The Future of Land Warfare

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LET’S LEAVE ASIDE THE United States and its possible role in warfighting for the moment. Where are consequential conflicts, or other large-scale disasters, most plausible in the coming decades around the world—and especially in areas of greatest strategic significance to the international system, and thus to U.S. national security?

Reaching conclusions about future war is, of course, a tricky business. Who would have guessed, in the year 2000, that Afghanistan could soon be the place where 150,000 of the world’s best military personnel would be deployed? Or in early 1950 that half a million GIs would soon be fighting in Korea, or in 1960 that another half million American troops would be engaged in combat in Indochina? One must be imaginative in thinking about where war is possible in the future. That is the case even if some such conflicts might, in retrospect, be ones that the United States could have or should have avoided. In fact, ignoring such possibilities in the past did not keep the United States out of these conflicts. Ignorance did not produce either bliss or nonintervention.

It is important to underscore at the outset that U.S. ground force operations are not desirable for the good of the country. They drain its coffers, expend its treasure, take the lives of its soldiers, and often polarize its politics. They can cause blowback against American interests as well,
if U.S. military operations are seen as illegitimate by even a substantial minority of a given country’s or region’s population. But this chapter does not prejudge if and when the United States should engage in combat in response to the outbreak of violence elsewhere; such considerations are the subject of later chapters. Here the goal is to survey regional politics in key strategic theaters around the world in an attempt to evaluate the chances that large-scale violence may occur, with or without the United States in the mix.

Some of the cases are fairly obvious, in light of Vladimir Putin’s adventures, China’s ongoing rise, the Middle East’s ongoing volatility, South Asia’s combustible mix of huge populations and ongoing territorial disputes, and so forth. In other cases, a bit more imagination is employed.

In the interest of brevity, the approach taken in this chapter and the next is not designed to be comprehensive. Instead, I primarily examine those countries and parts of the world of greatest size, strategic significance, economic potential, and military capability, beginning with the great powers of Russia and China, then working through South Asia and the Middle East before concluding with Africa and Latin America. (See the following tables on world population, GDP, military spending, and ground power distributions, as well as additional tables in appendix D.) The analysis here is generally strategic and political in character, invoking matters of economics and natural resources when appropriate; more detailed background on these latter matters is found in the appendixes to the book.

Table 2-1. Twenty Most Populous Countries, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population in millions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China 1,350.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India 1,236.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States 313.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia 246.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil 198.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan 179.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigeria 168.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh 154.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia 143.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan 127.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico 120.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philippines 96.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia 91.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam 88.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt 80.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany 80.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran 76.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey 74.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand 66.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Congo, Democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Republic of the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2-2. Twenty Largest Economies Based on GDP, 2014
Billions of current U.S. dollars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>16,768.1</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1,839.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China*</td>
<td>9,469.1</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1,501.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,919.6</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1,393.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany*</td>
<td>3,731.4</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>1,304.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2,807.3</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>1,262.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2,680.1</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>912.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>2,391.0</td>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>853.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2,137.6</td>
<td>Turkey*</td>
<td>821.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia*</td>
<td>2,079.1</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>744.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,875.2</td>
<td>Switzerland</td>
<td>685.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimates by the International Monetary Fund.

### Table 2-3. Twenty Largest Economies Based on PPP Valuation of Country GDP, 2014
Billions of current international dollars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>PPP</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>PPP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>16,163.2</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>2,110.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China*</td>
<td>14,789.5</td>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>2,007.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>6,252.7</td>
<td>Korea</td>
<td>1,623.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>4,543.2</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>1,477.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany*</td>
<td>3,549.5</td>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>1,466.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia*</td>
<td>3,396.2</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>1,519.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>3,080.6</td>
<td>Turkey*</td>
<td>1,367.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>2,490.2</td>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>1,282.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>2,343.8</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>1,014.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>2,374.2</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>984.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimates by the International Monetary Fund.
PPP = purchasing power parity

### Table 2-4. Twenty Largest Defense Expenditure Countries, 2014
Millions of current U.S. dollars

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Expenditure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>640,221</td>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>32,657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>188,460*</td>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>31,456</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>87,836*</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>23,963</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>66,996</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>19,085</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>61,228</td>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>18,460</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>57,891</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>16,032*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>48,790</td>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>13,003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>48,604</td>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>12,765</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>47,398</td>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>10,530</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>33,937</td>
<td>Algeria</td>
<td>10,402</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Estimate.
The Future of Land Warfare

Table 2-5. Top Ten Active Duty Armies by Country, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of personnel</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,150,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>1,020,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>550,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>539,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>522,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>412,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>402,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>375,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>350,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2-6. Top Twenty Countries with Active Personnel in Armed Forces, 2014

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Number of personnel, all forces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2,333,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>1,433,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,346,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Korea</td>
<td>1,190,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>771,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korea</td>
<td>655,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>644,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran</td>
<td>523,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkey</td>
<td>511,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vietnam</td>
<td>482,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Egypt</td>
<td>439,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>406,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>396,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>361,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>318,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>297,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan</td>
<td>290,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>267,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>247,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sudan</td>
<td>244,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

RUSSIA AND THE FORMER SOVIET UNION

A survey on the future of land warfare might usefully begin by examining areas in and around the world’s largest country, with the longest borders—and the most recent history, among the major powers, of waging interstate war. Indeed, the Russia case should be a reminder of the need to stretch imaginations, because some of the scenarios that now seem all too plausible under Vladimir Putin’s Russia might have struck some as purely speculative or even inconceivable just a few years ago. In short, as argued below, it seems necessary to wonder whether Russia might, for many years to come, have aspirations for reclaiming parts of the former Soviet Union populated predominantly by Russian speakers and loyalists, particularly in light of the Kremlin’s recent claim to a right to protect ethnic Russians and Russian speakers wherever they may be. That real risk then implies other possible dangers, and the chance of escalation, particularly if the Russian ambitions were someday to extend all the way to NATO members such as the Baltic states.

Vladimir Putin’s Russia dominated the international news in 2014 as the Russian strongman invaded and then annexed Crimea, and then stoked trouble in eastern Ukraine. Secretary of State John Kerry aptly described this set of actions as a throwback to the behavior of major powers in the nineteenth century.

But Putin’s behavior enjoyed enormous popularity within Russia, with his favorability ratings often in the range of 80 percent—even if those numbers have partly been engineered, and should not be taken entirely at face value. After suppressing dissent and marginalizing many opposition politicians before the election of 2012, he won that race handily. One must wonder whether it was the Russian polity itself, as much as any one man, that was ultimately responsible for the aggression against independent Ukraine. And that leads naturally to the next question: can we really be confident that the twenty-first century will be generally free of the kind of interstate behavior that typified the nineteenth (or eighteenth or twentieth)? In fairness, Putin used a more cunning form of warfare than most leaders in the past, and caused fewer casualties as well—at least in the initial incursion into Crimea, if not in the subsequent conflict in eastern Ukraine. That cunning may have made the action even more popular in Russia. It reflected a certain cleverness in modern military tactics at a time when many Russians had felt humiliated by the West and down on
their luck for the previous couple of decades. In other words, it helped restore Russian pride.

These concerns are particularly salient in regard to a large, aggrieved land power like Russia bordering many countries that it formerly controlled and that do not presently have recourse to the protection of an alliance system like NATO. Even leaving aside its own internal Chechnya conflict, with all the brutality associated with that struggle, Russia contributed to violence in Georgia in 2008 and in Ukraine beginning in 2014. What actions, and which victims, may be next? Since Putin has conjured up so many fears and vivid scenarios among his neighbors, the question here may be less theoretical or abstract than it is in regard to other countries in subsequent sections of this chapter and the next. Much of the issue in regard to Russia, therefore, is not which scenarios we can imagine but how much of the broader Russian polity beyond Putin would consider aggression against other neighbors over the longer term. In other words, how durable is the Putin effect, and how deeply rooted in the Russian political mind is the notion of hegemony in central Eurasia?

Focusing on the other former Soviet republics that are not, like the Baltic states, part of NATO today, one might wonder about the fate of a Moldova, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, or Uzbekistan. There remains as well the possibility of renewed conflict with Georgia and Ukraine—and perhaps even Russian designs on eastern parts of the Baltic states, where Russian speakers are numerous, especially if NATO should be seen to lose its focus or verve in protecting alliance members. At least, it seems fair to ask such questions at this juncture. Putin’s behavior, however egregious and brutal in the real world, may have a benefit in the context of this book by jarring us out of any complacency about the supposed permanence of great-power peace in the modern world, forcing us to ask uncomfortable questions about what the future may hold, and spurring thought about where wars that had previously been considered unimaginable may in fact be quite plausible, especially if we lower our collective guard.

None of this discussion is meant to prejudge the question of where, if anywhere, the U.S. Army and Marine Corps may be relevant to conflict scenarios involving Russia. The purpose here is to examine the potential for conflicts in their own right, while withholding judgment about the implications for American military planning until subsequent chapters.

The decade of the 1990s was one of Russian decline. Putin is infamous in the West for calling the dissolution of the Soviet Union the greatest...
Conflicts Real, Latent, and Imaginable

strategic catastrophe of the twentieth century. That is clearly a huge exaggeration by any fair standard. But for Russian nationalists, the 1990s were not only the decade in which the Warsaw Pact fell apart and the Soviet Union dissolved, they were also a period of extreme state weakness. The country’s population was cut nearly in half; its military forces declined by two-thirds in size and four-fifths in funding; and the economy went into free-fall, as the transition from communism to capitalism was dominated by corrupt cronies of the ruling elite, who largely plundered the nation for their own selfish ends. The Western world became more concerned about Russian weakness, possible state collapse, and loose nuclear materials than about any new aggression initiated by Moscow. The Chechen war raged off and on as well, and other parts of the former Soviet empire sometimes took up arms too, notably Armenia and Azerbaijan against each other. Given how much of the Russian Federation included minority populations that had been subjugated or assimilated in earlier times, the distinct possibility seemed to exist of centrifugal forces ripping the country apart.\(^3\) And, of course, NATO expanded, not only up to the frontiers of the former Soviet Union but right up to the Russian border, when the Baltic states were incorporated into the Western alliance.

Then came the new century, and Putin. Its early years were characterized by a greater sense of stability at home, as well as hopefulness in relations with the West, especially after the 9/11 attacks and extremist violence on Russian soil seemed to give Washington and Moscow common purpose. George W. Bush famously looked into Putin’s eyes and liked what he discerned about the former KGB official’s soul. Russian economic recovery was recognized as important, and its energy resources were seen as crucial in an era of Persian Gulf instability.

Russian military recovery in the first instance meant fewer terrible accidents like the tragedy in 2000 aboard the attack submarine *Kursk*, less danger of loose Russian nukes winding up in terrorist hands or of a brain drain of underpaid Russian weapons scientists heading for rogue nations for more remunerative work, and greater stability (however brutally achieved) in Chechnya. The downside of this Russian recovery seemed manageable, especially since Russia was now something of a democracy that limited Putin to two consecutive terms and benefited from a nascent Western-like civil society.

But especially since 2008, this narrative has broken down, culminating in the dual developments of Putin’s return to the Russian presidency after
a four-year stint as prime minister and now the crisis in Ukraine. Problems began earlier in the decade, of course, with Putin developing a sense of grievance over issues such as the 2002 round of NATO expansion and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But the Georgia conflict of 2008 may have been the first unambiguous sign of trouble. It was reinforced by a growing suppression of dissent and political debate at home, an ambitious military buildup, and then intense acrimony between Moscow and the West over Libya and Syria policy (see box 2-1 for more about Russia’s military). To be sure, the Obama administration’s Russia reset policy seemed to achieve certain specific successes in its early years, including greater logistical access to northern entry points into Afghanistan to support the war effort there and cooperation in sanctioning Iran and North Korea, as well as the conclusion of the New START treaty in 2010. But the trend line was never clearly favorable, and the entire momentum of the reset has by now surely been lost, a conclusion few would dispute after the events of early 2014. Nor can the problem be pinned exclusively on Putin. His popularity at home, symbolized by the happily tearful reactions of Russian parliamentarians when he explained the logic behind his actions in Crimea, shows that both the resentments and the aspirations run much deeper within Russia.

Russians are proud of their history and their nation and their state. Such views are not becoming anachronistic; they seem every bit as powerful today in younger generations as in older ones. Russians also tend to think that the state it is still very relevant for ensuring their security. They see a rising China to their east, what they believe to be a highly assertive and sanctimonious America and its allies to their west, and trouble to their south. They also have felt embarrassed and anxious over the decline in their nation’s cohesion, power, and standard of living after the cold war. The Russians are not a people who will quickly dismiss the importance of the state. Putin may exemplify this attitude most poignantly. But his popularity, the generally favorable reaction of normal Russians to his assertiveness in Crimea, and the general weakness of civil society and independent media within the country as a whole suggest that it is widespread.

It is difficult to forecast possible future wars involving Russia by reference to specific territorial disputes involving the federation and its neighbors. None of these neighbors appears to be itching for a fight against the great Russian bear, and none of them has particularly obvious salience as
the next logical target for Putin or a subsequent leader. Russia is already huge and controls huge resources; it already has ways of reaching various ports and waterways (even more so with Crimea in its grasp, and Black Sea ports therefore under its control).

Therefore, it is probably more helpful to look at broad schools of thought within Russian strategic culture and the Russian national security debate, rather than seek to identify specific flash points for future conflict. Thinking through which of the strategic dispositions might most strongly influence future policy choices in Moscow, under Putin and his successors, could conjure up the most useful visions of where warfare might occur.

It is certainly possible that one paradigm could be a Russia that is not anti-West. Even if it is incredible that a future Russia would ever seek NATO membership, it is not beyond belief that a future Russian state could look to mend fences and develop fundamentally compatible interests with the Western world. Several motivations could drive Russians toward such an outcome. Russia could seek to maximize its interactions with the outside world largely for the sake of economic growth and prosperity. It could also see a strong association with the EU or NATO as a useful hedge against Islamist extremism and China’s rise. Put differently, to reach this mental disposition, Russia would not necessarily have to abandon all security fears, real or imagined, but would have to conclude that the greater dangers came from the south or east (or from within) and could be more effectively checked with Western help. Such a conclusion would reflect a decision that may seem obvious to Western observers but is much harder at present for Russians to countenance, in light of the common view that NATO broke its word and took advantage of Russian weakness after the cold war. However, Russians might reach a decision to align with the West partly as a result of the cooling of passions that have been stoked in many minds ever since the cold war ended. NATO expansion, largely a phenomenon of the 1990s and early 2000s, may someday be a more distant memory. If the West in conjunction with Russia can find a solution to ensuring Ukrainian and Georgian security, and that of the other former Soviet republics not currently in the Western alliance, without offering NATO membership to them, it is possible that future generations of Russians will be able to declare a truce in this geostrategic competition (as many Americans probably assumed they already had, prior to the events of 2014).6
The essence of this kind of policy would be a return to the calmer days of NATO-Russian relations of the 1990s or the early Putin years, but in the context of a confident and stable Russia. New institutional mechanisms might be created. Or existing vehicles such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the NATO-Russia Council, and the UN Security Council might be deemed adequate (as well as a possible Russian return to the G-7/G-8). Nuclear arms control might resume,

**Box 2-1. Russia’s Military Modernization Plan**

In late 2008, after a difficult war with Georgia, Russia embarked on military reforms under Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, building on an earlier phase of reforms the year before. The general improvement in Russia’s economy and the desire to reassert national power led to an expansion of available resources to fund the country’s armed forces and implement those reforms.

The modernization agenda had several components. A central goal was to create higher-performance, more mobile, and better-equipped units. The military was reduced in size considerably, by about a third, and officer ranks were scaled back as well. As with the U.S. military during this time period, the main unit of ground combat capability was reduced from the division to the brigade, and the remaining brigades were more fully staffed and manned. Most tanks were eliminated or deactivated as well, though some 2,000 remained, out of an initial force ten times that size. Military education was revamped; pay was improved; professionalism was emphasized.

In late 2010, then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin announced a dramatic weapons procurement plan to go along with this earlier set of reforms in personnel, force structure, and readiness. Ambitiously, some $700 billion was projected for weapons modernization over a ten-year time frame. This plan includes a wide range of equipment. For example, in the naval realm it includes Yasen-class nuclear attack submarines, Lada-class and Kilo-class diesel attack submarines, several classes of frigates and corvettes, Borey-class ballistic missile submarines, and two Mistral-class amphibious vessels (from France, in the last case a sale now canceled). Fighter aircraft deliveries have been averaging about two dozen a year and include MiG-29SMT, Su-34, and Su-35S jets.

By 2014, annual military spending levels had reached the range of $70 billion to $80 billion, at least half again as much as the 2008 figure. Projections were for that total to approach $100 billion in the near future.

The essence of this kind of policy would be a return to the calmer days of NATO-Russian relations of the 1990s or the early Putin years, but in the context of a confident and stable Russia. New institutional mechanisms might be created. Or existing vehicles such as the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the NATO-Russia Council, and the UN Security Council might be deemed adequate (as well as a possible Russian return to the G-7/G-8). Nuclear arms control might resume,
Subsequently, the dramatic drop in oil prices, combined with the imposition of various sanctions on Russia over the Ukraine crisis, reduced these numbers considerably (when denominated in dollars at least, given the rapid decline of the ruble). Thus, Russia may slow down this plan but probably will not terminate it. Indeed, by purchasing power parity metrics, Russian defense expenditures remained above $100 billion in 2014, according to certain estimates, and at a still quite significant 3.4 percent of GDP.\(^6\)

Such large resource increases provided the basis for modernizing most elements of Russian military power. However, the increases are not proportionate across all components of the armed forces. As Russia’s 2014 activities in Ukraine suggest, it would appear, for example, that special operators, airborne forces, and cyberunits, among others, may have been preferentially favored, in weapons and training and logistics, among other dimensions of military power.\(^7\) And indeed, there have been some successes already attributable to the military reform and modernization plan.\(^8\)

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seeks to do less in world affairs. While not overmilitarized, it might not be so pro-West either. Indeed, it could result from a somewhat jaundiced Russian view of other states. And yet it might still wind up being fairly benign in the international arena. If Russia concluded that it was not likely to be attacked or otherwise threatened, it could perhaps get by with a modest-sized army and navy and defense budget, coupled with a substantial nuclear arsenal (something that seems a given under any plausible future scenario). This Russian outlook might, for example, result from the simultaneous Russian rejection of both the Western world and Vladimir Putin, together with his legacy.

This approach to foreign policy might be based in part on the notion that Russian security was threatened less by interstate conflict or foreign foes and more by internal challenges that required attention and resources. Since the Russian national security strategy for the period to 2020, approved in May 2009, emphasizes the importance of everything from economics to health care to the environment in its list of national security priorities, there is a precedent in modern Russian thought for leavening the importance given to more traditional measures of power and security.

A third possibility is what Cliff Gaddy and I term a “Reaganov Russia.” It would be associated with a proud, nationalistic state that in the Russian context might strike many as aggressively motivated and inclined. But if in fact the Russian state could take pride in reestablishing itself as a successful status quo power, it might not see the need for revanchism or other aggression.

The concept builds on some aspects of Ronald Reagan’s legacy in the United States. That is not to criticize Reagan’s legacy, which was largely positive. But if one reduces Reagan foreign policy to its component parts—a strong military, but a military rarely used, and a confident United States that might have struck some as arrogant but that was led by a generally affable leader—there could be an analogy with a future Russia. Americans might not like that Russia as much as they liked Reagan, and indeed, that future Russian state might or might not measure up favorably against Reagan’s America. It might sound rather chauvinistic rhetorically and act that way at times diplomatically. But if it channeled its main national competitiveness and patriotism into relatively benign actions such as improving its armed forces and making progress in economic and scientific realms, the net effect of such a Russia on the region and the world could be tolerable.
This philosophy for the future Russian state might envision the defense sector providing technological innovations that could be spun off to revive the Russian scientific and manufacturing sectors more broadly. The idea is Reaganesque in the American tradition (though spinoffs from the defense world were perhaps even more notable in the United States in the decades just before Reagan). But it is also an idea that has been advanced by Russian defense official Dmitry Rogozin in the modern Russian context.

A fourth and less happy possibility is a Russia that feels itself besieged. Perhaps the least needs to be said about this possible future path for Russia because it may be what current events under Putin most evoke. The idea here is that, even if Russia sees the futility of trying to restore previous levels of international grandeur, the wounds to Russian pride are deeper than many have appreciated. Particularly if Vladimir Putin is able to get away with additional adventures in Ukraine, and if Russian economic growth does not suffer unduly as a consequence, Russian leaders may decide there is room to make further mischief in the near abroad for many years to come, and Russian voters may condone their assertiveness.

By this vision, Russia would not relent, even though it could make various tactical adjustments and show restraint when temporarily expedient or necessary. It could at some future time pursue opportunities for expansion or at least reestablishment of a strong sphere of influence in much of Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia while pursuing potentially hostile policies toward the Baltic states and perhaps Poland and other Central European states. That Vladimir Putin may remain in office a full decade more, and perhaps also shape the selection of his successor, provides further grounds for believing that this model of a future Russia cannot be dismissed.

It is also possible that latter-day notions of a great-power Russia could influence this way of thinking. Harking back to traditions of Russian thought that glorified the country’s role as the great Slav nation, the bridge between East and West, and the huge Eurasian land power, this kind of Russia could be inspired by pride as well. It would build on the traditions of earlier Russian leaders such as Peter the Great and Alexander II, and the thinking of intellectuals such as Eduard Limonov and Elgiz Pozdnyakov.

Such a worldview would be not unlike what Gaddy and I describe in our vision of a Reaganov Russia. But it would likely be less benign in this case, as it would be intertwined with a sense of besiegement and perhaps also be inclined toward aggression. Dmitri Trenin describes this outlook
as “postimperialist” rather than imperialist or neo-imperialist, still quite
assertive in goals even if different from traditional forms of great-power
behavior in the means employed. Militarily, its signature behavior might
be exemplified by the special operators in unmarked outfits in Crimea in
early 2014, in contrast to the classic infantry or tank invasion forces of
earlier epochs.\textsuperscript{10}

A final and even more concerning possibility, what might be termed a
neo-tsarist Russia, takes the idea of a besieged Russia one step further. It
postulates a Russian state that seeks not only to gain revenge and restore
dominance over near-abroad states but also to maximize national power
more generally, and to advance the romantic vision of a Russian state
that encompasses and protects all or nearly all Russian speakers through-
out Eurasia.\textsuperscript{11}

This paradigm could imply even more blatant and aggressive actions
against the former Soviet republics in Europe, up to and including com-
plete annexation. It could further include Russian expansionism into the
Central Asian republics, where there are some significant ethnic Russian
populations, which could provide a Putin-like leader with a pretext for
aggression.\textsuperscript{12} It could also feature greater use of Russian naval power in
the state’s exclusive economic zones and beyond, to extract economic
benefits through means such as mineral and hydrocarbon exploitation
and extensive fishing and dominance of Arctic shipping lanes as they open
up as a result of global warming. (Some of these anticipated postures are
already evident under Putin, with the September 2013 occupation of the
New Siberian Islands in the northern regions above Russia and increased
military maneuvers in northern seas.\textsuperscript{13}) Finally, such a worldview and the
competitive international approach it implies could manifest in further
efforts to impede international collaboration on projects of importance
to the West, such as nuclear nonproliferation agreements with countries
such as Iran and North Korea.

Russia will not be able to restore its previous superpower status under
any of the above approaches to national security policy. Its population
base and economic strength are too limited, and will remain so even if
Russian political leadership makes occasional conquests, as with Crimea.
But it can sustain very substantial capabilities. Russia might, for example,
spend 3 percent or perhaps an even higher fraction of GDP on the nation’s
armed forces. That could imply a total of perhaps 5 percent or more of
GDP spent on all security capabilities, including internal defense, an area
of recent emphasis in light of various internal challenges, among them unrest from growing Muslim populations and exclusionary groups. This level of effort would exceed that of any major Eurasian power and would also exceed projected levels for the United States, as a percentage of national economic output.

Because Russia’s economy will remain so much smaller than that of the United States, China, or even Japan or Germany under any realistic extrapolation from today, such a higher level of military spending as a fraction of national economic power would not elevate Russia to superpower status. But Russia would probably be able to retain and indeed solidify its position as the world’s number 3 military spender, after the United States and China. And it may be able to create a sense of military momentum over a period in which American and other Western defense spending may continue to decline, a momentum that Russia could seek to translate into favorable strategic outcomes, at least close to home.

Notionally, under this approach, in 2020 U.S. military spending might total around $500 billion to $550 billion. China might tally around $300 billion. Russia’s military spending, depending on what happens to its economy in the interim, might range from $100 billion to $150 billion annually, with several major American allies and India ranking next on the list, in the range of $50 billion a year each.

With all of that money, Russia would still be hard-pressed to maintain a military with full capacity to secure all its land borders through conventional military means alone. It would, of course, remain incapable of recreating the kind of military that the Soviet Union once possessed. A million-man force, up modestly from today’s, would be a realistic ceiling on the total active duty strength of the armed forces, even with the resources presumed in this scenario.

But Russia could nonetheless aspire to several capabilities that would likely be within its grasp. Its nuclear forces, at least in size and megatonnage, could remain equal to those of the United States. Its navy could be big enough to challenge any neighbor in coastal waters and exclusive economic zones, and in large swathes of the Arctic. Its special forces, of the type seen in Crimea, could remain well trained and well equipped (as they might in the other scenarios too). Its aerospace sectors could be well enough funded that Russian air and space forces would be very well endowed and Russian companies would be competitive in many international arms export markets.
As for the main ground forces, this is the area where the realities of defending a huge and exposed land mass with a military derived from a modest and declining population would cause great trouble for the Russian state. A robust defense capability for Siberia would be out of the question. And to the extent Russia believes that NATO poses an overland threat, maintaining a strong defense in the European parts of the nation would also be challenging when measured against the NATO militaries.

Realistically, however, Russia would have options. It could probably sustain several divisions of strong maneuver forces that could seek to contest and counterattack any hypothetical foreign invasion force that tried to move significantly into Russian territory. Because of the logistical challenges of invasion, even a huge Chinese military would for the foreseeable future have great difficulty sustaining a large fraction of its total armed forces in a distant locale like Siberia. Therefore, while a robust perimeter defense of the country may not be viable, Russia may still be able to build a good enough conventional military capability at least to isolate and counterattack any hypothetical invasion force, particularly from China. Such forces might employ nuclear weapons for certain tactical purposes as well, as Russian doctrine allows. As such, when all the pieces are put together, this more expensive and capable Russian military may hold appeal for future voters and policymakers.

But a Russian military built around such worst-case scenarios and implausible missions would naturally possess the capacity to cause a great deal of trouble against smaller neighbors to its west and south. Indeed, Russia could have viable forces for causing trouble in the neighborhood even at military spending levels well below 3 percent of GDP, given the limited sizes and capabilities of Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, and other nearby countries.

Just where all of this could lead in the future in a plausible worst-case scenario is difficult to discern, of course. If Russia continues its habit of bullying neighbors, and sometimes chipping away at their territories, but confines such behavior to the near abroad and to non-NATO members, the scale of any conflict is likely to remain modest, even if the West and Russia wind up in a mini-cold war in economic terms. If, however, Moscow is tempted to set its sights on Russian-majority areas of the Baltic states or otherwise take action that greatly ups the ante, it is possible to imagine significant and sustained military implications. How this issue might affect the United States is a matter left for subsequent chapters.
What is the potential for large-scale violence on land in eastern Asia in the early decades of the twenty-first century? Naturally, most scenarios center on China, but there are other important states in the region to consider as well.

It is not all about possible war. The sheer population densities of China’s coastal regions make the nation vulnerable to complex natural disasters—earthquakes or typhoons, for example—perhaps leading to nuclear power plant disasters or other breakdowns in infrastructure as a consequence. China would naturally attempt to handle the repercussions of any such disaster on its own, but the international community could be called on for help if the scale of the catastrophe exceeded the People’s Republic of China (PRC)’s capacities. Other populous states in the region, such as Indonesia, could be prone to such problems and potentially even less able to handle them independently.

As for the possibility of civil war, the odds within China itself seem very remote. There have been recent increases in the size and frequency of demonstrations against the government, along with rising expectations among the population and natural limits to the economic growth model that the country has adopted in recent decades. Still, the concern seems primarily theoretical. It is also difficult to discern along which regional or ethnic lines a Chinese civil war might be fought. The omnipresence of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in all aspects of life for the last sixty-five years makes it hard to see where and how the country could fissure. Moreover, the general pragmatism of the CCP makes it relatively hard to imagine another ideologically based civil war.

Civil warfare may be somewhat more plausible in the Philippines, with the Moro Islamic Front on the island of Mindanao, or in Indonesia in a region like Aceh. Owing to the sheer size of these giant archipelago nations and the relative dearth of infrastructure and connectedness to the main islands of Luzon in the Philippines or Java in Indonesia, future civil unrest is entirely possible (though probably unlikely to resemble cold war–era communist threats). Yet at present it is hard to foresee that the likely scale of the unrest would be massive, insofar as the nations’ various separatist groups are largely isolated internally and are relatively weak both militarily and politically. Moreover, ethnic and religious minorities do not constitute large fractions of the population in either place (for
example, just over 1 percent of Indonesians are ethnically Chinese and less than 4 percent are Malay; just 5 percent of Filipinos are Muslim). Civil war seems more likely to arise out of state weakness and a descent into anarchy than out of a pitched, large-scale movement that might draw in broader international forces and actors to aid their ethnic or religious kin. The most likely exception to this broad generalization about the region is probably the Korean Peninsula, a subject to which I return below.

At present, the chances for major interstate land wars involving China seem reasonably remote. In contrast to its approach at sea, the PRC has resolved many earlier border disputes with its neighbors and has tightened cooperation with a number, perhaps most notably Russia, in recent times. Indeed, many Chinese argue that, despite the sparks flying of late in maritime regions, China’s foreign policy is inherently peaceful and likely to remain that way. They assert that China has a distinctive strategic culture, much different from that of the European imperial powers in particular, derived from Confucian precepts. It largely preaches harmony and the peaceful, cooperative resolution of disputes. Where some form of contention cannot be avoided, it tends toward favoring Sun Tzu’s admonition to “win without fight or force.”

The standard Chinese portrayal of the Ming-era national hero, Admiral Zheng He, fits with this image. His voyages at the height of Chinese power in the fifteenth century are cited as proof that China does not seek territorial conquest or forcible subjugation. At the official commemoration of the 600th anniversary of Zheng He’s travel, a senior Chinese official stated, “During the overall course of six voyages to the western Ocean, Zheng He did not occupy a single piece of land, establish any fortress or seize any wealth from other countries.” Other Chinese officials have made similar arguments, grounded in their interpretation of Chinese history and Confucian culture.

In recent times, China has adopted a policy of “peaceful rise” since the Deng Xiaoping era. It has generally sought peace with neighbors and has not used ground force against any other country since 1979. As articulated in the 2013 Defense White Paper:

It is China’s unshakable national commitment and strategic choice to take the road of peaceful development. China unswervingly pursues an independent foreign policy of peace and a national defense policy that is defensive in nature. China opposes any form of
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hegemonism or power politics, and does not interfere in the internal affairs of other countries. China will never seek hegemony or behave in a hegemonic manner, nor will it engage in military expansion. China advocates a new security concept featuring mutual trust, mutual benefit, equality and coordination, and pursues comprehensive security, common security and cooperative security.  

Under President Hu, advocates of a more assertive China were countered as a matter of state policy. Although some have suggested that the early ideas advanced during the tenure of President Xi Jinping, such as the “China Dream” and “China Revival,” point to a more assertive nation, most Chinese officials continue to stress continuity with the core concept of peaceful development. They see it as serving China’s fundamental economic and other strategic interests and believe it should be sustained.

But other Chinese voices are becoming more assertive, and with China’s ongoing rise, their number as well as their influence could grow. They suggest that the weakening of U.S. economic power following the 2008 financial crisis and the ongoing budget challenges in the United States have led Chinese strategists to conclude that power relations have tilted decisively in China’s favor, justifying a new, more assertive approach. They point to what they perceive as increased Chinese assertiveness across a range of foreign policy issues and explicit calls by retired senior People’s Liberation Army officials to challenge U.S. hegemony.

Forming the backdrop to current debates about policy is China’s view of its own recent past, and specifically its experience in the century preceding the Communist Revolution of 1949, the so-called “century of humiliation.” This era began with the European incursions starting around 1839 and culminated in the Japanese invasion and occupation, followed by the expulsion of Chiang Kai-shek’s Kuomintang from the mainland by the Red Army and the CCP and the establishment of the PRC in 1949. This sense of vulnerability has deeper roots in Chinese history, for example during the periods when China was subject to invasion by the Mongols. There is disagreement over what it means to “reverse the losses” of these periods, but also little doubt or disagreement that avoiding any such future period of vulnerability is essential to the well-being of the Chinese people and Chinese state.

There is also a perceived imperative to restore lands purportedly taken from China during its period of weakness. In the sixty-plus years since
the establishment of the PRC, many of the instances of Chinese use of force have been connected with territorial claims, ranging from actions in India in 1962 and the Soviet Union in 1969 to the episodic use of force in the Taiwan Strait from the 1950s to the missile firings of 1995–96. These areas are routinely identified as “core interests”—consistent with the leadership’s oft repeated definition of China’s core interest as “sovereignty, unification and territorial integrity.” But there are important ambiguities about the scope of this core interest concept, as with the dispute over the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands. For most of the decades since 1949, the territorial imperative has focused on Hong Kong, Tibet, and Taiwan. Now a crucial additional question is whether the claims could be extended further, to states formerly seen as part of the broader Chinese sphere of influence in distant historical times, or to states and regions located at key strategic junctures where China now has established crucial economic interests on which it depends for its prosperity.

With respect to the South China Sea, China seized the Paracel Islands from Vietnam in 1974 and the Spratly Islands in 1988, as well as Mischief Reef (also claimed by the Philippines) in 1995. In justifying these actions and its broader claims, China has relied on a historical narrative buttressed by a reference to positions taken by Nationalist China prior to the revolution. Although the official territorial claim of the Chinese government appears to be limited to the islands themselves and the immediately surrounding waters, some Chinese have suggested the sovereignty claim extends to all seas within the “9 dash line,” which covers most of the South China Sea. China’s claim to the Diaoyu Islands is rooted in the assertion that the Ryukyu empire, of which the islands were a part, was a tributary state that Japan illegally sought to annex in 1895, and that the islands were implicitly promised to China as part of the post–World War II settlement at Yalta and Tehran. Some independent Chinese scholars writing in state-run papers have even raised the idea that Okinawa should be viewed as Chinese territory, although this position has been rejected in official statements.

In the first instance, such claims involve maritime interests rather than possible motivations for ground combat. But one can imagine a multistep process in which assertion of maritime claims could lead, possibly, to occupation of not only the small islands of the South China Sea but even some elements of, say, the Philippine archipelago, as a means of dominating and coercing Manila into more acquiescent behavior in the South
China Sea itself. As such, it is difficult to overlook these maritime issues entirely, even in a discussion about land power and land warfare.

From the Qing era on, China had other territorial holdings on the Eurasian mainland of even more direct relevance to the subject at hand. They included what is now Mongolia and part of Russian Manchuria, and were lost to Russia over the period of roughly 1860 to 1920. No Chinese leaders have suggested so far that reclaiming these lands could be a legitimate objective of the state’s foreign policy.35 China’s recent history of resolving border disputes with Russia, Kazakhstan, and Vietnam suggests that China values amicable relations with its neighbors over achieving maximalist territorial gains, at least for now.36 That said, there is some underlying tension in the Russia-China relationship, partly owing to latent worries in Russia that China could be a rival or even a threat. Some Russian officials and scholars have occasionally sounded the clarion call about the potential Chinese threat to Siberia.37

Turning back to Southeast Asia, some would argue that recent quarrels between China and Vietnam in maritime domains, however undesirable, should not be confused with any Chinese ambitions or irredentism along Vietnam’s land borders. Yet China’s long history of invasions of Vietnam—mostly centuries ago, but also in 1979—raises the question of whether things could change.38 And Beijing has shown the capacity to move ten or more divisions quickly about its own territory during various crises in the past, underscoring the potential to pose significant threats to its land neighbors should it so choose.39 Were a maritime dispute to escalate, ground combat could not be dismissed as a possibility.

Similarly, China’s border with Korea would seem stable at first blush. Yet historically, China has had claims to part of the peninsula, specifically the ancient kingdom of Koguryo, and has viewed Korea as a so-called tributary state. In addition, China likely values the buffer provided by North Korea’s existence, meaning that it might not welcome the disappearance of that state in any future change of strategic circumstances on the peninsula.40 And, of course, the presumed presence of nuclear weapons in North Korea—with apparent ongoing efforts by the regime not only to retain but to expand its arsenal—adds an additional degree of combustibility to the mix, and a degree of risk to the security of the American allies South Korea and Japan as well.41 As the Georgetown University scholar Victor Cha has argued, moreover, the fact that North Korea is effectively destitute, with few prospects of achieving economic
progress or greater political legitimacy and influence, does not guarantee peace, because desperate countries can sometimes become reckless. In the event of another war or major civil disturbance or the collapse of the Pyongyang government on the peninsula, Washington and Seoul would likely pursue reunification of the peninsula that could prove unwelcome in Beijing. While it is surely true that Beijing has a complex relationship with Pyongyang, and very mixed feelings about the North Korean regime, its strategic interests on the peninsula may not lead it naturally to cooperate with Seoul and Washington in a crisis or conflict.

The border dispute with India remains an inflammatory issue within a challenging relationship that China continues to face with one of its most consequential neighbors. China still occupies a part of Indian-claimed Kashmir that it considers important for maintaining control in Tibet. It may have further aspirations about an Indian province further east, Arunachal Pradesh, which it calls South Tibet and considers to have been taken from China a century ago by the British. Were Chinese forces ever to move into that region, the entire eastern zone of India, separated from the main territory of the country by the narrow corridor created by Bangladesh’s land mass, would in principle become vulnerable. In response to greater Chinese activity there, the Indian military over the last few years has beefed up ground and air forces and improved road networks in the vicinity. Relations remain tense in the area. On balance, the two sides seem to want to limit the salience of this dispute in their overall relationship, at least for the moment, but it is difficult to know whether the issue might flame up more intensely in the future.

The potential for disputes extends, in theory at least, even further. As China’s economy has become increasingly dependent on global trade and access to natural resources, economic issues have come to play a more important role in China’s national security debate. Specifically, China’s leaders and strategists have increasingly begun to focus on the need to ensure, through military means if necessary, Chinese unimpeded access to vital sea lanes and maritime resources. Some Chinese thinkers have also turned more attention to the need to reduce China’s vulnerability to coercion by the United States by virtue of America’s current domination of the open seas. This could have implications for Chinese military policy in South Asia and even in areas further west.

In sum, East Asia has the potential for natural disaster and also for civil war, but the greatest concerns have to do with China and its future. The
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immediate risks for land combat seem rather low, on balance—unless, that is, conflict erupts in Korea, in which case all bets are off about China’s possible ensuing role. The longer-term prospects for stability on land in East Asia hinge largely on whether China’s relative restraint vis-à-vis land border issues continues or whether the country instead becomes more assertive in these domains, just as it has of late at sea.

INDIA, PAKISTAN, AND SOUTH ASIA

Historically one of the world’s great powers, and the jewel in the crown of the British colonial empire in the first half of the twentieth century, India has also been home to nearly half the world’s poor for decades and has struggled during most of its independent history since 1947 to establish any kind of significant economic momentum. As the twentieth century wound down, India ranked 128th in the world on the UN’s Human Development Index and roughly 160th in per capita income (depending on the exact means of measure), out of fewer than 200 countries in the world. These figures have improved, but only modestly, since then. Yet India has been a fairly peaceful country for several decades, especially in regard to its foreign policy.

Pakistan is, of course, a much different story, with a great deal of internal violence, extremist movements, a history of conflict, what may be the world’s fastest-growing nuclear arsenal, and a poor economic track record in recent times. And unfortunately, the Indo-Pakistani relationship remains fraught.

Bangladesh may not present quite the same witches’ brew of weapons of mass destruction, extremism, overpopulation, and economic malaise. But it does share the latter two challenges with Pakistan, and perhaps even greater problems than are faced by Islamabad owing to the ever-present threat of natural disaster.

On balance, it is hard to escape the conclusion that South Asia contains major potential for large-scale operations by ground forces, whether in the context of interstate conflict, severe internal violence, or complex humanitarian catastrophe in which the effects of natural disasters are compounded by weak governance and political instability.

To flesh out some of the possibilities more clearly, first consider India. It experienced wars with Pakistan at independence, in 1947, and again in 1965 and 1971. It also faced a major crisis in 1999 over the
disputed Kashmir territory (which joined India at independence based on the actions of its Hindu leader, even though it had a Muslim majority), and then endured terrorist attacks by groups with links to Pakistan in 2001–02 and 2008.

Over the course of this period, India gradually built up a nuclear capability, carrying out a “peaceful nuclear explosion” in 1974 and then conducting five more undisguised nuclear tests in May 1998 (which were followed later that same month by Pakistan’s six nuclear tests).

India’s major military cooperation throughout the cold war was with the Soviet Union. The indigenous defense industry was for the most part underdeveloped. Bureaucratic parochialism, interservice rivalry, and a stultifying form of state capitalism led to what Stephen Cohen and Sunil Dasgupta have called India’s “arming without aiming”—that is, a rather vague, unfocused, and diffuse approach to military modernization and strategic planning. This mode was arguably not all bad, as it reflected and also reinforced a general Indian disinterest in foreign wars of aggression or conquest and the relatively modest burden placed by military spending on the overall economy (ranging typically from 3 to 4.5 percent over the previous several decades, closer to 2 percent today). But it also resulted from a multilayered dysfunctionality within the Indian defense community that left it unable to make big decisions or to push the envelope on technology development or force planning.\(^5\)

Whatever dysfunctionalities may have existed in India have been magnified greatly in the case of Pakistan. Arguably, the nation’s very existence is predicated on the notion of conflict, as its founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, defined the rationale for the Pakistani state largely as a homeland for Muslims—and as a counterweight to India. There was little other central purpose behind the Partition of the Raj. To many Indians, this was the equivalent of original sin, an irrevocable act with tragic consequences far into the future, creating turmoil and antipathy among peoples where none had been necessary, in light of the long-standing mixing of populations on the subcontinent.\(^5\)

Pakistan’s persistent focus on Kashmir, an area of limited strategic value, is telling in this regard. As the analyst Arvin Bahl writes,

The ideology that Pakistan was founded on, the two-nation theory, makes ending Indian rule over the Kashmir Valley of utmost national interest. For Pakistan to concede that a Muslim-majority
region that is contiguous with it can be a part of India would be for Pakistan to accept that there was no need for the partition of the subcontinent along religious lines and the creation of Pakistan in the first place.\textsuperscript{54}

Pakistan has used terrorist groups to further its agenda, aiding and abetting their attacks on India and Indian interests, over the years.\textsuperscript{55} Some of these groups may act more autonomously in the future.\textsuperscript{56} Pakistan’s approaches to this and other disputes with neighbors, including with Afghanistan, are amplified and exacerbated by elements of its national institutions, including the madrassa schools, which often inculcate extremist ideologies and methods in the minds of younger generations.\textsuperscript{57}

What does this diagnosis imply about Pakistan and India and their future potential for conflict? At this point, it is hard to believe India would ever wish to rule Pakistan’s territory again in a reunified state. Antipathies are too deep and Pakistan’s problems vis-à-vis India are too severe at this point in history. It may not always have been so, when the Pakistani territory boasted a stronger economy and a better-educated population base. (Indeed, its economic growth rate averaged 6 percent annually for decades after independence.)\textsuperscript{58} But things have changed. Pakistan’s scores on human development indices, while improved somewhat, have lagged behind improvements in India’s; the typical child in Pakistan now receives three years less education than the average Indian child, and Pakistan’s economic production per capita is currently 20 percent less than India’s.\textsuperscript{59}

So the greater worry is that Pakistan or its surrogates would start a conflict. A solution to the Kashmir issue appears far off at best, meaning that elements in Pakistan will continue to have a specific motivation for engaging in conflict.\textsuperscript{60} The Pakistani state has been complicit in aiding groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, the terrorist organization that carried out the 2008 Mumbai attacks, as well as other extremist organizations. Whether that policy is beginning to change now is unclear.\textsuperscript{61}

Delhi’s reaction was remarkably restrained in the immediate aftermath of the Mumbai attacks. But as a result of the tragedy, the Indian military gave inklings of formulating a “Cold Start” doctrine, along with associated changes to military organization and weaponry and posture, that would allow it to carry out a quick, punitive response, on up to eight axes, to any similar future Pakistani transgression. Plausible targets
might include terrorist training bases and other facilities in Kashmir, or perhaps even in and around Lahore.\textsuperscript{62} It is not clear just how codified the Cold Start doctrine has become in Indian military strategy and planning. But any such thinking could be dangerous, since if were actually implemented, it might raise the fear of all-out war in Islamabad, and thus increase the dangers of escalation.\textsuperscript{63} For that reason and others, the Cold Start concept has not been totally embraced even within India’s government or armed forces.\textsuperscript{64} At the same time, there is widespread awareness in South Asia that related ideas may in fact be influencing Indian strategic thought. And if Pakistan began to fear that Indian forces were thinking of marching on Islamabad, Pakistan might consider threatening the limited, localized employment of nuclear weapons.\textsuperscript{65} Once the nuclear threshold was crossed, it is far from clear that further escalation could be avoided, whether because India would then find it necessary to avoid appearing weak, and would use nuclear weapons in reply itself, or because doctrinal, organizational, or technical mistakes would produce escalation inadvertently.\textsuperscript{66}

Of course, the implications of a general nuclear war in South Asia could be extraordinarily bad. Beyond the direct casualties, which could reach into the low tens of millions at least, one study has estimated the potential for massive famine affecting many hundreds of millions of people (not to mention the general breakdown in state services, infrastructure, and health care that would surely ensue).\textsuperscript{67}

In 2013 and 2014, governments changed in both Pakistan and India. There are reasons for hopefulness in these recent political transitions. The return to power in Islamabad of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif in 2013 may or may not lead to any meaningful improvement in Indian-Pakistani relations. For one thing, Sharif’s own desires are only part of the equation; the Pakistani military has a good deal to say about this matter. But Sharif did attend Indian prime minister Narendra Modi’s 2014 inauguration. The jury is out, and skeptical, as to whether Sharif can make meaningful headway in reforming his own country’s economy or Pakistan’s role in the Afghan civil war. Among other things, the country continues to struggle mightily with its own Taliban threat and with huge challenges in terms of energy, infrastructure, and other economic requirements.

Yet as one looks out further into the future, one must contemplate the possibility not only of improved and more moderate governments in
the region but of worse ones as well. Pakistan ranks tenth on the Fund for Peace’s list of fragile states, a dangerously high position for such a large country possessing nuclear weapons as well as numerous extremist groups on its territory. Bruce Riedel has written of the possibility of a coup by an Islamist military officer in Pakistan. Such a development could usher in greater state support for terrorist groups like Lashkar-e-Taiba, with their apocalyptic visions of provoking an Indo-Pakistani war (perhaps as a means of dismembering India and improving the odds for the formation of a caliphate). Such state-sponsored terrorism could also increase the odds of further attacks against the United States like the Times Square bombing of 2010, conducted by the Pakistani Taliban or some other group, and raise the possibility of a direct American military response against the regions in Pakistan where such groups might be based.

Even short of such dramatic developments, other serious problems could emerge. One category centers on water sources. With the region increasingly densely populated, and with climate change affecting the Himalayan glaciers, the potential for problems between India and Pakistan or India and China or India and Bangladesh clearly exists. To date, the countries have generally been remarkably professional and responsible in keeping water management matters separate from broader political disputes. But there remain frictions, and not only over general matters, such as the Kashmiri origin of most major South Asian rivers, but also in regard to more specific issues, such as China’s provisional plan to dam the Tsangpo River in Tibet and change water flows in ways that could affect India.

What of other relationships and other countries on the subcontinent? India has had complex relations with a number of its smaller neighbors too, beyond China and Pakistan. Most of the relationships have been reasonably stable of late, but there have been significant tensions at times. Nepal sometimes resents India’s size and ability to dominate the mountainous, landlocked country. Sri Lankan Tamil separatists have sometimes been funded by Tamil communities within India—but some of their more extreme members have also turned their guns and suicide bombs against Indian peacekeepers and politicians at various points in the Sri Lankan civil war (in which the largely Hindu Tamil fought the largely Buddhist Sinhalese). India has also had insurgencies throughout
its history, leading to losses that have generally ranged into the low thousands per year—though, with the exception of the Kashmir challenge, India has generally viewed these uprisings on a scale appropriate for its police forces rather than its army.71

Bangladesh, though protected by India at the time of secession from Pakistan in 1971, has complex relations with Delhi now. It has also improved relations with China in a way that could potentially implicate it in struggles between South and East Asia’s two great powers. Desire for access to ports in Bangladesh by Beijing, or a fear of lost access to eastern India by Delhi, could conceivably result.72

Bangladesh certainly does not present the severity of challenges from Islamist extremist organizations witnessed in Pakistan, but it has not been spared all such problems either. Its most severe threats along such lines were countered fairly effectively by Bangladeshi security forces in the early years of the twenty-first century. Yet the extremist groups have sought to rebuild in recent years.73 Some extremist groups in Bangladesh have links to parallel organizations in Pakistan, such as Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (or HuJI).74

In addition, because of Bangladesh’s dense populations, low altitude, and uncertain weather, it is easy to imagine future large-scale refugee flows.75 By contrast, political problems involving Bangladesh’s indigenous tribes, largely in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of the country’s southeast near Burma, do not seem likely to be on a scale to cause major consequences for Bangladesh itself or the region (though there were periods when 30,000 Bangladeshi troops helped police the region of some 3 million).76 But the scale of movement abroad has been considerable, with up to 20 million illegal immigrants from Bangladesh in neighboring Indian provinces as of several years ago.77

Many countries in the South Asia region are progressing economically. The subcontinent’s superpower has been a relatively peaceful local hegemon over the years. With the exception of conflicts in Afghanistan, there has not been a large-scale war in decades. But the sheer confluence of dangerous elements—including huge and densely packed populations dependent on shaky infrastructure in regions prone to natural disasters, and enduring political grievances within and between states that possess weapons of mass destruction and are home to takfiri/extremist groups bent on overthrowing regimes or causing interstate conflict—makes the region fraught as well.
THE MIDDLE EAST

Many parts of the world face the possibility of irredentism or simple revenge by countries seeking redress for perceived historical slights, or interstate conflicts over disputed resources and territories, or nations trying to protect their dispersed citizens in other countries against threats real or imagined, or civil war.

The Middle East has all these challenges itself, to be sure. But it also faces a basic challenge to the existing state system from Salafist/jihadist extremism and other causes. The post-Ottoman order that arose after World War I is now experiencing severe duress. Sunni-Shia conflicts are intense in numerous places. On top of that, more than in any other part of the world at present, major states have recently experienced or are currently facing large-scale revolution from within. And none of this has even yet involved the shoe that could still fall, and with resounding implications if it did: potential instability of the House of Saud in Saudi Arabia.

In surveying the region’s carnage, and its momentous changes now under way, one has to ask which of these will be transformative and which, while still important, may be less tectonic in lasting effect. The world has experienced periods of intense turmoil before, only to realize in retrospect that the crises of the day were perhaps less cataclysmic and less unusual than contemporaries tended to believe. The scholar Yahya Sadowski persuasively argued this point about the 1990s, now often seen as a halcyon period in world history but at the time regarded as a time of unleashed hatreds and rampant violence in many parts of the world.

The debate over what went wrong in the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 illustrates the broader analytical conundrum. A considerable body of literature argues, with impressive documentation, that much of the mayhem that ensued after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein was caused by American mistakes that were foreseeable and preventable. This line of reasoning, with which I am in considerable sympathy, holds that the mission’s huge problems were largely the result of a lack of proper planning for stabilizing the country through the use of proper constabulary and counterinsurgency techniques after the initial invasion and through rebuilding security institutions quickly, giving former Baathists a path to forgiveness and a sure role in the new Iraq, and creating a sound political system that would be representative of all major sectarian groups.

But other analyses underscore the enormous challenges inherent in trying
Conflicts Real, Latent, and Imaginable

65
to rebuild a weak society broken by decades of misrule and afflicted by overwhelming sectarian tension. Even had the United States made most of its decisions wisely and carefully, it is difficult to believe the project would have been particularly straightforward or easy.82

Some very learned scholars wind up effectively being on both sides of this debate. For example, the Iraqi exile Kanan Makiya, in his powerful 1989 book, Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq, wrote of a badly broken and dysfunctional society after years of Baathist rule and Saddam’s cruelties.83 But Makiya was himself one of the most hopeful that, on Saddam’s overthrow, the Iraqi citizenry would be so relieved, joyous, and unburdened that they would “greet the troops with sweets and flowers,” as Makiya famously told top members of the Bush administration shortly before the 2003 invasion.84

The tension in these two views resonates powerfully when one tries to predict the region’s future. If prudent and competent decisions by a well-intentioned political leader can set a state on the path to success, all the region arguably needs is a few more leaders of the quality of, say, Ataturk or the King of Jordan or the new leadership in Tunisia—and a few less mistakes from Washington.85 Admittedly, finding such leaders is no mean task, but it is more tractable, perhaps, than a wholesale transformation of the respective societies. Perhaps Humpty Dumpty can be put back together again; perhaps some of the main drivers of political Islam can move in more moderate directions; perhaps Sunni and Shia can remember how to live together, as they have so often in so many places in the past. Perhaps most insurgents and others causing trouble in these lands are “accidental” guerrillas, in the soldier and scholar David Kilcullen’s memorable phrase, willing to revert to a more peaceful life once they sense there are reasonable opportunities available to them.86 Possibly the positive forces of democratization that have finally begun to take root in Central Europe and Latin America in recent decades can influence the Middle East as well.87

Yet if the forces of Salafist extremism, sectarianism, autocracy, and anti-Westernism have now become so strong that they will inevitably create ripple effects for decades to come, hope may be more elusive. In that case, the best we can attain in the near future might be to keep a lid on things and try to prevent threats from getting substantially worse.88 A number of astute observers, from within the region and outside, underscore the magnitude of the challenge in their various prescriptions for
what it will take to fix the Middle East and prevent another round of major tumult. Some have argued that peace between Israelis and Palestinians is central to everything else in the region, suggesting that if such a peace can be achieved, the region will do much better. But that seems a nearly hopeless proposition at present. The Brookings scholar Kenneth Pollack and others see a deeper problem, and suggest that a much broader agenda for political reform will be needed in the region. But the Arab Spring and its aftermath may make many established regimes less, rather than more, willing to countenance opening up, perhaps simply delaying the day when more revolutions will erupt. Centrist voices may have a hard time being heard in the years ahead, and reform efforts may be widely resisted.

And the magnitude of what could still go wrong is hard to exaggerate. For example, a worsening Sunni-Shia regional conflagration could produce a lasting division of Iraq and Syria, with one outcome possibly being an impoverished Sunni Arab zone run by extremists. A negotiated approach to federalism in either or both countries might be perfectly acceptable, but an unmanaged de facto partition that left boundaries and resources in dispute and minority rights in a shambles throughout the region would not be. It would almost surely exacerbate bitterness and extremism, and thereby plant the seeds of future conflict.

Bahrain, with its significant hydrocarbon resources and as the base for the U.S. Fifth Fleet headquarters, might wind up in revolution. Eastern Saudi Arabia, home to most of the kingdom’s Shia and possessing much of its oil resources, might be contested, with the hidden hand of Iran playing a more aggressive role. The Persian Gulf itself, with its extensive oil resources and crucial waterways, might be subject to violence, including, in the worst case, prolonged conflict of one type or another pitting Iran against members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. While our main focus here is on land conflict, the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz are so close to key land areas that any prolonged tension at sea could lead major state actors to try to control crucial littoral zones affording access to the Gulf.

The Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapons capability somewhere along the way, superimposed on all the above, could quite possibly result in the active pursuit of a nuclear weapons capability by Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates. The path to proliferation would itself be hazardous enough, but once one or more regional countries had the bomb,
the stakes in any possible war that might be unleashed would be even higher. Containing a nuclear Iran would not be a hopeless enterprise for the United States and its partners, but it would make life harder and more dangerous.92

There is also the possibility of another spectacular attack by al Qaeda or its affiliates, which remain committed to the overthrow of many countries in the broader region to permit the formation of a fundamentalist caliphate.93 Such attacks could occur within the region or beyond. Important al Qaeda affiliates or kindred spirit organizations exist from Nigeria, Mali, and Libya to Somalia and Yemen, to Syria and Iraq, to Central and South Asia.94 Egypt too could be affected.95

Al Qaeda and its affiliates could strike again in numerous ways. Crucial ports or oil fields in the broader region might be successfully targeted, for example. Several airliners might be brought down in a way that eludes clear diagnosis and response and thereby discourages normal commerce in the region for months or years thereafter. Key political leaders might be assassinated, with ensuing instability in a place like Jordan or Saudi Arabia. The foreign fighters now cultivating their networks, radical worldviews, and fighting tactics in Syria—perhaps approaching 20,000 individuals from ninety foreign countries, including the United States and other Western nations—could return home to attempt such attacks.96

From the vantage point of 2015, none of the above scenarios seems particularly far-fetched. Sketching out what could go wrong in the Middle East need not involve a great deal of imagination at this stage. Of greater intellectual difficulty is thinking through how plausible future scenarios could potentially implicate American armed forces, a subject addressed in the following chapters.

SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA AND ITS PIVOTAL STATES

Africa as a whole is showing promise. Indeed, it is showing more promise than at any time since the independence movements swept the continent in the late 1950s and early 1960s, only to be followed by a prolonged period of autocratic rulers, frequent coups, civil wars, cold war proxy conflicts, and economic mismanagement.97 All that has begun to change. In economic terms, nearly half the continent’s economies have found their way to sound policies featuring modest budget deficits,
reduced trade barriers, and less bureaucratic resistance to the creation and functioning of business. Promising growth rates have ensued in that group of some twenty countries. In political terms, there are also now some twenty democracies. The continent is less mired in largely fruitless north-south debates about colonialism and neocolonialism and is taking more responsibility for its own well-being, as reflected in, for example, the growth of African military participation in UN as well as African Union peacekeeping operations. In military terms, despite the increased threat of extremism and terrorism in places such as Nigeria, the continent as a whole is now substantially less violent than it was in all other postindependence decades. Promising signs are evident from Ethiopia, and even Somalia, in the Horn of Africa, to the western part of the continent, including Ivory Coast, Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (despite the Ebola outbreak), to Angola and Mozambique. Even the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) is showing some glimmers of relative progress.

Yet all of this progress is fragile. It is highly uneven across the continent. And it is juxtaposed with a growing terrorist threat that is exacerbating Christian-Muslim relations in much of sub-Saharan Africa’s northern tier of states as well.

As with other regions, it is logical to begin with the large states. The analysis below focuses largely on two countries, the DRC, because of its size and central location, its potential for sparking interstate conflict, and its resource wealth; and Nigeria, because of its enormous population and therefore its huge role in shaping all of West Africa’s future, as well as its new challenges from extremism in the form of Boko Haram. South Africa and Ethiopia, because of their size and stature, also merit some attention. All of these countries have rapidly growing populations, with Nigeria’s heading toward some 400 million by 2050, Congo’s and Ethiopia’s each likely to exceed 150 million then, and South Africa’s expected to reach about 65 million, according to recent projections.98

Nigeria is a country that, like Congo, experienced major internal unrest in the 1960s, but then stabilized somewhat in ensuing decades. That said, it has faced a host of challenges, from mediocre economic growth and inequities across regions to north-south competition across fault lines that are both ethnic and religious, enormous amounts of criminality, and now Boko Haram, with its al Qaeda-like ideology and extremely violent ways.99
Nigeria’s population is dominated by three main ethnic groups, the Yoruba, the Igbo, and the Hausa-Fulani. The last, the main Muslim group, predominates in the north; the Yoruba are centered in the country’s west, and the Igbo in the east. It was an Igbo-based revolt and attempted secession in 1967 that led to the deadly Biafra civil war. The nation was an amalgamation of otherwise disjointed and distinct British colonial possessions that had little political glue holding it together. Politics since independence in 1960 have largely amounted to internal competition among these three groups, with numerous centrifugal forces threatening and perhaps still imperiling the cohesion of the nation. Indeed, as with most of Africa, further civil conflict seems substantially more likely than interstate conflict. That is true even though Nigeria has sometimes employed its military regionally during various security challenges in West Africa, often through the Economic Community of West African States, or ECOWAS.

Boko Haram is a serious force to be reckoned with. It is responsible for several thousand deaths in Nigeria since 2010 and has also kidnapped many hundreds, including more than 200 schoolgirls in a single episode in 2014. It has shown some interest in extending operations to states such as Niger and Cameroon as well.

Trends in economics, population, and employment are mixed. Nigeria’s economy has been growing at 6 to 7 percent a year in real terms of late, but this rate may not be enough to improve employment prospects for a population still growing rapidly and projected to reach U.S. levels by mid-century. At that time, Nigeria’s population could exceed 400 million, as noted, more than twice the current figure.

These observations, when woven together, suggest that the prospects for future conflict in Nigeria are mixed. Interstate war seems unlikely. All-out civil war is not imminent but is possible over time. Extremism is serious, even if probably less worrisome than in the heart of the Middle East or South Asia. Some economic trends are hopeful. Yet the witches’ brew of transnational crime, north-south tensions fueled by sectarianism and unequal access to resources—and, of late, terrorist and counterterrorist operations—as well as a rapidly growing population would seem to make the country of significant potential international security concern.

Next to be considered is the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or Congo/Kinshasa, the former Zaire—and sub-Saharan Africa’s largest country. On the African continent, only Algeria is larger by land mass,
and much of Algeria’s land is desert. The DRC is also sub-Saharan Africa’s third most populous state, after Nigeria and Ethiopia, with some 75 million people (Nigeria has more than 175 million, Ethiopia some 85 million). It ranks fourth on the Fragile States Index of the Fund for Peace, making the DRC by this measure the most threatened large state in the world.\textsuperscript{105}

Like many African states, Congo has spent most of its postcolonial period engaged in internal conflicts of one sort or another. It was one of the poster children for what the renowned political scientist Crawford Young described in his book, \textit{The Politics of Cultural Pluralism}, as artificial multiethnic countries constructed by outside powers and held together by little more than a short colonial history, a common currency, and a strongman as leader.\textsuperscript{106}

The Mobotu period, from the mid-1960s through the mid-1990s, provided a respite of sorts from conflict—though only at the price of severe repression, enormous corruption, and economic mismanagement, which planted the seeds for future warfare over the last two decades. In recent times, internal combat in the country’s eastern highlands merged with the spillover effects from Rwanda’s conflicts to create a stew of violent militia groups and other armed factions. Congo became the site of Africa’s first true complex interstate war, with several other regional countries at least partly implicated in helping one side or another.\textsuperscript{107}

The conflict was characterized by a great deal of sexual violence and the virtual disappearance of the state, with the result that huge numbers of deaths occurred from lack of basic nutrition and health care, despite the region’s fertile soils and plentiful rains. A UN peacekeeping force, present in Congo since 1999, has been unable to make many inroads against this mayhem, despite totaling around 20,000 soldiers, which makes it the UN’s largest mission. But while large in one sense, the mission is very modest in scale in another. It attempts to address the needs of a country of 75 million—more than the population of Iraq and Afghanistan combined, or ten times the combined population of Bosnia and Kosovo—with force densities less than one-tenth as great. (Congo’s own military of some 135,000 is of quite mediocre quality and dependability.)

Though the international community has not marshaled a particularly strong response to Congo’s war, there has been more hope in recent times. The 2013 deployment of a UN rapid intervention force consisting
of troops from Tanzania, South Africa, and Malawi, and some overdue diplomatic cooperation between Rwanda and Congo, produced a moderate improvement in 2013. Were there better political leadership in Kinshasa, including a greater willingness to tackle corruption and institutional reform in the security forces, the world might sense an opportunity to do even more.

Should the horrible humanitarian tolls of the late 1990s and early 2000s resume, on the other hand, the pressure to do more could also increase. To be sure, the world might choose to ignore the situation, as it often has in the past in Africa. Then again, doing so would fly in the face of the supposed global consensus about a responsibility to protect, arrived at through UN auspices through such signature efforts as the 2000 Brahimi Report and the 2005 High-Level Panel. This responsibility to safeguard human life applies in the first instance to sovereign nations themselves, but then falls into the lap of the international community should sovereign nations prove unwilling or unable to uphold their own duties to their own peoples. Beyond such norm-based arguments, there could also be more direct challenges that emerge from Central Africa in the future that engage the more immediate security interests of the broader international community, such as new outbreaks of contagious disease with the potential to spread globally.

The broader Horn of Africa region merits some attention in any brief survey of Africa’s potential future conflict spots as well. Current conflicts in the region center largely on Sudan. In fact, there are three UN peacekeeping missions related to Sudan today (as of mid-2015)—addressing Darfur as well as the Sudan/South Sudan split and internal issues within South Sudan. The separation of Sudan into two states was a long, arduous, bloody process. Conflicts in Darfur and in the new South Sudan have continued to the present. All have the potential again to intensify.

Ethiopia is a key epicenter of many of the issues discussed here because of its size, its role as home to the African Union, headquartered in Addis Ababa, and its location, straddling the Arab and sub-Saharan regions. Partly as a result, it has been involved in more regional struggles with neighbors than the typical African state. Beyond that, it continues to experience enduring internal conflicts, even if they are not presently severe. It is doing well at the moment, but that may not last.

Ethiopia’s interstate challenges in recent decades have numbered at least three. First, it fought a very bloody war at the end of the twentieth
century against Eritrea, which seceded (thereby also depriving Ethiopia of any seacoast). That war remains unresolved because of ongoing border disputes, not to mention ongoing rancor, and one also has to wonder whether Ethiopia has fully accepted its lack of direct access to international waterways.\textsuperscript{115}

Second, Addis Ababa’s plans to build a major dam on the Nile River potentially implicate Ethiopia in complex water issues with the Sudans and Egypt. This is a new development in regional water issues, which have always been complex and fraught.\textsuperscript{116}

Third, the country has had historical struggles with Somalia too, and its ongoing problems with its own Ogaden region near Somalia have the potential for further flare-ups. Most recently, however, Ethiopia has been contributing in important and constructive ways to the African Union’s mission in support of the Transitional Federal Government in Somalia, under Somali president Hassan Sheikh Mohamud.\textsuperscript{117}

On balance, despite currently peaceful conditions and a reasonably robust economy, Ethiopia has its share of potential issues, not to mention a very rapidly growing population. Future regional conflicts, if severe enough, could conceivably complicate navigation in the Suez Canal or the Red Sea as well.

Finally, a word is in order about South Africa, the continent’s wealthiest country in per capita terms and also its most industrialized and advanced. Despite these advantages, South Africa cannot easily escape the history and legacy of apartheid, most evident in its endemic high rates of unemployment, misery, and crime in many of the nation’s black townships. Even though murder rates have been declining, they remain among the highest in the world.\textsuperscript{118} This volatile set of ingredients has the potential to cause considerable future unrest within the country. Fortunately, civil wars or interstate conflicts seem relatively unlikely; it is hard to imagine over what fault lines, territorial disputes, or other specific causes they would erupt and be waged.

On balance, Africa seems less likely to produce major wars of globally strategic significance than many other parts of the world. But there are enough looming stresses from population trends, crime and terrorism, ongoing civil conflicts, and disease such as the terrible Ebola outbreak of 2014 to keep its problems on the radar screen in any assessment of global trends in land warfare.
Once a global epicenter of cold war struggles, with frequent coups, leftist insurgencies, and rightist strongman rulers, Latin America has made remarkable progress in recent decades. Starting in the early 1970s, it gradually became quite democratic, with twenty-two of its thirty-three countries now rated “free” by Freedom House. There has been only one successful military coup in the last two decades.¹¹º There has not been a war between different states in the region since the nineteen-day border fight in 1995 between Peru and Ecuador; indeed, the occasional struggle between those two states has produced the region’s only real interstate conflicts since World War II.¹²º Economic growth, even if uneven in time and space, has accompanied this political progress as well.

Yet the region is not out of the woods, and its proximity to the United States raises the stakes for America. Severe income inequality is a blight on the region’s economic improvement, and severe poverty remains endemic. Partly as a result, violence—not so much between states but, as in Africa, within them—is a constant scourge in the lives of many. Much of the violence is not random but related to broader challenges posed by transnational criminal syndicates.

Along with southern Africa, Central America and Latin America have the highest homicide rates in the world. Moreover, even as democracy has spread and solidified its hold on politics, the trend lines for violence have pointed in the wrong direction. Between 1996 and 2010, the percentage of the region’s citizens who identified security as their greatest concern in life grew from 7 percent to 27 percent. Between 1990 and 2008, homicide rates across the region increased by 20 percent overall, and much more in some countries, such as Brazil and most states of Central America. In the 2000s, violence has greatly intensified in Mexico as well.¹²¹

The prognosis for various countries in the region varies greatly from case to case. From the perspective of U.S. national security, it makes sense to examine the case of Brazil, far and away the largest country, and the axis extending roughly from Colombia through Central America and into Mexico—the area most implicated in criminal narcotics activities, the part of Latin America closest to the United States, and the part with the fastest changes in violence rates in the region (for the better of late in Colombia, for the worse in areas further north).
Colombia has progressed enormously since the administration of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez starting in the early 2000s. Its rates of violence and crime have dropped by at least half, if not closer to two-thirds by now, and the FARC insurgency has been put on the ropes. Yet Colombia also has the second highest number of internally displaced persons in the world, some 5 million, as the toxic mix of right-wing militias, leftist insurgencies, and narcotraffickers has driven many ordinary citizens off their land. Its crime rates, while much improved, remain very high by global standards. Its justice system remains troubled, and local economic development is mediocre in many remote areas of the country. On balance, the trends are hopeful. Indeed, it is possible that Colombia will be an increasingly important ally of the United States in the region, among other things training partner militaries in counterinsurgency and countercrime tactics in a way that is often difficult for the United States to carry out. But it is too soon to declare Colombia definitively and permanently a success story.

Venezuela has been very troubled under presidents Hugo Chávez and Nicolás Maduro. Despite the charisma of Chávez and the momentum his leftist leadership created for a time in the region, Caracas hardly seems to be building a strong revolutionary or rejectionist axis in the region (despite ongoing close relationships with countries such as Cuba). Yet Venezuela’s authoritarian political leadership, overdependence on oil revenues, and very high crime rates mean that the country itself is very stressed, with a real potential for civil conflict or even partial state collapse.

As for Central America, and particularly the “northern triangle” countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, violence fueled by drug-trafficking organizations and other criminal gangs has been a terrible burden, resulting in large numbers of homicides in the region, as well as the recent influx of child refugees into the United States. Various approaches have been taken to deal with the problem, some building on ideas from Colombia and Mexico. They range from greater use of the military in law enforcement to broader-ranging development strategies focusing on economics and at-risk youth, to attempts at government-sponsored mediation with various gangs and syndicates. In broad brush, little has worked to date, at least relative to the scale of the problem. The resolutions of the region’s civil wars in past decades have so far produced limited benefits. Nor does economic growth promise a rapid rescue:
even where it has occurred, it has not significantly alleviated the extreme poverty afflicting much of the region. The northern triangle region of Central America of nearly 30 million inhabitants remains among the most troubled parts of the world, a virtual war zone in many ways.\textsuperscript{127}

Mexico has been on a roller coaster in recent years. The country has made considerable economic progress, and reforms are under way in important sectors such as energy.\textsuperscript{128} The nation’s levels of violence got far worse starting around 2008, before peaking in 2011. President Enrique Peña Nieto’s continuation of a policy of using the military, strengthened over the years in part through the Mérida Initiative, conducted in partnership with the United States, to target top drug and crime leaders, has had some success. Nonetheless, the country remains much more violent than a decade ago, and regions along the Pacific coast have not enjoyed even the limited progress that areas closer to the United States have experienced. Criminal groups with military-grade weaponry pose a serious potential threat to the state. Vigilante groups, however well intentioned and however effective in some cases, create the risk of a more warlord-like society in which the state would lose much of its monopoly on the use of force. Judicial systems and police forces remain weak and uncoordinated in much of the country.\textsuperscript{129}

It is entirely possible that the fragile progress of recent years will not be sustained and indeed could even be reversed. In that light, and because of its proximity to the United States and its size, Mexico bears watching as a potential high-end security problem for its northern neighbor.

Brazil is the regional behemoth, with a population roughly equal to all the above Latin American states combined. Its prognosis appears decidedly mixed. Brazil has long been a focal point of American business interests because of its size and potential.\textsuperscript{130} In the twenty-first century it has moved beyond its past troubles to have earned what the scholar and former ambassador Lincoln Gordon called a “second chance” to join the “first world.”\textsuperscript{131} It made considerable progress in the early years of the new century in particular,\textsuperscript{132} But it remains very troubled by corruption, worsening violence, deep poverty, and virtually all the other problems facing major Latin American states.

Latin America is doing better, overall. But many of the parts of the continent closest to the United States are not. And in parts of the region, internal violence and drug-related criminality remain severe threats.
CONCLUSION

How best to sum up the prospects for large-scale conflict, or other major challenges to global order, that may emerge on the world’s main land formations in the years and decades ahead?

Referring to table 2-7, which is based on the analyses of this chapter, as well as on my survey of the world’s natural resources and the potential for resource-related conflicts and disasters (discussed in appendix A), I begin with the following broad observations. In areas in and near Russia, natural disasters and demographic pressures are relatively unlikely to sow the seeds of possible trouble. But many other causes and factors could contribute, including revanchist politics and conflicts over natural resources. In and around China, disputes over hydrocarbons do not seem likely to cause severe tensions, except perhaps at sea. But other issues could, including the scarcity of certain key resources, such as water; and in political and military terms, the Korean Peninsula remains a tinderbox. The Indian subcontinent is perhaps most vulnerable to complex catastrophes that could be caused in part by natural disasters (or nuclear reactor catastrophes) and faces the added challenges of severe internal and interstate tensions, centered in particular on Pakistan. The Middle East is spared very few possible causes of unrest and violence. It may be less prone to storm damage or to fights over metals and minerals, but otherwise it displays vulnerabilities on multiple axes. Both Africa and Latin America may be less vulnerable to classic interstate conflict and somewhat less vulnerable than Asian rim states to massive storms or most other natural disasters, but they are very vulnerable to internal schisms resulting from poverty, criminality, and other problems associated with weak states.

Two competing themes emerge from this overview of the world. The planet is not becoming more violent or unstable on balance, at least not as far as the eye can easily see in 2015. But neither is there any inexorable trajectory apparent toward a more harmonious global society in which war somehow becomes obsolete or even rare. One can hope for the latter over time, and there are some grounds for optimism, but such a world will have to be created—it is not now here, and it is not on the horizon. With these general considerations in hand, we now turn to specific scenarios that could, under some circumstances, be relevant for U.S. military planning in general, and for American ground forces in particular.
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<th>Cause</th>
<th>Region</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Russia and neighbors</td>
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<tr>
<td>Population (and growth)</td>
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<td>Farmland, food, fisheries, forests, water (or floods or shortages)</td>
<td>Yes (especially China)</td>
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<td>Hydrocarbons</td>
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<td>Metals/minerals</td>
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<td>Nuclear power (and possible accidents)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interstate politics</td>
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<tr>
<td>Civil discord, crime, and terrorism</td>
<td>Yes (aided, abetted by Russia)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Not all conflicts would be within regions, of course. There could be conflicts, for example, pitting Russia against China, China against India, the United States against China, or the United States against Iran. Those cells with “Yes” are assessed as places where conflict could be caused by the noted factors.*