

At a certain point, the status of the borderland simply becomes a question of military and political power. The borderland belongs to the stronger side, and the question of strength is determined on the ground. Since 1848, the political border has been fixed by the overwhelming power of the United States. Populations might shift. Smuggling might take place. But the political boundaries are fixed by military reality.

Later in the century, the current border will have been in place for two hundred years. Mexican national power might reemerge, and the demography of the borderland on the American side may have shifted so dramatically that the political boundaries might not be able to hold. At that time, it's quite possible that Mexico may no longer be the fifteenth-biggest country economically, but well into the top ten. Stranger things have happened, and free trade with the United States helps. The countries currently ranked ahead of Mexico include many European countries with severe demographic problems.

Given the impact of a potential Mexican–American confrontation on the border, there is no question but that this fault line must be taken seriously.

SUMMING UP

If we are looking for new challenges after the U.S.–jihadist war is over, there are two obvious places to look. Mexico and Turkey are clearly not yet ready for a significant global role, and Europe will remain insular and divided (it will react to events but will not initiate them). That leaves two fault lines, the Pacific and Eurasia, and, in the context of 2020, that means two countries possibly asserting themselves: China or Russia. A third possibility, more distant in the context of 2020, is Japan, but Japan's behavior will depend heavily on China's. Therefore, we need to examine with some care the geopolitical positions of China and Russia in order to predict which will become active first, and which will therefore pose the greatest challenge to the United States in the next decade.

What we are talking about here, geopolitically, are what we call “systemic” conflicts. The Cold War was a systemic conflict. It pitted the two

leading powers against each other in a way that defined the entire international system. There were other conflicts, but most of them got sucked into the vortex of the major conflict. Thus everything from the Arab–Israeli wars to Chilean internal politics to Congolese independence got drawn into the Cold War and shaped by it. The two world wars were also systemic conflicts.

By definition, such a conflict must include the dominant geopolitical power at the time. Therefore, it must include the United States. And, again by definition, the United States will include itself in any major confrontation. If Russia and China were to confront each other, U.S. indifference or neutrality would be highly improbable. The outcome of the confrontation would mean too much to the United States. Moreover, Russia and China could not fight each other without absolute guarantees that the United States would stay out of the war. The United States is so powerful that its alliance with either would mean the defeat of the other.

Which country, China or Russia, is more likely to act in such a way as to bring it into confrontation with the United States? Given what we have seen of American grand strategy, the United States is not inclined to begin a conflict itself, unless it is faced with an aggressive regional power seeking to increase its security to the point of being able to threaten American interests in a fragmented Eurasian landmass. So, looking into future decades, we need to address the inclinations of China and Russia. Let's begin with the power everyone takes most seriously—China.