

## Transferring Risk

American Geopolitical Opportunities in the Middle East

### ABSTRACT

American hegemony is in decline, and it is on the verge of collapse. The greatest military and economic power in human history is losing a war it is not equipped to fight. It is losing the war in cyberspace. However, all is not lost. By learning from the strategies of its enemies America can turn them against each other and secure its place as the rightful ruler of the known world.

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## **Introduction**

The year is 2018, and everything seems to have gone wrong. What was supposed to be an American century has become a century for America's enemies to howl in triumph. Somewhere in the afterlife Osama Bin Laden is satisfied with how things turned out. Two decades of fighting Islamic Extremism have left the country a broken shell of what it once was. America has forgotten its principles, and in doing so has opened the door to defeat.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, America has had to face the existential challenge of balancing Counter Terrorism and Counter Insurgency operations with being the steward of human rights in the post-war era. The adoption of global information networks has made this problem exponentially harder as America's enemies learned how to use this technology to undermine the technologic and economic gap that American hegemony relied on. The Islamic State in Iraq and Al-Sham uses these networks to project soft power around the world, making them one of the most efficient transnational terrorist groups currently active. The Russian Federation has compounded on this issue, using the internet to engage in active measures against the American people. While America fights its several existential enemies, Russia takes advantage of domestic partisanship to cripple it from within. These two threats are significant, but both are distractions from the most significant existential threat America faces; Chinese Economic Expansion. China is reshaping the global economic order around itself by building railways throughout Eurasia that bypasses American controlled shipping routes. Besieged on all sides, America is losing the world it fought tirelessly to build.

But hope is not lost. Unconventional times call for unconventional measures, and there is an opportunity for America to transfer the risk of Islamic Extremism to China while mitigating the risk of Russian active measures. If handled properly, America can embrace its fall from grace and turn its enemies against each other. To do so it must learn a lesson from each of the conflicts that threaten to destroy it.

While the Islamic State has created an unprecedented decentralized radicalization machine, it has inadvertently given America a covert channel into the minds of every potential extremist who meets it. While a decentralized network prevents security forces from shutting it down, it also allows anonymity as a feature. The tools that keep potential jihadists safe from identification also give America an opportunity to influence the message. If America adopts Russian active measures and uses them to influence Islamic State propaganda networks, it can potentially transfer the risk of Islamic Extremism from itself to China, dragging China into the fight against terrorism and forcing China to inherit the international obligations that come with its new place as a global power.

## **UNITED STATES GEOPOLITICAL GOALS**

Before America can take any action to turn its enemies against each other, it needs to know what it wants. For most countries, foreign policy is built on deterring existential threats and America's foreign policy is no different. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century America focused on supporting and enforcing the Monroe Doctrine as a response to the war of 1812. The Monroe Doctrine created the geopolitical identity that defined American thought towards foreign policy. According to Mariano,

“Such a definition was again threefold. First, the division of the world in two spheres created an American identity against an ‘other’ and rooted the American experience in the Western Hemisphere - that is in the natural, as opposed to artificial, realm of geography. Second, opposition to further colonization reiterated the exceptionalist historical mission of America and its opposition to European imperialism; in fact it made clear that the United States were willing to lead by intervention, not only by example (whether or not such ‘intervention’ was viable, or necessary, in the 1820s is beside the point). Finally, the Doctrine merged geography and history, space, and time in a discourse on national security: preserving the geographical separation and carrying on the historical mission was vital to the survival and, later, the expansion of the American republic.” (Mariano, 2011)

This was easy for a young America, who had no desire to be embroiled in European affairs, but towards the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century America found itself winning a war against Spain where it inherited several

territories outside of the western hemisphere. This propelled them into the age of imperialism, and their involvement in both World Wars solidified it. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Monroe Doctrine was informally replaced with the Truman Doctrine. According to Elizabeth Edwards Spalding, “The Truman Doctrine was an unprecedented guarantee by the United States. Outside the boundaries of hot war, the United States intended to aid politically, economically, and strategically two threatened countries in a region that was not in its hemisphere.” (Spalding, 2017) This new approach to global diplomacy signaled to the world that America would respond to any potential existential threat.

While the Truman Doctrine served as a good framework for combating the Soviet Union, it ultimately led the United States to ruin after the Soviet Union collapsed. Without a more aggressive authoritarian nation to serve as a foil, the United States inherited the image of an unrepentant aggressor. This dynamic has been abused by Islamic and Russian propagandists who sought to divide the American national identity and make American hegemony domestically unpopular. Osama Bin Laden correctly identified one of the largest vulnerabilities in Pax Americana. Modern Americans have no stomach for entrenched warfare. He famously said “Once the bodies start coming home, Americans panic and retreat. (Wright, 2018, pg.187) This painful truth about the American commitment to supremacy is made worse when their military endeavors are seen as aggressive imperialism instead of altruistic responsibility. Americans long for a Just War, and without one the will to maintain its hegemony declines.

Now in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, America needs a new guiding framework to approach foreign policy. Without the binding fire of the Monroe Doctrine, or the call to moral responsibility of the Truman Doctrine, America is left without a guiding principle. For America to succeed, it must find a new way to project power around the globe while respecting the will of its people.

There are three major foreign policy challenges that America needs to manage in the 21<sup>st</sup> century: The first and most important major challenge is to disentangle itself from the Global War on Terror. America has been at war with Islamic Extremism for over twenty years, and in that time, it has no tangible

victories to point to. The lack of a defined victory condition has allowed many enemy propagandists to brand American involvement in the Middle East as a war without an end. Most foreign policy experts would point to the campaign against The Islamic State and try to use it to claim victory, but they would be short sighted. The Islamic State is not defeated, and even though their territorial gains have been reversed, their soft power is stronger than ever. If America withdrew while claiming victory, the Islamic State would reemerge to underscore how shallow a victory it was, and that would further damage America's global reputation. Instead, America should withdraw from the Global War on Terror as a tired giant. As America withdraws from the leading role in the war on Terror, it should focus specifically on how Russian cyber aggression and Chinese Economic warfare have made the burden of stopping Islamic Terrorism too costly.

The second major challenge is stifling Chinese expansion. China has seen massive economic growth since the fall of the Soviet Union as they have become one of the main manufacturers of goods for an indulgent and decadent west. Wisely, China has reinvested this money into preparing for future markets instead of projecting force where it is not needed. The Chinese One Belt, One Road initiative is the most important project to that end. One Belt One Road is a massive geopolitical and economic restructuring of the global economy that aims to establish trade routes across the Eurasian continent by building a port and railroad network. This network of trading posts would serve as the cardio vascular system for the new China-centric economic order. America cannot afford to let this initiative play out. As China expands economically, an information nervous system would follow, and America would find itself at a significant disadvantage. Following Kissinger's belief that a unified Eurasian economic system would dwarf the United States in power, the US must take every available step to prevent this from becoming a reality.

The third major challenge is reducing the effectiveness of Russian Federation active measures campaigns against the West. One of the largest contributing factors to western decline has been the demoralization of its people by foreign propagandists. The Global War on Terror provided Russia with the opportunity to draw parallels between the early colonial powers that had once subjugated the Middle east, and the United

States' attempts to bring stability to the region. Abroad, Counter Insurgency efforts were undermined by state sponsored cyber criminals stealing and spreading information about American human rights abuses. Domestically, Russian active measures threw gasoline on the fires of white nationalism, creating a new threat for counter terrorism agents to deal with. This was coordinated by the Russian Internet Research Agency, which operated as an extension of Moscow's information warfare campaign against the United States.

Together, these issues pose significant challenges. America's foreign policy goals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century need to ensure that as America declines, the groups that seek to fill that vacuum are punished as severely as possible for their ambitions. Any actions taken need to work toward these goals in some capacity.

For America to do that it must discard the Truman Doctrine as the central pillar of American foreign policy and embrace a new method of force projection. America needs to rebuild its reputation by distancing itself from Middle eastern conflicts wherever it can. Instead, America will rely on soft power in cyberspace to transfer the risk of Islamic Extremism towards China by drawing parallels between historical Muslim enemies and the rising Chinese government. As America retreats it needs to position China to inherit the mantle of combating Terrorism to ensure that China spends money defending its interests.

If these goals can be accomplished, America will find itself in a position to win from any outcome. A Chinese victory against Islamic Extremists would give the world the opportunity to observe and learn from a successful campaign in the Middle east. In the process, either China wins a costly victory by leveraging their authoritarian surveillance state against Islamic State soft power in the Middle East, or China fails to secure its investments along the projected One Belt One Road routes, which would delay China's economic expansion and cause deep embarrassment to China's new emperor in a way that may cause domestic unrest. The scope of such a conflict would refocus attention from the larger geopolitical

order toward China as it faces its first challenge as a world power, which would reduce the risk from Russian active measure campaigns.

### **Information Warfare and Active Measures**

“Cyber Warfare is as much about Psychological Strategy as technical prowess.” -James Scott

This comment by James Scott embraces the essence of information warfare. It is not enough to build extravagant technical machines, you must also know how to use them to get inside your target audiences mind. The use of information warfare is not new, but the ability to propagandize your enemy has never been easier. The rise of social media websites has changed the game. Groups of all types now have the ability to reach an audience that was once unreachable. The Islamic State and Russia have both used these tools to different ends. The Islamic State uses social media to propagandize, radicalize, and collect funds to further its goal of establishing an Islamic State. The Russian Federation’s use social media to disrupt, confuse and manipulate in their pursuit of undermining western democracy and American global power. For America to engage in counter terrorism with these tools, it needs to learn how each group utilizes information warfare, and how the Russian method can be used to influence the Islamic State network.

Understanding how the Russian misinformation toolkit can be used to transfer risk from the Islamic State to China requires an understanding of social media itself. Social media sites are websites that allow communities to grow and communicate using internet technologies. Each individual social media site is distinct in their approach to these connections and communities, but they all use an algorithmic approach to connecting people with similar interests and ideologies. Any attempt to utilize these networks as a resource requires an understanding of how social media uses algorithms to display content. While every site uses its own proprietary algorithm, they are all based around a simple premise; show content that keeps a user coming back. When a post is made, the social media site treats this post object as something to categorize, rank, and present. A post that has been shared or liked by many users is ranked higher, and therefore shown to more people eligible to see it. A post also considers the relationship between the poster

and the view, as well as the time since the content was posted. This type of presentation allows a social media site to show their user the most popular content at any given time, but it also severely restricts the content a user will see. Users who consistently like or interact with a certain type of content will start to see that content more frequently on their feed. This creates a bubble, where a user's view of events can become skewed or manipulated. "That's where the algorithms come in. American researchers have found they can use mathematical formulas to segment huge populations into thousands of subgroups according to defining characteristics like religion and political beliefs or taste in TV shows and music. Other algorithms can determine those groups' hot-button issues and identify "followers" among them, pinpointing those most susceptible to suggestion. Propagandists can then manually craft messages to influence them, deploying covert provocateurs, either humans or automated computer programs known as bots, in hopes of altering their behavior." (Calabresi, 2017) These bubbles are dangerous and create spaces where a user's preconceived beliefs can be supported through confirmation bias.

Gaming algorithms allows a malicious actor to spread misinformation more effectively, but the real damage is done by the misinformation itself. The real danger comes from fake news. Typically, fake news is created by publishing misleading or false information through a medium that emulates authority to manipulate the people who see it. During the 2016 Presidential election the Russian Federation used Fake News as a central component of their active measures. By creating fake news, using fake accounts to buy advertisements to push fake news, and putting them in places where conflict would help it be seen, Russia managed to increase viewer imprint and ensure that they got the maximum mileage for the least amount of money. When stories would not gain traction, they would create conflict to make sure the process gained ground. Russia's efforts on Facebook would not have gained ground if it was not for the "useful idiots". The term "Useful Idiot" was attributed to Vladimir Lenin. It described someone who unknowingly helped the Soviets spread communism. In the information era it has taken on a new meaning as social media user unknowingly spread Russian propaganda against the United States. Facebook users, political operatives, and Presidential candidates would parrot narratives being used by Russia to discredit



America. This gave those fraudulent news sources the authenticity and authority they needed to be accepted into an uneducated American population. More recently a new tool has emerged to further spread fake news. “Deepfakes”, a combination of Deep Learning and Fake, uses machine learning to create hyper realistic fake videos. This tool initially developed a pornographic subculture but was quickly adopted by propagandists to create realistic videos for active measures.

The key to the Islamic State’s information tactics is that it has built an outreach network around these algorithms that has no head and can reach the deepest depths of an enemy nation’s cultural psyche. While Russia hides who it is through obscurity, the Islamic State embraces its identity. With this network they can project propaganda to establish an identity for themselves, radicalize western citizens to come fight for their cause, and access methods of funding historically inaccessible to Islamic extremists.

The Islamic State are expert craftsmen of propaganda. Using a decentralized network structure, the message spreads from user to user without the need for direction or oversight. This is a movement away from the top down nature of the old Al-Qaeda method, which was heavily regulated by the Al-Qaeda leadership. Due to the structure of this network it is hard to stop. The normal control mechanisms used by social media websites do not work against the Islamic State, because once a single account is banned several more pop up in its place. They use this cycle of bans and recreation to show how powerful they are, drawing attention to the idea the inability for western countries to stop them. The structure of this network is like the structure of the Anonymous hacktivist group and inherent in that similarity is a weakness. With no Command and Control framework to direct the narratives that are spread it can be easily coopted by anyone who references the same cultural threads.

Islamic state propaganda roots itself in historical references to add to the emotional impact. According to Farwell, “The Islamic State stands apart for its sophisticated use and understanding of social media to achieve its goals. Its communication strategy aims to persuade all Muslims that battling to restore a caliphate is a religious duty. The group’s narrative portrays Islamic State as an agent of change, the true apostle of a sovereign faith, a champion of its own perverse notions of social justice, and a collection of

avengers bent on settling accounts for the perceived sufferings of others. This narrative stresses that the Islamic State is gaining strength and amassing power, and that victory is inevitable.” (Farwell, 2014) The Islamic State projects the idea that they are a stable government that can provide resources and services for its citizens. This civic safety and security is appealing to Muslims who feel the Middle East is constantly destabilized by foreign forces. This defensive message is underlined by the Islamic State’s offensive capabilities. While the Islamic State was the first to use the tools of modern social media, they are also the first to bring modern production quality to its propaganda. “The Islamic State has long taken pride in its flair for developing content that is innovative and repugnant in equal measure. Back in 2004, when the organization was known as al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), it earned substantial notoriety by releasing videos showing the beheadings of captives such as Nick Berg, a telecommunications engineer from Pennsylvania.” (Koerner, 2017) More recently, the Islamic State has started to use drones to capture live combat footage, and then after post production effects are applied they distribute them around the world using Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit.

With this propaganda, the Islamic State radicalizes foreign citizens. Unlike previous incarnations of Islamic Extremism, the Islamic State did not only open its arms to fighters. It also accepted white collar workers and tradesman. This allowed the Islamic state to appeal to a wider variety of people and helped them collect more talent than their predecessors. “The foreigners who’ve made the trek to the wilayats are not necessarily expected to fight; the Islamic State welcomes white-collar workers too. This policy has been a boon to the organization’s media departments, which have grown more sophisticated as they’ve added specialists with experience in the West—men like Ahmad Abousamra, a former Northeastern University computer-science student who became a top figure at the office that specializes in non-Arabic content.” (Koerner, 2017)

As the Islamic State’s network grew, so too did their ingenuity. The rise of cryptocurrencies allowed the Islamic State to move money without Counter Terrorism and Counter Insurgency forces being able to see it. “Zoobia Shahnaz allegedly obtained the funds by falsely representing herself and tricking banks into

giving her a \$22,500 loan and over a dozen credit cards. She then used these to buy around \$62,000 in cryptocurrencies online, according to the district attorney's office. After obtaining the digital dollars, she wired them to individuals and shell corporations in Pakistan, China and Turkey that were destined for the terrorist organization ISIS." (Hannam, 2017) While the Islamic State receives most of its funding from sources that require control of territory like oil, cryptocurrencies allow supporters who otherwise would not be able to contribute financially to do their part. Psychologically, this builds a stronger relationship between the Islamic State and supporters because there is now a financial investment.

While the Islamic State builds, Russia destroys. Russia uses social media to destabilize its enemies. This is because of Russia's geopolitical goal. Where the Islamic State is trying to raise itself to the status of regional power, Russia is trying to drag everyone else down to their level. They use social media to undermine the validity of global democracy by disrupting, confusing, and manipulating western citizens using active measures.

The Russian social media campaign was extensive and covered several social media sites. Russian operatives masqueraded as regular users on every app they could find a base on. Some of these operations took place within troll communities like 4chan, but the most effective propaganda was spread through Facebook, Twitter, and Reddit. Each of these offers a different service for a social media user, and Russia used each one for a different purpose. For Facebook, Russia took advantage of the personal atmosphere Facebook creates by reaching out through private messages and user created groups. This allowed them to gain the trust of various users and take advantage of that trust to convert these users into unwitting agents that would help spread the propaganda for them. For Twitter, Russia relied on overwhelming legitimate news sources with fake news. Russia played a numbers game, and because Twitter is a more public open forum that many political analysts use to keep a general view of public opinion Russia was able to convince large amount of people that fake events were taking place. Russia used large botnets to obscure the truth with misinformation to manipulate public opinion. For Reddit, Russia built communities that allowed users to congregate together and share ideas. Reddit allows for the creation of themed

communities, and Russia harnessed alt-right groups as a nexus of misinformation, which allowed them easy access to premade communities.

Using this trust, Russia disrupted the operations of daily American life. One example is the boosting of the Jade Helm conspiracy theory. According to former National Security Agency director Michael Hayden, “There was an exercise in Texas called Jade Helm 15 that Russian bots and the American alt-right media convinced most – many – Texans that Obama planned to round up political dissidents, and it got so much traction that the governor of Texas had to call up the [state guard] to observe the federal exercise to keep the population calm,” (Dart, 2018) The Jade Helm exercise saw Russian active measures influence using a Republican official as a useful idiot, and putting a wedge between members of the American government.

Like an organic environment that serves as a natural host to disease and parasites, once these bubbles are created they can become home to malicious users seeking to spread false information for a goal.

Malicious users or groups will buy ads on the platform of their choice and will serve those ads to a group they are trying to infect. Users will see these ads, and share them, creating a free publicity boost, and ensuring that more users see this malicious content. Compared to traditional propaganda efforts, this method is a lot cheaper. It allows for more information to be spread to a wider audience for less money.

One of the ways social media mitigates that risk is through a process called verification. Verification is a process by which social media sites authenticate public figures, bands, and companies to prevent other accounts from fraudulently impersonating them. Traditionally this has been used to ensure security to a brand’s integrity, but in the current political climate it also adds authority to their opinions or beliefs.

However, the Islamic State propaganda network inherently avoids the use of verified accounts. The process to verify an account requires the confirmation of an identity, and the ephemeral nature of Islamic State accounts make it so verification is not necessary. Without a verification aspect to the Islamic State’s propaganda network, it is vulnerable to hijacking and coopting from anyone with an internet connection.

This is where the United States has an opportunity to make its move. Russian active measures take advantage of the digital infrastructure in place to disrupt the operations of its enemies while confusing them about who the real enemy is. Once truth becomes relative, they manipulate users into going against a new enemy by making sure the user only sees information that reinforces that point. As China expands its influence around the world, these tools can be used to ensure that anti-American messaging is suppressed, and anti-China messaging proliferates.

## **ISLAMIC EXTREMISM AGAINST CHINA**

For America to help anti-China messaging proliferate, it needs to intimately understand the potential points of contention between China and the Muslim world. China is in the process of expanding its economic influence, and this process will put it in contact with forces who have conflicting geopolitical goals. With the pursuit of the One Belt One Road initiative, China needs to ensure that regions instrumental to the initiative are stable so that they can secure their investment, but their idea of stability may not be compatible with the modernizing Muslim world. This potentially forces China to approach the Middle East as a stabilizing force, which has historically drained the morale and resources of the last several powers to attempt it when conflict inevitably grew out of control. If China is confronted with Islamic Extremism it may face the same fate. The authoritarian and communist nature of the Chinese government provides additional vulnerabilities to its ambitions. The leader of China, Xi Jinping, cannot afford embarrassment so soon after the abolishment of term limits. If he is perceived to be weak, or if his ambitions are seen to undermine the economic growth of China he may be undone by domestic forces. Additionally, as a Communist country, China may rely on a tradition of suppressing religion in its own borders, which may bring back memories of Soviet expansion into Afghanistan.

To be concise, there are two points of contention that provide opportunities to undermine PRC's economic expansion by refocusing the Islamic State against the PRC. The first is the oppression of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang. The second is Chinese infrastructure building and resource extraction in Eastern Africa. Failure on these fronts would cause irreparable harm to the PRC's economic ambitions as

they become forced to defend their investments or risk international embarrassment by abandoning the One Belt One Road initiative.

The Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region is an autonomous region in the northwestern part of China. Xinjiang is home to the largest density of Muslims in China. As violence from Islamic extremism gained national attention around the world, China saw an opportunity to label Uyghur separatists as Terrorists to diminish their political power. According to Adrien Morin,

“The Chinese regime implemented a comprehensive panel of security measures in Xinjiang, built on the twin assumptions that Islamic terrorism was the most prominent security threat to the Middle Kingdom and that its roots were to be found in the Uyghur ethnic minority. Those security measures include the intervention of the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and various paramilitary organizations such as the People’s Armed Police (PAP) and the Xinjiang Production and Construction Corps (XPCC). It is important to note that the PLA remains an institution controlled by Han Chinese and that although Uyghurs can enroll, there are in fact very few of them in senior military posts. As for the PAP, the Chinese government stresses that one of its most prominent roles is to “hunt down the East Turkestan terrorists.” The number of guards on duty everyday nationwide within the PAP is now up to 260,000. “(Morin, 2017)

This approach to counter insurgency had an adverse effect on the Xinjiang region and caused Uyghur opposition groups to embrace radical extremism as a method for rallying anti-PRC. This approach opened a threat vector for the Islamic State to reach Muslims in China. “Oh, you Chinese who do not understand what people say. We are the soldiers of the Caliphate, and we will come to you to clarify to you with the tongues of our weapons, to shed blood like rivers and avenging the oppressed,” an Islamic State fighter said in a released video. (Gramer, 2017)

Considering the nature of Islamic State propaganda, the Xinjiang region demands action from radical Muslim groups. If the United States can underscore the oppression of Muslims in the Xinjiang region, it can redirect the Islamic State’s attention from fighting the West to fighting China. From there, the natural

ebb and flow of radicalization and oppressive counter insurgency would keep two of America's enemies focused on each other.

While the Chinese face a significant threat from insurgents at home, they face a less manageable threat abroad. The PRC are currently engaged in building the One Belt, One Road initiative. This initiative has many benefits for China but requires the stability of many areas riddled with Islamic extremism.

The One Belt, One Road initiative also has a heavy African presence that echoes the colonial exploitation of Africa. "For many African states, the main question will be how they can leverage the vast sums of money behind One Belt One Road to grow their own economies. They will be wary of an infrastructure heavy agenda resulting in a return to a colonial-style situation in which transport links are simply created to shuttle resources out of the host country, without creating opportunities for growth. Additionally, the One Belt One Road initiative may open up African markets to a wide variety of cheap Chinese goods, undercutting local manufacturers, and stymieing the prospects for large scale industrialization of their own." (Reboredo, 2017)

PRC investments in Africa have already caused them to involve themselves in local affairs. In 2014, 10 Chinese workers were abducted by Boko Haram, an Islamic State ally, in Nigeria. China has a strong economic relationship with Nigeria, and this is a good example of how far China is willing to go to protect its investments. According to the Chinese foreign affairs minister Wang Yi, "Nigeria and China are strategic partners; our relations have been developing well. China has already invested or financed a total number of \$22billion projects here in Nigeria, another \$23billion projects are on-going." (NAN, 2017) This attack on Chinese citizens prompted China to pledge to help Nigeria, promising to share human intelligence and resources. "China could provide satellite imagery and equipment such as night vision goggles to the Nigerian military to help it monitor militant groups in convoys in the desert terrain of northeastern Nigeria, said Jacob Zenn, an Africa analyst at the Jamestown Foundation. Zenn noted that China might have its own interests in dealing with the militant group because of its ties to the Pakistan-

based Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, which could pose a terrorist threat in the restive Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.” (Boehler, 2014)

Four years later, the conflict between the China backed Nigerian government and the Islamic State ally Boko Haram still rages on. In January, Boko Haram raided a military base and stole equipment. “The Kanamma raid took place amid a barrage of almost daily Boko Haram attacks, kidnappings and bombings over the holiday season last month, despite Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari saying in his New Year's address that the country has "beaten" the jihadists. The IS-affiliated Boko Haram faction is particularly active on the Chad and Niger borders and usually targets Nigerian forces.” (News24, 2018)

The divisions that America would exploit already exist. China has claimed that Uyghur militants have been training in Syria since 2009. (Clarke, 2016) “In August 2009, al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) issued a video describing the “Chinese regime” in the same way al-Qaeda describes the “Zionist regime” in Israel. [1] In October 2009, al-Qaeda's as-Sahab media wing also produced a video of Abu Yahya al-Libi discussing Xinjiang as the Muslim World's “Forgotten Wound.” Only the AQI video showed support for the Uyghur-led Turkistan Islamic Party (TIP), which operates with al-Qaeda, the Taliban and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) in Pakistan. The TIP claims to have carried out attacks in Afghanistan, but its goal is independence for “East Turkistan” (Xinjiang) and the establishment of an Islamic Caliphate across Central Asia.” (Zenn, 2013) There is already a deep support for action against the PRC in the Islamic world. America can take advantage of these conflicts between the PRC and Islamic extremists by using an active measures campaign of fake news, Deepfakes and boosting to ensure that an anti-PRC message permeates the Islamic State thought space. Whenever a Xinjiang citizen is unfairly persecuted, America should leverage social media tools to ensure as many Muslims see it as possible. Every new development in Africa should be presented as a new imperial action that will rob the Muslim people of their sovereignty. Parallels should be drawn between early European colonialism and new Chinese imperialism. The message that the Chinese are committing a genocide against the Muslims in Xinjiang should be constantly reinforced, and the fear that they will do the same in all Chinese influenced territory



should be spread to all corners of the Islamic State propaganda network. Deepfake videos should be created showing prominent Chinese leaders expressing a desire to wipe Islam off the globe. Whenever news of an American injustice becomes known, the narrative should be suppressed by deflecting attention to Chinese atrocities against Muslims.

## **CHALLENGES**

Building a geopolitical strategy around receding from the global stage and transferring risk as a Counter Terrorism strategy has its own set of challenges. America must be very careful about how it proceeds. No nation has even given up hegemony on its own terms, but if America wants to protect its long-term supremacy it needs to think unconventionally.

The largest challenge America will face will be how to structure this type of counter terrorism activity. Should the United States use government agencies to shape this narrative and project soft power in cyberspace, or should it embrace the use of non-state Advanced Persistent Threats (APTs) like Russia so it can avoid international accountability? Using government agencies to enact this CT initiative will let the entire government system coordinate towards a common goal, but it leaves it vulnerable to political pressure from partisan actors in the American political system. With a rising White Nationalist movement growing domestically, the United States may not be able to satisfy that demographic's blood lust. They may move to undermine this effort before it is completed, which would leave America vulnerable to the worst repercussions of losing hegemony and failing in transferring risk to China. However, if the United States embraces the use of APTs, it would lose direct control over this initiative, which may prevent any active measures from being coordinated properly.

The next challenge that America faces is the responsibility to counter violent extremism. The last two decades of American leadership charged the global community with countering violent extremism wherever it was found. If America abdicates that responsibility to then wield terrorism like a weapon, it may lose the global influence it still has. For this to work, America must step back from the global

responsibility to counter terrorism by making the claim that no one else carried their weight. If this is not done properly, America will lose its global leadership and suffer an international embarrassment.

The final challenge America faces is that this type of warfare would need to be done without the explicit consent of the American people. Historically, Americans have not responded positively to the United States taking covert actions against our enemies, but American citizens may not know what is best for America as a whole. If America is going to survive the changing global order they need to pull back from the fragility of popular support and focus on maintaining a steady course on a long-term goal.

These challenges present the United States with an obstacle course that could undermine its credibility and diminish its ability to project force. Many of the United States current allies want to benefit from the One Belt One Road initiative and undermining it may create tensions between the United States and those nations.

## **CONCLUSION**

With all this in mind, America has a long road ahead. This strategy will not win the war for America, but it will buy time. The fight against radical Islamic Extremism will continue until the Middle East finds stability. Whether it is the United States or China, someone will have to address the socioeconomic issues before there can be any semblance of peace. Chinese economic expansion is inevitable, and if America does not learn how to compete with Chinese clean energy manufacturing, artificial intelligence development, and resource acquisition it is going to lose regardless of any active measures. The Russian Federation is still engaging in cyberwarfare in Ukraine and has meddled in the elections of at least half a dozen NATO countries with no repercussions. Transferring risk to China, and undermining Russian active measures is only a temporary solution that eases the pressure on America to delay long enough for it to learn how to project power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If America does not learn how to compete in the new world, it will die the same death every hegemon has before it. America is at war - it needs to wage it.

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## Important Maps

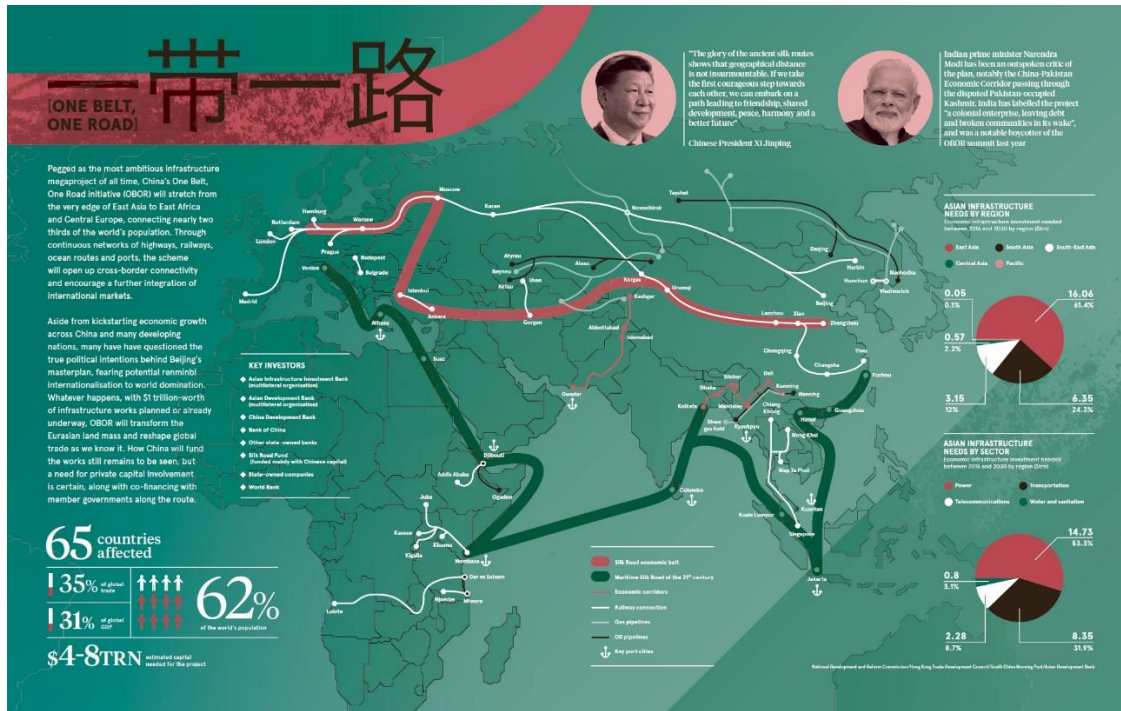


Figure 1 One Belt, One Road

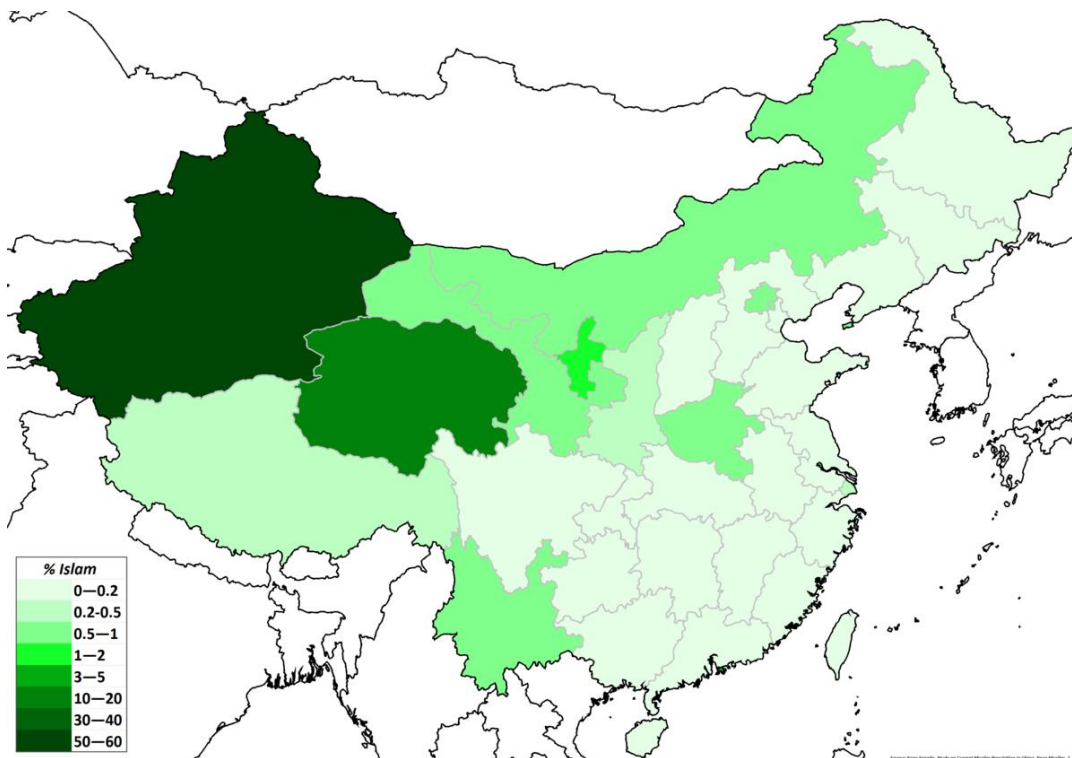


Figure 2 Percentage of population that is Muslim by Region