

Preparing for the Last War

Insurgency in the Era of Great Power Competition

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China's economic influence poses a threat to the international balance of power.¹ China uses its economic influence to achieve geopolitical goals that directly threaten US interests. This is seen in China's economic infusion in Latin America, which increases China's influence in the Western Hemisphere relative to the United States.² China organized the economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa into a structure that evades US economic leadership, and China created its own banking system to rival the World Bank—a US-led institution.³ In 2013, China announced its intention to create land and sea corridors that would reorient the world economy toward China.⁴ This One Belt One Road (OBOR) initiative will also offer China a trade route through Eurasia should the South China Sea (SCS) be closed to commerce due to a conflict in the waters. The Eurasian trade route, however, is vulnerable to disruption by religious and ethnic-based insurgency from groups in Central Asia. Lessons from insurgencies and proxy wars during the Cold War may inform an approach to frustrating China's advance through Eurasia. This article begins by examining some of the insurgencies sponsored by the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. This is followed by an examination of the sociopolitical context in regions along the OBOR. Lessons learned from this examination are then applied to policy recommendations for US competition with China.

Learning from the Past

A popular injunction among strategists is that preparation for the next war based on the last war is dangerous.⁵ This point is highlighted in Western Europe's ineptitude against Germany at the beginning of World War II.⁶ France, for example, prepared its forces in the 1930s for a war that resembled the Great War, em-

phasizing static lines of defense.⁷ Preparation along these lines proved disastrous for France, which capitulated six weeks after the German invasion. German maneuver warfare evolved substantially from 1918 and allowed Germany to outclass Allied forces decisively at the war's outset. Even with these evolved tactics, Germany eventually found itself in a protracted, multi-front war, which contributed to its downfall—just as it had in 1918. Though extrapolating the past merits caution, a look to the past can offer a glimpse of recurring historical patterns, such as those inherent in great power competition.

One historical pattern in great power competition is the presence of insurgency.⁸ Low-intensity conflict, such as insurgency, is a likelihood in great power competition because high-end military capabilities tend to deter direct conflict and push the fighting to the geopolitical periphery.⁹ The high-end military capability that is perhaps most effective at deterring direct conflict among great powers is nuclear weapons.¹⁰ Nuclear weapons likely prevented the United States and the Soviet Union (USSR) from turning the Cold War hot during their 45-year standoff. Instead of nuclear escalation, both nations engaged in proxy wars, many of which were insurgencies.

Support for insurgencies was deliberate and a matter of foreign policy.¹¹ Geopolitics—not the religious, ethnic, or social grievances that animated these conflicts—was the driving force behind the support. Insurgencies provided the great powers a forum for war by other means.¹² This forum allowed the United States and the USSR to vie for influence on the world stage by promulgating their respective ideologies and economic systems—many times through subversion and violence. Proxies would be selected and shaped for their capacity to effect social, political, or economic change through low-intensity conflict.¹³

For the United States, this policy could be traced back to the containment approach articulated by George Kennan.¹⁴ Kennan observed that the Soviet Union sought to flood the world with its influence, but if the Soviet Union encountered sufficient resistance in a particular region, it would redirect its attempt to exploit other opportunities.¹⁵ The Soviet persistence in spreading its influence necessitated a long-term strategy that contained Soviet expansion, rather than anticipated a single decisive victory. Efforts to contain Soviet expansion could be seen in the counterinsurgencies and insurgencies supported by the United States. Two notable examples, each with starkly different characters, were in Vietnam and Nicaragua.

In addition to containing Soviet expansion, support for low-intensity conflict facilitated a bloodletting of the Soviet Union, which—coupled with other instru-

ments of power—had a ruinous effect on Soviet viability.¹⁶ The Soviet's Afghanistan experience is a prime example. The protracted conflict caused great fiscal strain on the Soviet economy at the same time the Soviets relied heavily upon an unstable oil market. Saudi Arabia quadrupled its oil output in 1985, which caused a collapse in oil prices and significant loss in revenue for the Soviets, exacerbating preexisting problems feeding the latter's population and funding its government.¹⁷ Furthermore, the Soviet military experienced its own bloodletting as it struggled to adjust to the mujahedeen's unconventional warfare in Afghanistan.¹⁸ By the end of the Afghan War, the Soviet Union was on the verge of collapse.

Insurgency was also an important way to degrade great power influence, so it could not be concentrated on other priorities during the Cold War. The Soviet Union's involvement in Latin America sought to distract the United States from other regions of the world by creating instability in the Western Hemisphere.¹⁹ The Soviets' communist ally, Cuba, also sought to dissipate US global influence by sponsoring low-intensity conflict in Africa and Latin America.²⁰ Ernesto "Che" Guevara inveighed in his 1967 message to the Tricontinental Conference of Marxist revolutionaries from around the globe that the world needed "many Vietnams" to overextend the United States to facilitate its demise.²¹ The Soviet Union specifically supported revolutionary movements in Latin America to make the United States less effective in its global competition with the USSR.²² The Soviets' long-term objective for this type of influence was to eventually supplant US influence in Latin America.

The effects sought by the Soviet Union in the Western Hemisphere were multifaceted. The Soviets believed that supporting insurgencies in Latin America would threaten American security interests, such as access to the Panama Canal. Security threats and instability in the Western Hemisphere would result in a siphoning of resources and attention from other more contested Soviet interests elsewhere in the world. The Soviets believed that the United States had to become deeply involved in Latin America to stop a cascade of revolutions in the region. Yet, direct involvement in the region by the United States, according to the Soviets, would draw international condemnation and harm American credibility. The Soviets supported insurgencies in Latin America through intermediaries and surrogates to avoid a direct provocation of the United States.²³

Currently, China's ongoing ties to Latin America has gained American attention. Most conspicuous is China's economic statecraft in the region. China has already invested hundreds of billions of dollars in the region and has pledged more.

Though China is not overtly hostile in Latin America, its influence is not necessarily benign. China supports the Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América (ALBA, Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America), an organization hostile to US interests and a counterbalance to US-led organizations in the region.²⁴ China's assistance has helped fund the Bolivarian socialist projects that emanate from these countries. Bolivarian threats are notable for their potential to cause great instability in the region.²⁵ China's influence in Latin America, such as its support for ALBA, could be perceived as a way of undermining of the US-led order in the hemisphere and a glimpse of its worldwide ambitions.²⁶ Chinese support to these regimes could also grow into something directly hostile to US security, such as the Super Insurgency across Latin America promulgated by the now-deceased Hugo Chavez and his acolytes.²⁷ Even if not overtly hostile now, growing Chinese influence and capacity in Latin America can emerge as a capability directly hostile to the United States in the future.

Characteristics of Cold War Insurgencies

Several authors have distilled the elements of successful insurgencies. Robert Taber's classic work on guerilla warfare, for example, showed the importance of the insurgents' ability to inspire revolutionary fervor within local populations.²⁸ Successful insurgents nurtured their connection with the community because it was essential to the insurgents' survival. Organic connection with local populations is a strength insurgents have that poses an ongoing problem for counterinsurgents. Another important advantage enjoyed by insurgents is initiative. Insurgents begin the war and decide where and when to strike. They enjoy increased mobility and decreased territorial commitments. Victory for the insurgent is merely survival. This is the so-called "war of the flea," where a protracted conflict against an amorphous foe results in eventual exhaustion of military, political, and economic resources to sustain the fight. The Cuban Revolution exemplifies these aspects of insurgency. Fidel Castro's revolutionaries occupied a remote area of Cuba, where he and his *fidelistas* enjoyed sanctuary, while recruiting soldiers and running an economy. The government army was quite vulnerable to ambush by the fidelistas, who would only fight when the odds were in their favor. This resulted in constrained movement by government forces, which were rendered ineffective by the guerilla tactics. Although not a proxy war between the United States and Soviet Union, Castro's victory soon resulted in Cuba's affiliation with the Soviets and posed a source of ongoing concern in the Western Hemisphere.

Unlike the Cuban Revolution, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent insurgency there could be seen as a fight by proxy between the United States and Soviets. One of the most important aspects of the mujahideen's success was the ongoing and substantial support they received from outside sources, most notably the United States.²⁹ The insurgents received increasing levels of monetary and materiel support that allowed them to equalize aspects of the fight with the Soviets. This was clearly seen in the delivery of shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles that allowed the insurgents to degrade the Soviet air capability. Yet, the insurgents did not have to defeat the Soviets in a conventional sense. They simply had to survive and continue to drain Soviet will and capability. Furthermore, in addition to insurgent tactics, the conduct of the Soviets had an important role in the insurgents' success. The Soviets did not have a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy, so they brought conventional military hardware to the fight with the intent that they would "crush" the insurgents. The insurgents' mobility, in addition to weapons that equalized certain aspects of the battlefield, allowed them to surprise, exhaust, and ultimately prevail against the Soviets. The Soviet Union lacked legitimacy throughout the conflict, both within the Afghan culture and within the international community, which continued to harm Soviet efforts for the duration of the war.

Nicaragua was another battleground for a proxy fight between the United States and Soviet Union. The Soviets supplied the Sandinista government with military hardware, including tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, and helicopters. The United States, by contrast, provided funding and assistance to the counterrevolutionaries (i.e., "Contras") that fought the Soviet-backed Sandinista government. The United States also provided substantial support to covert operations during the insurgency—targeting important infrastructure, such as bridges, oil pipelines, and harbors—and supported the targeted killing of Sandinista leaders.³⁰ Both the insurgents and counterinsurgents adapted to their adversaries' tactics during the conflict. The Contras, however, remained viable by not giving up. Their persistence led to political talks within the government and ended in success when a US-backed candidate was elected president of Nicaragua. An overarching factor that contributed to the insurgents' success was ongoing US support.

China and the Road to Insurgency

China's pursuit of regional dominance is inherently hostile to US interests. China wants to displace the United States as the dominant power in the Indo-Pa-

cific region and aspires toward reshaping the international system to make it more favorable to Chinese interests.³¹ China is rapidly modernizing its military, while also asserting its military prowess in the absence of American presence. China employs other instruments of power, such as economic, diplomatic, and intelligence, to persuade or coerce weaker states to conform to its priorities.³²

The United States, according to China, is employing a containment strategy to stifle China's influence.³³ In addition to pressure by the United States, China has ongoing tension with its neighboring states related to issues of sovereignty near its territorial waters. Because of these constraints, China has looked to its west and south for ways to ensure its economic and political viability without being exclusively reliant upon the SCS. The OBOR initiative is a way to achieve that aim. China's OBOR extends economic and political influence throughout the Eurasian landmass, offering a way to reshape the international order by making China central to the world's economy. The OBOR has a number of trade corridors across Eurasia (i.e., the belt) and the Indian Ocean (i.e., the road). Countries involved in the land belt include China, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Turkey, and Russia. The sea road includes stops in Malaysia, Indonesia, India, Sri Lanka, Kenya, Somalia, Djibouti, and Egypt.

China's project relies on safe travel through states with social, political, and economic difficulties. Most of the states involved in the OBOR have elevated warnings for instability.³⁴ A substantial number of states have either a high warning or a very high warning for instability. Other states have alert status, and one, Somalia, has a very high alert status.³⁵ This suggests that some of the locations China will rely upon for its project cannot ensure safety of the commerce, and for those that can, preexisting instability leaves those countries at risk for further decline. Many of these countries have high levels of grievance within their populations, which is a major factor in societal discord and, in conjunction with other factors, insurgency.

China itself may be vulnerable to insurgency within and across its borders. China has a sizable Muslim Ethnic-Uyghur population, which has a range of grievances and a history of uprisings. One of the land belt corridors will pass through the Uyghur autonomous region in Xinjiang province. A major grievance held by the Uyghurs in China is related to their minority status and China's identification of them as a problem group. China has enforced interethnic mingling, suppressed Uyghur language instruction, and stifled Uyghur political expression.³⁶ Chinese authorities have hastily imprisoned millions of Uyghurs and placed others in re-education camps that entail degrading treatment and insensitivity to cultural

and religious observations. China's response has left the Uyghur population with a sense that its culture is in jeopardy.³⁷



Figure 1. Testimony of former Uyghur detainee. Mihrigul Tursun, a Uyghur woman who was detained in China, testifies at the National Press Club in Washington about the mass internment camps in China and the abuses she suffered therein. (Department of State photo by David A. Peterson)

The perception that Muslim cultures are in jeopardy has animated Islamic radicals for decades. The Soviet Union and then the United States became the target of Islamist hatred for what was perceived as outside powers attacking Muslim societies. With the OBOR, China may have a similar experience. A number of Islamic non-state actors are active in Central Asia, such as the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), the Islamic Jihad Union (IJU), al-Qaeda, and the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM).³⁸ Kyrgyzstan, for instance, has witnessed a number of fighters travel to and from Syria to participate to fight alongside the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Kyrgyzstan government has been concerned that terrorists may leave Afghanistan and occupy the country's mountainous region, which could become a sanctuary for fighters. In 2016, a person

identified as a Uyghur separatist detonated a vehicle borne improvised explosive device outside the Chinese embassy in Bishkek, suggesting specific animus toward China.³⁹

China's belt initiative through Central Asia travels through a milieu of risk factors for insurgency. Successful insurgencies historically have been able to mobilize local grievances, often of a peasant nature, and take control of rural areas, while forcing a larger foe into a state of protracted conflict.⁴⁰ Insurgencies benefit from irregular terrain, which provides challenges to counterinsurgents and cover for insurgents.⁴¹ Most importantly, insurgencies require support from a sympathetic population.⁴² Insurgencies in the twenty-first century are notable for their cultural and religious motivators, which offer potential for broader bases of support.⁴³ Moreover, twenty-first-century insurgencies are transnational rather than confined to specific borders; so, they may involve larger swathes of territory and have uprisings in regions dislocated from the main theater.

These factors appear prevalent among China's proposed Central Asian belt. China's attempted exploitation of the region may appear colonial as it invests in projects that support Beijing's economic interests rather than those of the local populations. Western liberalism is notably absent from Chinese policy, suggesting that human rights and individual freedoms may be absent from its international development projects. Instead, China's authoritarianism may be projected along with its investments in the region, further inflaming tension with indigenous populations that do not conform to China's plans. The propensity for Chinese initiatives to stimulate popular backlash is seen in Ecuador, where resistance to Chinese projects has included violent protests.⁴⁴

China's close ties to the regimes in Muslim countries may agitate Islamic fundamentalists. Muslim countries have remained relatively silent on China's treatment of the Uyghur population. Such silence is seen as the result of close trade relations with China.⁴⁵ China's relationships with Muslim regimes may inflame grievances, however, as it ties into a common Islamist narrative that apostate Muslim leaders regularly sell out their coreligionists for secular opportunities. As such, regimes that cooperate with China on the OBOR may be at risk for hostility directed at them from Islamist elements within their own populations.

China's Uyghurs and neighboring non-state actors pose a potential threat for a transnational insurgency against China's interest in Central Asia based on ethnoreligious grievances. As China's influence in Central Asia grows, local populations may perceive China more as an imperialist power whose basic tenets are antitheti-

cal to the Muslim societies its project spans. Though this appears to be an organic confluence of factors for insurgency, insurgency could be accelerated by outside organization and support.⁴⁶ Resistance to China's OBOR project could even bring larger instability to the region as the weak states involved in the OBOR may themselves be vulnerable to collapse due to insurgent violence.⁴⁷ China's approach to COIN is hard-power centric, which may only perpetuate insurgent violence, and leave China in a protracted conflict in Central Asia.⁴⁸

A Strategic Opportunity for the United States

China's OBOR project portends a scenario where China encounters insurgents in Central Asia and elsewhere. The current geopolitical context may support and accelerate the collision of China and Islamists. This scenario leaves the United States with an opportunity for a bait-and-bleed strategy through which China and Islamist fighters degrade each other, while the United States remains physically out of the fray.⁴⁹ The United States is decreasing its footprint in certain locations around the world, while China is actively increasing its own. This may gain China more recognition as a self-interested, colonial power. China's mistreatment of its Uyghur minority and its heavy-handed means of repression may only serve to inflame Islamist fervor as China becomes more and more noticeable on the world stage. Moreover, the weakness of many states China seeks to partner with in its economic endeavor increases the chances that the states will fail if faced with ongoing violence, leaving China with loss of investment and conflict.

Consistent with the transnational nature of contemporary insurgencies, resentment of the OBOR may also occur in regions outside of Central Asia. Somalia, for example, is a projected stop on China's sea road and is exceedingly unstable and teeming with extremists. China's activity in Central Asia could become a rallying cry for extremists in Somalia, who by themselves would not likely need an issue such as China's treatment of Uyghurs to foment chaos. China's belt and road also come into contact with a number of other countries with politically active Muslim populations that might take issue with China's treatment of the Uyghurs and China's exportation of Beijing's worldview. This could create a potential for protest and agitation against countries that deal with China. The center of gravity in this scenario, however, would be in Central Asia, where treatment of the Uyghurs and the exportation of China's self-interest becomes a local and possibly an international issue.

The United States would benefit from a bait-and-bleed strategy, but it is not without US investment. The United States would have to keep Afghanistan from being the main attraction for foreign fighters for this strategy's maximum impact. The Afghan government is not strong enough to protect its territory without US assistance, which leaves the United States with an important role in securing the country. To do this, the United States would have to increase troop numbers in Afghanistan substantially to provide proper training for Afghan forces and to secure Afghanistan's borders—particularly its eastern flank.⁵⁰ A strong US presence in Afghanistan that pushes fighters out of the country would leave China's OBOR an easy target for displaced fighters. The displacement of fighters from Afghanistan in conjunction with clarion calls to take up arms against China's imperialism may make China's commerce belt through Central Asia the target of insurgent activity, just as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria were attractions to fighters in the recent past. China may naturally seek to secure its route, which invites a protracted fight between a COIN-naïve Chinese military and Islamist radicals. Though the United States would remain out of the fight, US troops in Afghanistan would be an important deterrent to China seeking entry to Afghanistan to draw fighters away from its trade route.

Peace and security in Afghanistan have a direct relationship to concentration of fighters—or potential fighters—along the OBOR. Though a substantial US troop presence is important to secure Afghanistan's borders, troops in Afghanistan nonetheless attract foreign fighters, which may deplete the concentration of fighters along the OBOR. A peace negotiation with the Taliban would help minimize the incentive for foreign fighters to enter Afghanistan and would provide plausibility for a large troop presence in the country. A peace agreement that links alteration of location and mission of US troops and likelihood of eventual withdrawal to the Taliban's acceptance of peace and stability may be possible considering the latter has shown signs of willingness to negotiate, and though militarily confident, is realistic about its marginal prospects of retaking Kabul anytime soon.⁵¹ A negotiation such as this would be consistent with recent trends of continued talks about a peace agreement in Afghanistan. Perhaps more importantly, however, a peace agreement would allow maximal concentration on competition with China.

Inability for the OBOR initiative to get started, or its failure once begun, would highlight China's lack of options for power projection. The inability of China to create its land-based trade route leaves China beholden to the SCS. Since the US Navy is the dominant sea power in the region, this forces China to accede to US

presence or engage in a sea-based confrontation that aims at expelling the US presence from the SCS. China's military build-up and provocations in the waters suggests it may eventually choose a path of naval confrontation. Not only is entering battle with an experienced and technologically superior navy perilous, it is also self-injurious because China is highly dependent upon exports and needs the SCS open to commerce. More than 60 percent of China's trade travels by sea; so China's waters are extremely critical to Beijing's overall viability.⁵² Yet, trillions of dollars from the global economy also transit the waters, including commerce from close US allies, such as Japan. As such, a conflagration in the SCS would have wide-ranging implications, which would have negative effects on the United States and its allies, not just China. Even so, the implications are existential for China, whose economy mostly relies on safe passage in its waters.

Preparing for the Last War

Insurgencies had an important role during the last great power competition. The United States and Soviet Union used insurgencies to great effect—most successfully by the former, however, which was the winner of the Cold War. The great power competition with China may also call for alternatives to open warfare, degrading China's strength without entering into a high-end confrontation. As with past competitions, proxy fights are only one aspect of the larger contest. Other instruments of power will be necessary to maximize the effect of a bait-and-bleed strategy. The economy, for example, will play an important role in sealing China's fate—as will diplomacy with allies and strategic partners.

A bait-and-bleed strategy against China would be advantageous to the United States, but it would not be conclusive. At the end of the fight, a foe would still exist. If China endures, it would probably be degraded after fighting a protracted insurgency, which would invite other opportunities to continue bloodletting or even a change in strategy, such as a golden bridge that allows China to return to the global economy as a productive member—but certainly *not* as regional hegemon. If Islamists sufficiently stall the Chinese from getting through Central Asia, the remaining Islamists would need to be addressed. This would require timely engagement by the US military to prevent a repeat of the aftermath of the Soviet–Afghan War, where US disinterest fed Islamists' delusion of grandeur. This would also underscore the importance of diplomacy in the region as well as a secure Afghanistan. Even if China's economic plans for Central Asia and beyond encounter significant obstacles, it is still possible that China would consider seizing control of the SCS

by force. Yet, because China is so dependent on the sea lanes, such a move could be perilous, as China would effectively be shut out from the world economy.

A sharp halt to China's economy would place great strain on the communist regime. The hundreds of millions of Chinese who attained middle-class status and the hundreds of millions who live in poverty comparable to sub-Saharan-Africa would experience a dramatic downgrade in their way of life. This would pose a new source of unrest for China, a country with a history of factions. As China's economy faded so would its regime's power. The Chinese economy would dissipate quickly with a SCS fight because China needs access to ports where materials imported so it can make products that it then exports. Since violence increases when power is at risk, economic catastrophe that delegitimizes the regime may precipitate harsher crackdowns by the government, which would likely invite more rebelliousness and fictionalization.⁵³ A SCS fight may produce revolutionary fervor within China's own borders.

Policy Recommendations

Information operations should take place that amplify the plight of the Uyghurs on the world stage. News organizations should be encouraged to cover testimonials from dissidents, and stories related to Uyghur mistreatment should be made widely available online. Media should be introduced to the environmental enablers inherent to the situation, such as ethnic fissures, animosities, authoritarian repression, and others, which may stir passions related to the issue.⁵⁴ The aim is to create awareness of the issue in sympathetic populations around the world and to incite a desire to help the Uyghurs out of their plight. This awareness would also reach malcontents in certain parts of the world, who are animated by cultural paranoia and interested in their next transnational fight. Diplomacy, such as work within the United Nations, should make the Uyghurs plight a main topic to legitimize the issue and to enhance its media coverage.

Early implementation of information operations is important because China may try to deny an unconventional warfare strategy from being employed by continuing to make large investments in the region. Loans, labor jobs, and stimulation of local economies, along with promises of returns on investment, could logically be targeted at regimes and their indigenous populations with the aim of placating them so they do not take up arms against Chinese interests. The limits to buying favor are yet to be seen, however. The resentment at China from segments of the Muslim world is already burgeoning due to China's treatment of the Uyghurs.

China's exploitation of the region also underscores its authoritarian character and may stimulate resentment by local populations for that reason itself.

China's economic investment in the region is essentially mismatched to the challenge it faces. China faces a potential religious and ideological battle in Central Asia and elsewhere along the OBOR against which economic pledges may have little consequence. China's economic largesse could have a bifurcating effect on Muslim societies, where leaders and certain elites may welcome the investment, but those same investments may naturally frustrate Islamist interests. A major grievance nurtured by Islamist thought is related to the perceived marginalization of Muslim orthodoxy by secular interests.⁵⁵ This belief galvanized resistance to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and has fueled ongoing resentment at the United States. A new generation of "near enemies," therefore, have the potential to emerge based on close economic ties to China, in addition to a new "far away enemy" in China. Support of apostate Muslim regimes earned the United States great scorn and, along with policy toward the Palestinian people, served as the rationale for decades of terrorism against the United States, which culminated in the September 11, 2001 attack.⁵⁶ This hostility has occurred despite billions of dollars in American aid, opportunities for private investments, and military assistance to Muslim-majority countries. Even after heroic diplomatic efforts, segments of these societies maintain a highly distorted and hostile view of the United States. There is no reason to suppose that China's economic investments would elicit a different reaction from radicals in these countries. China's tendency to suppress basic human rights of those it identifies as enemies of the state and Beijing's other human rights violations may make it simply easier for regional animosity to emerge against China.

Special forces should establish ties with indigenous populations in Central Asia to develop allies and to gain knowledge of the culture and language. It is best for special forces to develop allies who have secular interests in opposing China's OBOR, such as those found in ethnic-based grievances instead of religious fundamentalism. These allies in the region could be designated key players at the end of a successful campaign against China and possibly supported in their efforts to assert control over territory, which itself would be in various levels of disrepair due to protracted low-intensity conflict. In addition to indigenous forces deemed favorable to the United States, US diplomats should work channels with Muslim allies in the Middle East and South Asia to motivate politically active Muslims to fight for the Uyghurs. China's mistreatment of the Uyghurs and its imperialism in Muslim lands would serve as the siren song of handlers who motivate Islamists

against China, much as Pakistan's intelligence service motivated warring factions against the USSR during the Soviet-Afghan War.⁵⁷

Intermediaries will be important in accelerating the collision between Islamists and China. Though animus would naturally be organic to the situation, materiel and personnel would be needed for an effective insurgency. The examination above suggests that outside assistance is crucial to successful insurgencies. Indeed, surrogates may be more important in this instance because the United States would have no physical role beyond amplifying messages and creating allies close to the fight. In a bait-and-bleed strategy, the United States has no real interest in seeing the insurgents through to victory as it did with, say, the Contras in Nicaragua. Surrogates will also be important in maintaining plausible deniability for the United States. Such deniability is important to prevent escalation. However, if the Cold War is any lesson, discovery of support for proxies may lead to more proxy fights, rather than conventional war.

The United States must underscore its nuclear capability throughout the competition. A critical assumption is that great powers will not engage in a high-end fight because they acknowledge that such a confrontation could lead to nuclear escalation. Evidence that the US military is upgrading its nuclear arsenal and that US leaders are willing to use nuclear weapons if sufficiently provoked will have an important deterrent effect, which is needed to keep the fighting on the geopolitical periphery. However, such posturing must occur in a fashion that does not provoke unnecessary anticipation of a first strike.

Benefit to the National Security Strategist

The National Security Strategy of the United States holds that America will use all instruments of power to prevent regional domination by any country.⁵⁸ A bait-and-bleed strategy against China in Central Asia meets this requirement, while also maintaining the United States' strategic depth. China is but one actor in a multipolar world; so, the possibility exists that the United States will be faced with other near-peer adversaries concurrent with, or sequential to, open warfare with China. A bait-and-bleed strategy would maintain the United States' high-end military capabilities, while China and Islamists degrade each other. The United States' overmatch capability, as a result, is not degraded with this approach should other conflicts erupt.

Another benefit of this strategy is that it can achieve success in defeating China. Some of the ablest militaries have historically struggled with insurgencies. In itself,

engaging in a protracted COIN would reduce China's capability to address issues it had prioritized, such as those related to regional dominance or undermining the international order. Yet, the nature of insurgency in Central Asia along China's OBOR has greater implications because of China's investment in the project and China's need to diversify its ability to conduct commerce. Denying China its commerce belt through Central Asia would strike at one of China's vital interests. This strategy, therefore, offers a way to weaken China, and, depending on the courses of action China chooses during its fight, could lead to the failure of its government.

On Opposing Views and Counterarguments

An opposing view to the strategic approach described above is that insurgencies are not always successful against an established power. The irredentist Hmong insurgency in Laos, for example, did not achieve its separatist aims against Laotian government forces. This view, however, overlooks the fact that the aim of the above strategy is not to install a new regime. Rather, this strategy seeks to impose additional constraints on China that will affect Beijing's strategic decision making and its advance across Eurasia. To be sure, the strategy proposed above is a bait-and-bleed strategy that does not have use for insurgents beyond a source of friction that frustrates China's advance. To this end, the insurgents do not have to "win" in a conventional sense. This strategy will nonetheless have value if China finds itself in a COIN quagmire that drains military, political, and financial resources.

The strategy stands the risk of provoking a Chinese backlash if US support for insurgencies against China's interests are discovered. Despite this, the competition between the United States and China is already developing into a game of hardball. American tariffs on Chinese goods and Chinese naval operations that put US warships at risk also have potential for backlash. Even if support for insurgency is attributed to the United States, such a strategy must be appropriately placed within the context of great power competition. In this context, where vital interests are at stake, discovery and its resultant escalation may be an acceptable risk. Unconventional warfare would be an unsurprising aspect of great power competition.

This strategy does not aim specifically for regime change in China, but second- and third-order effects of this strategy may occur that result in the implosion of the regime. Such an implosion would be due to China's decision making as it navigates its constraints—not due to an overt US objective. A backlash by China to frustration along the OBOR that incites a SCS conflagration and its attendant ef-

fects on the Chinese economy—and government—would be a chain of events set in motion by Beijing. Within the context of great power competition, China faces a number of threats to its internal stability that Beijing must carefully manage. China's intentional or accidental provocation of a conventional naval confrontation, for example, carries risks for regime instability as does its economic maneuvering. Great power competition is naturally perilous.

The above strategy not only affects China but also impacts those countries that may host fighting between insurgents and China. Central Asian countries may find themselves the battleground for increased insurgent activity against China. Diplomatic and political backlash against the United States may occur if America is seen as the instigator of these insurgents. It is clear that Central Asia currently has an Islamist problem, with a number of Islamist terrorist groups active in the region. Some of these groups may share not only a religious affiliation with the Uyghurs but also an ethnic connection. This has nothing to do with the United States and everything to do with the counterterrorism policies of these countries that left their nations vulnerable to non-state actors. The willingness of the United States to step out of the way and allow insurgents and China to inflict damage on each other is simply not a legitimate grievance against the United States.

It is important to underscore that the strategy discussed above is a theoretical discussion of geopolitics. Since this strategy deals with future events, it cannot be known whether the strategy would unfold as discussed. Important facts can change or emerge that might alter the course of this approach. For instance, this strategy expects that the same animus that emerged against the USSR and United States from Islamic radicals would emerge against China. Yet, certain geopolitical events could mitigate such hostility and therefore alter the strategy. Despite this limitation, the above discussion can elucidate geopolitical vulnerabilities that exist in isolation or as a whole, which can inform strategic competition with China.

Conclusion

Insurgency played a major role during the last great power competition between the United States and Soviet Union. The history of insurgency in this context shows that proxy wars can distract, drain, and, in conjunction with other factors, contribute to the downfall of a major power. This does not suggest that the situation presently studied is a carbon copy of the past; most certainly it is not. Constraints exist, however, that make patterns more likely to occur, such as an effort to

avoid nuclear conflict or a large-scale war. Certain geopolitical realities serve as powerful motivators for war by other means.

China's actions against its Uyghur minority and its influence projection have a ready-made adversary in Islamist fighters who are themselves targets of American lethal operations. A strategy that fosters the collision of Islamist fighters and China is advantageous to the United States, which can remain out of the physical fight while each foe exhausts the other. This strategy defeats China's attempt at regional domination and undermining of the world order by distracting and eroding China's political, economic, and military capabilities. Failure with the OBOR initiative would leave China beholden to the SCS. Though this reality could cause China to attempt to dominate its waters, doing so would quickly suffocate its economy, placing its regime at risk. Very importantly, this strategy prevents the United States' high-end capability from being depleted against China in open warfare. This conservation of resources is particularly needed in the multipolar world, where other competitors with high-end capabilities themselves can attack the United States' interests around the world or in the homeland. **JIPA**

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