces would need to improve coordination with local government and national civilian ministries, including the police force, foreign ministry, and emergency-management services.⁴⁹ Both the United States and China could find their militaries in demand from partners grappling with nonstate threats. In some cases, this could open avenues of cooperation but, in others, could aggravate competition for influence, as happened when the United States and China competed to provide aid in the wake of the natural disaster in the Philippines in 2013.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Helena Legarda and Meia Nouwens, "Guardians of the Belt and Road: The Internationalization of China's Private Security Companies," Mercator Institute for China Studies. Berlin, August 16, 2018.

⁴⁸ Zi Yang, "Securing China's Belt and Road Initiative," United States Institute of Peace, November 26 2018.

⁴⁹ Michael S. Chase, Jeffrey Engstrom, Tai Ming Cheung, Kristen A. Gunness, Scott Warren Harold, Susan Puska, and Samuel K. Berkowitz, *China's Incomplete Military Transformation: Assessing the Weaknesses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA)*, RAND Corporation, RR-893-USCC, 2015.

⁵⁰ "Typhoon Haiyan: China Sends Relief Team to Philippines," BBC, November 20, 2013.

If U.S.-China tensions escalated to conflict, both sides might be stressed by the continuing imperative to respond to nonstate dangers. Pandemics, migration, natural disasters, violent nonstate actors, and regional upheaval appear poised to remain permanent features of the security landscape for the foreseeable future.⁵¹ U.S. decisionmakers may need to allocate adequate forces to cope with these competing threats even as they focus on the military challenge China poses. The shift in resources to cope with such dangers could constrain the ability to invest in forces dedicated to fighting adversary conventional forces, which might, in turn, incentivize both sides to resort to largely indirect methods of conflict that leverage the potential of some nonstate threats to impose costs on the adversary.

In a U.S.-China war, incentives could grow for both sides to exploit the difficulties the adversary encounters in contending with nonstate threats. At the very least, both sides may have an incentive to refrain from helping the rival. For example, the prevalence of state fragility across Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia raises the prospect of overlapping interstate and intrastate violence, of which Syria's current war might well serve as a prototype. If these expand amid an unfolding state of U.S.-China hostilities, both sides could be incentivized to intervene to aid friendly armed groups and combat adversaries backed by the rival side.⁵² Such a situation would resemble U.S.-Chinese indirect confrontations across the developing world in the Cold War but on a much larger scale.⁵³

In some situations, both the U.S. and Chinese militaries may independently tackle the same violent nonstate threats even while remaining opposed to each other. This could, in turn, aggravate the dynamics of regional security competition.⁵⁴ For example, China and the United States

⁵¹ Mely Caballero-Anthony, *Negotiating Governance on Non-Traditional Security in Southeast Asia and Beyond*, Columbia University Press, 2018.

⁵² Geraint Alun Hughes, "Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2014.

⁵³ Shu Zhang, "The Sino-Soviet Alliance and the Cold War in Asia, 1954–1962," in Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad, eds., *The Cold War*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁵⁴ Erik Lin-Greenberg, "Non-Traditional Security Dilemmas: Can Military Operations Other Than War Intensify Security Competition in Asia?" *Asian Security*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2018.

both offered disaster relief after typhoons struck the Philippines in recent years.⁵⁵ However, the rival offers were widely regarded in terms of political gestures to shore up influence with a strategically located country.⁵⁶ Finally, the military capabilities required to respond to cyber intrusion and social unrest could prove especially valuable in U.S.-China conflict, especially because many of the nonstate threats are likely to appear in both countries.

Political Security: State Delegitimization and Civil Strife

The *political security* of a state refers to its relative domestic strength and ability to withstand challenges to the government's right to rule. A strong and secure state enjoys strong legitimacy and stability. A strong and secure state is more likely to face fewer challenges to its legitimacy and to overcome those that do arise. A weak and insecure state is likely to face many more challenges to its right to rule and may fall to some of the challenges. Weak and insecure states are especially vulnerable to violent attempts to overthrow the government through uprisings, insurgencies, rebellions, and revolutions.

Preindustrial states generally experienced a higher level of political insecurity. In medieval Europe, rulers faced frequent challenges to both their sovereignty and legitimacy from a variety of actors. Nobles, the Catholic Church, religious minorities, and other actors challenged the authority of the king or supreme ruler. The Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 proved a critical step in establishing the principle of sovereignty, but states continued to grapple with challenges to their sovereignty and legitimacy for centuries afterward.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ "China Offers More Assistance to Philippine Typhoon Victims," Xinhua, December 22, 2021.

⁵⁶ Sydney J. Freedberg, "Philippine Typhoon Showcases U.S. Strategic Edge Over China," *Breaking Defense*, November 11, 2013.

⁵⁷ Tilly, 1990.

In China, the political security of the empire varied over time. In periods of prosperity and peace, the emperor's rule remained secure in the core of the state but faced challenges to his universal claims from non-Han tribes and smaller kingdoms along the periphery.⁵⁸ In periods of dynastic decline, however, the emperor's rule became more tenuous. Rebellions and insurrections appeared more frequently and sometimes succeeded in overthrowing the emperor.⁵⁹ In all periods, the importance of establishing the state's legitimacy weighed heavily on the imperial bureaucracy. Because legitimacy hinged in part on the notion of the mandate of heaven, large-scale disasters of any type posed a constant threat to his rule. Moreover, the frequency of famine, corruption, and other disasters, as well as the generally limited capacity of preindustrial bureaucracies, made rebellions and challenges to the state's authority a perpetual danger.⁶⁰ Accordingly, the imperial court expended considerable effort to censor publications and promote Confucian teachings that affirmed the popular belief in divine affirmation.⁶¹

The industrial nation-state enjoyed a high degree of political security in part because of its centralization, consolidation of power, and provision of economic opportunity and various public goods. Politically secure governments could focus on external threats and, accordingly, build strong militaries to cope with such dangers. Citizens and groups may have challenged national governments with insurgencies and rebellions, but revolutions in the industrialized West rarely succeeded. Among consolidated liberal democracies, most changes in power occurred peacefully. The fascist and communist states attained power through considerable violence, but, once in power, proved relatively resistant to internal challenges. However, maintaining such a high level of political security required enormous resources, which proved a weakness for authoritarian states. Fascist Germany turned

⁵⁸ Dazheng Ma [马大正], "Imperial Frontier Policy and Governance of Ancient China [中国古代的边疆政策与边疆治理], *Western Regions Studies* [西与研究], Vol. 4, 2002.

⁵⁹ Frederick Wakeman, "Rebellion and Revolution: The Study of Popular Movements in Chinese History," *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, 1977.

⁶⁰ Shiwen Yang, 1991.

⁶¹ Xinliang Bai [白新良], "A Commentary on the Literary Prison of the Qianlong Dynasty" [乾隆朝文字狱述评], *Journal of the Palace Museum* [故宫博物院院刊], No. 3, 1991.

to military conquest partly to secure resources for its population.⁶² The Soviet Union remained durable so long as its economy generated sufficient revenue to meet some of the state's welfare obligations to the people but collapsed when its economy failed.⁶³

In the initial years following its establishment, the impoverished PRC experienced considerable internal turmoil, such as that of the Cultural Revolution. Stability increased once market-friendly reforms bolstered economic growth beginning in the late 1970s. However, the Chinese state did not achieve the levels of consolidated rule and political security enjoyed by wealthy Western industrial states. In the 1970s and 1980s, CCP rule faced severe challenges, including elite infighting and large-scale protests, such as those that ended in the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989.⁶⁴

In the neomedieval era, state legitimacy faces a growing number of threats. As states have failed to deliver satisfactory levels of governance, competitor groups have grown more attractive. Moreover, the emergence of alternatively governed spaces and porous borders have enabled external actors to exploit a weakening domestic security environment, exacerbating political extremism and violence.⁶⁵ The rise of the internet and social media has also contributed to the prevalence of social unrest and growth of trans- and subnational groups. This became readily apparent during the Arab Spring uprisings in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt around 2010, when grassroots movements used such technologies to coordinate actions and, eventually, overthrow regimes.⁶⁶ In liberal democracies, extremist movements have grown as support for centrist political parties withered. Extremist and terrorist groups have, in recent years, involved U.S. law enforcement and mili-

⁶² Adam Tooze, *The Wages of Destruction: The Making and Breaking of the Nazi Economy*, Penguin Books, 2008.

⁶³ Chris Miller, *The Struggle to Save the Soviet Economy*, University of North Carolina Press, 2016.

⁶⁴ Spence, 1996.

⁶⁵ "Civil Unrest Around the World Has Doubled in Last Decade," webpage, Vision of Humanity, 2020.

⁶⁶ Christos Frangonikolopoulos, "Explaining the Role and Impact of Social Media in the 'Arab Spring,'" *Academia's Global Media Journey*, Vol. 8, No. 1, 2012.

tary personnel.⁶⁷ Crime in general has declined since the highs of the 1990s; the FBI has reported that violent crime declined 47 percent from 1993 to 2019. However, perceptions that crime is worsening have persisted.⁶⁸ In the United States, state and local police-protection expenditures rose 26 percent per capita from 2000 to 2017.⁶⁹

In China, domestic challenges to CCP rule have intensified as well. Chinese scholars have focused, in particular, on a variety of challenges to government legitimacy, including the diversification of values and outlooks, insufficient public services, the lack of economic equity and social equality, and corruption.⁷⁰ As an example from the literature, scholar Qing He, from the Central Party School, lamented the government's inability to carry out policies that actually satisfied public needs.⁷¹ Chun Lu, also of the Central Party School, noted the difficulty of "energizing the society" while at the same time "avoiding social chaos."⁷² Central Party School scholar Xiaoming Jia similarly warned that the lack of public participation in governance posed a danger to the state's legitimacy.⁷³ Among the challenges identified,

⁶⁷ Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee, Grace Hwang, and Jared Thompson, "The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States," Center for Strategic & International Studies, April 12, 2021.

⁶⁸ John Gramlich, "What the Data Says (and Doesn't Say) About Crime in the United States," Pew Research, November 20, 2020.

⁶⁹ Emily Buehler and Kevin Scott, "State and Local Government Expenditures on Police Protection in the U.S., 2000–2017," statistical brief, U.S. Department of Justice, July 2020.

⁷⁰ Sang Xuecheng [桑学成], "Challenges Faced by CCP Government and Its Reconstruction in the Period of Social Change" [社会转型期中国共产党执政合法性面临的挑战及其重构], *Jiangsu Social Sciences* [江苏社会科学], 2008; Zheng Shucun [郑曙村], "The Transformation of CCP Government Legitimacy and Path Selection" [中国共产党执政合法性的转型及其路径选择], *Literature History and Philosophy* [文史哲], 2005.

⁷¹ He Qing [何芹], "Governance Performance and Legitimacy of the Ruling Party" [政绩与执政党的合法性], *Frontier* [前沿], Vol. 8, 2004.

⁷² Lu Chun [陆春], "Study on the Legitimacy of Long-Term Ruling of CCP" [中国共产党长期执政的合法性研究], Party School of the Central Committee of CCP [中共中央党校], 2013.

⁷³ Xiaoming Jia [贾小明], *Study on the Legitimacy of the CCP Rule* [共产党执政合法性研究], Party School of the Central Committee of CCP [中共中央党校], 2003.

organized crime and corruption have become particularly salient, according to some experts. Professor Boxin Wu from the People's Public Security University of China (the highest institution of professional education for China's police force) stated in a 2014 interview that criminal organizations numbered "one million strong." He stated that these entities had grown more sophisticated, "more structured in organization," and "more advanced in crimes involving corruptive and collusive political activities."⁷⁴ Associate Professor Aijun Tang from the Party School of the Central Committee of CCP argued that social division and social conflicts have become a major challenge to legitimacy and that "ideological construction" is vital to "providing a social consensus for the mediation of conflicts."⁷⁵

At the same time, government officials and scholars have begun to highlight the role that foreign influence may have on the state's legitimacy challenges.⁷⁶ Some scholars associated with the central government have argued for more active measures to "guard against and fend off the infiltration of Western ideologies and values."⁷⁷ Associate Professor Zhang Zhidan, from the Party School of the Central Committee of CCP, argued that social division and social conflicts have become major challenges to legitimacy and that ideology construction is vital to "providing a social consensus to mediate conflicts." He also warned against the dangers of infiltration of Western ideologies and values, which could exacerbate the social divisions.⁷⁸

The weakening legitimacy of the state has coincided with increasing domestic challenges to the government's rule. As disorder grows and politi-

⁷⁴ "Public Security University Professor: There Are No Less Than One Million Members of Gang-Related Organizations in Mainland (China)" [公安大学教授：内地涉黑组织成员不下百万人], Sohu News, April 5, 2014.

⁷⁵ Tang Aijun [唐爱军], "On the Self-Adaptability of CCP Ideology" [论中国共产党意识形态的自我调适], *Marxism & Reality* [马克思主义与现实], Vol. 3, 2017.

⁷⁶ Zhang Ning [张宁], "On the Ruling Legitimacy of the Communist Party of China from the Perspective of a Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Party Politics" [中西政党政治比较视阈下的中国共产党执政合法性研究], *Journal of Socialist Theory Guide* [理论导刊], Vol. 6, 2021.

⁷⁷ Tang Aijun, 2017.

⁷⁸ Zhang Zhidan [张志丹], "On the Innovation of Mainstream Ideology" [我国主流意识形态创新研究], *Contemporary World and Socialism* [当代世界与社会主义], 2020.

cal violence intensifies, states have had to commit more resources to law enforcement to ensure public order. Yet the increase in policing has brought about issues as well, including accusations of abuses in the United States and of corruption and brutal repression in China. The increase in domestic disorder and political violence resembles the less-stable situation in many preindustrial societies.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The domestic challenges to the legitimacy of the nation-state are likely to exacerbate competition between China and the United States and could carry extra risks in the event of war. Measures taken to shore up the legitimacy of the state and fend off the corrosive influence of rival states have aggravated perceptions of threat. Chinese efforts to bolster its ideological defense and narrative have, for example, spurred Western criticism of repression and anti-Western bias.⁷⁹ Similarly, China has denounced U.S. government efforts to constrain the potentially subversive influence of Chinese institutions and media hostile acts.⁸⁰ The weakening legitimacy of the state has made the issue of foreign influence more salient, elevating public discontent over issues of slowing economic growth, the financial cost of supporting an aging population, dwindling opportunities for upward mobility, and other domestic governance issues.⁸¹ The changing nature of international relations, which has expanded opportunities for states to influence subnational actors and groups in other countries, highlighted in Chapter 4, has only intensified the problem.

The same trends could, paradoxically, constrain competitive dynamics. To shore up legitimacy, both states may have little choice but to increase spending to address domestic concerns, including law enforcement and

⁷⁹ Vicky Xiuzhong Xu, "China's Youth Are Trapped in the Cult of Nationalism," *Foreign Policy*, October 1, 2019.

⁸⁰ "China Slams U.S. Designation of Confucius Institute," *Xinhua*, August 14, 2020.

⁸¹ Judith Banister, David E. Bloom, and Larry Rosenberg, "Population Aging and Economic Growth in China," in Masahiko Aoki and Jinglian Wu, eds., *The Chinese Economy*, Springer, 2012; Hongsheng Chen, Xingping Wang, Guo Chen, and Zhigang Li, "Upward Social Mobility in China: Do Cities and Neighbourhoods Matter?" *Habitat International*, Vol. 82, 2018.

social welfare spending.⁸² Concern about rising crime levels is one reason why China's internal security budget has surpassed its defense budget since 2011.⁸³ Chinese military texts, such as the *Science of Military Strategy*, similarly note that a consistent responsibility of the PLA remains that of "stability maintenance," which includes such tasks as "dealing with large-scale mass incidents" and "quelling riots."⁸⁴

In the event of a conflict, the vulnerability of both states to domestic challenges to state legitimacy could invite either side to carry out operations to foment unrest in the rival's home country. Hybrid war involving information operations, cyber operations, propaganda, and political agitation could feature prominently in such efforts.⁸⁵ The threat that the rival poses to state legitimacy could, in turn, aggravate nationalist sentiment and raise the risk of escalation to dangerous levels because of the acute perception of danger and the sense that it is impossible to coexist with a rival that threatens the existence of a state.⁸⁶

Security Force Organization: Military–Law Enforcement Collaboration

A basic responsibility of a state is to provide security for its populace. Threats can arise internally or externally. Accordingly, a state's security forces must be prepared to counter internal and external security forces. Such forces can be organized to address one type of threat or a combination of threats.

⁸² Yuchao Zhu, "'Performance Legitimacy' and China's Political Adaptation Strategy," *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Vol. 16, No. 2, 2011.

⁸³ Buckley, 2011.

⁸⁴ Xiao Tianliang, 2020.

⁸⁵ Christopher S. Chivvis, "Understanding Russian 'Hybrid Warfare': And What Can Be Done About It," testimony presented before the House Armed Services Committee on March 22, 2017, RAND Corporation, CT-468, 2017.

⁸⁶ John D. Ciorciari and Jessica Chen Weiss, "Nationalist Protests, Government Responses, and the Risk of Escalation in Interstate Disputes," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 2016.

Preindustrial societies did not distinguish between military and police forces. Dedicated, centrally organized police forces did not exist, at least in the modern form. To enforce law, preindustrial societies relied on military forces to cope with internal and external dangers. Rulers occasionally employed guards to protect temples, parks, and markets and to control crowds. These forces were not centralized and standardized in the sense of modern police forces and usually played limited roles in ensuring public order.⁸⁷ Pervasive domestic unrest and the limited availability of resources led rulers to employ military forces to enforce domestic order when not campaigning against foreign enemies.⁸⁸

A distinctive feature of the modern state period was the clear distinction between armed forces designed for international and external threats. Modern police forces that consisted of uniformed, centrally organized, and publicly employed units dedicated to enforcing the law arose in the late 1700s.⁸⁹ In particular, the standardization of criminal law and courts proved instrumental to the emergence of public police forces.⁹⁰ Around this time, permanent national militaries dedicated to combating external threats also arose. The militaries of the industrial nation-state specialized in fighting foreign enemies, usually adversary conventional militaries. National militaries consisted of citizen-soldiers who wore uniforms and were armed and equipped by the state.⁹¹ Although there were episodes in which nation-states used military forces to quell domestic insurrections, such as Britain's operations in Ireland, these were relatively rare.⁹²

⁸⁷ Douglas W. Allen and Yoram Barzel, "The Evolution of Criminal Law and Police During the Pre-Modern Era," *Journal of Law, Economics, & Organization*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2011.

⁸⁸ Timothy Edmunds, "What Are Armed Forces for? The Changing Nature of Military Roles in Europe," *International Affairs*, Vol. 82, No. 6, 2006.

⁸⁹ Richard J. Terrill, *World Criminal Justice Systems: A Comparative Survey*, Routledge Press, 2015.

⁹⁰ Allen and Barzel, 2011.

⁹¹ McNeil, 1982.

⁹² Andrew Sanders, *Times of Troubles: Britain's War in Northern Ireland*, Edinburgh University Press, 2012.

In the neomedieval era, militaries in developed countries continue to abide by laws that limit their involvement in the provision of domestic security. However, militaries in many developing countries have long waged war against nonstate actors, including drug cartels, insurgencies, and separatist movements.⁹³ In the United States, police forces have extended their presence abroad and often collaborate with military forces. Domestic law enforcement organizations, such as the Drug Enforcement Administration and the FBI, focus on activities abroad and domestically. For example, to stop drug and other trafficking activity, such law enforcement agencies as the Drug Enforcement Administration and the U.S. Coast Guard have expanded cooperation with law enforcement bodies in other countries.⁹⁴ U.S. law enforcement also works with U.S. military officials to counter criminal activity abroad.⁹⁵ Law enforcement authorities also track financial flows around the world as well.⁹⁶

Externally focused defense agencies have increased domestic surveillance as threats have proliferated. This surveillance has been facilitated by the advent of such new technologies as smart devices in homes, big data, the internet, and smartphones. The U.S. government has increased domestic surveillance in response to such events as the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terror.⁹⁷ The U.S. military has occasionally been deployed in border-control activities, such as Operation Faithful Patriot, but this is relatively rare. The military's Modern Airborne Fire Fighting System also seems to have been deployed increasingly over the past

⁹³ John Sullivan, "Criminal Insurgency in the Americas," *Small Wars Journal*, February 13, 2010.

⁹⁴ Lauren Monsen, "U.S. Law Enforcement Works with Counterparts Worldwide," U.S. State Department, Share America, July 15, 2021.

⁹⁵ Evan Munsing and Christopher J. Lamb, *Joint Interagency Task Force-South: The Best Known, Least Understood Interagency Success*, National Defense University Press, 2011.

⁹⁶ Steven M. D'Antuono, "Combating Money Laundering and Other Forms of Illicit Finance: Regulator and Law Enforcement Perspectives on Reform," statement before the Senate Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs Committee, November 29, 2018.

⁹⁷ Patrick Toomey, "The NSA Continues to Violate Americans' Internet Privacy Rights," American Civil Liberties Union, August 22, 2018.

two decades, with at least 18 major deployments since 2000 compared to five between 1980 and 1999.⁹⁸

As a political military, the PLA has, from the start, regarded domestic security as a top responsibility. Throughout its history, the PLA has occasionally intervened in domestic politics to impose order, as it did during the Cultural Revolution in the 1960s. After the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989, however, authorities sought to remove the military from domestic security functions. Subsequently, Beijing directed the PLA to focus on external threats and created the paramilitary People's Armed Police (PAP) to augment local law enforcement for domestic security. PAP's top responsibility remains guaranteeing CCP rule. PAP also routinely assists with disaster relief and humanitarian assistance in China.⁹⁹ At the same time, Chinese law enforcement forces are playing a larger role abroad. Chinese Coast Guard forces work closely with PLA and maritime militia forces to defend Chinese sovereignty claims in contested waters, sometimes in opposition to rival navies patrolling the same areas.¹⁰⁰

However, the situation has changed again in recent years. Chinese leaders have directed policies that increasingly blur the lines between law enforcement and military activities. On taking power, Xi Jinping created the National Security Commission, charged with coordinating all security activities domestically and abroad. He also articulated a "holistic security concept" that blurred the lines between traditional military and law enforcement and expanded the realm of security policy to economics, culture, politics, and other domains.¹⁰¹ Between 2017 and 2018, PAP gained control of the Chinese Coast Guard and now reports in the military's chain of command.¹⁰² PAP also has expanded its activities abroad. In recent years,

⁹⁸ National Interagency Fire Center, "Military Support History," undated.

⁹⁹ Ding Dou, "PLA's Disaster Relief Works: Review and Reform," *East Asian Policy*, Vol. 2, No. 3, July–September 2010.

¹⁰⁰ Ralph Jennings, "China's Coast Guard Can Fire on Foreign Vessels, Complicating Security in South Sea," VOA News, February 19, 2021.

¹⁰¹ Xi Jinping, 2020.

¹⁰² Henry Boyd, "China's People's Armed Police: Reorganized and Refocused," International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 21, 2019.

PAP has developed deployable counterterrorism units that train with partner countries abroad and has deployed armed guards in other countries.¹⁰³

Like so many other features of modern states, the sharply delineated responsibilities of modern police and military forces reflect, in part, the ample resources created by industrial economies and the internal unity of the states. As economies slow, states weaken, and threats multiply. In the countries where neomedieval trends have advanced the furthest, the boundary between internal and external security forces has blurred to such a degree as to evoke preindustrial societies. However, even in the wealthiest and most consolidated countries, governments face growing incentives to reallocate scarce military and law enforcement resources to tackle a diverse array of dangers.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The changing nature of security forces reflects the evolution of the threats and security challenges modern states face. There are several key implications for a U.S.-China competition and potential conflict. In competition, law enforcement can be expected to play a large role in countering the rival state because the risk of escalation is lower from the involvement of law enforcement than from that of military forces.¹⁰⁴ China's gray zone tactics involving Chinese Coast Guard ships have, for example, proven difficult for the United States to counter.¹⁰⁵ Military assets might help domestic law enforcement carry out surveillance to track and resist the rival efforts of a

¹⁰³ Yang Haolin [杨昊霖] and Li Li [李莉], "Points Taken from Reviewing Armed Police Overseas Antiterrorist Operations" [对武警部队境外反恐行动的几点思考], *Legal System and Society* [法制与社会], Vol. 32, 2016; Liu Lianlian [刘莲莲], "The Significance and Path of Enhancing the International Legitimacy of China's Overseas Interests Protection Mechanisms" [论国家海外利益保护机制的国际合法性意义与路径], *Pacific Journal* [太平洋学报], Vol. 6, 2018.

¹⁰⁴ Alexander Lott, "Low-Intensity Use of Force (Hybrid Warfare) Through the Prism of Law Enforcement and an Armed Attack," in Alexander Lott, *Hybrid Threats and the Law of the Sea*, Brill Nijhoff, 2022.

¹⁰⁵ Stephen F. Burgess, "Rising Bipolarity in the South China Sea: The American Rebalance to Asia and China's Expansion," *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 37, No. 1, 2016.

state to target U.S. personnel in other countries.¹⁰⁶ Space, information, and cyber operations span borders and, therefore, require close coordination between law enforcement and military authorities to protect U.S. interests and keep pace with China's military activities in those domains.

In conflict, the blurring line between military and police suggests closer coordination should be imperative. U.S. military forces could help partner states maintain law and order in the face of threats from nonstate actors, including those potentially backed by China.¹⁰⁷ Global domains, such as cyberspace and the information domain, also raise the possibility that law enforcement and military forces will have to coordinate more closely to defend the homeland from adversary attacks. The pervasiveness of state breakdown and nonstate threats could elevate the importance of constabulary duties for U.S. military forces even as they participate in combat operations against Chinese-backed forces.

Conclusion

The increasing salience of nonstate threats and the changing nature of organized violence carry important implications for the U.S.-China rivalry and potential conflict (Table 5.2). Worldwide, intrastate conflict will likely continue to be more common than interstate war. Natural disasters, pandemics, and other nonstate threats could become more prominent as well. The United States and China could find opportunities to cooperate to counter some of the dangers. However, an increase in tensions could spur both sides to take opposing sides on the same issues. Many of these dangers are most acute in developing countries along the BRI routes, which suggest that both countries could find opportunities to contend or cooperate in those areas. Both the United States and China may face growing pressure in the coming years to efficiently allocate military and law enforcement resources to counter a diverse array of threats.

¹⁰⁶ David G. Bolgiano, "Military Support of Domestic Law Enforcement Operations: Working Within Posse Comitatus," *FBI Enforcement Bulletin*, Vol. 70, No. 12, December 2001, p. 16.

¹⁰⁷ Richard L. Millett, *Searching for Stability: The US Development of Constabulary Forces in Latin America and the Philippines*, Army Combined Arms Center, 2010.

TABLE 5.2
Implications of Neomedieval Security Aspects for U.S.-China Rivalry

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Rivalry	Implications for U.S.-China Conflict
Organized violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primarily intrastate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Internal conflict in third parties could aggravate competition for influence Demands for assistance to cope with internal threats in partner states could stress patron military resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The potential is increasing for proxy conflict in fragile countries along BRI routes The need to cope with security problems arising from conflict-ridden countries could dampen U.S.-China rivalry
Nonstate threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensive threats, including pandemics, natural disasters, and violent nonstate actors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. and Chinese militaries may need to manage pandemics, natural disasters, and violent nonstate actor threats as they confront one another There is potential competition for military resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> War fighting resources may need to be diverted to address pressing nonstate threats Nonstate threats may be exploited for military advantage
Political security	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trending toward being insecure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Resources may need to be allocated from the military to more-pressing needs to bolster state legitimacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Political legitimacy could emerge as a key issue in a conflict, raising the stakes and risks Opportunities are increasing for operations to threaten adversary's political security
Security force organization	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Military and police: both internal and external duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> U.S. and Chinese militaries may need to plan for more constabulary duties and involve police forces in overseas operations Coordination will be required in cyber and information operations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Closer coordination between military and police forces may be required to counter adversary war efforts and cope with diverse threats

In the event of war, the same trends could increase the possibility of proxy conflicts, particularly in fragile countries along BRI routes. Nonstate threats could prove costly for countries to cope with, raising the possibility that adversaries might intervene in some way to further aggravate the burdens associated with mitigating such dangers. The insecurity of neomedieval states could make information and cyber operations more attractive among other methods that target the political vulnerability of the rival. And in a war, law enforcement and military forces will likely cooperate even more closely to counter both domestic and foreign threats.

Military Affairs: The Informalization of Warfare

In this chapter, we review developments related to military affairs in the neomedieval era. We highlight the *informalization of war* as an overarching trend but will explore four interrelated aspects in more detail: (1) combat operations, (2) war administration, (3) combatants, and (4) noncombatants. We will examine how these have changed across the preindustrial Europe, preindustrial China, industrial nation-state, and neomedieval eras. We will argue that the neomedieval battlefield evokes aspects of preindustrial warfare in the prevalence of intrastate conflict, prominence of siege warfare, and eclectic armed forces composed of professionals, mercenaries, and partner nonstate armed groups (Table 6.1). We will then explore what these trends might mean for U.S.-China rivalry.

Combat Operations: Irregular Warfare and Sieges

How militaries fight depends on many factors, including the composition of forces, geography, technology, and even the stakes over which they fight. Wars for national survival, for example, can be expected to be waged differently from fights over remote borders. And battles waged between massive conventional armies will unfold differently from those involving irregular forces on one side or the other. Combat operations can occur in pitched battles, in which massed bodies of troops fight in open terrain; as sieges; or as other forms.

War in medieval Europe tended to feature far smaller combat formations, frequently involved irregular operations, and often took the form of

TABLE 6.1

Military Affairs: Aspects Between Eras

Aspect	Preindustrial Europe	Preindustrial China	Industrial Nation-State	Neomedieval
Combat operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irregular warfare • Sieges predominate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irregular warfare • Sieges predominate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pitched conventional battles predominate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Irregular warfare • Sieges predominate
War administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited administration • Reliance on contracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited administration • Reliance on contracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly centralized government administration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited administration • Reliance on contracts
Combatants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Royal militaries augmented with informal coalitions of mercenaries • Noble-led forces, irregular troops 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imperial military augmented with mercenaries, non-Han tribes, client militaries, some conscripts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National militaries • Formal alliances, often institutionalized (e.g., NATO, Warsaw Pact) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Professional militaries augmented with mercenaries, militia, paramilitary, other armed groups
Noncombatants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilians provide passive support or are targeted (religious wars, banditry) • Limited conscription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilians provide passive support or targeted (raids, banditry) • Limited conscription 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilians not a main target • Main role is conscription • Political and/or economic mobilization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Civilians provide passive support • Targeted (ethnic cleansing, terror) • Limited conscription

sieges. Armies numbered in the thousands or tens of thousands at most. The Battle of Agincourt, considered one of the larger medieval battles, involved perhaps 20,000 combatants. The constraints of slow transportation technologies also played a role. Armies relied on horses and sailing ships to move, resupply, and communicate. Soldiers fought and killed one another with handheld melee and ranged weapons, such as swords; bows; and, later, firearms. These technologies limited the amount of damage and casualties that could be inflicted. Irregular war operations were common. Because there were virtually no standing medieval armies, all fighting forces consisted of temporarily recruited combatants. Rulers frequently lacked revenue to fight their wars and often relied on powerful nobles and other actors to contribute levied forces under their respective authorities.¹ These forces often sustained themselves with raids, looting, and pillage.² Medieval warfare also prominently featured the widespread use of assassination as a means of bring a war to a close quickly by eliminating the enemy leader.³ Although pitched battles did occur, medieval warfare more commonly took the form of sieges. Sieges allowed armies to control access to towns, cities, and other vital areas by weakening and adversary's defenses and denying access to reinforcements.⁴ Sieges offered the possibility of subduing an enemy while minimizing one's own casualties.

Preindustrial China shared some of these features but on a larger scale. Warfare in the Ming and Qing dynasties featured large armies, but these lacked the standardization and level of centralized control typical of modern industrial militaries. Instead, China's imperial government often relied on a combination of a relatively small professional imperial guard and large territorial garrisons (e.g., the Eight Banners elites and the Pan-Green Coalition of the Qing dynasty) augmented with mercenaries and levied forces contrib-

¹ Tilly, 1990.

² John France, "Medieval Irregular Warfare, c. 1000–1300," in John France, Kelly Devries, and Clifford J. Rogers, eds., *Medieval Military History*, Cambridge University Press, 2017.

³ Withington, 2020.

⁴ David Nicolle, *Medieval Warfare Source Book: Warfare in Western Christendom*, Caxton Press, 2004.

uted by local officials and allies.⁵ Chinese forces also featured types of technologies similar to those of their Western medieval counterparts. Although pitched battles did occur, wars frequently featured sieges.⁶

Wars of the industrial nation-state stood out in their epic scale, scope, and level of destruction. Key features include the use of industrial technologies; standardized, mass produced weapons and equipment; and conscription. Starting in the mid-1800s, these conflicts also featured the rapid transport of forces and telegraph or wireless communication. Sieges did occur, as happened at Vicksburg in the U.S. Civil War or Leningrad in World War II, but infrequently. Warfare from the Napoleonic through the world wars instead tended to feature epic set-piece battles involving large combat formations of conscripted citizen-soldiers. Battles in the Napoleonic wars and the U.S. Civil War often involved hundreds of thousands of troops in a single battle. The scale of warfare peaked in the world wars, which occasionally saw millions of troops fight in battles, as happened in the Battle of the Somme in 1916 and the Battle of Stalingrad in 1942. The Cold War did not feature direct combat between U.S. and Soviet conventional forces, but hundreds of thousands of troops remained deployed for years on end in Europe and beyond.⁷

In the neomedieval era, warfare has generally regressed toward preindustrial norms. Modern weapon technologies have persisted, of course, but militaries have declined in size from the gigantic formations of the 20th century. As militaries shrink in size and as state legitimacy weakens, militaries have again become more wary of incurring casualties. Sieges have reappeared as a prominent feature of contemporary warfare, as seen in the wars in Bosnia, Syria, Chechnya, Iraq, and elsewhere.⁸ Illustrative of this trend, in the recent Russia-Ukraine war, commanders have besieged numer-

⁵ Qu Lin Dong, *A General History of China*, English ed., China Translation and Publishing Corporation, 2013.

⁶ Frederick W. Mote and Denis Twitchett, *The Cambridge History of China: Vol. 7, The Ming Dynasty, 1368–1644*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.

⁷ Kaldor, 2012 p. 2.

⁸ Anthony King, “Will Inter-State War Take Place in Cities?” *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 45, No. 1, 2022.

ous cities and towns.⁹ Warfare has also shifted toward hybrid and irregular forms, in which relatively small sized professional military forces contend with adversaries either through proxy forces or in coordination with mercenaries, militia, and other irregular forces.¹⁰

Chinese experts often emphasize the technological dimensions of conventional war, focusing on such trends as the growth artificial intelligence–related technologies.¹¹ At the same time, Chinese scholars have generally been skeptical about the likelihood of large-scale conventional war involving the PLA. In a 2006 article, PLA academics Chu Juntian and Wang Nuancheng foresaw a continued decline in major conventional war. They also judged that urban and irregular war would become more prevalent.¹² Indeed, interest in hybrid and irregular war has grown among the PLA scholarly community in recent years. Chinese analysts praise Russian hybrid wars for the trailblazing integration of irregular war methods.¹³ In a recent publication, Professor Jiadong Zhang from the Center for American Studies at Fudan University proposed the idea of a *multiborder war*. He described such a war as occurring on multiple fronts “without unified battlefields or front lines and without singular outcomes.”¹⁴ He regarded it as a war in which victories and losses in different domains coexist; a war

⁹ Kristin Ljungkvist, “The War Against Ukraine’s Cities,” Chicago Council on Public Affairs, March 21, 2022; Robert M. Dover, “Ukraine War: Putin Is Rewriting the Rules of Siege Warfare This Winter,” *The Conversation*, November 3, 2022.

¹⁰ Ma Jianguang [马建光] and Yuanbin Li [李元斌], “Hybrid War: A New Sharp Weapon for International Competition” [混合战争：国际竞争的新利器], *Military Digest* [军事文摘], Vol. 17, 2020.

¹¹ Lin Bin [林斌], “What Will Future Wars Look Like?” [未来的战争是什么样的], *Com-milit* [现代军事], Vol. 3, 1998.

¹² Chu Juntian [初军田], Nuancheng Wang [王暖臣], and Yingwei Guan [管英伟], “Some Reflections about the Future Land Battlefield Movement” [对未来陆战场变化的思考], *Journal of Academy of Armored Force Engineering* [装甲兵工程学院学报], Vol. 2, 2006.

¹³ Duan Junze [段君泽], “Russian ‘Hybrid Warfare’ Application and Its Influence” [俄式“混合战争”实践及其影响], *Modern International Relations* [现代国际关系], Vol. 3, 2017.

¹⁴ Zhang Jiadong [张家栋], “Multi-Border War: The Possible Form of Future War” [多边疆战争：未来战争的可能形态], *Frontiers* [人民论坛·学术前沿], 2021.

fought by diversified actors including politicians, technicians, and business professionals; and a war fought by almost any means. Such a war would blur the boundary between peace and war. Similarly, in 2021, Wang Xiangsui, an irregular warfare expert of the PLA Air Force, discussed the concept of hybrid warfare as a form of war in “which material destruction is never the purpose” but aims instead to extract political gains.¹⁵

Two components of hybrid warfare have drawn particular attention among Chinese experts: information operations and proxies. Some experts have argued that information operations could potentially win wars without kinetic force.¹⁶ The idea remains controversial, however. Some military professionals have rejected the possibility of winning a war purely through the information domain.¹⁷ The study of proxy war has grown in recent years as well, with PLA officers noting the potential lower cost and high strategic value of such methods.¹⁸ Chinese military strategy texts emphasize the importance of the information, space, and cyber spaces in future wars.¹⁹ A Chinese Academy of Social Sciences analysis anticipated that the threats in cyber space would “grow significantly.”²⁰

Despite the persistence and introduction of new weapon technologies, the smaller scale of operations, the mix of diverse armed actors, prevalence of sieges, and return to hybrid-type operations evokes patterns commonly seen in preindustrial warfare.

¹⁵ Wang Xiangsui [王湘穗], “Analysis of Future Hybrid Warfare” [未来混合战争形式解析], *Military Digest* [军事文摘], Vol. 13, 2021.

¹⁶ Huang Shuofeng [黄硕风], “Future Wars—Infowars” [未来战争——信息战], *Future and Development* [未来与发展], Vol. 4, 1996.

¹⁷ Zhu Xiaoning [朱小宁], “Future Wars Still Focus on Technology—Argument Against Infowar Supremacy” [未来战争中战术仍然重于技术—兼驳“信息制胜”论], *Conmilit* [现代军事], Vol. 8, 1998.

¹⁸ Ma Rongsheng [马荣升], “An Exploration of Proxy Wars” [代理人战争探析], *China Military Science* [中国军事科学], Vol. 1, 2017.

¹⁹ Xiao Tianliang, 2020.

²⁰ Hong Yuan [洪源], “The New Form of Future Wars and Its Influencing Factors” [未来战争的新形态及其影响因素分析], *Frontiers* [人民论坛·学术前沿], Vol. 10, 2021.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

These trends carry important implications for U.S.-China peacetime competition and any potential conflict that could arise from an escalation in tensions. For peacetime competition, the declining salience of large-scale conventional war and the increasing importance of hybrid war, including in the information, cyber, and space domains, suggests the peacetime competition could resemble an indirect or irregular form of conflict in some cases.²¹ The distinction between peace and war may become blurred and difficult to distinguish, especially in the information and cyber domains. The unconventional struggle could play out most acutely in partner states and their antagonists. The United States and China have already opposed each other in the Russia-Ukraine war and, to a lesser extent, in Syria, Ethiopia, and elsewhere. If the competition becomes more antagonistic, the venues for indirect conflict could spread to other regions as well.

In the event of war, indirect and low-intensity methods could predominate. Large, set-piece battles may not occur or occur only rarely. Instead, sieges might become more appealing. China might seek to carry out a blockade against Taiwan and other vulnerable adversaries, for example. Both sides might also contend via proxy conflicts in war-torn partner nations or via indirect methods in cyberspace and the information domain. The increasing disorder and spread of fragile states in BRI countries could provide ample opportunities for indirect confrontations. Violent nonstate actors, such as political insurgencies, criminal groups, and radicalized militias, could become involved in indirect struggles between China and the United States. These would differ from the Cold War's indirect conflicts in that they would, perhaps, be larger and involve different types of assets, such as drones or cyber units.

²¹ Cary Mittelmark, "Playing Chess with the Dragon: Chinese-US Competition in the Era of Irregular Warfare," *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2021.

War Administration: From Mobilization to Contract Warfare

Warfare has traditionally strained the resources of a state because of the immense demands for manpower and money. Physical destruction from the fighting and the disruption to economic life has usually compounded the cost of war. The political pressure to secure additional revenue to sustain the fighting has, in some cases, driven major innovations in statecraft. However, the pursuit of revenue to fund wars is not without risk. A state's efforts to extract more taxes and levy conscripts have, on some occasions, spurred social and political violence and even revolution.²²

Prior to the modern period, most polities waged war on a far more limited scale. The weak administrative capacities of preindustrial states and the necessities of agricultural life imposed a hard constraint on the ability of states to mobilize people and resources for war. Too heavy an exaction of taxes could result in the starvation of the peasantry, thereby undermining the country's tax base. Accordingly, wars often waxed and waned over time, as rulers exhausted their treasuries in war and subsequently sought a respite to replenish their coffers. As an extreme example, medieval French and English kingdoms waged a series of campaigns featuring alternative periods of fighting and rest that were later cumulatively labeled the Hundred Years' War.²³ Conscription occurred, but it was usually an occasional, localized, and somewhat haphazard process. Moreover, in medieval levies, many conscripts furnished their own arms and equipment. Authorities did not provide much training.²⁴ Rulers in medieval Europe frequently employed skilled mercenaries. Not only were mercenaries potentially more effective on the battlefield, they also cost far less than standing militaries because they could be disbanded when not needed.²⁵ Rulers also built coalitions

²² Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

²³ Clifford Backman, *The Worlds of Medieval Europe*, Oxford University Press, 2003.

²⁴ Bernard Bachrach and David Bachrach, *Warfare in Medieval Europe c. 400–1453*, Taylor and Francis Group, 2021.

²⁵ McFate, 2017.

of volunteer armed fighters, such as militia and other sympathetic armed groups.

Preindustrial China relied on an imperial bureaucracy to administer military forces. In the Ming dynasty, the imperial government established colonies of farmer-soldiers on the frontiers who could sustain themselves and thereby lessen the state's expense of sustaining such forces.²⁶ In the Qing era, the government bureaucracy administered mobile banner troops and garrison forces. However, the civilian economy did not participate in any war efforts beyond the usual tax levies. In the words of one historian, "many people in the country hardly felt" the effects of military campaigns. Farmers generally did not pay any additional tax to fund campaigns, for example.²⁷ Both the Ming and Qing militaries frequently employed mercenaries to augment imperial forces on campaign.²⁸

A defining feature of great-power war in the age of industrial nation-states was the ability of the government to mobilize all state resources in support of war for a sustained period, often lasting many years. The state's capacity to administer such a vast endeavor was partly due to the growth of a larger government bureaucracy capable of managing and coordinating so many economic, military, and political tasks.²⁹ These government bureaucracies systematically conscripted the nation's labor force for service in the armed forces or in factories. Nation-states also mobilized popular sentiment through mass media that exhorted the people to adopt a spirit of self-sacrifice in support of the country's war aims. States also oversaw the conversion or buildup of industries to create a war economy to maximize the resources available to fighting forces.

Neomedieval states have retreated from the comprehensive methods of total war toward more-limited government administration, reminis-

²⁶ Edward Dreyer, "Tuntian Farming of the Ming Dynasty," *Ming Studies*, Vol. 1987, No. 1, 1987.

²⁷ Dai Yincong, "Qing Military Institutions and Their Effects on Government, Economy, and Society, 1640–1800," *Journal of Chinese History*, Vol. 1, 2017.

²⁸ Christine Moll-Murata and Ulrich Theobald, "Military Employment in Qing Dynasty China: A Comparative Study of Military Labour 1500–2000," in Erik-Jan Zürcher, ed., *Fighting for a Living*, Amsterdam University Press, 2014.

²⁹ Tilly, 1990.

cent of preindustrial societies. The administrative reach of modern states has declined as responsibilities have been delegated to marketplace actors and as services have been curtailed. Many countries have abandoned the practice of large-scale conscription, in part because of political opposition and in part because of the resource constraints that slowing growth rates impose, as well as the changing nature of warfare, which now requires fewer troops.³⁰ Modern militaries tend, instead, to administer their wars through the use of contracts, as was the case in the Middle Ages. Professional volunteers serve out terms outlined in contracts in exchange for pay and benefits. Both the U.S. and Chinese militaries have also expanded their use of civilian contractors to augment volunteer military forces. Similarly, the arming and equipping of modern militaries is no longer carried out exclusively by national defense industries. Instead, defense industries produce desired items largely according to contracts. In China, the PLA has expanded the use of open public bidding for the provision of defense articles to improve transparency, reduce corruption, and improve efficiency.³¹

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The change in the state's administration of warfare carries important implications for peacetime competition and potential war involving the United States and China. In peacetime, the state will likely rely on contracts and material incentives to recruit the professional, specialized, and technical personnel required to carry out tasks related to research, development, and competition. Operations and activities to support active campaigning may need to be organized in terms of complementary teams of contractors and military or government professionals.³²

The same trends suggest that an escalation in U.S.-China tensions to conflict could result in a war effort that is, at best, incomplete in its abil-

³⁰ Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle*, Princeton University Press, 2004.

³¹ "China Says Military Procurement Costs Down from Previous Years," Reuters, April 9, 2015.

³² Deborah D. Avant, "Contracting for Services in U.S. Military Operations," *Political Science & Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2007.

ity to access and mobilize the resources of the nation.³³ Contending states may find it more effective and politically feasible to rely on contracts to administer logistics and support for a war effort. Both sides may face strong incentives to avoid major, high-end war because of the financial difficulty of replacing skilled troops and military equipment.³⁴ Conflict may, instead, rely heavily on asymmetric methods, proxy conflict, siege-type engagements, and confrontations in the cyber and information domains.³⁵ Conventional combat, should it occur, may take the form of episodic clashes involving modestly sized forces followed by long periods of reconstitution.

Combatants: Informal Coalitions and the Thriving Market for Mercenaries

Rulers and states have employed a variety of troops to fight for them throughout history. Soldiers can be directly employed, trained, and equipped by a government. But troops can also be hired as mercenaries. Military power can also be added from sources external to a polity. Allies and partners can also furnish armed forces. Combatants can be equipped with standardized uniforms and weapons or can feature a more motley array of uniforms and equipment.

Warriors in medieval Europe consisted of a small number of highly trained military elites, known as knights. These were augmented by lower-status fighters—conscripted peasants—who were often more lightly equipped and generally lacked the extensive training and experience of the knights. Some knights fought for a king, but others served powerful nobles and magnates, who may have held complicated relationships with

³³ Mark F. Cancian, Adam Saxton, Lee Ann Bryan, and Owen Helman, “Industrial Mobilization—Assessing Surge Capabilities, Wartime Risk, and System Brittleness,” *Naval Engineers Journal*, Vol. 132, No. 2, 2020.

³⁴ Udi Lebel, “‘Casualty Panic’: Military Recruitment Models, Civil-Military Gap and Their Implications for the Legitimacy of Military Loss,” *Democracy and Security*, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2010.

³⁵ Patrick Porter, “Review Essay: Shadow Wars: Asymmetric Warfare in the Past and Future,” *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 37, No. 4, 2006.

the supreme ruler of a land. These warriors did not wear standardized uniforms or wield standardized equipment. Rulers also frequently employed mercenaries to augment their knights and their retainers. Mercenaries were far more affordable than a large standing army, as these could be disbanded when no longer needed. Indeed, medieval Europe had a thriving market for mercenaries.³⁶ Armies also fought alongside partner armed groups from other lands. Medieval military coalitions could include troops contributed from allied kingdoms or fiefs, religious orders, individual volunteers, rebel groups, bandits, and other nonstate actors. This military cooperation was not institutionalized and could be ad hoc and discontinuous. The coalitions could be unwieldy and changeable. In the Hundred Years' War, for example, opposing French factions fought over rights of succession, joined on either side by rebel groups, opposing Papal states, and various republics and kingdoms.³⁷

In China, the emperor's army consisted of a relatively modest-sized imperial force, augmented by conscription in frontier areas. Mercenaries were often hired to augment the Ming and Qing imperial armies.³⁸ Chinese imperial militaries also included coalition partners from friendly tribes and kingdoms. Armed nonstate groups could join either side, as happened in the Boxer Rebellion. Sometimes the emperor allied with Western states. In the Boxer Rebellion, an enfeebled Chinese government hesitated to suppress the rebels and hired Western mercenaries, before backing the anti-imperialist protestors in a failed bid to oust the imperialists.³⁹

During the era of industrial nation-states, militaries consisted primarily of conscripted citizens recruited, trained, and equipped by the state. These military forces could be substantial, in some cases reaching millions of people, as happened in World Wars I and II. These forces featured a high

³⁶ Hunt Janin, *Mercenaries in Medieval and Renaissance Europe*, McFarland Press, 2013.

³⁷ Backman, 2003.

³⁸ Chuntao Xia [夏春涛], "A Probe into the British Mercenaries in the Taiping Rebels" [太平军中的英国雇佣兵问题初探], *Modern History Research* [近代史研究], No. 5, 1994; Moll-Murata and Theobald, 2014.

³⁹ David A. Graff and Robin Higham, *A Military History of China*, University of Kentucky Press, 2011.

degree of standardization in their uniforms, equipment, and operations. Contractors made up a tiny portion of total troop strength, and their work was usually confined to technical and support work. International collaboration tended to take the form of institutionalized alliances, such as NATO, the Warsaw Pact, and the alliances formed in the world wars. The members of the alliances consisted almost exclusively of nation-states and their uniformed citizen-militaries. In some cases, these institutionalized alliances included regularly scheduled meetings, training and exercises, and/or combat operations.⁴⁰

In the post-2000 neomedieval era, militaries have evolved in a direction similar to that of the preindustrial past. National militaries continue to feature citizen armies, but these are almost exclusively professional volunteers who secure pay and benefits for their service. Evoking the prevalence of mercenaries in the medieval age, contemporary war relies heavily on mercenaries and contractors willing to fight and carry out other military duties for pay.⁴¹ For example, the Russia-Ukraine war has seen the extensive use of mercenaries.⁴² Part of the increasing role of contractors is due to the highly technical nature of contemporary warfare, which includes digital technologies, space, and cyberspace assets. Another reason is public sensitivities about military casualties and the lower cost of contractors and mercenaries compared to national military of similar size.⁴³ In the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, contractors constituted about half the strength of the U.S.-led force.⁴⁴

Coalitions have also changed. In wars since 2000, military coalitions have become increasingly ad hoc, informal coalitions of the willing that

⁴⁰ Richard English, *Modern War: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁴¹ Sean McFate, *Durable Disorder: The Return of Private Armies and the Emergence of Neomedievalism*, dissertation, London School of Economics and Political Science, August 2011.

⁴² Robin Wright, "Will Foreign Volunteers and Mercenaries Change the Course of Ukraine's War?" *New Yorker*, April 5, 2022.

⁴³ Hongwei Wang [王宏伟], "The Rise and Prospect of Private Military Companies" [私人军事公司的兴起原因及发展前景], *International Forum* [国际论坛], No. 3, 2005.

⁴⁴ Kathy Gilsinan, "The War Machine Runs on Contracts," *The Atlantic*, January 17, 2020.

include a variety of military and irregular forces.⁴⁵ In Iraq and Afghanistan, the Russia-Ukraine war, and the Syrian conflict, professional military forces have fought alongside allies recruited from militias, mercenaries, volunteer fighters, and tribal groups.⁴⁶ China's military has mainly shifted toward professional volunteers, although it still conscripts some personnel to make up shortfalls in recruitment. The PLA has also increased its use of contractors.⁴⁷ In such countries as Pakistan, China relies extensively on local hired troops to augment its limited security forces.⁴⁸

On the contemporary battlefield, professional militaries are joined by a diverse mix of troop types, many of whom fight for specific reasons that may not completely align with those of their allies. The complexity of the composition of fighting forces echoes the diverse and eclectic set of actors that engaged in medieval warfare. Managing such coalitions could prove as challenging today as it did then.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The composition of military forces in the post-2000 neomedieval era carries important implications for the U.S.-China peacetime competition and from any potential conflict. In peacetime, contractors will likely continue to play a major role in all aspects of military competition. Contractors can help manage operations in the information, space, and cyber domains to protect interests and counter an adversary's efforts. Contractors can also help provide valuable security assistance to partner states as part of the broader competition for influence.

⁴⁵ John Karlsrud and Yf Reykers, "Ad Hoc Coalitions and Institutional Exploitation in International Security: Towards a Typology," *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 41, No. 9, 2020.

⁴⁶ Seth G. Jones and Arturo Muñoz, *Afghanistan's Local War: Building Local Defense Forces*, RAND Corporation, MG-1002-MCIA, 2010.

⁴⁷ Alessandro Arduino, *China's Private Army: Protecting the New Silk Road*, Springer, 2017.

⁴⁸ Sarah Zheng, "China Seeks Security Guarantees for Pakistan Belt and Road Projects After Terror Attacks," *South China Morning Post*, March 28, 2019.

Coalitions in support of one side or the other can be more fragile and limited because of the diversity of interests and the nature of a global economy. To win support and maintain partnerships, both sides may have to deliver more goods and clear benefits.

In wartime, contending militaries can be expected to consist primarily of professional military forces, sympathetic partner militaries, mercenaries, and other armed groups. Because of political sensitivities and a generally lower willingness on the part of the population to serve in the armed forces, conscription may be a risky way to reconstitute forces depleted by combat.⁴⁹ Recruitment of mercenaries or coalition partner forces from abroad could become more politically appealing. But these eclectic coalitions will likely impose their own challenges in terms of maintaining alliances and sustaining a unified coalition.

Noncombatants: From Active Back to Passive Supporters

The role of noncombatants in war has varied considerably throughout history. Civilians may be bystanders; may provide passive support; or may actively support the war effort by enlisting in the armed forces, working in industries directly related to the war, or providing other services. Enemy military forces may or may not target civilians as objects of plunder, rape, or atrocities.

Preindustrial wars did not distinguish between combatants and non-combatants. Because peasant populations in feudal Europe lacked a means of political participation, many of them did not provide meaningful political support to the wars their overlords waged. Kings and rulers made no effort to mobilize the populace, whom they did not regard as active supporters. The significance of the populace lay in its passive support. Rulers benefited most when the populace remained passive and furnished taxes and occasional labor through levies. However, because support was con-

⁴⁹ Panu Poutvaara and Andreas Wagener, "The Political Economy of Conscription," in Christopher J. Coyne and Rachel L. Mathers, eds., *The Handbook on the Political Economy of War*, Edward Elgar Publishing, 2011.

ditioned on the provision of security, hardships imposed on the populace could disrupt that support. Peasants who suffered famine, predation, and other hardships could not furnish taxes, which would undercut the ruler's ability to sustain a war. In medieval warfare, therefore, armies often targeted the fields and villages of peasants who served a rival ruler. Imposing economic hardship could cause the leader to sue for peace to restore stability and repair finances.⁵⁰

Indeed, in many ways, the preindustrial polities did not have the notion of a national will to fight because nations were not conceived as such. Moreover, the will to fight largely rested with the king or ruler and his elites. Contending armies thus often sought to win by killing the enemy ruler through assassination or by directly attacking him on the battlefield.⁵¹ Noncombatants were more likely to be bystanders or victims of fighting. Marauding armies might carry out raids to seize plunder or inflict hardship on an enemy's population. Medieval militaries frequently targeted civilians in wars over ethnic, religious, and other identities. In the Thirty Years' War, large-scale massacres of rival civilian populations proved all too common.⁵²

Preindustrial China also lacked the modern period's clear distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Many of the wars in the Ming and Qing periods and the dynasties that preceded them involved nomadic tribes along the periphery. Here, too, the noncombatant populations did not have meaningful ways to participate; thus, their experience of war was largely as passive supporters or victims. There were occasional exceptions when the government involved select populations in a more institutionalized fashion, most notably that of the Military Household System of the Ming dynasty, which established colonies of soldier-farmers to help man frontier armies.⁵³ The government generally demanded little of the population in terms of war participation. So long as the populace remained content, they could furnish taxes, and the emperor could appear to enjoy the mandate of heaven. How-

⁵⁰ Maurice Keen, *The Laws of War in the Late Middle Ages*, Routledge, 1965.

⁵¹ Withington, 2020.

⁵² Withington, 2020.

⁵³ David Robinson, "Why Military Institutions Matter for Ming History," *Journal of Chinese History*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2017.

ever, the hardships famine and war bring might provoke common people to rebel or starve. The spread of disorder and rebellion posed a serious political threat to the emperor's legitimacy. Ming and Qing dynasty China experienced some of the most harrowing bloodbaths in human history. For example, large-scale rebellions, such as the Taiping Rebellion and the insurrection led by Zhang Xianzhong, killed tens of millions of people.⁵⁴

In the age of modern industrial states, combatants tended to view war as largely an affair of contending militaries. But the civilian populace played an unusually active role in war. Political integration provided a direct means for the government to involve the public. The populace could actively support a war effort through elections in democracies, through mass rallies in authoritarian states, and through conscription into the armed forces or labor in war-related industries. To promote active support, officials carried out mass propaganda. Modern propaganda also aimed to undermine the adversary public's will to fight by persuading the people of the justness of the cause and the injustice or futility of the adversary's cause.⁵⁵

This had important implications for industrial-age warfare. Victory was usually envisioned in terms of the total defeat of the enemy's military. Since the active support of the civilian population underpinned the adversary military's ability and will to fight, war occasionally targeted the industrial capacity and morale of the populace. Accordingly, civilians suffered in all great-power wars, sometimes enduring horrific slaughter.⁵⁶ Yet paradoxically, it was not the civilians themselves that were the object of military attack but their active support for the war. Authorities directed the imposition of hardships on the civilian populace as a way to breaking the public's capacity and will to fight, as Tecumseh Sherman did when he marched across the South in the U.S. Civil War or when Allied air forces carried out extensive bombing raids across Germany and Japan in World War II. However, in all these cases, the killing of civilians was not regarded as a primary objective but more in terms of unintended or *collateral* casualties. The main

⁵⁴ William T. Rowe, "Violence in Ming-Qing China: An Overview," *Crime, History and Societies*, Vol. 18, No. 2, 2014.

⁵⁵ Michael W. Hughley, "Propaganda in the Modern World," *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1996.

⁵⁶ Kaldor, 2012.

goal remained the destruction of the adversary's military. Consistent with this logic, the imposition of hardships on the civilian populace generally stopped once the adversary's military had been decisively defeated and the government surrendered unconditionally.

To be sure, occasions of mass violence did occur during the nation-state era. Nazi Germany's genocide against Jewish people, its brutal massacre of civilian populations on the Eastern Front, and the Ottoman Empire's genocide against Armenians stood out as prominent and horrific examples. But the outrage these cases generated only underscored the infrequency with which this occurred, at least in comparison with preindustrial societies.

In the neomedieval era, the role of the population has regressed from that of the nation-state to something closer to the preindustrial periods. Such scholars as Mary Kaldor have highlighted the emergence of "new" wars that resemble the wars of medieval Europe. In such conflicts, armed groups often aim to kill enemy civilian populations as a main war aim. The goal of mass murder is often tied to issues of ethnic and religious identity. The Bosnian Wars provided an archetype of the new type of conflict, which often involved acts of ethnic cleansing designed to wipe out a minority group.⁵⁷

The role of the population has changed as well. People are no longer expected to provide active support as they did in the mobilizations of the great wars. Tacitly conceding the limits of their powers, authorities no longer demand a spirit of sacrifice. Instead, they ask people to continue their usual work and consumption habits. In the Second Gulf War, for example, President George W. Bush called on the people to continue shopping and buying to keep the economy growing.⁵⁸ Severe disruptions, in the form of economic downturns or discontent arising from the progress of a war, threaten the government's ability to maintain a fragile popular support. As the notion of a national will to fight loses salience, the center of gravity for war may shift back to the will of the national leader. Rulers may wage conflicts so long as the people remain passively supportive. However, the support is always tenuous and could be vulnerable to disruption. Should it turn against the

⁵⁷ Kaldor, 2012.

⁵⁸ Emily Stewart, "How 9/11 Convinced Americans to Buy, Buy, Buy," *Vox*, September 9, 2021.

ruler for any reason, the leader may face a strong incentive to curtail or cease combat operations.

Implications for U.S.-China Competition and Conflict

The changing role of the populace in contemporary war carries important implications for U.S.-China competition and any potential conflict. In peacetime, public support for any competitive endeavor is likely to be more conditional than would have been the case in the modern industrial era. A people with low trust in the government may provide support to endeavors that impose a light economic burden and that offer clear benefits to the public. Exceptions may arise when a country's homeland is invaded, as has happened in Ukraine, or when a population faces evidence of enemy atrocities against countrymen.⁵⁹ In general, however, public support for war outside national boundaries may evaporate if the government demands costly sacrifices, such as conscription, high taxes, or actions that spur inflation. A key ingredient to success will be maintaining the public's general level of support for the government through careful management of the economy and domestic security.

In partner countries, intrastate and interstate wars involving civilian atrocities could open opportunities for collaboration between the U.S. and Chinese militaries, as well as confrontation. The horrors of such atrocities could increase pressure on U.S. or Chinese patrons for military support, further stressing military budgets. Intrastate and interstate conflicts could also open opportunities for indirect or proxy conflicts. The wars in Syria provides an example in which severe crises have increased political pressure on the United States and antagonists, such as Russia, to intervene, often in a manner opposed to one another.

In war, the shift away from a national will to fight to a ruler's will to fight carries profound implications for defense planning. War operations may have a broader range of options to prevail on an adversary by imposing costs through horizontal escalation or other measures that erode the public's general level of support for a ruler. Moreover, the same vulnerabilities

⁵⁹ Peter Liberman, "An Eye for an Eye: Public Support for War Against Evildoers," *International Organization*, Vol. 60, No. 3, 2006.

will confront the United States. Decisionmakers may need to assume that, even in a major war with a great power, the public's support may be tenuous and doubtful.

Sensitivity to the potential loss of public support could constrain the government's ability to scale the war effort or risk missions that incur massive casualties or financial cost. Accordingly, "victory" under such conditions could become more limited. With total victory implausible, the goal of an operation may be extraction of some minor concession in proximate disputes. Concern about the fragile nature of public support could also incentivize militaries to rely on mercenaries, unmanned systems, and coalition partners to do more of the fighting.

The potential disaffection of the public also makes the domestic political situation a perpetual vulnerability. The adversary could seek to exploit this potential through cyber and information operations, which could make this domain critical for homeland defense. The fragility of public support could also be targeted through measures that strike the economy through sanctions and disruptions to trade and investment. Moreover, disruptions to trade and investment could affect populations around the world, eroding popular support in friendly countries.

Conclusion

The changing nature of warfare carries important implications for U.S.-China competition and any conflict that might emerge (Table 6.2). The line between peacetime competition and hostile engagements could blur as both sides resort to hybrid tactics to achieve goals in a manner that minimizes the risk of escalation. Militaries may find reliance on professional soldiers and mercenaries to be a politically and economically more sustainable way to manage operations. Policymakers and planners will also need to consider how to ensure a steady economy and minimize domestic vulnerabilities to external disruption when contemplating war plans.

TABLE 6.2

Implications of Neomedieval Military Affairs Aspects for U.S.-China Rivalry

Aspect	Neomedieval Era	Implications for U.S.-China Competition	Implications for U.S. China Conflict
Combat operations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Irregular warfare and sieges predominate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Campaigning in peacetime will resemble conflict to some extent Rivals may get pulled into intrastate wars in partner states 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conflict could prove sporadic Low-intensity war more likely Sieges may become is more prominent Long-range strike and automation are preferred fighting methods
War administration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Administration is limited Administration relies on contracts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Contracting could become the primary means of administering peacetime military and competitive efforts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partial mobilizations and heavy reliance on mercenaries could become the main modes of administering war
Combatants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional militaries are augmented with contractors, militia, paramilitary, other armed groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities exist for worldwide recruitment Coalition-building is important but challenging to sustain 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Coalitions could be more fragile and limited because of diversity of participants Fragile public support could lead states to rely more on mercenaries and automation
Noncombatants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civilians provide passive support Civilians may be targeted (ethnic cleansing, terror) Conscription is limited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Civilian support for competition initiatives is conditional Partners experiencing civilian atrocities could press patrons for military assistance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rivals could oppose each other in intrastate wars Fragile public support in war could be targeted by information operations Cost imposition via economic and financial coercion could be a regular part of war

Back to the Past? The Future of U.S.-China Rivalry

Is the world really moving toward something resembling neomedievalism? Do current events validate the judgment that the future is likely to be defined by weakening states, societal fragmentation, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and the informalization of war? One event that may appear to refute this thesis is the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The war has involved conventional combat between two national militaries involving coordinated operations between infantry, tank, artillery, and aircraft, which on the surface resembles the type of modern warfare that this report has argued to be obsolete. Indeed, Russian authorities have frequently evoked the classic World War II battles between the Soviet Union and Germany in the same regions in their appeals for popular support.¹

But a closer look provides ample support to the view that the modern warfare between nation-states has passed and that a transition into a neomedieval era is in progress. Despite the ongoing war, armed conflict worldwide remains overwhelmingly characterized by intrastate and internationalized intrastate war.² In the conflict itself, many of Russia's military troubles are due to a mistaken attempt to fight a modern war in the neomedieval era. Russia's military and political situation exhibits many of the weaknesses and limitations described previously. A state burdened by declining legitimacy

¹ Mark Trevelyan, "Putin Channels Victory Over Hitler to Spur Russian Army in Ukraine," Reuters, May 9, 2022.

² Julia Palik, Anna Marie Obermeier, and Siri Aas Rustad, *Conflict Trends: A Global Overview, 1946–2021*, Peace Research Institute, 2022.

has struggled to carry out even a partial mobilization.³ Constrained by limited resources, Moscow has had to fight with a relatively modest-size professional military augmented by mercenaries and irregular forces, including militia furnished by criminal warlords.⁴ Eschewing the classic industrial-age battles of maneuver, Russian forces have relied heavily on sieges. Both sides have sought to provoke discontent in the rival state by imposing costs in the economic, cyber, and information domains. Believing the Ukrainian leader to be a center of gravity of resistance, Russian forces have made numerous attempts to assassinate President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.⁵ The militaries of both countries have been plagued by criminal predation, and corruption has debilitated Russia's military in particular.⁶ The blending of these neomedieval with modern features marks the Russia-Ukraine conflict as one of a series of wars, including the troubled U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, that mark the transition from industrial age to neomedieval warfare.

Russia's painful experience in Ukraine underscores a key conclusion of this report: U.S. decisionmakers and planners should be wary of resorting to strategies and methods drawn from industrial-age wars with which contemporary militaries bear a superficial resemblance. Indeed, perhaps one of the biggest dangers that the U.S. military faces is to fall into the temptation of prescribing solutions from the era of industrial nation-states to solve neomedieval problems. The temptation can be difficult to resist because Western militaries have proven so superior on the modern battlefield against other conventional militaries. Focusing on conventional military challenges is tempting because it both validates the importance of such forces and frames problems in terms for which existing military forces were originally designed.

But the temptation should be resisted. Defense strategies and plans should instead be formulated bearing some of the most salient trends that

³ Andrew Roth, "Kremlin Tries to Calm Russian Fury Over Chaotic Mobilization," *The Guardian*, October 1, 2022.

⁴ Clara Ferreira Marques, "Putin's Pet Warlord Doubles Down in Ukraine," *Washington Post*, April 4, 2022.

⁵ Bill Bostock, "Ukraine's President Survived at Least 3 Assassination Attempts from Russian-Backed Agents in the Past Week, Report Says," *Business Insider*, May 4, 2022.

⁶ Benowitz, 2022.

define the neomedieval era uppermost in mind: the weakening of states, the fragmentation of societies, imbalanced economies, the pervasiveness of threats, and the informalization of war.

In the political domain, the weakening of states is a trend that affects all nations, including the United States and China. Decaying state legitimacy and declining governance capacity introduce new challenges that consolidated nation-states of the 20th century scarcely needed to consider. This is not a new problem, however. Preindustrial societies and countries across the developing world have long grappled with the challenges of coping with inadequate state capacity. The United States, with a stronger basis of legitimacy, may have an advantage over China and many other countries around the world. However, the turmoil of recent U.S. politics shows that the advantage is best regarded as one of degree, not absolutes. The question of how to mitigate domestic vulnerabilities and operate within those constraints must be a major consideration in the U.S.-China competition and potential conflict .

The deepening fragmentation of societies compounds the political problem. Again, these features have pervaded preindustrial societies and are most acute in the developing world. As the nation-state's loses its appeal because of its diminishing governance capacity, individuals are likely to prioritize alternative sources of identity, values, and loyalty. Subnational communities may act with greater autonomy and might coordinate with external actors. Persistent social inequality can also erode the state's ability to summon patriotic enthusiasm. States face few appealing prospects to counter these trends. Increased repression, as China has done, may limit the ability of external parties to recruit followers. However, repression is not only cruel but raises the risk of masking the root causes of disaffection instead. The could increase the hidden long-term danger of an explosive rebellion. Repression may also drive away capital and skilled labor and stifle innovation. On the other hand, inability to reverse fragmentation risks national disintegration into contending groups that have little in common with each other. A divided and fragmented society may elevate the risk of political violence.

Slowing and imbalanced economic growth stemming from the deindustrialization of advanced economies poses another key challenge. Echoing the low growth rates of preindustrial economies, low productivity growth rates in nation-states constrain the availability of resources for defense pur-

poses, exacerbate weakened state capacity and social inequality, and expose the economic sector's vulnerability in conflict. As legitimate avenues for advancement disappear, the lure of illicit gains is likely to grow. Moreover, the diminished capacity of the state impairs its ability to control criminality. The illicit economy appears poised to thrive and could inject itself as another complicating factor in international politics.

The pervasiveness of threats is another important consideration. Consolidated nation-states mainly worried about challenges posed by adversary militaries; states in the neomedieval era contend with a far more diverse and intractable array of dangers. Compounding the threats posed by an increasingly unstable and unpredictable international environment, states face intensifying domestic insecurity and increased demand for assistance from embattled partner nations. The nearly overwhelming set of demands on militaries occurs at a time, moreover, of slowing and imbalanced economic growth and greater demand for domestic social-welfare spending.

Warfare appears to be shifting away from the epic wars and massive set-piece battles that pervaded the industrial age. Instead, combat seems likely to resemble the informalized characteristics typical of preindustrial societies. Irregular forces and operations, including mercenaries, insurgents, militias, and other armed groups, may begin to dominate. Professional militaries will continue to be key actors, but with a smaller role. Rules and norms of combat may change dramatically as a result. Professional militaries may increasingly have to deal with looting and attacks on civilians by irregular adversaries. The importance of set-piece battles will likely decline. Instead, sieges and war from a distance are likely to become more attractive to militaries seeking to prevail against their enemies while minimizing the risks of direct combat. Demand for assistance from partner states engaged in intrastate war could increase the persistent strain on scarce military resources.

The potency of each of these factors is compounded by the fact that they interact with and compound one another. A weakening state encourages societal fragmentation and inequitable economic growth and decreases the ability to mitigate or prevent nonstate threats. The state becomes incapable of resourcing large professional forces and compelled to rely more on irregular forces to assist with security needs. Societal fragmentation hampers a state's efforts to govern coherently and aggravates inequitable growth as civil strife between contending groups impairs economic activity. The perils

of nonstate threats also expand if the society cannot coordinate to address problems as a unified entity. Slow and unequal growth exacerbates social and political fragmentation and invites criminals to prey on civilians in pursuit of rapid gains. Finally, nonstate threats and privatized war threaten to destabilize societies and further undermine the governing capacity of states.

The Need for a New Paradigm

Analysts have long struggled to make sense of strange and unfamiliar developments in the U.S.-China competition that defy norms set in the industrial age. Comparisons with the Cold War remain one of the common reference points in contemporary analysis and scholarship on great-power competition. One can see clear echoes of the U.S.-Soviet struggle of the 20th century in the commentary and policy recommendations that pervade the burgeoning literature on 21st century U.S.-China relations.⁷ The Cold War likely appeals to analysts for several reasons. First, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics was the most recent great-power competitor with the United States. Since the Cold War ended a little more than 30 years ago, many political institutions, economic arrangements, and modern weapons and technologies present then persist today. Second, there appear to be similarities between the Soviet Union and China. For example, a communist party governed the Soviet Union and governs China, suggesting that Moscow's behavior may provide clues about Beijing's potential behavior. To be sure, virtually all analysts acknowledge important differences and caution against simply replicating Cold War strategies and concepts. But given the apparent lack of better alternatives, the Cold War persists as a touchstone experience for many analysts. The Cold War's powerful grip on understanding of the current rivalry and why this may be of doubtful relevance in many cases can be underscored by pointing out just a few of the sharply contrasting features of the two contests (Table 7.1).

⁷ As but a handful of examples, see Hal Brands, *The Twilight Struggle: What the Cold War Teaches Us About Great-Power Rivalry Today*, Yale University Press, 2022; Yukon Huang, "The U.S.-China Trade War Has Become a Cold War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 16, 2021; Hung Tran, "Is the U.S.-China Strategic Competition a New Cold War?" Atlantic Council, April 21, 2021.

TABLE 7.1

Contrasting Dimensions of Great-Power Competition Between the Cold War and Neomedieval Eras

Dimension	U.S.-Soviet Union (1950s–1990)	U.S.-China (2000–present)
Ideological	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The era featured a binary ideological contest between relatively cohesive societies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The era features splintered contests among identity groups and among fragmented societies
Economic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High productivity, rapid growth, and manageable expenses enable generous military budgets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low productivity, slow growth, and excessive costs strain military budgets
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The domestic front is secure A patriotic, actively involved populace can be mobilized for national effort The domestic situation is an advantage 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The domestic front is insecure A disaffected, disengaged populace is unlikely to be mobilized for national effort The domestic situation is a vulnerability

The current competition is widely understood to include contesting ideas and influence. Often this is framed in binary terms: *democratic* or *authoritarian*.⁸ U.S. officials lent support to this approach by holding a “summit for democracy” in 2021.⁹ This framing echoes the binary ideological struggle of the Cold War, which pitted a U.S.-led free world against the communist bloc—capitalism versus communism, as the Soviets framed it.¹⁰ Yet using a Cold War-inspired paradigm to frame the contest is more misleading than helpful for many reasons. First, it obscures the central challenge today: weakening state capacity and legitimacy. The divide between China and the United States and their respective partners seems arguably more about contrasting approaches to this central issue. Moreover, the United States is divided on how to respond to the issues of inadequate state capacity and legitimacy. China’s government has the appearance of a more unified approach, but only because its government has suppressed other

⁸ Matthew Kroenig, “The Power Delusion,” *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2020.

⁹ U.S. Department of State, “The Summit for Democracy,” webpage, undated.

¹⁰ Gaddis, 2006.

voices. China's government emphasizes the importance of ensuring social stability, ideological coherence, and ethnonational sentiment as the basis of legitimacy. The contest appears splintered, with diverse messages contending with one another within countries and around the world.

Economically, the Cold War saw the U.S. economy at the height of its powers, generating more than one-quarter of world GDP on its own. The enormous wealth that a highly productive economy generated enabled generous spending on military budgets. Given the limited linkage with the economies of Soviet-dominated areas, the United States could also afford a containment strategy. Today, the U.S. and Chinese economies are far more interdependent, and most observers reject the notion of containment. Yet the drive to decouple the two economies has often been informed by an awareness of Washington's success using containment against the Soviet Union. U.S. and Chinese defense planning also continues to favor huge military budgets designed to improve conventional combat capabilities, many of which were designed for the Cold War. The current contest is unfolding under different economic conditions that highlight the limitations of this approach, given the globalization of production and the mutual dependence of the world's two largest economies. Economies are growing too slowly to operate without access to global markets, and defense spending appears poised to remain constrained for years to come.

The political aspect of the competition has also changed dramatically. The Cold War saw the continuation of mobilization strategies that served both sides well throughout the 20th century. The respective governments drafted their people, oversaw massive defense industries, and carried out extensive propaganda to mobilize political sentiment against the rival. In the current era, the enervation of state capacity has weakened the ability of governments to command the loyalty of their respective populations. The populace is likely to remain largely disengaged, leaving foreign policy ever more dependent on elites. Yet rather than explore ways of operating within the constraints of perpetually fragile public support, experts often urge unrealistic or vague measures to "fix" U.S. politics, presumably with the idea of restoring the potential for political mobilization.¹¹

¹¹ Katherine M. Gehl and Michael E. Porter, "Fixing U.S. Politics," *Harvard Business Review*, July–August 2020.

The experiences of the Cold War and the world wars continue to exert a powerful influence on thinking about the current U.S. competition with China. The affinity is natural, given the superficial resemblances in terms of similar technologies, military forces, and other modern features. But this view is almost certainly misguided and probably counterproductive. The similarities, although superficially numerous, are less than they appear. In many ways, the Cold War represented the closing chapter in the history of modern industrial nation-states. Since that experience is unlikely to be replicated for the foreseeable future, the lessons it offers are likely to be of doubtful utility. Indeed, one conclusion from our research is that *any policy recommendation derived principally from experiences of the Cold War or the world wars should be immediately viewed skeptically because it is derived from a historical era that is of receding relevance to our own*. The best approach may be to integrate lessons from multiple periods, weighting lessons drawn from preindustrial societies more heavily. This does not mean that there is nothing to be learned from the study of industrial-age contests, but that far fewer relevant lessons are likely to be drawn than is often expected. Relevant lessons should be accepted only after being carefully scrutinized to see whether they still hold true in a neomedieval world. Russia's misfortunes in Ukraine and America's painful withdrawal from Afghanistan are examples of what can happen when outdated thinking dominates approaches to warfare. To avoid potentially disastrous misjudgments and miscalculations, a new paradigm is required.

Toward a New Paradigm for Great-Power Rivalry: Neomedievalism

A neomedieval paradigm will be required to guide U.S. defense planners and decisionmakers in responding to a radically changing threat picture and to help them cope more effectively with the challenge from China. Discerning how patterns of neomedieval regression interact with modern and emerging technologies and postindustrial societal developments will be a central task of future research. General trends of attenuation and regression may well be irreversible but will also be influenced by the unique features of modern life. Many aspects of the current situation lack precedent in recorded human

history, including the pervasiveness of digital technologies, the presence of nuclear weapons, the speed and capacity of modern transportation, aging populations, and the looming threat of climate change. The neomedieval world will inevitably involve a blend of these unique influences, technologies, and developments. Discerning how the forces of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity interact to shape the prospects for peace and prosperity will be an increasingly important task for analysts in coming years. Development of a new paradigm does not guarantee success. But operating within a neomedieval paradigm increases the likelihood that strategies and plans will be developed with realistic and accurate judgments about the security environment in mind.

Additional careful examination of the dynamics of state deconsolidation and warfare in the developing world may provide valuable insights. Developing countries have experienced the neomedieval trends outlined in this report to the greatest extent. In a reversal from years past, developing countries that once studied the developed world for lessons may find themselves studied by developed countries anxious to understand the logic and meaning of unexpected developments and to better anticipate future trends. Although creating a neomedieval security paradigm is beyond the scope of this report, we do offer some general conclusions that could inform its future development.

First and most important, the neomedieval era is here to stay. The trends outlined are structural, and return to the conditions of the industrial nation-state is impossible. This is because the fundamental driver—the declining strength of the industrial nation-state—is unlikely to be reversed. The neomedieval era is likely to last the duration of the century or longer. The most likely long-term trend is further fracturing and reconfiguration of nation-states into new forms. Some possibilities derived from historical precedent include weakened central states that share power with subnational actors. But many others are possible. The sooner U.S. decisionmakers and planners recognize and accept the reality of the neomedieval era, the sooner appropriate and effective strategies and plans can be developed. In the current contest, strategic advantage may well accrue to the state that accommodates and adapts to the new reality most effectively.

Second, the reality of weakening states is likely to be a defining feature of the U.S.-China rivalry. Nation-states are experiencing a decline in political

legitimacy and governance capacity. This weakness afflicts both the United States and China, as well as virtually all countries around the world. As economic growth decelerates, the debilitation of modern states will likely worsen over time, and efforts to fully reverse the trends are unlikely to work. This does not mean that strengthening state capacity is futile, however—far from it. Finding ways to improve state capacity and rebuild state legitimacy will become central tasks in the contest. But even in the best case, both the United States and China will be weaker and less-cohesive states than they were in the past century. All defense planning should begin with an awareness of this vulnerability and the constraints it imposes. Declining state capacity and legitimacy restrict options for building military power and waging conflict, introduce new vulnerabilities that must be accounted for in defensive preparations, and offer opportunities for offensive operations against rival powers.

Third, coping with domestic and transnational threats should have the same or higher priority as deterrence of conventional military attack. Compared with the modern industrial era, states are both more secure from external threats and more vulnerable to internal threats. States are more secure in the sense that weakened rivals generally lack the national will and resource base to subjugate other countries. Thus, most countries continue to face a lower threat of invasion and conquest. However, perpetually fragile public support for the government will leave the domestic situation perpetually vulnerable. The principal threat to states will come from internal rather than external sources, including pandemics, terrorism, crime, and political violence. Because failure to ensure domestic security directly implicates the legitimacy of the state, controlling such dangers will become an urgent priority. Resources may need to be allocated accordingly.

Fourth, major conventional war between the United States and China is improbable because of their political, economic, and societal weaknesses. Despite the potential for heightened tensions, the same trends make prospects for total war between the United States and China unlikely. The persistent fragility of public support, inability to carry out a societal mobilization, and the exceeding risks and difficulties of sustaining high-end war have made wars in the mold of World War II nearly impossible to wage. The political and economic requirements for major conventional war simply exceed what most neomedieval states can afford. This provides a strong dis-

incentive to waging major, conventional war between great powers. Moreover, involvement in high-end war raises the risk of rapid depletion of scarce military resources that will be difficult to replace, especially given compelling competing demands to bolster the state's legitimacy by improving domestic security and governance.

Fifth, the goal and logic of warfare may change accordingly. Because the pursuit of total victory over flashpoints, such as Taiwan, is infeasible, conflict could instead simply aim to secure positional gains by targeting the rival's domestic vulnerabilities. The weakening of the state opens new vulnerabilities that a rival can target. Providing state support to subnational actors and sympathetic groups located in the state of the rival is one way to exploit the weakened legitimacy of rival states. But other methods also promise potentially high payoffs in terms of affecting adversary decisionmaking at low cost—a combination that will be difficult for neomedieval rivals to resist. Challenging the legitimacy of the rival could bolster one's own legitimacy. The state with a stronger sense of political legitimacy may, accordingly, gain an advantage in recruiting foreign talent, capital, and technology, all of which play a larger role in economic success today than does conquest of land. However, attacking a country's homeland also aggravates perceptions of threat and hostility, especially given the sensitivity with which states regard their own faltering sense of legitimacy. Moreover, some partner states may undergo acute distress because of the same trends of weakening states, fragmenting societies, and pervasive threats. Opportunities and incentives for proxy and irregular operations are likely to increase in both peacetime and in the event of hostilities. Great-power war, if it occurs at all, is more likely to consist primarily of a chronic state of low-intensity irregular or proxy conflict or siegeliike operations.

Sixth, both militaries are likely to experience nearly overwhelming demands on perpetually limited capabilities. The neomedieval era is one of resource scarcity because of both inadequate supply and excessive demand. Demand for resources far exceeds what imbalanced, slow-growing neomedieval economies can provide. Given the weakness in state legitimacy, the imperative to address domestic and transnational threats to a fragile social stability will remain acute. The sheer expense and difficulty of replacing high-end military equipment adds to the challenge. These constraints impose strong incentives for leaders to be judicious in their use of military

resources. Preserving military resources will permit more scarce resources to be used for other urgent needs. Replacing lost high-end platforms will entail major opportunity costs relative to the state's domestic development needs, which could directly harm its political legitimacy. The art of strategy will aim to conserve resources and avoid unnecessary engagements that consume costly and difficult-to-replace military capabilities.

Seventh, the transition from an industrial to a neomedieval era may carry more dangers than would a potential power transition between China and the United States because of the proliferation of hazards, the perpetual weakness of states, and the scarcity of resources to address both. The recent past is not always a reliable guide to the future, and this is doubly so during transitions into new eras. Although the possibilities of a “power transition” between China and the United States have received much attention, we question whether such a transition will ever happen, given the weakness of the competitors and the spread of international disorder. At the very least, the study of power transitions should be tempered by a deeper understanding of why or how such transitions may or may not have occurred in the developing world and in preindustrial societies. More important, an equally large or even more dangerous risk lies in the possibility that conflict and political upheaval might attend the transition from the modern to the neomedieval era. Historical precedents for such transitions, such as when medieval Europe turned to modernity and when the ancient world transitioned into the medieval era, provide little cause for optimism. These periods featured considerable violence, disorder, and political upheaval. It is far from clear that our own transition into a neomedieval era will be orderly and free of violence. At the very least, it will be imperative to avoid the common error of trying to fight the last war by focusing on issues of the possibilities of Cold War–style conventional battles while ignoring potential problems that might arise from the transition to a neomedieval era.

Eighth, theories and ideas about international politics and warfare derived principally from the modern industrial era will be less relevant. The most popular theories and ideas regarding U.S.-China competition, such as theories about realism and power transition, draw heavily from data about wars and politics from 1800 to 2000. For example, Mearscheimer's theory of “offensive realism” has gained currency because of its prediction of an impending war, but his analysis is based almost exclusively on European

history from the age of Napoleon through the Cold War.¹² Similarly, Hal Brand and Michael Beckley's theory about a likely increase in war because of a "declining" national power draw principally from studies of wars over the past 150 years.¹³ Even such notions as the national will to fight betray a bias arising from industrial nation-states that may not pertain to the structure of neomedieval societies. These theories are not inherently wrong and may well be correct. However, they and all other theories based on modern experience should undergo a more rigorous examination that includes consideration of historical experiences beyond the past 200 years. More broadly, U.S. planners and decisionmakers will require new theories, ideas, and paradigms to guide them in the neomedieval era.

Ninth, the public's increasingly tenuous support of the government will likely deepen the military's dependence on mercenaries, unmanned systems, and coalition partners for combat operations. The permanent demobilization of the populace, decay of national spirit, and the depth of societal fragmentation mean that foreign policy and issues of warfare are once again returning to the domain of top rulers and the elites that support them. War may change in character accordingly. Without the need to mobilize public opinion, for example, leaders may have more freedom to start and to stop conflict. However, at the same time, leaders may have little ability to escalate conflict beyond a low level because of the perpetual fragility of public support. The public may accept a war so long as the cost is bearable and so long as the war does not prove too disruptive. Indeed, success in war may hinge on a ruler's ability to achieve their goals at a manageable cost to this general level of passive popular support. Relevant policies might include scaling operations to modest levels, keeping taxes low, and relying on mercenaries and unmanned systems to minimize politically sensitive casualties. Conversely, offensive war plans may attempt to impose hardship on enemy populations by damaging the economy or provoking social unrest through cyber, information, or other means. Provoking public discontent could aid the war aim of pressuring a rival government to seek a temporary truce and return to negotiations over some proximate issue.

¹² John Mearscheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, W. W. Norton, 2001.

¹³ Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, "China Is a Declining Power—and That's the Problem," *Foreign Policy*, September 24, 2021.

Tenth, and finally, extremism, corruption, and criminality will likely become more acute in societies and increasingly corrosive to military discipline. Societal fragmentation will increase social disorder, but social ills will manifest in different ways, depending on the nature of a society and strength of its institutions. In the United States, the combination of considerable individual liberty, social fragmentation, entrenched inequality, and diminishing prospects for social mobility is likely to increase the risk of political extremism. Relatively strong institutions make corruption and government collusion with criminals less prominent, however. In China, by contrast, rigid ideological repression, greater ethnic homogeneity, and extensive state surveillance reduce the risk of political extremism outside regions dominated by oppressed minorities, such as Tibet and Xinjiang. However, weak institutions raise the likelihood that corruption and collusion between criminals and government officials will increase in China. The disorder that afflicts society will affect militaries as well. The increasing reliance on contracts to perform military work opens ample opportunities for corruption. Extremists and criminals may attempt to infiltrate militaries to gain access to their weapons and equipment. More resources may be required to ensure discipline, and such vulnerabilities may degrade military performances.

Adapting to the Neomedieval World: Whose Advantage?

This neomedieval era is neither hypothetical nor looming in a distant future. In many ways, it is already here. The trends that we trace in this report will appear familiar to any observer of the contemporary scene. But these trends, scarcely two decades old, are just getting underway. The long-term trajectory points to their inevitable deepening over time. Although efforts to resist and reverse the trends might be tempting, such an approach is likely to prove futile. Finding ways to instead accommodate and, in select cases, delay or mitigate these trends will be essential to national success.

The neomedieval period will likely last for the rest of the century and perhaps longer. Medieval history lasted more than 1,000 years, after all,

stretching from the fall of Rome in the 400s AD to the late 1400s.¹⁴ Chinese preindustrial history, which has many features in common with the neomedieval era, lasted even longer, encompassing well over 3,000 years.¹⁵ What might follow a neomedieval era is impossible to say, but the cumulative experience of previous human civilizations militates against the idea of a return to modern conditions. More likely, whatever follows the neomedieval era is likely to share considerable continuity with the neomedieval era. Another way to put it is that the future may well rest in a return to the norms that have prevailed in virtually all human civilizations outside the anomaly of the modern industrial period.

The great powers that grasp and adapt to the neomedieval reality most effectively may gain an important advantage over rivals that continue to exhaust increasingly scarce treasure in futile efforts to recreate the past. Which country is best positioned to do this? Paradoxically, China's more-limited experience with modernity may prove a valuable asset. China has a rich history of experience outside the modern industrial era. Although the CCP initially turned against China's preindustrial history and traditions, Beijing has reversed itself in recent years.¹⁶ In practical terms, this sensitivity to China's long history may allow Beijing to grasp neomedieval trends more intuitively than Western countries, whose principal point of reference rests in a recent past in which they predominated. China's sensitivity to history beyond the past two centuries might explain many decisions that have otherwise puzzled observers. China's turn to repression and the centralization of power may, for example, reflect an acute awareness of the dangers of decaying state legitimacy and the concomitant perils of internal dissolution. Similarly, Xi's extensive anticorruption campaign could stem from fears that out-of-touch elites could undermine the public's faith and contribute to the country's weakening and collapse. Likewise, the military's focus on ensuring domestic order and coping with a broad array of state and nonstate

¹⁴ Norman Cantor, *The Civilization of the Middle Ages: A Completely Revised and Expanded Edition of Medieval History*, Harper Perennial, 1994.

¹⁵ John K. Fairbank, *China: A New History*, 2nd ed., Bellknap Press, 2006.

¹⁶ "During 39th Collective Study Session of CPC Central Committee Political Bureau, Xi Jinping Stresses: Deepen Study of Chinese Civilization, History" [把中国文明历史研究引向深入 增强历史自觉坚定文化自信], Xinhua, May 28, 2022.

dangers suggests an awareness of the danger of nontraditional sources and how these could threaten a government's legitimacy.

Yet China may suffer its own blind spots when it comes to this period of historical transition. Its experience with the nation-state has yielded such considerable benefits that the ruling party may resist abandoning the ideal. The nation-state's ability to command the loyalty of the people, its tendency toward strong patriotic sentiment, and its provision of taxes to fund state activities far exceed the capacities of imperial Chinese governments. Moreover, the CCP's identity as a "Marxist" party unavoidably roots much of its identity in the modern industrial era. Not surprisingly, Chinese leaders have generally sought to selectively and politically define traditional culture in ways consistent with CCP ideology and modern politics.¹⁷

Adaptation may prove extremely difficult for the United States. This is in part because the past way of doing things has served the country so well. Thanks to its radical innovations as a liberal democracy, in modern industry, and as a technological innovator, America's contribution to the era of industrial nation-states has been enormous. Moreover, nearly the entire history of the United States of America has unfolded in the modern industrial era. U.S. analysts and decisionmakers will likely face strong incentives to dismiss perspectives outside the nation-state experience.

Despite these challenges, there is ample reason to believe the United States can adjust effectively. The most important one is the country's innate dynamism and innovation. One reason America has succeeded so well as a nation-state has been its willingness and ability to continually experiment and adapt to historic changes. This adaptability can serve in the transition to a neomedieval era as well. If the United States is to maintain its position as the leading state in the future, finding ways to lead as a neomedieval great power will be a critical step in that direction.

¹⁷ "Adhere to and Improve Socialist System with Chinese Characteristics, Push Forward Modernization of State Governance System and Governance Capability" [坚持和完善中国特色社会主义制度推进国家治理体系和治理能力现代化], *Seeking Truth* [求是], January 1, 2020.

Glossary

attenuation	the general weakening or deterioration of relevant aspects of modern life
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
contractor	As used in this report, a commercial entity hired to provide security and related services. Mercenaries are a subset of contractors.
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
fragmenting societies	The erosion of national spirit and the increasing salience of competing group identities, such as diverse sub- and transnational communities that prioritize loyalty to something other than the nation-state
GDP	gross domestic product
IGO	intergovernmental organization
imbalanced economies	The disparate growth patterns of neomedieval economies, in which rapid growth is concentrated in a few sectors, while the rest experience marginal growth at best, and the related problems of entrenched inequality, stagnant social mobility, and a large illicit economy
informalization of warfare	The shift away from warfare conducted exclusively by national militaries toward diverse forces consisting of professional troops; contractors (or mercenaries); and sympathetic armed groups, such as militias, and the revival of older methods of fighting, such as intrastate conflicts, sieges, and irregular conflict
mercenary	As used in this report, a commercial entity hired to serve as a combatant or to provide direct support to combat operations

modern industrial era	Roughly the period from 1800 to 2000, featuring the rise of industrial nation-states
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
neomedieval era	A historical period, beginning around 2000, characterized by weakening state capacity, fragmenting societies, imbalanced economies, pervasive threats, and the informalization of warfare
neomedievalism	Characterized by a blend of some aspects of modern life and attenuation or regression of others
NGO	nongovernmental organization
PAP	People's Armed Police
pervasive threats	The proliferation of dangers from both military and nonmilitary sources, such as natural disasters, infectious disease, and violent nonstate actors, underscoring the increasing salience of domestic and transnational dangers even as the possibility of conflict with rival state militaries persists
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China
regression	A general reversal of features associated with the industrial modern age and toward patterns more commonly seen in preindustrial societies
UN	United Nations
weakening states	The decay in the political legitimacy of states because of their declining ability to maintain legitimacy; ensure domestic security; and provide levels of goods, services, and opportunities satisfactory to the populace

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The report outlines key trends that collectively suggest that the future of the U.S.-China rivalry will bear little resemblance to the titanic struggles of the past two centuries. U.S.-China peacetime competition appears headed to unfold under conditions featuring a high degree of international disorder, decaying state capacity, pervasive and acute domestic challenges, and severe constraints imposed by economic and social factors that are vastly different from those industrial nation-states experienced in the 19th and 20th centuries. These trends interact with and compound the effects of one another and are unlikely to be reversed. The net effect will be to considerably weaken virtually all states, including the United States and China. At the same time, severe resource constraints and a nearly overwhelming array of threats will stress the U.S. and China militaries and impair their ability to contend with one another. Many theories and ideas of why and how great powers compete may need to be reconsidered.

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