

From the Great Power Competition to Great Power Cooperation: Strategic Lessons from a Pandemic

Adib Farhadi, PhD

Abstract A swiftly changing geopolitical and geoeconomic landscape in Central Asia- Southeast Asia (CASA) resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic coupled with the modern Great Power Competition (GPC)—calls for a timely shift in U.S. foreign diplomacy to “soft power” facilitation and cooperation in this fragile region. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed that isolationism and/or the over-reliance on militaristic might are ineffective strategies for maintaining long-term U.S. national interests. As China rapidly expands its “soft power” influence in the Central Region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the U.S. must enact similar strategic undertakings to remain competitive. To that end, the New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) is the United States’ best option to compete and/or cooperate with China’s BRI. Strategic implementation of the NSRI is critical, not only for gaining traction in the modern GPC, but ultimately for expediting a successful recovery from the pandemic, through increased regional trade and economic development. The NSRI can facilitate the commercialization of Afghanistan’s vast wealth of natural resources, especially its rare earth and critical minerals, ensuring continued U.S. strategic influence in the CASA region. The NSRI can also be instrumental in affording new opportunities for interstate cooperation within the scientific and technological communities during this crucial time of global recovery. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted not only our global interconnectedness and interdependence, but also the prospect of *great power cooperation* in the service of global healing.

Keywords Key Words · COVID-19 · Great Power Competition · Cooperation · Afghanistan · Silk Road · Central Asia–Southeast Asia · United States · China · National Security · Regionalism · Geoeconomics · Geopolitical · Public–Private Partnerships · Belt and Road Initiative · Soft Power

A. Farhadi (✉)
University of South Florida, Tampa, FL 33620, USA
e-mail: Farhadi@usf.edu

Introduction

The lasting impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on U.S. objectives in the CASA region remain uncertain. However, the dawn of the twenty-first century was already marked by notable changes in the international system before the advent of the pandemic, including challenges to the modern nation-state system, the emboldening of malign entities supported by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), and the intensification of great power competition for global influence (Brands, Feaver and Inboden 2020).

The chaos and insecurity resulting from the pandemic has created new opportunities for the spread of misinformation among already vulnerable populations. This is most apparent in the fragile Central Region, which currently faces the threat of renewed civil war in Afghanistan, following the withdrawal of U.S. troops in late 2021. Layered on top of these concerns are sophisticated efforts by regional and global powers to wield economic, military, and societal power to influence and shape population groups across the region (Gibson 2020, GPCC, Sept. 16-17).

As the U.S. re-enters the great power competition during its recovery from the pandemic, strategies for effectively competing must be re-assessed and new ways to cooperate in the Central Region explored. As General Michael Nagata emphasized during his talk at the Great Power Competition Conference (GPCC), September 2020, this situation is now a “contest for strategic influence [whose] stakes and consequences... are rapidly becoming as consequential as any prospect of an armed conflict with Russia, China, or Iran” (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16-17).

Acting on this principle of cooperation, means shifting the U.S. strategic perspective from a zero-sum game of losing or winning the modern great power competition to a win-win strategy of moving towards *great power cooperation*. This strategic undertaking will be particularly critical for competing effectively in the CASA region, where China has already gained substantial influence by stimulating economic growth with massive infrastructure projects such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), alongside targeted regionalist rhetoric.

To that end, Afghanistan should become a renewed focal point for U.S. soft power engagement and cooperation in the region, as it faces an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. If left abandoned by the U.S., Afghanistan will almost certainly devolve into relative chaos, echoing the devastation experienced in Vietnam following the U.S. withdrawal in 1973. Moreover, while Afghanistan remains perpetually dependent on humanitarian foreign aid, and thus vulnerable to malign influence, the entire region will remain volatile and fragile, posing a lingering threat to U.S. national security interests and global stability. The cycle of crisis and aid dependency in Afghanistan can only be assuaged by multilateral initiatives that foster long range economic development.

The New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI) is the most expedient route to Afghanistan’s economic sustainability, and ultimately, regional integration and stability. The primary promise of this initiative is its affordance of large-scale commercial development of natural resources through renewed direct access to international trade markets

for landlocked Afghanistan. The U.S., in return for its vital role in the success of the NSRI, will garner critical influence in the region, preeminent positioning in the modern GPC, and greater opportunities for cooperation with China and other regional influencers, which is essential for supporting global stability during recovery from the pandemic.

Further, this chapter posits that the U.S. and China should revisit their historical willingness to cooperate on interstate biomedical research initiatives and technological advancements during times of crisis. As leaders in these fields, the U.S. and China can act together to expedite global recovery from the devastation of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus contributing to a shift in the modern great power competition towards *great power cooperation*.

The present chapter will survey several key lessons from the global pandemic within the broader context of the modern GPC, followed by relevant prescriptions for sustainable recovery in Afghanistan and the CASA region. These lessons will demonstrate that the pandemic has altered the geostrategic landscape in CASA in two critical ways: (a) it has increased global interconnectedness and interdependence, requiring a shift in U.S. strategic planning and engagement in the region; and (b) exacerbated diplomatic rifts and vulnerabilities to misinformation, necessitating renewed cooperation between the U.S. and China for greater overall regional stability. Effective prescriptions for maintaining and gaining U.S. influence in the CASA region, and strong positioning in the modern GPC, center on soft power diplomacy. The U.S. should continue its humanitarian assistance and facilitation of economic investment growth in Afghanistan (NSRI), while capitalizing on emerging opportunities in the wider region (such as the China Pakistan Economic Corridor and the NSRI) for renewed cooperation with China in CASA.

How the Pandemic Has Altered the Geo-Strategic Landscape in CASA - Revealed Interconnectedness and Interdependence

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted our daily lives—from the need for facial coverings and social distancing to novel implications of far-reaching global communications and the rapid spread of disinformation—evidence abounds of our growing global interconnectedness and the critical effects our actions have on one another as individuals and as nation-states. Further, the pandemic has afforded vital lessons for international communities at large, driving home the reality that significant events and crises occurring in one region can, and do, rapidly affect the entire global community.

Possibly, the most critical lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that our international communities are increasingly economically interdependent, calling for new ways to manage relations with historical competitors that we now rely on for essential goods and services. As Mr. Todd Veazie, Director of Strategic Multilayer Assessment (SMA) Pentagon Joint Staff, illustrated in his recent talk, this reality is

true across several vital sectors such as production, manufacturing, and healthcare, and especially pronounced in those sectors most affected by the pandemic and most necessary for an expedient global recovery (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). From a positive perspective, this growing interconnectedness and interdependence affords our global communities much greater access to one another, and in turn, greater opportunities to form profitable alliances and cooperative relationships, even while engaged in economic competition.

Interconnectedness, however, has a dark side that was further exacerbated by the pandemic. During a recent presentation, Dr. Richard Legault, Senior Advisor for Social Sciences at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, demonstrated the implications of expanding social media platforms. The ability for users to transmit digital information across the globe rapidly means that vulnerable populations are now, more than ever, regularly exposed to dangerous messaging, disinformation, and the rhetoric of violent opportunists. The pandemic has, at least temporarily, created a global culture largely centered on fear and uncertainty, even in the most prosperous countries (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). The Central Region is thus ripe for the proliferation of disinformation and the increased spread of violent extremism.

In his introduction to the second GPC conference, Dr. Eric Eisenberg, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at USF, indicated that the Covid-19 pandemic has opened additional channels for increased activity by malign actors. Dr. Eisenberg suggested that while notable changes in the international system had already marked the twenty-first century (before COVID-19), the pandemic has engendered an environment in which malign actors, supported by information and communication technology, may take advantage of the disruption caused by the pandemic to advance their agendas (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16-17).

Further, global interconnectedness has increased complexities in communications that intelligence mechanisms fail to fuse into cohesive intelligence gathering. Private wealth and enterprises, criminal networks, international media, and social media all increase these complexities and contribute to state and non-state actors' abilities to levy influence and obscure attribution. U.S. intelligence apparatuses must account for these changes and develop the ability to fuse disparate information into cohesive knowledge for commanders and decision-makers more rapidly. U.S. strategic command and control systems must now evolve beyond Combatant Command boundaries to all domains. Elaborating on this, LTG Karen Gibson, Deputy Director of National Intelligence for National Security Partnerships, has stated that, “[new threat vectors] include cyber, space, cognition, and influence” in our interconnected world of the COVID-19 era (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17).

Increased Vulnerability to Misinformation in the COVID-19 Era

Over the past century, the global landscape has been defined by international competition in terms of political, economic, military, and social power—with U.S. power and influence dominating the global stage since the end of the Second World War (Brands, Feaver and Inboden 2020). However, the common era has seen a shifting landscape of power, in which many new players are now vying for top position. Though the central tensions still lie between the three global powers (the U.S., China, and Russia), other major players cannot be overlooked. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Brazil, Mexico, the United Kingdom, and many others, hold their stakes and claims for regional power, influencing states' actions and the private sector on the world stage.

This geopolitical shift has created a space for the devaluation of liberal values abroad and domestically. Further, critical shifts in population dynamics have spurred global unrest. “Economic inequality and rapid demographic changes have fueled populist resentment, ethno-nationalism, and sweeping distrust in national and international institutions alike. Shifts in technology and communications have heightened avenues for surveillance and enabled the proliferation of disinformation” (Daniels 2020, x).

The COVID-19 pandemic has uncovered and amplified these pre-existing fracture lines in U.S. domestic and foreign policy and has served to strengthen emerging global trends that are now moving away from the liberal order (Brands, Feaver and Inboden 2020). History has shown that following wars, pandemics, or economic crises, political shifts always occur. “The question of how to reconstruct world order following the COVID-19 pandemic requires us to address not only recovery from the disease, but also the underlying problems it revealed” (Gavin and Brands 2020, p. 5).

The Great Power Competition is becoming increasingly complex during the COVID era, as it is now more centered on the acquisition of global and regional influence than growing military power (Nagata 2020). Competition now coincides with cooperation and conflict along multiple dimensions including air, land, sea, cyber, space, and information/influence campaigns. The U.S. is losing its traditional lead on this new global playing field. Russia and China do not adhere to Cold War rule sets now and often target the U.S. holistically. Halting or slowing the imminent erosion of U.S. power by gaining and maintaining influence in the Central and CASA region is now essential. Influence, rather than conventional might, should be the strategic focus for moving forward in the modern GPC.

Disruption and distraction are demonstrated objectives in adversaries' information and influence campaigns against the U.S. and our allies. Mr. Robert Jones, Senior Strategist at U.S. Special Operations Command, suggests that opportunities to disrupt and distract U.S. adversaries exist within their populations as well (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). Foreign populations with discrete identities and/or grievances present vulnerabilities to U.S. adversaries, just as they do for the United States.

The U.S. must re-prioritize its domestic and foreign agendas to build trust and resilience within its vulnerable domestic populations and those in the Central Region. U.S. practitioners must develop a deeper understanding of influence narratives and greater capabilities in strategic information and influence operations. LTG Terry Wolff, Director of the Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies, acknowledges the need for shifting U.S. national security priorities. Describing the modern playing field as a “new operating environment”, Wolff explains that the vital national interest is now control of the central position—to ensure access to the global economy, deny access to GPC rivals, deny sanctuary to transnational threats, and prevent the proliferation of WMD (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). This competitive approach implies a positive aim (accessibility) and a negative aim (to deny advantage). Critically, this approach depends on the ability to collaborate with and enable our allies.

Another consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic is that it has amplified the many ways in which malign actors can now reach vulnerable populations in the Central Region and globally, even in remote areas, through digital media and messaging. Major Gen. Alexis G. Grynkewich, Director of Operations U.S. Central Command, has emphasized that such activities increase the potential for a resurgence of violent movements in the region during its recovery (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). Likewise, the pandemic has highlighted emerging cracks in U.S. information gathering and its ability to counter rapidly disseminated disinformation effectively. During this vulnerable period of recovery, abandoning Afghanistan may result in grave disadvantages for U.S. intelligence gathering, leverage, and mitigation in the CASA region.

Ultimately, the U.S. must remain strategically engaged in the Central Region to effectively stave off third-party control by China, stabilize economies, and build regional alliances that increase trust. Such engagement can best be achieved by utilizing U.S. convening power to encourage economic regionalism, in large part by focusing on aiding interstate public–private partnerships (PPPs) in Afghanistan and the CASA region. If the region remains economically fractured and largely underdeveloped in states such as Afghanistan, it will remain highly vulnerable to increased third-party influence and malign activity, which can and will have dangerous repercussions for regional and international security and prosperity.

Recommendations for U.S. Strategic Shifts in a Post-Pandemic CASA Region

Covid-19 has forever changed the power dynamics of the GPC. The pandemic has illuminated cracks in U.S. foreign diplomacy and crisis management and demonstrated that disinformation and messaging can now reach vulnerable populations at the speed of light. Given these profound shifts in the GPC’s power dynamics, reliance on predominantly militaristic strategies for managing interests in the Central Region

is no longer advantageous or practical. Instead, the progressive utilization of U.S. soft power influence to bolster vital economic sectors in the CASA region is as critical now to successful competition in the modern GPC, as military presence once was.

The United States must capitalize on lessons learned during the pandemic to leverage its strategic influence in the Central Region. Specifically, it must utilize its convening power to build novel regionalist economic alliances between competing states and gain trust among the vulnerable and developing populations most susceptible to malign actors. This approach will serve to offset third-party dominance in the region, grant greater access to on-the-ground intelligence, increase leverage with the new Afghan Government, and allow the U.S. to remain competitive in the new era of the modern GPC.

The pandemic has demonstrated that cooperation between traditionally competitive nation-states is essential in times of crisis. Moreover, that cooperation can serve as the paradigm for future foreign diplomacy and global initiatives. During the present era of recovery, establishing strategic cooperation *in conjunction* with competition in the GPC will become increasingly important in a globalized society that is interconnected and interdependent across vital sectors (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 Map of China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) (Dezan Shira and Associates 2020)

New Silk Road Initiative Investment in Afghanistan

As noted above, increasing global interdependence demonstrates that unilateral and isolationist foreign diplomacy policies are no longer realistic. Such policies should be reconsidered for more effective COVID-era competition in a modern GPC now centered on the acquisition of regional and global influence. Through strategic cooperation, the U.S. can position itself for increased influence in the Central Region, affording greater access to critical natural resources and vulnerable populations, counter-messaging, mitigation of disinformation, and added leverage with the new Afghan Government. These goals are best accomplished through active facilitation of CASA regionalist economic growth initiatives, such as the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) or the NSRI, that will serve both U.S. national interests and local populations; specifically, by growing local economies, industries, and multilateral trade alliances that increase trust.

To that end, Afghanistan remains the key to creating enduring stability in the Central Region. If the U.S. does not remain proactively engaged in integrating Afghanistan into regional economic alliances, Afghanistan can again become a haven for dangerous actors including Violent Extremist Organizations (VEOs) and NARCO Mafia, rendering the region exponentially more vulnerable and volatile.

As the U.S. strategizes future engagement in Afghanistan, now is the time to pivot its attention towards innovative soft power influence and cooperation. Afghanistan and the region can be strengthened through such a strategic shift, as originally intended decades ago. Specifically, such stability can be achieved by encouraging regionalist multi-lateral alliances and initiatives, engaging in regional economic initiatives already in place, and developing interstate public–private partnerships to expedite infrastructure funding and create greater interstate institutional accountability.

Significant opportunities for meaningful U.S. influence through such endeavors lie primarily in the New Silk Road Initiative (NSRI). The NSRI aims to link the region economically through wide-scale infrastructure and transit trade alliances. Within this context, the U.S. can use its influence to solidify *contingent* trade and infrastructure agreements as well as public–private partnerships (PPPs) that go beyond immediate profitability to support local workforce education and institutional guidance, thereby setting an example for the region with a new “resource cure” in Afghanistan. These interventions will help stabilize the CASA region through interstate partnerships and shared economic interests. Additionally, they can aid U.S. national security interests by establishing greater trust with local and vulnerable populations, offering greater access to intelligence and mitigation of malign messaging.

As the U.S. prepares to re-engage with Afghanistan, following years of relationship-building with local populations, it should aim for a resource development agenda that highlights public, private partnerships for the expedient extraction and commercialization of Afghanistan’s natural resources, establishing Afghanistan as the central transit trade hub within the NSRI. Funds presently dispersed as “foreign aid” could be used more effectively by the U.S. in Afghanistan to bolster internal

economic and employment growth and support its underdeveloped mining industry with additional infrastructure and education initiatives. Conversely, if Afghanistan remains perpetually reliant on U.S. and donor foreign aid, it will continue to wither in its present vulnerable and volatile economic condition. While Afghanistan remains broken, regional and international security likewise remains vulnerable.

Stabilizing Afghanistan by facilitating commercialization and market access for its vast wealth of minerals and economic integration with its neighbors, will ultimately contribute to regional and global security. However, given Afghanistan's current weakened state, a culture of peace can only be restored with external support. The U.S. should strive to be a critical constructive influence in the CASA region. By aiding enduring regional integration and stability, the U.S. can re-establish itself as the pre-eminent power in the modern GPC.

Convening inroads in the CASA region will additionally offer U.S. interests ground-floor opportunities to initialize and participate in profitable business ventures with the long-range purpose of commercializing Afghanistan's natural resources and influencing structural growth and strength in local institutions. Afghanistan has up to \$3 trillion in minerals located throughout the country, waiting to be mined and commercialized. However, local Afghan miners are still largely undereducated and underequipped to deal with the vast amount of untapped natural mineral deposits.

Further, several mineral deposits lie in areas surrounded by rugged terrain requiring additional investment and development of transportation and infrastructure. Local institutions remain disorganized and overwhelmed by decades of war, interstate tensions, foreign occupation, and insurgencies. By influencing and overseeing lucrative regional efforts towards developing Afghanistan's natural mineral resources, the U.S. can contribute significantly to the decentralization of Afghanistan's wartime economy and instrumentalization of regional partnerships that will support education, workforce initiatives, and foster economic autonomy for long-term regional sustainability.

Cooperation with Other Regional Powers

While stabilizing Afghanistan may be the key to securing future U.S. strategic influence in the Central Region, working with other powers to encourage economic regionalism in general in Central Asia will be key to shifting the playing field from the great power competition to the *great power cooperation* and towards a more peaceful and prosperous global recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic. By building durable economic autonomy in Afghanistan, alongside stronger geo-economic alliances (functional regionalism) in the CASA region, the U.S. will not only diminish potentially dangerous third-party control of the region but will also, ideally, create new autonomous economies and prosperous partnerships that can better handle crises, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic and the present humanitarian disaster.

Afghanistan is landlocked by neighboring states Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in the north, Iran in the west, Pakistan in the east and south, and China in

the northeast. This landlocked geography forces Afghanistan to depend on the cooperation of neighboring states for access to essential goods and transit access points such as the Gwadar Port in Southern Pakistan on the Arabian Sea. Afghanistan's centralized geographical location in the region renders it critical to the future development of energy transport pipelines linking the oil-rich Northern CASA states to oil-poor states in the south. The region is poised for development and integration with Afghanistan. This nation is waiting to bring its wealth of natural resources to the global market as the central transit hub.

China has begun to address the inclusion of Afghanistan in its regionalist efforts to dominate Central Asia. Only recently have major players in the CASA region looked in earnest at formalizing progressive regionalist aims that include Afghanistan in large-scale interstate infrastructure and trade initiatives. Two such current examples are the CPEC and TAPI Pipeline (Standish 2020), both involving China. Without renewed U.S. support of these budding regional alliances however, such vital initiatives may soon lose momentum due to the lure of short-term incentives for bi-lateral deals with China or Russia in place of regional multi-lateral agreements, thus further destabilizing local relations.

Noting the special considerations necessary for effectively aiding landlocked developing countries (LLDCs), the International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries and Asian Development Bank Institute posits that, "in the current international trading system, there is no special consideration for these states. For regional cooperation to promote productivity within the LLDCs, we need to promote regional integration that exploits the new trade space with technologies that both decrease search costs and promote the better design of institutions" (2017, p. 2).

Today, several prominent theorists predict a reactionary shift in geoeconomics away from decades-long trends in "globalization" towards a new era of "regionalism," occurring mainly as a byproduct of logistical necessity during the global pandemic. In this scenario, while a globalized economy may still exist and even thrive, new regional geoeconomic alliances and structures would become vital as well, creating more autonomous local supply chains and decreasing reliance on foreign production. In a recent interview with Yoshinari Kurose, historian and author Edward Luttwak stated, "I see a big retreat from globalization, a retreat from multinational organizations, a return to nation-state responsibility. Because this is the truth virus" (Luttwak 2020, Japan Forward).

Echoing this sentiment, Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) expert Dr. Mathew Maavak highlights the perils of relying mainly on foreign supplies in a global economy. According to Maavak, at the onset of the pandemic, India "was sourcing 70% of its active pharmaceutical ingredient (API) imports worth \$2.4 billion from China," despite itself being a longtime "pharmaceutical powerhouse." Maavak continued, "The figures appear worse for the U.S. According to a recent CFR blog, about 97% of all antibiotics in the U.S. were sourced from China, on top of 80% of APIs used in local drug production. To make matters worse, both the U.S. and India are engaged in a serious geopolitical logjam with China." Maavak warns of "the consequences of a full-scale trade war" (2020).

Fredrik Söderbaum from the School of Global Studies at the University of Gothenburg defines the term regionalism as “the body of ideas, values, and objectives that contribute to the creation, maintenance or modification of a particular region or type of world order. It is usually associated with a formal policy and project and often leads to institution-building” (Söderbaum 2018, p. 4). This definition illustrates how essential establishing functional economic regionalism is to the sustainability of Afghanistan’s economic growth in a now fractured region.

For the sake of regional security and that of the international community at large, multilateral trade and infrastructure CASA initiatives must be encouraged by third-party powers as the foundation of common interests and interstate relations (Krapohl and Vasileva-Dienes 2020). Further, for interstate institutional cohesion to flourish, state actors in CASA must adopt regionalist economic attitudes, allowing for greater accountability among neighboring states and greater enduring stability. The immediate goal of the U.S., in collaboration with other great powers in the region, and within the broader context of the NSRI, should be to move the CASA region towards unifying economic initiatives that can secure a more peaceful and prosperous future.

Cooperation Over Competition with China in Afghanistan

As Ronald Daniels notes in his forward to *Covid-19 and World Order: the Future of Conflict, Competition and Cooperation*, “The U.S.’s failure to effectively control and mitigate the spread of COVID-19 is reflective of its diminished role as a geopolitical leader” (2020, x). China, with its various soft power and economic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) that connects China to more than 60 countries through trade and infrastructure projects and the China–Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), has done more to boost its global image and influence in the region than any of its former actions. While far from perfect, China’s response has “only affirmed its centrality in the 21st-century global order” (Daniels 2020 x).

The crossroad of the modern great power competition lies in the Central Region, and China sees opportunities to dominate and influence the region using its soft power strategically. At the same time, the U.S. plans to shift its attention away from CASA to other regions. Dr. Maorong Jiang, of Creighton University, suggests that China continues to focus on its economic interests in the Middle East and has established public–private partnerships with countries of the region through its strategic Belt and Road Initiative to expand its cultural and economic influence (2020, GPCC, Sept. 16–17). In recent years, Beijing has begun evolving its approach to pay more attention to providing military protection to its extensive economic interests in the region.

Countering revisionist powers such as China will require more than an understanding of their strategic objectives, perspectives, and the challenges that limit their competitive mobilization. It also requires identifying common areas of interest

and potential pathways to more holistic approaches to sustainable competition that decrease dangerous consequences.

These pathways include finding intersections and/or establishing cooperative efforts to combat common enemies such as terrorism and transnational organized crime in Afghanistan and the CASA region. If the U.S. does not heed China's growing influence in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and the Central Region, and fails to find a path to greater cooperation, it will miss critical opportunities to flex its soft power influence, encourage desirable alliances and outcomes, and gain access to vital populations and natural resources in Afghanistan and the larger region.

In particular, the CASA region and Afghanistan remain underdeveloped and vulnerable to third-party influence and domination. China has already created significant inroads in Pakistan and the Northern CASA states with its Belt and Road (BRI) and China Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) initiatives. Beijing is currently considering ways to incorporate Afghanistan in future regional transit trade projects, which will grant China not only a significant advantage in the GPC but greater access to Afghanistan's wealth of natural minerals, including rare earth and critical minerals such as lithium. Although China has explicitly stated that these economic and infrastructure projects are not intended to garner political leverage, if left unchecked by a lack of U.S. presence in Afghanistan, China will gain substantial control of these critical assets. In the Central Region, what is needed now, is a balance of influence to better serve the development, not domination, of local regional economies and individuals. This outcome can only be achieved with continued U.S. influence and support in the region. A cooperative approach cannot be overemphasized.

Although U.S. foreign policy will continue to be based primarily on national security interests, security interests must now shift to meet the challenges of sustaining increasingly interconnected and interdependent economic relations with even our strongest GPC competitors. From a positive perspective, the Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated that large-scale interstate cooperation can work among competitors. China has been operating on this principle for some time in the Central Region, as evidenced by its continued progress with massive multilateral infrastructure projects. By facilitating regional infrastructure and transit trade alliances, China has positioned itself for increasingly greater influence and control in the Central Region, as globalization may be on a downtrend.

The chapter has illustrated that China has already begun to capitalize on the vast resource opportunities in the CASA region, by initiating its Belt and Road transit trade infrastructure project alongside the China Pakistan Economic Corridor. China will now turn its attention to integrating Afghanistan into regional transit and trade projects that will link Afghanistan to the economic corridor that runs from China to Gwadar Port in the South. The U.S. must renew its economic influence in Afghanistan as well, or risk losing control completely.

The U.S. is poised right now to serve as a third-party power catalyst for economic regionalism—the crux of peace and prosperity in the Central Region. However, regional stability, economic and otherwise, will not be possible until Afghanistan is fully integrated into ongoing and future CASA economic alliances and infrastructure projects (such as the NSRI). The U.S. must now mitigate China's growing authority

by establishing its own brand of influence in the Central Region, based on its ability to integrate Afghanistan most efficiently in the economic corridor.

The extraction and commercialization of Afghan minerals, especially through progressive PPPs that focus on institutional accountability, sustainability, and education of local workforces, will be essential to reversing Afghanistan's perpetual dependency on foreign aid and mitigating the present humanitarian crisis. Beyond the obvious strategic benefits of gaining access to Afghanistan's critical minerals within the context of the GPC, durable interstate alliances and PPPs in the region will have significant positive geo-political outcomes as Afghanistan shifts to more autonomous economic stability and a decentralized economy.

China–U.S. Partnerships

The notion that competition and cooperation can take place simultaneously between powerful nation-states is not new. China and the U.S. have a long-standing history of joining forces within the fields of research and science to tackle global health threats that otherwise could not have been managed as expediently. For example, during the SARS-CoV-1 outbreak that began in 2003 in Asia, epidemiologists and other specialists in China and the U.S. collaborated openly to successfully contain the emerging virus in a timely manner (Troullioud 2020). Unfortunately, the same level of cooperation between the U.S. and China has not existed during critical management junctures in the COVID-19 global pandemic, despite both countries leading the world in biomedical research and epidemiology. Rather, the U.S. and China have demonstrated antagonistic and even uncooperative stances towards one another, choosing to remain largely disconnected (even among research communities) in their efforts to manage the deadly coronavirus pandemic (Troullioud 2020).

Apart from leading the world in the biomedical sciences, the U.S. and China currently dominate the rapidly developing fields of technology and communications. While innovations in technology can be immensely beneficial for humanity, across varying sectors, they are equally potentially dangerous if left unchecked or if cultivated solely for political leverage or the dissemination of disinformation (Yang 2020).

Rapid advancements in technology and communications will require multilateral efforts among global powers to develop interstate oversight protocols that enhance global security in the digital age of COVID-19, rather than diminish international security by focusing attention on more narrow unilateral objectives within the modern GPC.

Now, more than ever, great powers must work together on issues related to scientific development and international security in a combined spirit of cooperation and competition. To this end, the U.S. and China can construct novel pathways to sustainable cooperation that will allow their leaders in the expanding fields of science and technology to interact and flourish for the betterment of humanity. According to Lin

Yang, Founder and President of the Innovation Ideas Institute, “Competing for prosperity while finding new areas for collaboration, despite the differences, is the new art of leadership” (Yang 2020).

Considering these points, two overarching objectives call for developing renewed collaboration between China and the U.S.: to expedite the joint scientific and technological research that can address the global pandemic; and to ensure analogous oversight of rapidly developing “technology” during the lengthy process of global recovery.

One of the central issues in the current standoff between China and the U.S. is the toll that separatism has taken on their respective science and technology research communities. Until recently, they have largely remained cooperative. According to Julien de Troullioud of Stanford University’s Center for International Security and Cooperation, “In 2016, more than 1.7 million students in science and engineering graduated in China, the highest number in the world. Many of these students decide to work abroad after graduating. And each year, U.S. universities welcome the greatest number of international students in science, technology, engineering, and math in the world—about 497,413 students in 2019, of whom a third come from China” (Troullioud 2020).

Troullioud emphasizes that the ability for international graduate students, researchers, and professionals to engage with one another and share ideas and research openly is essential, not only to the integrity of the international research community, but the overall wellbeing of humanity; further, that “pandemics, climate change, and other global perils can only be tackled successfully if future generations of scientists are allowed to thrive in a global environment in which collaboration prevails over competition” (2020).

Recently, in response to legitimate concerns related to the limited abuse of U.S. intellectual property, U.S. policies have been put in place that make it exponentially more difficult for Chinese students to engage in U.S. research and development activities in the last few years. One such initiative is the “Protect Our Universities Act” of 2019 that requires exhaustive background clearance for Chinese students. While domestic security measures should unquestionably match the actual threat to the U.S., extreme restrictions on interstate activity hinder not only the occasional nefarious actions, but also, ongoing invaluable collaborative initiatives within international science and technology communities (Troullioud 2020).

The U.S. is not the only nation to have become more secretive in recent years. In China, centralized bureaucratic practices, including government regulations and control of Chinese internet content, have increasingly restricted Chinese scientists and researchers from access to the free flow exchange of ideas with international colleagues necessary for efficient progress. Such restrictions significantly limit the potential of scientific and technological innovations in terms of global welfare (Troullioud 2020).

Suppose China and the U.S. do not find a way to reconcile these disparate developmental aims, at least in terms of a broader global vision. In that case, the relationship between the two powers will become increasingly volatile while depriving the world

of potentially critical innovations during the struggle to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Opportunities still exist to work smarter and faster together on global solutions that can benefit the entire international community. Still, these will remain largely untapped by the U.S. and China unless state leaders in both countries re-orient their respective aims in the GPC towards prioritizing human security. Additionally, with the rapid growth in communications abilities paired with recent trends towards regionalist attitudes arising from the pandemic, the U.S. and China must reconsider their present separatist agendas and develop new multilateral supervisory protocols that will ensure greater international security within the realm of digital communications.

Finally, the U.S. must re-establish its cooperative efforts with China in the fields of science and technology as we begin our shared recovery from the devastation of the global pandemic. Humanity will not be served well by technological advances, however exceptional, that are aimed at unilateral winning rather than multilateral healing. The new GPC must now be viewed as a playing field for economic competition and more broadly, an opportunity for growth within the larger context of cooperation. The only viable win-win—enduring global sustainability.

Conclusion

With these critical lessons in mind, U.S. policymakers should re-evaluate what winning means in the strategic modern great power competition. Afghanistan and the Central Region must remain a key focal point for U.S. national interests and efforts. At the same time, greater cooperation with other third-party influencers, like China, is essential for effectively competing in the modern GPC as we enter a lengthy period of global recovery.

The efficient economic integration of Afghanistan in CASA is the crux to establishing a more peaceful Central Region as we rebuild from the COVID-19 pandemic. Though the region remains unstable, it is poised for the large-scale economic development of its untapped natural resources. From vast mineral deposits in Afghanistan to abundant oil fields in the Northern States, the CASA region calls out for balanced third-party facilitation to further develop its potential and aid in uniting its vulnerable communities in a shared sense of purpose and industry.

As international attitudes shift from globalization towards regionalist perspectives following the isolating effects of the pandemic, the U.S. must play a leading role in facilitating and overseeing interstate economic initiatives in the CASA region. Such involvement can ensure the inclusion of Afghanistan as the trade and transit hub of the Modern Silk Road. Until Afghanistan is fully integrated into budding regional economic alliances, CASA will remain fragile and volatile, a lingering threat to global security. Conversely, bolstering regionalist attitudes will fortify the region to overcome future humanitarian and health crises and remain stronger against the threat of insurgencies and violent extremism.

Global economic interdependence demonstrates that the U.S. can no longer rely primarily on military might to maintain national security interests. Economic influence is swiftly becoming the name of the game in the modern GPC, with China moving into its role as the dominating influencer in the Central Region. For now, China remains somewhat hesitant to fully engage Afghanistan, primarily due to security concerns (Notezai 2021), but this could quickly change as China continues to gain traction in Pakistan, potentially leaving the U.S. out of future opportunities for meaningful engagement in Afghanistan when it most counts.

As the U.S. prepares to engage the new government in Afghanistan on a number of key issues, it faces a critical juncture in U.S. strategic planning: a fleeting opportunity to capitalize on its well-established relationships with local populations and convening power in the CASA region for the greater good. Additionally, the inevitable lever of U.S. shared security efforts in the region can incentivize cooperation from other influencers, like China, thus ensuring the balance of third-party control. Finally, exploring new opportunities for U.S. cooperation with China, in both the Central Region and within science and technology communities, remains essential during this crucial time of global healing.

References

- Brands H et al. (2020) Maybe it Won't Be So Bad: A Modestly Optimistic Take on COVID and World Order. In: Gavin, F. J. & Brands, H. (eds). *COVID-19 and World Order The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*. Johns Hopkins University Press
- Daniels R (2020) Forward. In: Gavin, F. J. & Brands, H. (eds) *COVID-19 and World Order: The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*. Johns Hopkins University Press
- Dezan Shira and Associates (2020) Pakistan CPEC road and rail route to Kabul. <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2020/07/27/gwadar-port-processes-first-transit-goods-afghanistan-markets/>
- Eisenberg E (2020) The great power competition conference series, September 16–17. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Gavin FJ, Brands H (2020) *COVID-19 and World Order The Future of Conflict, Competition, and Cooperation*. Johns Hopkins University Press
- Gibson K (2020) How America advances in the great power competition. In: The great power competition conference series, September 16–17, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Grynkewich A (2020) Defining the U.S. role in the great power competition. In: The great power competition conference series, September 16–17, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- International Think Tank for Landlocked Developing Countries (2017) Regional integration 2017: rethinking regional integration for landlocked countries. <http://land-locked.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/Rethinking-Regional-Integration.pdf>
- Jiang M (2020) The great power competition conference series, September 16–17. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Jones R (2020) Embracing uncertainty and mitigating operational risk: how to change the operational lens. In: The great power competition conference series, September 16–17, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Krapohl S, Vasileva-Dienes A (2020) The region that isn't: China, Russia and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia. *Asia Eur J* 18:347–366. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10308-019-00548-0>

- Legault R (2020) The Great Power Competition Conference Series, September 16–17. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Luttwak E (2020) Pandemic shows nations are on their own. Interview with Yoshinari Kurose. Japan Forward, 25 May 2020. <https://japan-forward.com/interview-pandemic-shows-nations-are-on-their-own-historian-edward-luttwak/>
- Maavaak M (2020) The case for regionalism in a post-coronavirus world. Modern Diplomacy. <https://modern diplomacy.eu/2020/07/16/the-case-for-regionalism-in-a-post-coronavirus-world>
- Nagata M (2020) The rise of malign actors in the globalized, digital age. In: The great power competition conference series, September 16–17, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Notezai MA (2021) What happened to the China–Pakistan economic corridor? The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/what-happened-to-the-china-pakistan-economic-corridor/>
- Söderbaum F (2019) Rethinking regionalism in the 21st century. In: Mania, Grabowski, Pugacewicz (eds) Global politics in the 21st century: between regional cooperation and conflict. Peter Lang Publishing Verlag, Bern, pp 25–40
- Standish R (2020) Beijing ramps up investment push in Pakistan, Afghanistan, despite risks. <https://www.rferl.org/a/beijing-cautiously-ramps-up-belt-and-road-dreams-in-pakistanafghanistan/30862796.html>
- Troullioud J (2020) US–China rivalry: when great power competition endangers global science. The Bulletin. <https://thebulletin.org/2020/10/us-china-rivalry-when-great-power-competition-endangers-global-science>
- Veazie T (2020) The great power competition conference series, September 16–17. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Wolff T (2020) The great power competition conference series, September 16–17. University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
- Yang L (2020) The US and China must learn to balance competition and cooperation in the coming era. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/05/will-china-and-the-us-compete-or-collaborate-in-the-post-covid-era/>

Dr. Adib Farhadi is Assistant Professor and Faculty Director of the Executive Education Program at the University of South Florida. His research focuses on the intersection of geoeconomics, geopolitics, and religion, particularly on the “Silk Road” Central and South Asia (CASA) Region. Dr. Farhadi also serves as the Editor-in-Chief of The Great Power Competition book series and previously served in senior positions for Afghanistan and extensively advised the U.S. government and various other international organizations.