The Issue

An important component of security competition over the next decade will be the challenge of “hiding and finding,” especially the struggle to identify the locations and activities of adversaries such as China and Russia well outside of Eastern Europe and East Asia. The expanding global nature of competition, improvement of Chinese and Russian denial and deception capabilities, and declining U.S. military footprint in the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and other areas will require the United States and its partners to improve air, space, and other surveillance capabilities to monitor adversary actions across the globe.

Much of the United States’ focus on security competition has been preparing to deter or fight China and Russia in such areas as the South China Sea, the Taiwan Strait, and the Baltic countries of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. U.S. defense planning—including the Joint Warfighting Concept, which is the Department of Defense’s vision to fight across land, sea, air, space, and cyber domains—primarily concentrates on large-scale combat operations. As one U.S. Army strategic document highlights, “The Army of 2035 will continue to fulfill its strategic roles for the Joint Force and the American people. The Army’s most foundational strategic role is the capability and capacity to prevail in large-scale combat.” In addition, most wargames and operational plans (OPLANS)—the detailed plans that combatant commanders develop for conducting joint military operations—have focused on major wars against China and Russia.

While it is important to prepare for large-scale combat and to deter adversary actions, the costs and risks of both conventional and nuclear war will likely be significant. A U.S. war with China could significantly decrease the gross domestic products of both countries—at least temporarily—depending on the specifics of the war. If war expanded to include allies, as it did during World War I, World War II, and the Korean War, economic and casualty figures would skyrocket even further. Wargames that involve a conflict between the United States and China or Russia sometimes escalate to include the threat—or use—of nuclear weapons. Nuclear war would raise the number of dead to millions of civilians, create far-reaching environmental destruction, and trigger massive global financial costs. In fact, the proliferation of nuclear weapons has significantly reduced the likelihood of conventional war between great powers.

Who rules East Europe commands the Heartland; who rules the Heartland commands the World-Island; who rules the World-Island commands the world.

—HALFORD J. MACKINDER
These costs and risks make conventional and nuclear war unlikely. Instead, the United States should focus on daily security competition—the constant struggle between countries, including great powers, in the international system for power and influence. Security competition is a normal reality of balance-of-power politics between countries. Leaders care a great deal about power, including relative power, and countries compete for power. Security competition has typically involved the struggle between great powers over military, economic, and other forms of power and influence. Consequently, this CSIS brief asks three sets of questions. First, where will security competition occur over the next decade? Will it primarily occur in such areas as the Baltics and Taiwan Strait, or will it be global? Second, what are the challenges for the United States and its partners to detect the activities of China, Russia, and other adversaries in these areas as they compete for power and influence? Third, what types of capabilities will U.S. military and intelligence agencies need to deal with these challenges? To answer these questions, this brief combines a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods. It compiles data on such issues as global demographic trends, the size of armies, and force posture. It also uses information from interviews with government officials and other experts on the future of competition.

This brief argues that a critical part of future security competition will be solving the challenge of hiding and finding across the globe. This challenge entails identifying the locations and activities of adversaries, including the movement of their armies, navies, air forces, and intelligence operatives. The challenge of hiding and finding will likely be exacerbated by at least three trends, which are highlighted throughout this analysis.

First, security competition between the United States and its main adversaries—such as China and Russia—will be global, not confined to Eastern Europe, the South China Sea, and Taiwan. Competition will likely be intense in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions. U.S. and partner military and intelligence agencies will likely face significant challenges in identifying the activities of state and non-state actors in such a large and diverse geographic landscape. In the words of English geographer Halford Mackinder, competition will span large landmasses (the “heartlands”) and littoral areas (the “world-islands”). Second, Chinese and Russian tactics and technologies to hide will likely improve, making it increasingly difficult for the United States and its partners to track their activities. Third, the size of U.S. ground forces is declining, and the United States is decreasing its military force posture from important areas of competition, including the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia. These developments will require the United States and its partners to increasingly develop capabilities that monitor adversary activity using air- and space-based platforms and systems, including uncrewed platforms, that can operate at range over considerable distances.

**Competition will likely be intense in Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, South Asia, and other regions.**

The rest of this brief is divided into four sections. The first analyzes the competition landscape through 2030, particularly the expanding geographic landscape. The second section assesses adversary capabilities that may impact the challenge of hiding and finding. The third examines the decline of U.S. global force posture and U.S. Army and Marine Corps forces. The fourth section outlines implications for the United States and its partners.

**THE GLOBAL NATURE OF SECURITY COMPETITION**

Security competition is not likely to occur primarily in or around areas such as the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, and Baltics. Instead, it is likely to be global, for at least two reasons. First, great powers need access to foreign markets for raw materials and other goods and services to bolster their military and economic power. Second, great powers have historically attempted to expand their influence, particularly at the expense of other powers. During the Cold War, for example, competition did not primarily occur in Europe (as both the Soviet Union and the United States expected), but rather in Africa, Latin America, and Asia. As the political scientist Hans Morgenthau argued, the Cold War was fought across the globe “primarily in terms of competition between two rival political philosophies, economic systems, and ways of life.” Indeed, future competition with China and Russia will likely occur across a diverse geographic landscape, from densely populated cities to littoral areas, deserts, and mountains.

China, for instance, is expanding its global reach. The Belt and Road Initiative is an ambitious global development strategy that uses infrastructure investments to expand China’s political, economic, and military power. The Belt and Road Initiative is about much more than economics. China uses economic assistance to pressure foreign
governments to adopt favorable policies on such issues as Taiwan, Hong Kong, control of islands in the South China Sea, and the plight of Uyghurs in western China. Xi Jinping’s goal is to create a vast network of railways, highways, energy pipelines, maritime trade routes, and ports to connect China with the rest of Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The “belts” refer to the network of land routes that connect China to Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. The “roads” refer—somewhat confusingly—to the maritime routes, including ports, that connect Chinese seaports to countries in the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, South Pacific, and Mediterranean Sea. Russia has also expanded its global footprint. As Figure 2 highlights, Russia has military bases in Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia (in Abkhazia and South Ossetia), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Sudan, Syria, Tajikistan, and Vietnam. Instead of deploying large numbers of conventional Russian soldiers, however, Moscow has leveraged special operations forces, intelligence units, private military companies (PMCs), and other government and non-government organizations to expand its influence, build the capacity of partners and allies, and increase economic opportunity. Some Russian PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, are quasi-arms of the Russian government, and they have direct or indirect links with the Russian Ministry of Defense (particularly the Main Intelligence Directorate, or GRU), the Federal Security Service (FSB), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), and the Kremlin. In 2021, Russian PMCs were active in over two dozen countries in Africa (such as the Central African Republic, Libya, and Sudan), the Middle East (such as Iraq, Syria, and Yemen), Europe (such as Belarus, Serbia, and Ukraine), Latin America (such as Venezuela), and Asia (such as Afghanistan and Azerbaijan). Based on the expansion of Chinese and Russian interests across the globe, there are several aspects of competition that will likely impact the challenge of hiding and finding. The first is variation in the terrain in which adversaries attempt to hide. As Sun Tzu remarked, understanding terrain is essential in warfare. “By terrain, I mean distances,” he wrote, “whether the ground is traversed with ease or difficulty, whether it is open or constricted, and the chances of life or death.” This observation is...
no less relevant two millennia later. Types of terrain that may be conducive to hiding include the jungles and rainforests of Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America; the forested areas of Eastern Europe; the mountain ranges of Asia; the Arctic (particularly under the ice); and underwater. Adversaries may attempt to use woods, underbrush, caves, jungle vegetation, and ice for concealment and cover. Weather in these areas can also impact intelligence collection.

Second, competition will likely occur in areas with varied demographics, including in sprawling urban cities and peri-urban slums in the Middle East, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By 2030, 75 percent of humans will likely reside in the tightly packed areas of the world’s coastal cities, as highlighted in Figure 3. These areas present challenges in collecting information, including from remote intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms.

Third, competition will increasingly occur in the cyber and space domains, which are easier for adversaries to hide in. For example, countries such as China and Russia can place malware in critical infrastructure or siphon off intelligence from 5G wireless networks such as Huawei and ZTE.

DENIAL, DECEPTION, AND STEALTH
Understanding this varied terrain will require conducting ISR across expansive geographic areas, as well as in the cyber realm. In these areas, U.S. competitors will frequently attempt to hide many of their activities using a combination of denial and deception tactics, techniques, and technologies, including stealth. The rest of this section focuses on China and Russia.

China: Beijing is developing a growing arsenal of capabilities and tactics that could make it difficult for the United States and its partners to monitor its activities and operate in some locations. For example, China is developing J-20A and J-20B fifth-generation stealth fighters, armed stealth uncrewed aircraft systems, and the J-31 medium-weight stealth fighter.

In addition, China has used deception tactics and techniques to expand its influence. For example, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has utilized fleets of fishing vessels and created—virtually overnight—artificial islands by dumping millions of tons of sand and concrete onto reefs to assert its territorial and resource claims in the Pacific. Clusters of Chinese vessels in the Spratly Islands dredged white sand by sucking it up from the sea bed.
and pumping it onto formerly undeveloped reefs. China replaced dilapidated fishing shacks on stilts with airfields, control towers, aircraft hangars, and radar installations. At first, Chinese amphibious warships, capable of holding 500 to 800 troops, began to patrol the reefs. China then added HQ-9B surface-to-air missiles and YJ-12B anti-ship cruise missiles to locations such as Mischief Reef. Other islands across the Spratlys now have military barracks, fuel depots, anti-aircraft and anti-missile systems, anti-ship cruise missiles, long-range surface-to-air missiles, sensors, electronic warfare systems, space-based systems, and signals intelligence platforms. They serve as important logistics hubs for the PLA across the South China Sea.

To protect its interests, China has employed a suite of irregular capabilities: Coast Guard cutters, vessels from the People’s Armed Forces Maritime Militia, and even fishing boats.

In an effort to deny U.S. freedom of movement, China is building more advanced precision-guided cruise missiles and conventional short-, medium-, and intermediate-range ballistic missiles; air-, ground-, and sea-launched anti-ship cruise missiles; and anti-ship ballistic missiles.

Much of China’s activity has focused on the development or acquisition of power projection capabilities—from fourth- and fifth-generation aircraft to China’s first aircraft carrier—designed to give China greater ability to influence actions in the Indo-Pacific and other areas of the globe. The PLA can increasingly put aircraft carrier strike groups at risk and neutralize ground-based airpower. China is also developing an increasingly robust over-the-horizon ISR capability. The development of China’s space, counter-space, and electronics sectors has enabled it to increase the pace of satellite launches and deploy a wider range of sophisticated satellites.

**Russia:** Moscow has long utilized denial and deception tactics, techniques, and procedures. Generally referred to as *maskirovka*, Russian denial and deception includes the concealment of forces and intentions, including the utilization of decoys to misdirect or otherwise confuse the United States and other Russian adversaries. Russia has also increasingly leveraged special operations and intelligence personnel overseas, including GRU, SVR, and FSB, to expand its power and influence. These types of clandestine forces are ideal for hiding. In addition, Moscow has used Russian PMCs. The Wagner Group, for example, is perhaps best understood as a clandestine collection of businesses with close ties to the Russian government, including financial facilitators, cut-outs, front companies, and shell companies to hide activities and investments.
These security and financial arrangements are designed to hide Russian activity.26

Russia is also modernizing its legacy aircraft, surface-to-air missile systems, and radars, which will make it difficult for the United States and its partners to operate in some areas. By roughly 2025, Russia plans to deploy two regiments equipped with Avangard hypersonic glide vehicles.27 Russia’s navy will incorporate new attack capabilities, such as anti-submarine sensors, advanced missiles, and long-range land attack cruise missiles. By 2025, Russia’s Pacific Fleet will likely incorporate additional surface combatants equipped with the Kalibr cruise missile system and three new Project 22350 frigates armed with the Tsirkon missile system.

Russia is also focused on improving other components of its A2/AD capabilities through 2030, including air defense, coastal missiles, and layered defenses.28

Russian foreign military sales present a related challenge, since Moscow will likely provide advanced technology, systems, and platforms to foreign countries that the United States will need to monitor. For example, the Russians have already exported advanced weapons systems, such as the S-400 anti-aircraft system, to some countries.29 In Libya, Russian PMCs have operated MiG-29 and Sukhoi Su-24 fighter aircraft, as well as Pantsir S-1 surface-to-air missile systems.30

Russian operations in the Central African Republic (CAR) highlight Russian attempts to hide or otherwise mask their activities. Around January 2018, Russia deployed military and civilian instructors to the CAR to provide military training, equipment, information operations, and security services for concessions to develop gold, uranium, and diamond mines.31 Wagner contractors established a base and training camp southwest of Bangui in the ruins of Jean-Bédel Bokassa’s former palace at Berengo.32 A comparison of satellite imagery before the PMC’s arrival at Berengo and annually since 2018 indicates that the troops made repairs to the existing palace structures and built additional facilities.33

Russian activities at Berengo highlight two issues relevant to the challenge of hiding and finding. First, Moscow utilized PMCs, such as the Wagner Group, Sewa Security Services, and Patriot, in the CAR.34 Moscow has employed these types of low-profile, deniable forces to mask Russian government activity. Second, Russia has used terrain, such as tropical rainforests in the CAR, to hide some activity. As illustrated in Figures 4.1 and 4.2, satellite imagery shows the development of adjacent training facilities, including firing ranges, revetments, and other defensive positions in the rainforests.
THE DECLINE OF U.S. FORCE POSTURE
As competition expands globally and U.S. adversaries improve their denial and deception capabilities, the U.S. military footprint overseas is shrinking. In 2021, the number of active-duty U.S. personnel overseas (171,111) was at its lowest level since 1950 (298,621), as highlighted in Figure 5.35 During the Cold War, U.S. posture focused on balance-of-power competition with the Soviet Union that involved positioning large numbers of U.S. ground, air, and naval forces in garrisons at strategic strongpoints in Europe and Asia.36 The U.S. Army had as many as five divisions based in Europe, while the U.S. Air Force had as many as 2,100 aircraft stationed at over 40 bases in Europe.37 Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. military posture in the Middle East temporarily intensified—both in aggregate numbers and as a percentage of U.S. forces overseas—as the United States engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.38 But the number of forces eventually dropped as the U.S. military decreased its involvement in counterterrorism operations.

In 2021, the United States had 65,837 forces in Europe, 81,967 in Asia, 13,903 in the Middle East, and 9,404 in other areas of the globe—its lowest level in the last seven decades.39 The United States is also decreasing its force posture in such areas as the Middle East, Africa, and South Asia—some of the same areas in which the Russians and Chinese are increasing their footprints.

In addition, the size of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps has declined—and may continue to decline over the next decade. As Figure 6 highlights, the size of the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps has decreased since the end of the Cold War, from 966,697 personnel in 1989 (769,741 U.S. Army and 196,956 U.S. Marines) to 665,303 in 2021 (483,742 U.S. Army and 181,561 U.S. Marines).41 The total number of active-duty U.S. military personnel has also significantly declined after the end of the Cold War to take advantage of the "peace dividend."42 So has the number of selected major ground combat systems. Between 1989 and 2020, for example, the number of U.S. Army main battle tanks declined by 84 percent.43 At the same time, the number of crewed combat aircraft declined by 38 percent, from 3,658 in 1989 to 2,263 in 2020. The Navy’s inventory of ships has been cut by more than half since 1989, with likely future cuts in cruisers and littoral combat ships.44

Just as competition is expanding in geographic scope and types of terrain and adversary capabilities are improving, the U.S. military posture is shrinking in key areas of competition, and the size of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps is declining. The result is that a significant component of security competition will be solving the problem of hiding and finding in a vast area of the globe. The United States and its partners will need to identify the actions of adversaries, including the movement of their

Figure 5: Active-Duty U.S. Military Personnel Overseas, 1950–202140

Source: CSIS original research and analysis based on multiple sources. Please see endnote 40 for detailed notes and references.
armies, navies, air forces, intelligence, and proxy personnel, platforms, and systems. There may also be a vulnerability to mass forces because of the development of precision weapons, which may cause adversaries to increasingly disperse their forces and use a combination of deception techniques and stealth technologies. In this environment, the United States and its partners will need to continue developing capabilities to monitor Chinese, Russian, and other adversary activities to counter and deter them.

THE IMPLICATIONS FOR HIDING AND FINDING

Based on these developments, what types of capabilities will U.S. military and intelligence agencies require? This section focuses on several capabilities: (1) air and space platforms and systems; (2) uncrewed strike and ISR platforms that can operate at range over considerable distances and in A2/AD environments; and (3) a digital backbone. The United States will also need to continue developing its capabilities and tactics, techniques, and technologies to hide as part of security competition.

First, given the decline in the United States’ ground and maritime footprint, there will likely be a growing need to develop and utilize air- and space-based capabilities that can quickly collect and process vast amounts of information on adversary activities. Adversaries will likely attempt to hide their actions in the land, maritime, air, cyber, and space domains; in a rich variety of terrain, from jungles and mountains to dense forests and subsurface locations; and in areas with diverse demographics, including tightly packed mega-cities. They will also attempt to use denial and deception tactics and techniques, as well as stealth and other technologies.

These challenges will require the United States and its partners to overcome the tyranny of distance (operating over a significant area) and time (reacting quickly when necessary). ISR systems and platforms should be designed to conduct long-range and long-endurance missions at high and low altitudes—and often quickly. Systems and platforms also need to provide the capabilities for over-the-horizon detection, identification, and location of radar and communications signals; anti-submarine warfare; and signals intelligence sensing.

Second, there will likely be a need to focus on a growing number of relatively cheap remotely crewed platforms for strike and ISR that can operate for longer periods of time, including inside A2/AD environments. For example, improved Chinese and Russian capabilities will allow both countries to expand their kill zones with ballistic and cruise missiles, long-range fires, and fifth-generation aircraft. In addition, China, Russia, and Iran could give increasingly sophisticated capabilities to state and non-state actors, or they could forward-deploy capabilities such as surface-to-air missile systems to foreign countries. For example, Moscow
has deployed the S-400 anti-aircraft system to countries such as Syria and sold or deployed it to Belarus, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and India. Iran has provided some sophisticated capabilities to state and non-state actors in the Middle East, such as the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, and Hezbollah in Lebanon.

With the decline in land armies, there was a temporary rise in uncrewed aircraft systems. As highlighted in Figure 7, the number of systems increased from zero in 1989 to well over 500 total by 2020 across the U.S. Army, Navy, and Air Force. These types of systems are well suited to conduct over-the-horizon ISR. Remotely-crewed platforms should be able to operate for longer periods of time in these environments—with improved long-range radar warning receivers, infrared countermeasures, electronic attack, self-protect pods, active radio frequency decoys, and other improvements—without risking human lives. An additional benefit of remotely crewed systems is that they allow military and intelligence agencies to increase capabilities without increasing personnel costs. Remotely crewed platforms have involved increased utilization rates and decreased personnel and operating costs compared to crewed ISR aircraft, both on a per-aircraft and per-flying-hour basis.

Yet some of the U.S. military services appear to be divesting themselves of numerous uncrewed platforms. The Air Force is planning to cut RQ-4 Block 30 Global Hawks, the Navy is planning to retire the Broad Area Maritime Surveillance-Demonstrator (BAMS-D), and the Marine Corps is planning to divest its RQ-21 Blackjacks. Several U.S. partners, such as the United Kingdom and Australia, are buying the newest MQ-9—the MQ-9B SkyGuardian—since it can fly over 14 hours longer and carry a higher payload than the MQ-9A Reaper. But the U.S. military has not purchased any MQ-9Bs. Overall, the services appear likely to buy few additional uncrewed aircraft, a serious miscalculation based on the increasingly global nature of security competition. This decision could also be problematic following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, since the Taliban will likely increase its control of territory, and Russia, Iran, and China will likely expand their presence in the country. Persistent strike and ISR missions will continue to be critical in countries such as Afghanistan.

Third, competition will need to be enabled at every level by a digital backbone into which sensors, effectors, and deciders can be plugged. This is the essence of joint all-domain command and control (JADC2). This process will likely involve connecting sensors from all of the military services—Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, Navy, and Space Force—into a more efficient network. The challenge of hiding and finding heightens the need to establish a digital backbone across multiple domains.

The world has evolved since Halford Mackinder wrote his seminal essay, “The Geographical Pivot of History,” in which...
he argued that “the actual balance of political power at any given time is, of course, the product, on the one hand, of geographical conditions, both economic and strategic, and, on the other hand, of the relative number, virility, equipment, and organization of competing peoples.” But he was prescient in concluding that security competition would be global in nature and include a struggle over the “heartlands” (land masses) and “world-islands” (littoral areas). Growing competition in a broadening geographic area—as well as in the cyber domain—will heighten the challenge of hiding and finding. And it will become increasingly important for the United States and its partners to identify solutions to this global challenge.

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13. See, for example, “习近平在印度尼西亚国会的演讲” [“Xi Jinping’s Speech at the Indonesian Parliament”], 新华 [Xinhua], October 3, 2013.


22. Mao Zedong argued that the PLA needed to leverage fisherman, who could be an important component of irregular warfare. “The navy must also rely on the people; it must rely on fishermen. It must plant roots among the fishermen,” he said. 毛泽东 [Zhan Lipeng], “毛泽东人民海军建设思想及启示” [Contemporary Lessons from Mao Zedong’s Thought on Building the People’s Navy], 军事历史 [Military History], no. 3 (2009): 20.


Deputy Director of the Information and Press Department Artyom Kozhin’s Answer to a Media Question on Cooperation Between the Russian Federation and the Central African Republic, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Press release, March 22, 2018, https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJe02Bw/content/id/3136399?_p_id=101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJe02Bw&.101_INSTANCE_cKNonkJe02Bw.languageld=en_GB.


The data come from the U.S. Department of Defense’s Manpower Data Center (DMDC) at https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports.

See, for example, Melvyn P. Leffler, A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).


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There were 15,440 U.S. Army main battle tanks in 1989 and 2,509


50 Cancian, “The Five Surprises in Pentagon’s 2022 Budget.”

