



The Chinese navy conducts its first joint maritime exercise with Djibouti in 2015. China said its then new outpost would be largely to support Chinese forces on missions such as antipiracy patrols off of the Somalian coast. (Photo courtesy of the Chinese navy)

# Enduring Competition in a New Age of Power

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**T**he United States is responding to increased adversary influence with a national security strategy focused on strategic competition below the level of armed conflict. The strategy relies on traditional power structures, but these activities, while necessary, are not sufficient in the current competition

environment. It is imperative that indirect approaches be equally prioritized as leaders and institutions work to fix these strategic gaps.

The United States must develop innovative strategic thought, refocus institutions, and refine tactical tools that allow it to execute *enduring competition*.



Employees work at the construction site of the Hunutlu Thermal Power Plant, China's biggest project with direct investment in Turkey, 22 September 2019 in Adana, Turkey. The \$1.7 billion (USD) project spearheaded by the Shanghai Electric Power Company is a flagship project linking the China-proposed Belt and Road Initiative with Turkey's Middle Corridor. (Photo by Zheng Siyuan, Xinhua via Alamy Stock Photo)

Enduring competition is defined here as the judicious use of a nation's power to defend democracy and influence allies and partners to counter adversaries. Enduring competition is critical to any future strategy because its low cost, compared to the costs of military deterrence or economic investment, allows the United States to compete in the periphery. The periphery are nonpriority regions that remain important to strategic competition—given partnerships, their geostrategic positions, or access to natural resources. The United States risks ignoring adversary investments in these areas at its own peril.

## China in the Periphery

The People's Republic of China (PRC) is expanding its global influence through a political warfare strategy that promotes autocratic mercantilism. While its actions in the South China Sea are the most

egregious example of Chinese expansion, the United States cannot discount China's activities in Latin America and Africa. The periphery is where the PRC hopes to exploit Western myopia by dislocating the status quo as it propagates "Chinese" values, controls sea and information networks, builds dual-use infrastructure, and most importantly, secures the natural resources necessary for domestic growth. The PRC achieves these objectives through a set of ways and means that generate political power for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The CCP remains a Leninist system whose control of China rests on three pillars: control of personnel, propaganda, and the People's Liberation Army (PLA).<sup>1</sup> As the CCP gains influence abroad, it is unsurprising that its political warfare strategy is an extension of these core pillars. The CCP relies heavily on its "Three Warfares": public opinion

warfare, psychological warfare, and legal warfare.<sup>2</sup> This three-pronged framework guides the CCP's whole-of-government approach as it pushes Chinese narratives in academia, business, and foreign political circles to incrementally and indirectly shift foreign perceptions of China. The PLA's intelligence agencies, state-owned enterprises, China Global Television Network, and a multitude of other state organs are central to executing this strategy.

The PRC's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is the economic initiative that serves as a vehicle for transforming the above strategy into reality. At a time when countries in the periphery sorely need foreign direct investment, the PRC uses official government negotiations, elite capture, and the Chinese diaspora to secure state-sponsored business deals. These purported "win-win" infrastructure deals often transform into a coercive mechanism that the PRC uses to expand its sphere of influence to include countries like Djibouti and Ecuador.

There is substantial global evidence of how the BRI advances the CCP's strategic objectives. In May 2017, the Djiboutian government and the China Merchants Group inaugurated a rehabilitated Doraleh Container Terminal and free trade zone, followed that July by a military base for the PLA navy.<sup>3</sup> The new commercial and military complex sits ten kilometers from Camp Lemonnier, a U.S. military base, and provides strategic overwatch of the Gulf of Aden and the Bab al-Mandeb Strait.<sup>4</sup> Djibouti is estimated to owe China \$1.2 billion in sovereign debt.<sup>5</sup> This strategic investment connects China to the Suez Canal and Indian Ocean trade basin, which includes the ports of Hambantota, Sri Lanka, and Gwadar, Pakistan—both of which China acquired through debt diplomacy.<sup>6</sup>

A similar pattern can be found in Latin America, where China has become the second-largest trading partner after the United States, with trade booming from \$17 billion in 2002 to \$315 billion by 2019.<sup>7</sup> China is now the primary trading partner for Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay, where it harvests ore (32 percent of imports), mineral fuels (19 percent), soybeans (16.7 percent), and copper (5.6 percent). President Xi Jinping plans to increase trade to the region to \$500 billion by 2025.<sup>8</sup> To be sure, this level of economic trade is beneficial to the region on a macrolevel as exports increase, especially for agricultural

and mineral powerhouses such as Brazil and Chile. However, smaller countries, desperate for capital, often suffer the consequences of Chinese easy money.<sup>9</sup>

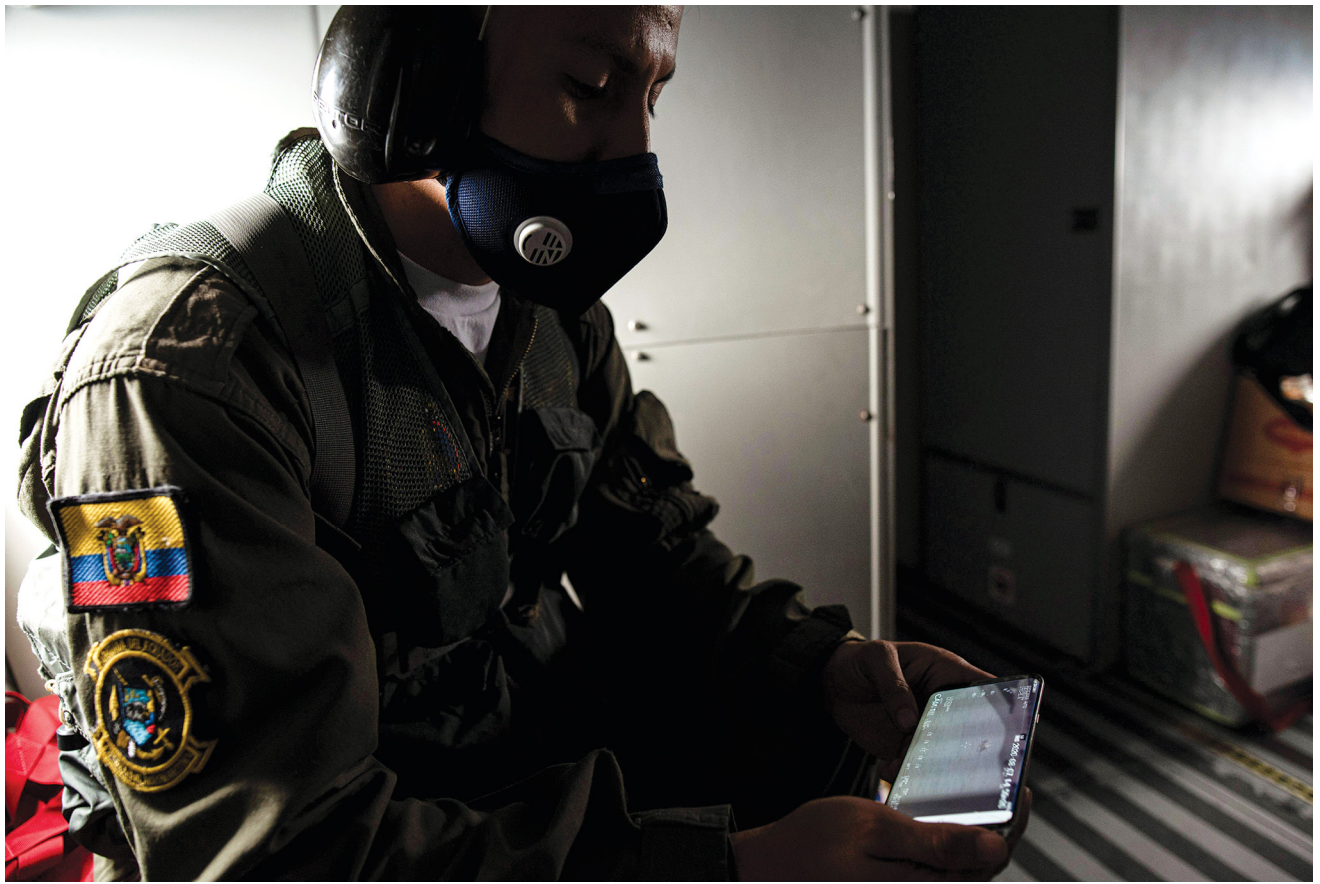
Ecuador became a victim of Chinese debt-diplomacy under leftist President Rafael Correa, who negotiated away 90 percent of exportable crude for \$6.5 billion in Chinese loans.<sup>10</sup> Faced with a huge budget deficit, Correa's democratically elected successor, Lenin Moreno, negotiated Ecuador out of this onerous deal by first readopting neoliberal policies that led to a \$17.4 billion International Monetary Fund bailout. China contributed \$2 billion and granted a yearlong amnesty on capital repayments, while offering Ecuador fresh loans.<sup>11</sup> Despite the respite, China retains Ecuadorean oil as collateral, potentially influencing Ecuador's response to a recent uproar over Chinese illegal fishing off the coast of the Galapagos Islands.<sup>12</sup>

Panama's recognition of China is particularly disturbing given the Panama Canal's strategic value as a commercial, financial, and communications hub. It appears that the PRC's diplomatic coup was carefully planned and brokered through secretive negotiations with then President Juan Carlos Varela.<sup>13</sup> Panama became the first country in Latin America to sign on to the BRI; fourteen other countries subsequently joined after Ecuador became a member in December 2018.

The PRC capitalized on its victory by commencing construction on the Panama Colon Container Port at the canal's Atlantic entrance.<sup>14</sup> Future plans include investment in the economically depressed Colon Free Trade Zone and the construction of a liquid natural gas power plant.<sup>15</sup> On the Pacific side of the canal, the Chinese constructed a new convention center, won the contract to build the fourth bridge across the Panama Canal in a murky bidding process, and are actively building a cruise terminal.<sup>16</sup> Many of these initiatives have since stalled with the election of President Laurentino Cortizo as Panama reevaluates its relationship with China.<sup>17</sup>

These examples demonstrate how China

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competes on the global stage to achieve its national objectives but also how stable democratic governments are critical to thwarting Chinese malign behavior. The PRC is dedicated, disciplined, and daring in the execution of a strategy that incorporates a whole-of-nation approach, but it is vulnerable when confronted by strong institutions and an informed population. The United States must bolster vulnerable allies and partners, especially at a time when the coronavirus is devastating the periphery's economies. A U.S. response will require an audacious use of national power, but first we must understand the nature of political warfare.

### **Political Warfare: Not a New Way of War**

Political warfare is not a new way of war, but it is also not a well-known theory of war. The dissolution of the Soviet Union seemed to diminish its relevance, while the post-9/11 Global War on Terrorism focused on irregular warfare, which is the military subset of political warfare. Political warfare's subversive nature and willingness to circumvent the rules and norms of international statecraft make it asymmetric, nontraditional,

An Ecuadorian navy officer looks at images of fishing boats on a device 7 August 2020 after a fishing fleet of mostly Chinese-flagged ships was detected in an international corridor that borders the Galapagos Islands' exclusive economic zone in the Pacific Ocean. (Photo by Santiago Arcos, Reuters via Alamy Stock Photo)

and controversial in Western society. The political warfare spectrum includes the unrestricted use of national power and leverages zeitgeist (the spirit of the times) to influence allies and adversaries.

A foreign power can use political warfare to economically pressure a government, threaten it with conventional force, or undermine its legitimacy by harnessing the current zeitgeist. Zeitgeist is the generational theme of a society.<sup>18</sup> Zeitgeist tends to be radical, revolutionary, and the ideological foundation for conflict that upsets the ruling political paradigm. Sociopolitical ideologies are the foundation of civilization, and as new ones rise, they create tension that challenges the established order. Examples of this creative destruction include the Protestant Reformation's challenge to Catholicism, America's concept of popular sovereignty,

Napoleonic nationalism's destruction of monarchy, Adam Smith's victory over mercantilism, and Marx-Lenin's assault on the bourgeoisie's capitalistic state.

Today's zeitgeist is the product of globalization's unintended consequences of widening economic inequality and an information revolution. The "globalized" disenfranchised feel lost, fearful, and resent-

institutions to properly address these grievances while instilling skepticism of malign influence.

The United States struggles to implement enduring competition given authorities, institutional boundaries, and an engagement model that prioritizes foreign governments and military entities over the population. Engaging a foreign population may appear to violate

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ful, while the “globalizing” winners fight for greater integration. Populist leaders and external actors hijack this phenomenon to create a climate of cynicism, mistrust, and hatred that widens the divides between powerful and powerless, rural and urban, conservative and liberal, and nativist and immigrant communities.<sup>19</sup> Populism has always used information mechanisms to spread its message, but never in human history have super computers subconsciously hacked human emotion. Today's information revolution gives political warfare strategists immense power.

Adversaries are ruthlessly implementing political warfare across the spectrum of conflict to achieve their strategic objectives. The PRC has cleverly cloaked its influence of governments, populations, and businesses by recruiting clients into its economic orbit. This is why the United States cannot focus solely on its traditional power mechanisms. The interagency, to include the military, must create innovative and economical means to compete with and disrupt adversary political warfare.

### **Enduring Competition: A Necessary Way to Compete**

Enduring competition fixes scale and scope shortfalls by reinforcing institutions and empowering governments and populations to expose malign influence. This important contribution blunts populism, division, and an authoritarian world view with false promises of “win-win.” Enduring competition reinforces counter-corruption efforts and provides economic and educational opportunities for threatened populations. It fosters the necessary trust in civil society for democratic

Western norms of noninterference in another country's domestic affairs, but it is not without precedent. Since 1961, the United States has promoted democracy by encouraging the transition to or improvement of democratic institutions in other countries.<sup>20</sup>

U.S. democracy promotion assistance serves as a model for enduring competition. Democracy promotion assistance strengthens governments, institutions, and democratic participation by providing electoral and municipal support, judicial reform, and law enforcement reform, and by highlighting the importance of human rights and the rule of law.<sup>21</sup> State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs; the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID); and the National Endowment for Democracy, a Washington, D.C.-based private nonprofit organization, are primarily responsible for providing this assistance. Democracy promotion's controversial association with neoconservative justification for regime change in Iraq is problematic, but we should not discount its significant contribution to enduring competition.<sup>22</sup>

Enduring competition does not seek regime change but instead the moderate and indirect defense of democracy, civil society, human rights, and mutual interests. Enduring competition strengthens civil society while undercutting the PRC's economic influence by empowering local groups with organizational training, judicious funding, and voice amplification to identify, monitor, and disrupt adversary intentions. The strategy echoes counterterrorism approaches by inoculating local populations against radicalism.

Enduring competition helps counter PRC malign influence and activities and paints the United States as a more desirable partner among foreign populations. This approach is important because PRC investment in the periphery is not merely focused on large-scale

The goal of enduring competition is to defend democracy and disrupt adversary tempo through foreign partners. This mechanism is a complementary but not competing effort to traditional deterrence and diplomacy. It is not a silver bullet, but it promises preventive



An Ifras Water Center technician adjusts the water intake settings 26 March 2018 according to the new operations and maintenance protocol introduced by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Iraq Governance and Performance Accountability (IGPA)/Takamul Project in Erbil, Iraq. With the help of USAID, IGPA supports the water directorates across Iraq provinces and in the Kurdistan region to better respond to citizens' urgent calls for stable potable water services by reengineering the water system's workflow and operations. Projects like this help the United States compete with China by offering more attractive options for foreign partnerships. (Photo by Maria Lourdes Luces, IGPA/Takamul Project)

development projects such as ports and dams but delves into local to provincial investments. Investment in these small-scale economies is attractive to many local and national elites but carries risk to the detriment of disenfranchised populations. Indigenous groups, labor unions, and other groups recognize that PRC investments carry long-term costs such as irresponsible resource extraction, environmental damage, and labor standards violations. These grievances are ripe opportunities through which the United States can subtly disrupt PRC objectives.

action if policy makers are willing to invest in U.S. institutions that facilitate interagency coordination.

### **Making it Work**

Western governments shy away from gray methods that operate in the space between the binary choices of war and peace because they are designed to operate in these two modalities. The United States must adjust its institutions and culture to one of enduring competition so that it can use its national power to

defend democracy and counter adversary political warfare. One way to compete is to establish country engagement centers (CEC) in U.S. embassies.

U.S. diplomatic missions can determine the appropriate use of enduring competition through CECs that plan, execute, and evaluate enduring competi-

Enduring competition may entail a national-level institution or greater coordination by the National Security Council, but success lies in planning and executing enduring competition at the lowest level. The above model attempts to resolve the complexity of implementation by integrating authorities and decon-

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tion campaigns. The ambassador or chief of mission (CoM) has the authority, interagency influence, and innate knowledge of the operational environment to make this model feasible. The CoM would have approval authority over CEC initiatives and provide guidance to an interagency steering committee, which would incentivize initiatives at the country team level and ensure that enduring competition plans are synched with the embassy’s integrated country strategy.

The steering committee would be comprised of the political counselor, the senior defense official/defense attaché, the public affairs officer, the treasury attaché, the commerce attaché and the USAID mission director, and it would be led by the deputy chief of mission or another qualified embassy official. The day-to-day work of the CEC would be conducted by an interagency planning team that submits draft enduring competition plans to the steering committee for review.

The Department of State, USAID, Department of Commerce, and the Department of the Treasury are key players given their overt engagement with the government and population. The interagency must enhance and support their efforts without compromising their legitimacy. Outside of these traditional efforts, enabling support to disenfranchised groups is a novel way to resist adversary misinformation and economic malpractice vice attributable U.S. actions that might delegitimize native efforts. Strongly worded statements, diplomatic demarches, and military deployments set red lines, but their ephemeral nature falls short in blunting adversaries.

flicting interests at the speed of relevance. It calls for a review of institutional roles, authorities, and capabilities to determine if they address the current strategic environment. These operations can span from transparent public diplomacy to covert operations, but they require the ambassador to be the final arbiter of risk.

## Conclusion

Leaders should recognize the value of enduring competition despite the risks and reassess how the whole-of-government can provide a powerful way to compete against adversaries. Naturally, there are concerns as to who bears responsibility of compromised operations, escalation, and unintended consequences. Leaders will ask about return on investment and opportunity costs as this initiative will involve multiyear funding, training, and a reevaluation of priorities, but it is a bargain when compared to traditional power mechanisms.

Countering adversary influence through enduring competition will necessitate leaders recalculate their risk appetite and clearly demarcate each organization’s roles, functions, and missions as it moves toward an integrated and networked culture. Some leaders will cautiously embrace enduring competition campaigns since fallout from exposed operations risks damaging foreign relationships. Others may be unfamiliar with department and agency authorities due to the infrequency of such actions.

Decision calculations must weigh the costs of inactivity, reacting to adversary action, and risk of escalation. Risk is directly correlated with the type of action

and the permissiveness of the environment. In general, risk increases as the environment turns increasingly nonpermissive and operations become more secretive. This is first-order risk as the initiation of competition will undoubtedly elicit a reaction from adversaries. Second-order risk involves tit-for-tat escalation, as seen in the U.S.-China trade war that saw a combination of tariffs, overt messaging, and ultimately, legal actions against Chinese companies such as Huawei and TikTok.

The vast majority of enduring competition operations should be overt, attributable, and conducted with the tacit knowledge or active participation of the partner nation. Diplomatic messaging cautioning the Colombian government and population about the dangers of a Chinese telecommunications company is relatively low risk compared to a misattributable messaging operation that influences a population to contest a Chinese port deal. Empowering an indigenous group to protest environmental damage generated by a Chinese dam or mine will incense local and maybe international business elites but defame China's image as a reputable partner. The calibration of this tool is key.

To help manage this risk, policy makers should recognize the value of CECs as an immediate mechanism for countering rising adversary influence that seeks to undermine democratic institutions, fair markets, and civil society. CECs prioritize CoM authority and State oversight while integrating interagency

expertise to provide nontraditional options. The Department of Defense has a role to play as it challenges the PLA. The Department of Defense must also recognize that enduring competition is complementary to deterrence operations.

In short, enduring competition provides a novel way for the United States and its partners to compete below the level of armed conflict. This mechanism is particularly suited to the periphery due to endemic resource constraints. Concerns regarding risk are valid but can be mitigated and are outweighed by the risk of inaction in the face of our adversaries' broad use of political warfare. The promotion of democracy and the countering of malign influence by, with, and through local- to national-level partners is necessary to preserve the current world order not only today but also indefinitely. ■

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