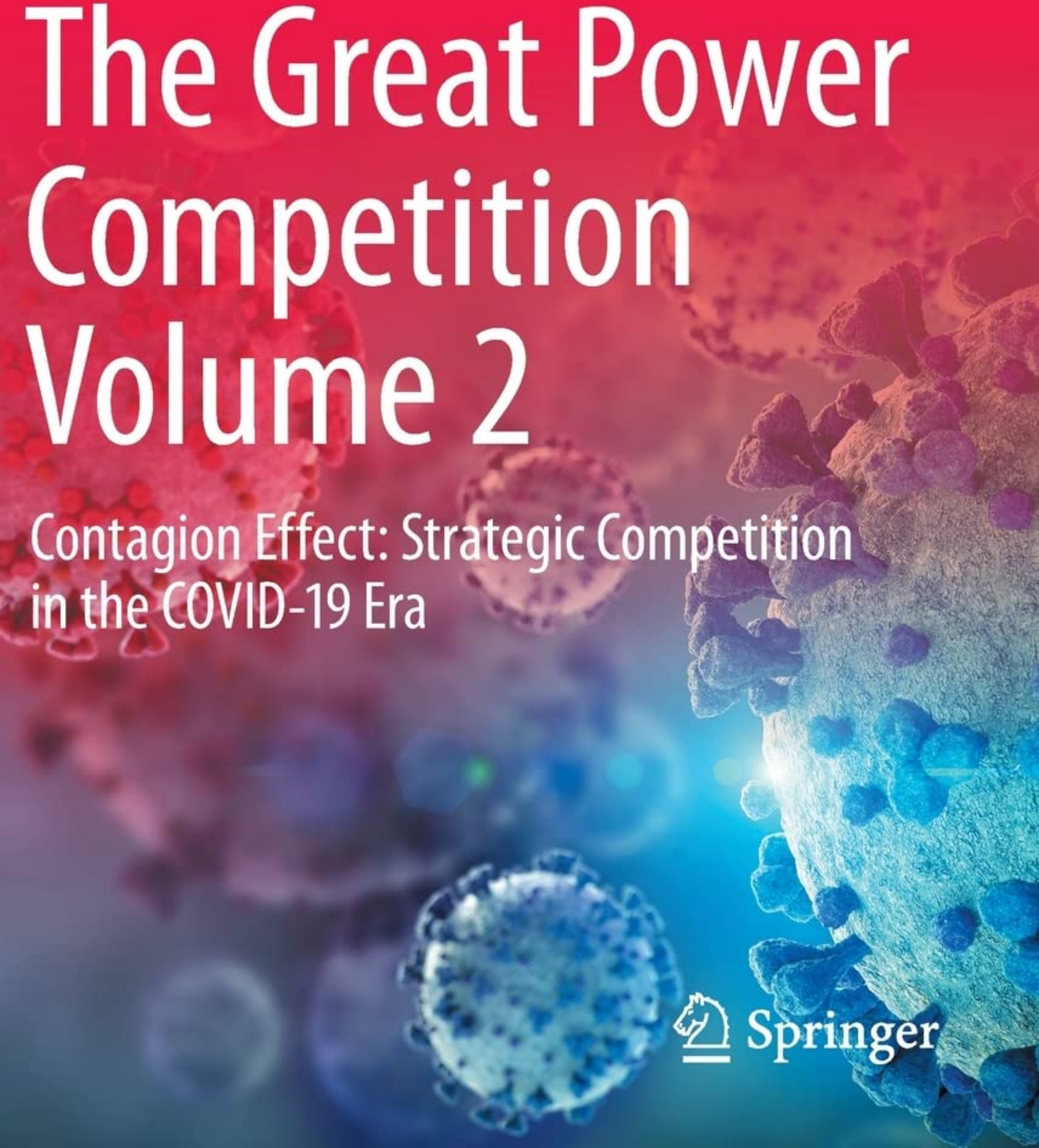
Adib Farhadi
Anthony Masys *Editors*

The Great Power Competition Volume 2

Contagion Effect: Strategic Competition in the COVID-19 Era



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About this book

Even before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Central Region faced numerous obstacles to building a stable and prosperous future. The region, which encompasses the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, Central Asia, and South Asia, has been plagued by economic and political uncertainty amidst dramatic shifts in the global power structure. With the pandemic now exacerbating the volatility in this already fragile region, the U.S.'s strategic objectives are rife for re-examination.

A complicated stew of factors such as weakening of established governance systems, the emboldening of extremist individuals and groups through advances in digital technology, the humanitarian crises in Afghanistan and Syria, and the intensification of the great power competition with China and Russia are creating a fertile environment for the growth of violent extremist organizations (VEOs). Such organizations take advantage of vulnerable, aggrieved, and traumatized populations to fuel radicalization, recruitment, and unrest, which further undermine stability and the potential for peace and prosperity.

While it is still early to fully understand how the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic will impact U.S. policy, this book provides a timely analysis of relevant dynamics such as popular radicalization, digital information ecosystems, networks of influence, and new capabilities to recognize and prepare for other such black swan events in the region.

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Preface

The implications of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on U.S. objectives in Central Asia-Southeast Asia and the Middle East are uncertain. The dawn of the twenty-first century was already marked by notable changes in the international system before the COVID-19 pandemic, including challenges to the modern nation-state global system, emboldening of individuals and groups supported by advances in information and communication technology (ICT), and intensification of great power competition for influence (Gavin and Brands 2020).

The Organization for Economic Co-operation states, "the pandemic has reminded us bluntly of the fragility of some of our most basic human-made systems. Shortages of masks, tests, ventilators, and other essential items have left frontline workers and the general population dangerously exposed to the disease itself. At a wider level, we have witnessed the cascading collapse of entire production, financial, and transportation systems, due to a vicious combination of supply and demand shocks" (2020).

These dynamics, especially in post-conflict and fragile areas, have provided a fertile field for violent extremist organizations (VEOs) to take advantage of vulnerable, aggrieved, and traumatized populations and fuel radicalization, recruitment, and unrest. The addition of an unprecedented number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in the Central Region further exacerbates the many social and ethnic cleavages that underpin regional instability. Layered on top of these concerns are sophisticated efforts by regional and global powers to yield economic, security, and cultural levers of power to influence and shape population groups across the Central Region.

Anca Agachi describes the pandemic as "a canary in the coal mine from an international security perspective. The pandemic is the harbinger of a security landscape marked by the rise of non-traditional security threats. These challenges will act as threat multipliers, further exacerbating existing security dilemmas…. COVID-19 is the template for what lies ahead, that is unless we take action. The sooner we understand the fundamental transformation ahead of us, the sooner we can adapt our concepts and institutions to guarantee the safety of people, states, and the international community" (2020).

With this in mind, Anthony Masys argues that, "across an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, COVID-19 has been a dramatic reminder of the ever more cascading, complex, and systemic nature of risks. The impacts have revealed systemic vulnerabilities across societal systems. It has seen the closure of borders, economic disruptions and failures, strained and overwhelmed health care systems, [and] failure of supply chains, all of which are contributing to a human and national security issue" (2021).

Yet, Masys states, "COVID-19 is not a black swan. For years stemming from our experience with SARS, H1N1, and Ebola, Public Health and foresight experts have been calling attention to the global and national security impacts of global outbreaks. COVID-19 has, in fact, stress-tested our national and global societal systems, revealing inherent vulnerabilities within our societal systems and infrastructure in addition to vulnerabilities and shortcomings associated with our mindset" (2021c). Further, "despite the shock, there were plenty of warning signs. Consider the following recent outbreaks: SARS (2003), H1N1 (2009), MERS (2011), Ebola (2014–2016), all can be viewed as dress rehearsals for [the] COVID-19 pandemic (Hiscott et al., 2020). [The] COVID-19 pandemic reflects how unexpected events often audit our resilience (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2007)" (Masys 2021a).

From a geopolitical/security lens, we can say that the outbreak of COVID-19 emerged as a new battleground between authoritarian regimes and democracies. China's ability to successfully impose lockdown policies, compared to many democratic nations, raises a question regarding the efficiency of democratic regimes during times of emergency. The fragility of the Western Alliance was further revealed in the "war for masks and other equipment" among European nations, indicating Western nations may prioritize their national interest over their sociopolitical alliances in times of emergency (CNN 2020). emergency.

COVID-19 has further uncovered pre-existing fracture lines in the liberal order and has strengthened emerging global trends that are now shifting away from that order (Brands, Feaver and Inboden 2020). According to Freedom Houses' "Freedom in the World Index," the United States recently dropped 7 points, falling from 93 in 2013 to 86 in 2020 (2020). While the U.S. remains a "free" country, this is a worrying trend that is reflected in 25 other established democracies such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Thought leaders, such as Ronald Daniels of Johns Hopkins University, have suggested that the European Union is no longer compromised of democracies but shades of former democracies (2020). History has shown that there is always a political shift following wars, pandemics, or economic crises. "The question of how to effectively reconstruct world order after COVID [-19] involves addressing not only the disease but also the underlyingproblems it revealed" (Gavin and Brands 2020, p. 5).

Expanding on this notion, Adib Farhadi asserts that, "possibly the most critical lesson learned from the COVID-19 pandemic, is that our international communities are increasingly economically interdependent, calling for new ways to manage relations with historical competitors that we now rely on for essential goods and services" (2021).

Yet, even with the present national, regional, and global challenges and tensions, *great power cooperation* can work. Multilateral cooperation between the United States, the United Kingdom, and Germany in developing the COVID-19 vaccine, proved that great global powers can overcome worldwide challenges through cooperation. Thus, it is safe to say that we can overcome other global challenges such as climate change, hunger, and terrorism as well with multilateral cooperation.

While still early on in the effort to fully understand how the COVID-19 pandemic will impact U.S. interests and capabilities in the Central Region, the second conference in the Great Power Competition Conference Series explored how the pandemic could impact U.S. military readiness, reach, and effectiveness. The GPC Conference centered on the issues of popular radicalization and information and considered theoretical outcomes and opportunities posed by the U.S. response to the pandemic across key challenges in the Central Region, such as, the Great Power Competition, popular unrest, violent extremism, information and influence operations, and new capabilities in recognizing and preparing for other such *black swan* events.

Radicalization topics included, (a) the attraction of individuals to a radical ideology and the reasons why people join VEO's; (b) the steps to preventing and countering the radicalization cycle; (c) the difference between disengagement and deradicalization; (d) re-integration and reconciliation; and (e) ideas, programs, and strategies aimed at deterring and understanding radicalization (countering violent extremism), as well as the historical context of radicalization, toward a better understanding of its origins and evolution.

Population Dynamics topics addressed the shifting of power from violent extremism support groups to population groups that globalization and information technology may influence, are moving away from sectarian ideologies, and are calling for better governance. Further, population dynamics explored the tectonic shifts emerging in specific "regions" and the resulting empowerment of population groups, expectations for governance, and future impacts on the region and the U.S.

This second volume of the Great Power Competition series entitled: *Contagion Effect: Radicalization, Unrest, and Competition in the COVID-19 Era* is the result of a two-day conference hosted by the University of South Florida and the National Defense University-Near East South Asia (NESA) Center for Strategic Studies. The second GPC conference brought together exceptional international scholars, practitioners, and thought leaders from multiple disciplines to consider our strategic way forward in the present covid era.

Tampa, USA

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