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Council Special Report No. 99
December 2024

No Limits? The China- Russia Relationship and U.S. Foreign Policy

Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine

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FOREWORD

There are changes happening, the likes of which we haven't seen for a hundred years. Let's drive those changes together.

—Chinese leader Xi Jinping speaking to Russian President Vladimir Putin at the end of a state visit to Russia in March 2023.

In the summer of 1969, the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union were fighting an undeclared war on two fronts—an ideological war to command the vanguard of international communism, and a hot war over contested territory in modern-day Xinjiang and Heilongjiang provinces. Over the decades that followed, Washington exploited the animosity between Beijing and Moscow to create a strategic triangle that proved instrumental in managing and, ultimately, winning the Cold War.

Those days of China-Russia rancor are now long gone. During the summer of 2024, Chinese and Russian warplanes flew in close proximity, not toward each other, but in parallel, jointly probing Alaska's air defense identification zone for the first time in history.

In a bid to undermine the existing world order, if not to cultivate a new one—free from dollar hegemony, rights-based global governance, and the long arm of the U.S. military—Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin have cast aside historical perfidy and forged a quasi-alliance stronger than any previous China-Russia entente.

In this Council Special Report, Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine expertly detail the military, economic, and diplomatic facets of the new “no limits” China-Russia friendship and the distinct

challenges they pose to the United States and its allies around the world. China-Russia amity is hardly a marriage of convenience, and Blackwill and Fontaine identify its numerous long-term drivers, including shared antipathy toward the United States and the rules-based international order; complementary resource endowments; geography; the remarkably close personal relationship between Xi and Putin; and an expanding web of strategic partnerships with the revisionist, autocratic powers of Blackwill and Fontaine’s “Axis of Upheaval”—namely Iran and North Korea.

This report provides a glimpse of the multipolar world order that Beijing and Moscow hope to establish through an analysis of the architecture of their bilateral partnership. Whether through joint naval and air exercises in the East China Sea, development of the new cross-border trade and financial infrastructure under the auspices of BRICS, or regional security exercises under the mandate of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, China-Russia cooperation is deepening in all domains. The two countries trade in controlled goods over a secured land border, settle cross-border payments in yuan or rubles through Chinese networks, vote in lockstep to degrade established norms in multilateral forums such as the United Nations, and transfer sensitive technology and intelligence to erode the United States’ strategic edge.

The report’s close study of the China-Russia relationship also dispels two widely held, yet fanciful, ideas: a Kissinger-esque gambit to flip Russia to the United States’ side in its competition with China, and the notion that Russia would be too proud to accept junior partner status at the helm of the Axis of Upheaval. But rejecting those ideas does not mitigate the threat. A tectonic shift in China-Russia relations demands an equally substantial policy adjustment to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific and contain further Russian expansion in Europe.

For the United States to address the strategic risks posed by the robust China-Russia partnership, Blackwill and Fontaine propose a number of important policy recommendations, including a material increase in defense spending; an enhanced U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia; a reduced U.S. military presence in the Middle East; an expansive and dynamic U.S. trade policy toward Asia; a surge in military aid to Ukraine; increased investment in U.S. allies, partners, and multilateral security pacts; enhanced engagement with global swing states such as Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey; and heightened preparedness for opportunistic aggression by China or Russia in the event of future military contingencies involving

either country and the United States.

The question is whether Washington and its allies can marshal the unity of purpose now on display in Beijing and Moscow. To implement Blackwill and Fontaine’s recommendations and outcompete the rapidly crystallizing Axis of Upheaval, the United States will need to foster a domestic and international consensus that the rules-based international order is worth defending, and worth defending at significant cost.

The United States will also need to come to terms with the limitations of its capacity to influence decision-making in Zhongnanhai and the Kremlin. There is no ingenious deal or sanctions package capable of prying China from Russia or Russia from China. The United States should be clear-eyed about entering an era of long-term strategic competition against an increasingly unified opposition who, in President Xi’s words, are enjoying “their best period in history.”

Michael Froman

President

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The analysis and conclusions are our responsibility alone.

Robert D. Blackwill and Richard Fontaine

INTRODUCTION

The growing quasi-alliance between China and Russia poses the greatest threat to vital U.S. national interests in sixty years. As this Council Special Report demonstrates, their joint efforts to undermine U.S. policies and international order have made marked progress in the past decade and will continue for the foreseeable future. Although the United States and its partners have not yet mounted an adequate response to this historic challenge, there are grounds for optimism about the West's capacity to deal with strengthening China-Russia alignment. Thus, this report concludes with fourteen policy prescriptions that highlight the United States' top priorities in managing Chinese and Russian influence.

Nearly thirty years ago, former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski issued a prophetic warning. “Potentially, the most dangerous scenario,” he said, “would be a grand coalition of China, Russia, and perhaps Iran, an ‘antihegemonic’ coalition united not by ideology but by complementary grievances. It would be reminiscent in scale and scope of the challenge once posed by the Sino-Soviet bloc, though this time China would likely be the leader and Russia the follower.”¹

Today, this coalition has emerged, bound by shared opposition to a Western-dominated international order and determined to be active in its revision. Visiting Moscow in March 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping said, “Right now there are changes—the likes of which we haven’t seen for 100 years—and we are the ones driving these changes together.”² In a lengthy May 2024 joint statement, Xi and Russian President Vladimir Putin made their long-term goals clear. “Russian-Chinese relations,” they wrote, “stand the test of rapid changes in the world, demonstrating strength and stability, and are experiencing the best period in their history.... [We] intend to increase interaction and tighten

coordination in order to counter Washington's destructive and hostile course towards the so-called 'dual containment' of our countries."³

Together, China and Russia pursue the following strategic objectives:

- replace the United States as the primary global actor;
- erode U.S. power and influence in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, the Middle East, and the Global South;
- weaken the U.S. alliance system and compromise U.S. extended nuclear deterrence;
- shift regional military balances in their favor;
- undermine international confidence in U.S. credibility, reliability, and staying power; and
- ensure U.S. democratic values do not diminish China's or Russia's hold on domestic power.

Skeptics argue that the China-Russia relationship is more fragile than it appears and highlight differences that could weaken the partnership. Beijing, for instance, values a degree of stability in the international system, while Moscow has grown highly risk tolerant, seeking upheaval.⁴ Lingering territorial disputes along their shared border represent a potential point of contestation; in August 2023, for instance, the People's Republic of China (PRC) published an official map claiming full sovereignty over Bolshoi Ussuriysky Island, which the two agreed in 2005 to split equally.⁵ Beijing still smarts from the fact that Russia now occupies 350,000 square miles of formerly Chinese territory.⁶ Russia's nuclear saber-rattling during the war in Ukraine has sparked concern in China, and Xi has stressed Beijing's opposition to "the use or threats to use nuclear weapons."⁷ The widening power disparity between a stagnating Russia and an ascendant China threatens to transform their partnership into an increasingly lopsided affair.⁸ The two nations compete for influence in Central Asia, for two centuries in Russia's sphere of influence, and Russia's recent defense treaty with North Korea sparked concern in China.⁹ In the Arctic, too, Moscow and Beijing have competed for influence and resources.¹⁰

Such critiques neglect the reality that the China-Russia relationship continues to deepen and widen, and occasional disagreements

are dwarfed by the scale and momentum of their strategic cooperation. Theirs is a formidable partnership bordering on alliance, bound together by resistance to what they view as a U.S.-led, anachronistic international order, one that does not permit either country its rightful place despite their power, history, domestic legitimacy, civilizational triumphs, and vital regional interests.

Their tactical differences pale in comparison to a shared strategic theme: resistance to the United States. Their territorial disputes are also exaggerated. In response to the August 2023 Chinese map, a Russian Foreign Ministry spokesperson stressed that this did not indicate a territorial dispute.¹¹ While Xi has been indirectly critical of the Kremlin's nuclear threats, Beijing's nuclear energy cooperation has increased since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, and China and Russia continue to trade enriched uranium.¹² According to reliable news sources, Xi did warn Putin in November 2022 and July 2023 against using nuclear weapons, but he has not diminished China's multifaceted assistance to Russia's war in Ukraine.¹³

Their economic partnership is highly asymmetric but a source of significant mutual benefit: Russia has embraced China as its primary supplier of goods once sourced from Europe, while China has secured a reliable flow of Siberian hydrocarbons—an essential pillar of its energy security strategy. Even tensions in the Arctic have seemingly melted away; a July 2024 Pentagon report indicates that “increasingly, [China] and Russia are collaborating in the Arctic across multiple instruments of national power.”¹⁴

The United States is likely to face these two powerful and determined adversaries, working together more closely and attempting to enlist other revisionist states, into the indefinite future. In the words of Putin himself, “The People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation are allies in every sense of the word.”¹⁵ Safeguarding American national interests and the stability of international order will be no easy task. Given Russian and Chinese power, ambition, and collaboration, rising to the challenge they pose to the existing international system poses a generational task for U.S. policymakers.

CHINA'S VIEW OF THE CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

Chinese leaders sense in Russia a transactional strategic opportunity, not an emotional connection.¹⁶ China does not trust Russia at any deep level but views Russian objectives as largely parallel to its own.¹⁷ Beijing looks to Moscow to endorse China's sovereignty claims, strengthen the Chinese economy, resist American dominance of existing rules and institutions, and side with (though not to fight alongside) China in any conflict over Taiwan. As one of China's premier Russia experts, Zhao Huasheng, stresses, China seeks a "relatively stable strategic rear . . . invisible and seemingly unremarkable in times of peace, but its strategic relevance to China will be revealed were our country to be faced with a major upheaval."¹⁸

Since taking office in 2012, Xi has decisively shaped China-Russia relations. His first overseas trip as leader was to Russia, he refers to Putin as his "best friend and colleague," and he has met one-on-one with the Russian leader more than forty times, far more than any other world leader. In the weeks before Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the two declared a "no limits" partnership between their countries.¹⁹

From China's perspective, it reaps substantial practical benefits from close ties with Russia. Moscow advances Beijing's global diplomacy at the United Nations and in regional organizations.²⁰ Its provision of advanced military equipment and training as well as joint exercises fortifies China's defense capabilities.²¹ It supplies vital energy to China's domestic economy, and at discount prices.²² It represents a relatively modest but increasingly important destination for Chinese exports.²³ It is a gateway for China to the Arctic and the critical Northern Sea Route, unlocking new avenues for the PRC's trade and influence.²⁴ Most important, Russia works with China to oppose what both

Putin and Xi view as American refusal to accept the legitimacy of their political systems.

As noted above, Chinese leaders retain reservations about Russia. In addition to policy differences and regional competition, China worries that the Kremlin's confrontational risk-taking will provoke Europe into a sustained anti-China posture. It remains concerned that Russia's ostentatious aggression will lead the West, and especially the United States, to strengthen its resolve and defenses to meet the authoritarian challenge, with negative implications for the geopolitical balance in the Indo-Pacific.

Finally, there is the ultimate strategic nightmare for China regarding Russia: Putin or his successors are overthrown by a popular revolution like that in Ukraine, and Russia joins the West in a united effort to undermine Chinese Communist Party rule. That worry on its own is sufficient to continue China's support for Russia, including in the Ukraine war, which Putin routinely frames as not against Ukraine but rather the entire West.

RUSSIA'S VIEW OF THE CHINA-RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP

Russian leaders view China as an economic lifeline, a military supplier, and an autocratic partner similarly discontented with the existing international system. Putin has invested heavily in his personal relationship with Xi, spending hundreds of hours in conversation across more than sixty personal meetings, and the two are linked by a determination to alter the U.S.-led order which, they believe, serves as little more than a smoke screen for American domination at their expense.²⁵ Russia wants Chinese technology and components, markets and financial arrangements, diplomatic cover and political support.

As the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center's Alexander Gabuev summarizes, Russia values China's assistance on the battlefield in Ukraine, support for sustaining the Russian economy and circumventing sanctions, and help in pushing back against the West and punishing the United States for supporting Ukraine.²⁶

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has said that enhancing ties with China represents Russia's top foreign policy priority, and with such tangible results it is not difficult to see why.²⁷ Even as the United States struggles to pivot to Asia, Russia buttresses its relationship with China. Russian aspirations, however, go beyond immediate benefits, and include Chinese help in making fundamental revisions to existing international arrangements. Putin in May 2024 described bilateral ties to China as a "stabilizing" force in the world, one that acts in defense of a "democratic world order that reflects multipolar realities."²⁸

That includes a healthy respect for great-power spheres of influence. Putin has expressed support not only for China's actions to "protect its sovereignty and territorial integrity," but also to "reunify the country," a barely veiled reference to Chinese ambitions in Taiwan.²⁹ The two coordinate a grand narrative, aimed especially but not only at the

Global South, that condemns overweening American power as riddled by hypocrisy and accustomed to domination, notwithstanding soaring U.S. rhetoric about liberal order and universal values or the reality of American decline.

Moscow ultimately sees Beijing as assisting its drive for regime security. In their 2022 joint manifesto, Putin and Xi pledged to “stand against attempts by external forces to undermine security and stability in their common adjacent regions,” and to “oppose color revolutions.”³⁰ Russian leaders understand that Chinese assistance does not come free, and appear ready to supply air defense systems, submarine technology, and other military support in return, and to support Chinese diplomatic and economic initiatives.³¹ Even if Russian trust in China remains limited, Moscow fears neither Chinese efforts to undermine its domestic stability nor Chinese military aggression—the latter illustrated by Russia’s moving its forces to Ukraine from border areas, leaving its frontier with China effectively undefended for some two years.³²

Where possible tensions could emerge between Russia and China—over influence in Central Asia, activities in the Arctic, or relations with North Korea—Russia has sought to smooth differences and harmonize approaches. For all the betting that the Kremlin would never accept a junior partner status in its relationship with the Chinese superpower, Russia has done just that. China is essential to Russia, and Putin knows it.

CHINA-RUSSIA COLLABORATION TO UNDERMINE THE WEST

The public record demonstrates that China and Russia are embarked on a comprehensive global effort to weaken American diplomatic, military, and economic power and influence. The data in this section, however, is only a shadow of all that they do daily in this regard. Because these two nations can keep secrets, there exists no public record of most bilateral meetings and only scant knowledge of any joint activities and mutual support discussed, planned, and carried out.

In short, what follows is a faint rendering of the full scope of what these two adversaries jointly undertake to undermine the foreign policies and vital national interests of the United States. Nevertheless, that record should constitute both a concern and a challenge to U.S. policymakers.

DIPLOMATIC COLLABORATION

In recent decades, Beijing and Moscow have launched a joint diplomatic offensive. Only once before 2006 did they jointly veto a proposed resolution at the UN Security Council.³³ As their national interests and policy objectives have increasingly aligned, however, the two states have vetoed sixteen resolutions together since 2007, all to thwart U.S. foreign policy objectives.³⁴ They rejected an American-led proposal in 2007 that called on Myanmar's government to release political prisoners and end human rights violations against ethnic minorities.³⁵ The following year, China and Russia voted down a text that condemned Zimbabwe's arbitrary political arrests and supported fair and free elections in the country.³⁶ In its explanation of its veto, Moscow stated its firm intent to continue to "counter" a perceived expansion of Security Council power in all future decisions.³⁷

After the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, China and Russia continued to oppose American policies at the Security Council. On four separate votes from 2011 to 2014, collectively intended to hold Syria accountable for attacks on civilian population centers and enjoin an immediate end to Syrian human rights violations, Beijing and Moscow responded with joint vetoes.³⁸ The two again acted in concert and killed a 2016 proposal calling for an immediate cease-fire in Aleppo.³⁹ They then prevented the passage of a resolution put forward by the United States in 2017 that held top Syrian officials accountable for using chemical weapons against Syrian citizens.⁴⁰

In 2019, China and Russia thwarted a U.S. resolution that called for free and fair presidential elections in Venezuela, as well as two more texts that demanded a cease-fire and improved humanitarian assistance in Syria.⁴¹ The pair were the only two votes against a U.S. resolution at the Security Council the next year to indefinitely extend the arms embargo on Iran.⁴² Two Security Council motions in 2020 that urged Syria to comply with international human rights laws and supported a mechanism to supply humanitarian aid were also met with back-to-back joint vetoes.⁴³ When North Korea in 2022 launched an intercontinental ballistic missile in violation of international law, the two quashed a UN proposal to strengthen sanctions against the country.⁴⁴ A U.S. attempt in 2023 to condemn Hamas's attack on Israel and call for the protection of Israeli and Palestinian citizens was vetoed by China and Russia, as was an American-led proposal the next year that urged a humanitarian cease-fire in Gaza.⁴⁵

In each of the nineteen cases since 2007 in which Russia exercised its veto power alone, China abstained.⁴⁶ Indeed, Beijing has not opposed a Security Council resolution without Moscow since 1999.⁴⁷ Every Security Council member voted in favor of a 2014 resolution to condemn Russia's annexation of Crimea except Russia, which vetoed the resolution, and China, which abstained.⁴⁸ Moscow was also the sole veto against four separate draft resolutions in 2017 to intensify investigations of Syria for chemical weapon use against its population.⁴⁹ Beijing abstained in each case.⁵⁰ It abstained once again when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, while Russia vetoed a condemnation of its own actions.⁵¹

The Russian veto reappeared in March 2024 on an American resolution to extend UN surveillance of North Korea's nuclear capabilities and assess the need for further sanctions (once again, all other Security Council members voted in favor other than China, which abstained).⁵²

In April 2024, Russia denied a resolution cosponsored by the United States to prevent the placement of nuclear weapons in outer space, while China abstained.⁵³ Beijing then sided with Moscow in October 2024 during a Security Council debate over accountability for the 2022 Nord Stream pipeline explosion. China's deputy permanent representative to the United Nations echoed the Russian chorus alleging a cover-up of the United States and Britain's role in the explosion.⁵⁴ Not since the founding of the Russian Federation has one nation vetoed a Security Council resolution proposed by the other.⁵⁵ Thus, Beijing and Moscow are much more than close partners in the Security Council; they march in lockstep.

In the UN General Assembly (UNGA), China and Russia are similarly strong diplomatic comrades. From 1991 to 2020, they together opposed Washington on over 1,500 resolutions, supported by a strong coalition that they jointly helped organize. In 86 percent of these cases, the Sino-Russian position prevailed.⁵⁶ Although these resolutions are nonbinding, they demonstrate both the weak standing of many U.S. policy preferences among the nations of the world and successful lobbying efforts by Beijing and Moscow.⁵⁷ The two have voted together against each of the twenty-two resolutions that expressed deep concern for human rights violations in Iran proffered from 2000 to 2023.⁵⁸ In 2021, the United States was defeated in a resolution supported by China and Russia that criticized using sanctions for geopolitical purposes; the vote was 119 to 7 in favor of the resolution, with 46 abstentions.⁵⁹ Beijing and Moscow also increasingly disrupt routine procedures at the United Nations. In September 2024, for instance, Moscow prevented the imposition of sanctions on Sudan's Rapid Support Forces accused of genocide, and both states blocked a plan to establish a UN peacekeeping operation in Haiti.⁶⁰

In this context, China has utilized the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to rally votes in the UNGA behind Russian policy preferences. For instance, on a 2022 UNGA resolution that called on Russia to withdraw its forces from Ukraine, thirty-six of the thirty-eight countries that opposed or abstained were BRI recipients.⁶¹ In February 2023, the UNGA passed another resolution that called for an end to the conflict: thirty-five of the thirty-nine abstentions or opposing votes received BRI funds.⁶² As the American novelist Emma Bull put it, "Coincidence is the word we use when we can't see the levers and pulleys."⁶³

China and Russia have consistently demanded across twenty-nine resolutions in the UNGA that the United States end its economic embargo of Cuba, all supported by a vast majority of the General

Assembly.⁶⁴ Further, the two elevated the role of the China- and Russia-dominated Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) in a 2023 UNGA resolution that the United States opposed; the vote won eighty to two against the United States, with forty-seven abstentions.⁶⁵ Beijing and Moscow then successfully cosponsored a proposal that insisted on “no first placement” of weapons in outer space, despite the fact both countries had already deployed dual-use space capabilities with potential military applications; they were joined by 125 other countries in opposition to Washington’s position.⁶⁶

Beijing has moved beyond votes in the United Nations and has expanded its leadership over the institution itself, with Moscow as the consistent junior partner. By 2019, China became the second largest financial contributor to the United Nations and, as one senior European diplomat put it, “At the UN, China’s influence is massive. They really are so powerful there and so much more sophisticated than, say, the Russians, who are only really able to spoil things. . . . They know how to work the system to their advantage.”⁶⁷

In 2020, China led an unprecedented four of fifteen UN special agencies: the Food and Agriculture Organization—which China still heads—the International Telecommunications Union (ITU), the Industrial Development Organization, and the International Civil Aviation Organization, all also important to Russia. Through strong influence on these standard-setting organizations, Beijing has supported autocratic models of government, similarly advanced by Moscow.

During the eight years it held the secretary-general position at the ITU, China advocated limiting online freedom of speech, and in other UN-affiliated bodies such as the Human Rights Council (HRC), it sponsored resolutions and amendments supported by Russia to disregard human rights mechanisms, empower states to delegitimize civil society, and emphasize sovereignty over basic citizen rights.⁶⁸ China unsuccessfully attempted to keep Russia on the HRC in April 2022 after the invasion of Ukraine and abused Interpol’s Red Notice System, a mechanism for locating and extraditing criminal suspects, as part of its forced repatriation of dissidents.⁶⁹

Beijing provides more peacekeepers to the United Nations than the other four Security Council permanent members combined.⁷⁰ By expanding into UN peacekeeping, China safeguards its own national interests, especially in Africa where more than 75 percent of China’s peacekeeping forces are deployed.⁷¹ A Chinese national was appointed special envoy for the Great Lakes region of Africa, in a move that could help “open doors at the highest levels in the Great Lakes region” to

Chinese officials.⁷² With the same joint objectives, Russia's paramilitary Wagner Group and its successor have provided political and security support to authoritarian regimes in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Libya, Mali, Niger, and Sudan.⁷³ Together, China and Russia's power and influence in Africa have surged dramatically in the past decade, often at the United States' expense.⁷⁴ Thus, throughout the UN system, the duo collaborate, often with success, to thwart American policies and undermine traditional principles of international order.

China and Russia have also expanded their diplomatic arsenal to include non-Western multilateral institutions, where they exert even greater influence. In this spirit, Beijing and Moscow founded the BRICS—a group established in 2009 by Brazil, Russia, India, and China, and joined the next year by South Africa. As of this writing, BRICS has hosted fifteen summits, and the organization has consistently been silent on or endorsed policies that violate standing international norms. In 2014, after Russia annexed Crimea and deployed forces in eastern Ukraine, for instance, the BRICS leaders called only for “a comprehensive dialogue” and “the de-escalation of the conflict,” without acknowledging Russian aggression.⁷⁵

The group was similarly quiet after Putin's February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and only expressed support for “talks between Russia and Ukraine,” consistent with China's position that would cede to Russia all Ukrainian territory it occupied.⁷⁶ At a June 2024 meeting of BRICS foreign ministers, the organization was also highly critical of Israel's military action in Gaza and voiced its “serious concern at Israel's continued blatant disregard of international law,” with no mention or condemnation of Hamas, mimicking the position of the Chinese and Russian governments.⁷⁷

BRICS communiqués have also stressed the need to develop a new group reserve currency to reduce their reliance on the dollar and shield against U.S.-led economic sanctions—a process spearheaded by China and Russia as they increasingly trade in their own currencies.⁷⁸ In July 2015, BRICS established the New Development Bank to provide financial assistance to developing states, absent the human rights requirements imposed by the World Bank.⁷⁹ The organization further championed a global economic pivot away from the West in August 2023, when the bloc advocated “reform of the Bretton Woods institutions . . . including in leadership positions,” proclaimed “the importance of encouraging the use of local currencies in international trade,” and announced their opposition to “unilateral illegal measures such as sanctions” as used by the United States.⁸⁰ To undermine the

influence of Western financial institutions such as the banking messenger SWIFT, the BRICS launched a payment task force and a rival payment mechanism—BRICS Pay—and, in the weeks before the October 2024 summit in Kazan, BRICS finance and central bank officials met in Moscow. There, Russian Finance Minister Anton Siluanov continued to push for an alternative international financial system, arguing, “It is necessary to form new conditions or even new institutions . . . within the framework of our community, within the framework of BRICS.”⁸¹ During his remarks at the Kazan summit, Xi made a similar argument, as he insisted that “the urgency of reforming the international financial architecture is prominent.”⁸² The group also challenged attempts by Western states to curtail Chinese electric vehicles and climate technology flooding their markets, as in June 2024 when BRICS condemned “unilateral, punitive and discriminatory protectionist measures,” with no mention of China’s own unfair trade practices.⁸³

Consistent with their efforts to organize nations against Western policies and standards, Beijing and Moscow have expanded BRICS membership. In August 2023, Argentina, Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were invited to become BRICS members.⁸⁴ Apart from Argentina, which declined, and Saudi Arabia, which remains undecided at this writing, all invitees subsequently joined.⁸⁵ Ahead of visits by Putin and Chinese Premier Li Qiang to Southeast Asia in June 2024, Thailand and Malaysia announced their intention to join the bloc as well; in August 2024, Azerbaijan asked to join the group, followed by a formal request from Turkey a month later, and then by Cuba in early October 2024.⁸⁶ Thirty-six delegations participated in the October 2024 BRICS summit, including over twenty heads of state.⁸⁷ In Kazan, Xi announced four new initiatives—the BRICS Deep-Sea Resources International Research Center, China Center for Cooperation on Development of Special Economic Zones, China Center for BRICS Industrial Competencies, and BRICS Digital Ecosystem Cooperation Network—aimed to bolster Beijing’s own interests and investment opportunities while promoting China-dependent industrial development in BRICS countries.⁸⁸ The group also established a BRICS Grain Exchange, a Russian initiative designed to dilute the dollar’s dominance in food exports.⁸⁹ Thus, an ever larger and more influential BRICS grouping seeks to reduce the impact of Western-led institutions around the world, and to diminish U.S. influence, especially in the Global South.

With the same intent, Beijing and Moscow formed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in June 2001. The SCO includes China,

Russia, Belarus, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, and covers 80 percent of the Eurasian landmass, 40 percent of global population, and almost 30 percent of global gross domestic product (GDP).⁹⁰ The organization advocates a “multipolar international order,” in contrast to what Beijing and Moscow assert is a U.S.-dominated, hegemonic international system.⁹¹ In November 2022, the SCO outlined its aim to create a “Greater Eurasian Partnership” comprised of SCO countries, the Eurasian Economic Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. The organization consistently affirms support for China’s BRI and provides diplomatic backup for the Kremlin’s war in Ukraine, including via communiqués that condemn the West’s “unilateral economic sanctions.”⁹² A July 2023 declaration by SCO leaders lamented the “unilateral and unlimited expansion of global missile defense systems by certain countries or groups of countries,” a clear reference to U.S. policy.⁹³

With Xi at his side in July 2024, Putin explicitly labeled the SCO as a “new framework” to replace “the obsolete Europe-centric and Euro-Atlantic models that granted unilateral advantages to certain states” and warned that “[t]he use of force is increasing, the norms of international law are systemically being violated, geopolitical confrontation and conflicts are growing, and risks to stability in the world and the SCO region are multiplying.”⁹⁴ Putin decried “unilateral attempts to resolve this Palestinian deadlock, most notably by the United States” and repeated his claim that the conflict in Ukraine is “a result of the reckless and intrusive policies of the United States and its satellites.”⁹⁵ Beijing also used the July 2024 SCO Summit to condemn the United States, as Xi cautioned his audience about the “real risks of small yards with high fences,” a reference to U.S. policy on export of key technologies to China, and called on the members to “resist external interference.”⁹⁶

More important, China continually reinforces Russia’s war aims in Ukraine and conducts disinformation campaigns that adopt Russia’s formulation that the invasion is a “special military operation,” provoked by the United States and NATO expansion.⁹⁷ China’s barrage of misleading information include fabricated stories about U.S. bioweapon laboratories in Ukraine, claims that the United States and Ukraine falsified footage of the atrocities in Bucha, and assertions that Ukraine’s military—rather than Russian forces—was responsible for the civilian deaths in the Kramatorsk bombing.⁹⁸

In February 2023, Beijing issued a twelve-point proposal for negotiations between Moscow and Kyiv, a plan that failed to condemn the

invasion and opposed Western sanctions against Russia.⁹⁹ In April 2024, Lavrov unsurprisingly endorsed China's proposal as "a reasonable plan that the great Chinese civilization proposed for discussion."¹⁰⁰ The Kremlin agreed to enter such negotiations on the condition that they reflect "new realities" on the battlefield—a signal that Russia will demand control of its occupied territories in Ukraine under the Chinese settlement framework.¹⁰¹ On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in September 2024, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi partnered with Brazilian foreign policy advisor Celso Amorim to rally developing countries behind Beijing's peace proposal.¹⁰²

Ukrainian officials have openly condemned China's support of the Russian position on Ukraine.¹⁰³ During the June 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy accused Russia of "using Chinese influence in the region, using Chinese diplomats also . . . to disrupt the peace summit," in reference to a Swiss-organized peace conference.¹⁰⁴ He later added that it "is unfortunate that such a big independent powerful country as China is an instrument in the hands of Putin."¹⁰⁵

Beijing and Moscow also work to take advantage of fractures in the NATO alliance, including by seeking closer ties to Budapest. Hungary and China promoted their bilateral relationship to an "all-weather, comprehensive strategic partnership" in May 2024, and Hungary has been one of the largest beneficiaries of China's BRI in Europe (alongside Serbia).¹⁰⁶ Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán visited Moscow in April 2022 and again in July 2024, in defiance of the EU and U.S. attempt to diplomatically isolate Russia.¹⁰⁷ During his July 2024 talks with Putin, Orbán advocated "the shortest road to end the [Ukraine] war," and in Orbán's conversation with Xi the same month in Beijing, they declared, "China and Hungary share the same basic propositions and directions of efforts" on Ukraine—a perspective that includes China's insistence on a permanent cease-fire that legitimizes Russian annexation of occupied Ukrainian territory.¹⁰⁸

In parallel, the Kremlin has supported China's policies in the Indo-Pacific. Amid growing tensions in the South China Sea in October 2021, Putin stood at Xi's side and opposed "interference from non-regional powers," an allusion to U.S. policy in the region.¹⁰⁹ In March 2023, Lavrov criticized Western-led partnerships such as the Quad—a grouping that includes the United States, Australia, India, and Japan—and the defense technology-sharing arrangement known as AUKUS—comprising Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States—as instances of external interference in the Indo-

Pacific, employed “not for economic purposes but trying to militarize.”¹¹⁰ Not long after, Russia again endorsed Chinese sovereignty over Taiwan and said it “firmly support[s] actions of the Chinese side for the defense of its state sovereignty and territorial integrity.”¹¹¹ Putin doubled down in a speech following the March 2024 Russian presidential elections. He alleged that “unfriendly countries” were attempting “to make all kinds of provocations around Taiwan which is an inherent part of the People’s Republic of China.”¹¹² When Lavrov and Wang met in April 2024, the pair claimed that NATO wished to expand into Asia and warned against the bloc “stretching its hands to our common home.”¹¹³ In October 2024, marking the seventy-fifth anniversary of China-Russia diplomatic relations, Lavrov condemned the United States directly, saying, “the United States and its satellites deliberately stir up the situation in the Strait of Taiwan” and reiterating that “Russia’s position on the Taiwan issue has been unchanged support for China’s territorial integrity.”¹¹⁴ At the East Asian Summit in Laos later that month, Beijing and Moscow blocked a proposed consensus statement drafted by Southeast Asian countries over language on the contested South China Sea, which Lavrov condemned as an effort by the United States to make a “purely political statement.”¹¹⁵

All told, China and Russia have made substantial progress in the past decade and more, in a joint global diplomatic offensive to undermine U.S.-led world order and Western values and to end American leadership in the international system. As Lavrov explained in October 2024, the China-Russia entente desires a “world order . . . adjusted to current realities,” achieved through the irreversible process of “power rebalancing.”¹¹⁶

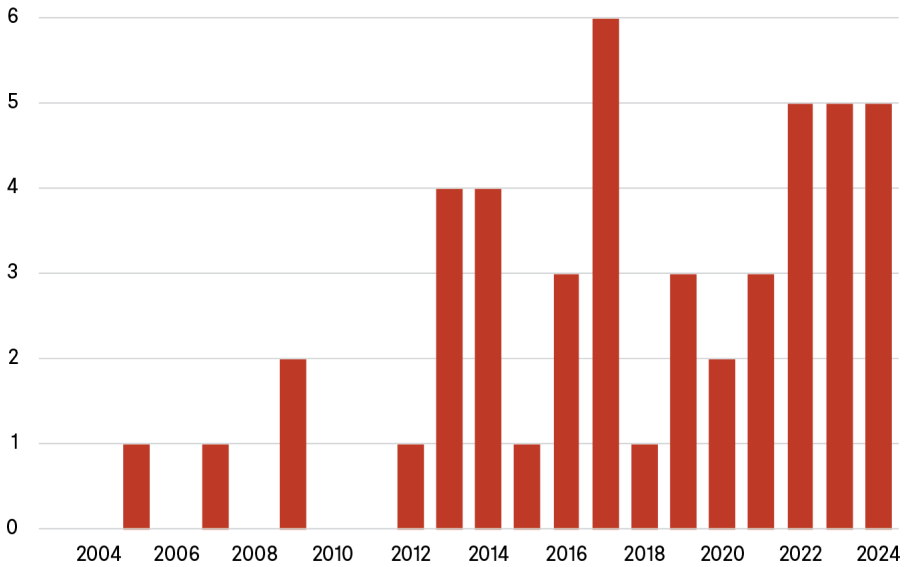
MILITARY COLLABORATION

In the last decade, Beijing and Moscow have deepened their security ties to tilt the balance of power across the Indo-Pacific and in Europe. This military cooperation rapidly intensified after Xi took office, and again after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Together, the two nations have formulated a “top-level design” to bolster their military planning in tandem and strengthen defense coordination.¹¹⁷ Two defense collaboration road maps have been developed that extend from 2017 to 2025 to enhance their joint military capabilities through security exercises and patrols.¹¹⁸ Between 2012 and 2014, Beijing and Moscow conducted nine joint military exercises.¹¹⁹ A decade later, from 2022 until August 2024, they held fifteen.¹²⁰

Figure 1

China-Russia Military Exercises Have Grown More Frequent

Number of bilateral military exercises (as of August 2024)



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The Chinese and Russian militaries have joined forces in a series of dynamic land exercises and pulled nations from the SCO and BRICS into their growing network of combined drills. Since China and Russia first practiced large-scale land and amphibious assaults at the 2005 bilateral Peace Mission, the series has expanded into multilateral engagement that involves member states of the SCO, such as Peace Mission 2021, which included nations from the Middle East and Central Asia.¹²¹ From 2018 onward, the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) has participated with the Russian army in the latter’s largest combat drills, and the two have enlisted countries such as South Africa and India in training maneuvers as well.¹²² Only days before NATO labeled China a “decisive enabler” of Russia’s war against Ukraine, the PLA started an eleven-day joint exercise with Russia-aligned Belarus.¹²³

Through unified naval and aerial exercises, China and Russia have strengthened their military interoperability and demonstrated their combined military prowess. Every year since 2012, the two have held

progressively more complex Joint Sea naval simulations, often in areas of geopolitical importance. The 2016 Joint Sea exercise in the South China Sea improved their ability to attack and seize an island—a drill with obvious parallels to Chinese ambitions in Taiwan—and 2017 maneuvers in the Baltic Sea practiced live fire against surface and aerial targets.¹²⁴ Russia joined China’s air patrols around the Indo-Pacific’s first island chain in 2019, when two Russian bombers teamed up with two Chinese counterparts for a flight over the East China Sea and Sea of Japan (often referred to as East Sea).¹²⁵ Then, as Quad leaders met for a summit in Tokyo in May 2022, six Chinese and Russian bombers flew over the same area.¹²⁶ On the same day, South Korea reported that two Chinese bombers and four Russian warplanes entered Seoul’s air defense identification zone without notice.¹²⁷ From April 2023 to March 2024, China and Russia mounted a combined total of 653 incursions into Japan’s air defense identification zone and conducted 133 naval operations that required the Japanese navy to intercept the vessels.¹²⁸

In 2024, China and Russia accelerated their joint naval exercises. In March, the Chinese, Russian, and Iranian navies executed joint operations in the Gulf of Oman, and Chinese naval vessels one month later deployed in the waters between Taiwan and Japan, while a Russian intelligence ship approached the Japanese coast.¹²⁹ Just a week after Japan and the Philippines signed a bilateral defense agreement that facilitated joint combat drills, Chinese and Russian warships patrolled together in the South China Sea.¹³⁰ In September, China joined Russia’s Ocean-2024 strategic command and staff exercises, which covered the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and the Mediterranean, Caspian, and Baltic Seas and involved more than four hundred sea vessels and over ninety thousand troops.¹³¹ The same month, the Chinese Defense Ministry announced another joint exercise with Russia, Northern/Interaction-2024, in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, which was followed by their fifth joint maritime patrol in the Pacific.¹³²

As the partnership strengthens, Beijing and Moscow have become bolder and increasingly willing to directly engage Washington. In an unprecedented move that defiantly challenged U.S. sovereignty, two Chinese and two Russian bombers penetrated Alaska’s air defense identification zone in July 2024.¹³³ This deployment was “the first time that we’ve seen these two countries fly together like that,” Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin observed. Taking off from Russia’s Anadyr airfield, the Chinese aircraft would have been out of range without

Russian support.¹³⁴ In October 2024, following the series of joint exercises, Russian Defense Minister Andrei Belousov met with Vice Chairman of China's Central Military Commission Zhang Youxia in Beijing to cement the partnership, after which Belousov announced that "the military departments of Russia and China are united in their assessments of global processes, and they have a common understanding of what needs to be done."¹³⁵

In the past eighteen months, the two militaries have bolstered their cooperation in the Arctic. In April 2023, the Russian Border Guard Service and the Chinese Coast Guard signed an agreement on naval law enforcement in Arctic waters.¹³⁶ By providing monitoring equipment, Beijing enhances Russia's efforts to secure its Arctic coastline and threatens NATO's communications and data infrastructure.¹³⁷ In Svalbard, a northern Norwegian archipelago, Moscow, with Beijing's support, has exploited a 1920 treaty that granted the Soviet Union limited rights over the territory. Moscow has constructed research centers, held military parades, and projected power across the Bear Gap, a critical maritime thoroughfare to the archipelago's south.¹³⁸ In August 2024, Li and his Russian counterpart Mikhail Mishustin agreed in a joint communiqué to consolidate China-Russia collaboration, develop shipping routes, and strengthen technology and infrastructure in the Arctic.¹³⁹ Later that month, China sent three icebreakers to the region, and from September 20 to October 10, 2024, Beijing and Moscow conducted their first combined coast guard patrol near Arctic shipping routes in the Sea of Japan.¹⁴⁰ In the Arctic, China and Russia's coast guard cooperation demonstrates the growing depth of their maritime alliance, which challenges the United States through gray-zone provocations.¹⁴¹

This rapid expansion of the China-Russia partnership has established the Arctic as a frontier of strategic competition. The U.S. Department of Defense's July 2024 Arctic Strategy report pinpointed Sino-Russian joint activities in the region: "The growing cooperation between Russia and the PRC," it said, has "the potential to alter the Arctic's stability and threat picture."¹⁴² For the Kremlin, coordination with Beijing is essential to advance Russia's Arctic ambitions while minimizing the influence of the Western-led Arctic Council.¹⁴³ China's ambassador to Moscow Zhang Hanhui told Russian media the joint exercises were "a concrete manifestation of the strategic mutual trust between the two countries," and U.S. Rear Admiral Megan Dean stressed that these joint operations in the Bering Strait demonstrate "the increased interest in the Arctic by our strategic competitors."¹⁴⁴

Figure 2

China and Russia Joint Military Exercises

Locations of bilateral exercises from January 2022 to August 2024



Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies.

In addition to those joint exercises, China and Russia have increasingly cooperated on arms transfers. Historically, Moscow has had more advanced military capabilities than Beijing, but the gap has narrowed—and, in many domains, China has caught up or even exceeded Russian capabilities, as with stealth fighter jets.¹⁴⁵ Russia maintains a technological edge in submarines, space satellites, and aircraft engines, yet China is swiftly matching and could surpass Russian capabilities.¹⁴⁶

At the beginning of the 1990s, the PLA had “mostly obsolete military equipment,” according to a RAND report.¹⁴⁷ Yet decades of Russian arms transfers have helped the Chinese military modernize its forces: Chinese arms imports from Russia between 2000 and 2010 were 258 percent higher than the decade prior, and since 2007, 71 percent of China’s arms imports have come from Russia, a figure that rose to 77 percent between 2019 and 2023.¹⁴⁸ These weapons include advanced aircraft, missiles, air defense systems, anti-ship missiles, and Sovremenny-class destroyers.¹⁴⁹ Just two years after Xi assumed office, the Kremlin agreed to send \$5 billion worth of Sukhoi Su-35 combat aircraft and S-400 missile systems to China, which strengthened the country’s air capability over the South China Sea.¹⁵⁰

Russia began to send Mi-17 helicopters in 2020 to China to support PLA air maritime expeditionary operations in the Indo-Pacific, including against Taiwan.¹⁵¹ Although no plans have been publicly announced, many analysts suspect that Beijing and Moscow will work together to operate an integrated regional missile defense system to better detect and respond to a potential missile attack on either state.¹⁵²

Russia is not just funneling weapons to China but is also sharing battle-hardened military expertise. Russian officers who have fought in Europe and the Middle East provide the PLA with invaluable practical insights into modern warfare, such as when Russian Chief of the General Staff Valery Gerasimov met with his Chinese counterpart in June 2023.¹⁵³ According to a 2024 RAND report, the Kremlin educates Chinese military officers through professional military exchanges and facilitates their study of military theory.¹⁵⁴

The SCO helps facilitate this cooperation as well: China has unveiled a comprehensive framework for military collaboration with SCO members and emphasized its intent to leverage Russia's recent combat experiences.¹⁵⁵ In this way, the PLA shores up one of its critical military weaknesses—lack of combat experience—by tapping directly into Russian battlefield successes and failures.¹⁵⁶

Although China has not openly equipped Russia with lethal military aid after its 2022 invasion of Ukraine, it has supplied numerous components used in Russian military manufacturing.¹⁵⁷ In April 2024, President Joe Biden raised “concerns over the PRC’s support for Russia’s defense industrial base” with Xi during their first conversation in over four months.¹⁵⁸ Soon thereafter, Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen visited China and “emphasized that companies, including those in the PRC, must not provide material support for Russia’s war against Ukraine, including support to the Russian defense industrial base, and the significant consequences if they do so.”¹⁵⁹

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning emphasized that “China will not accept the accusations and pressuring. . . . If certain countries truly care about peace and want an early end to the crisis, they should reflect on the root cause of the crisis and do something that will actually help bring about peace, rather than deflect the blame to China.”¹⁶⁰ Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin similarly complained, “The United States keeps making groundless accusations over the normal trade and economic exchanges between China and Russia, while passing a bill providing a large amount of aid for Ukraine. This is just hypocritical and highly irresponsible. China firmly rejects this.”¹⁶¹ In October 2024, Lavrov

praised Beijing’s support as a “balanced and consistent” approach to the conflict, rightly focused on the root causes of NATO expansion and the “anti-Russian military bridgehead in Ukraine.”¹⁶²

During the same time period, China has furnished Russia with dual-use goods that have enhanced Russia’s capabilities on the battlefield.¹⁶³ In the first ten months of the war alone, Chinese companies sent \$570 million worth of semiconductors to Russia—an increase from \$200 million over all of 2021.¹⁶⁴ By 2023, China provided 90 percent of Russia’s semiconductors, technology vital for the production of tanks, missiles, and aircraft.¹⁶⁵ Much of this trade is conducted under the guise of Chinese shell companies, which China uses to evade U.S. sanctions and send restricted technology components to Russia.¹⁶⁶ After a meeting between Xi and Putin in March 2023, China provided massive shipments to Russia of precision manufacturing equipment used in critical weapons systems—with over ten thousand transactions per month between March and July.¹⁶⁷ China also buttressed Russia’s fighting force by exporting trucks to move personnel and materiel along combat supply lines, including excavators and front-end shovel loaders to dig trenches. It also provides geospatial information that enables Russian forces to target Ukrainian troops on the front line, as well as access to satellite photographs of Ukrainian nuclear plants.¹⁶⁸

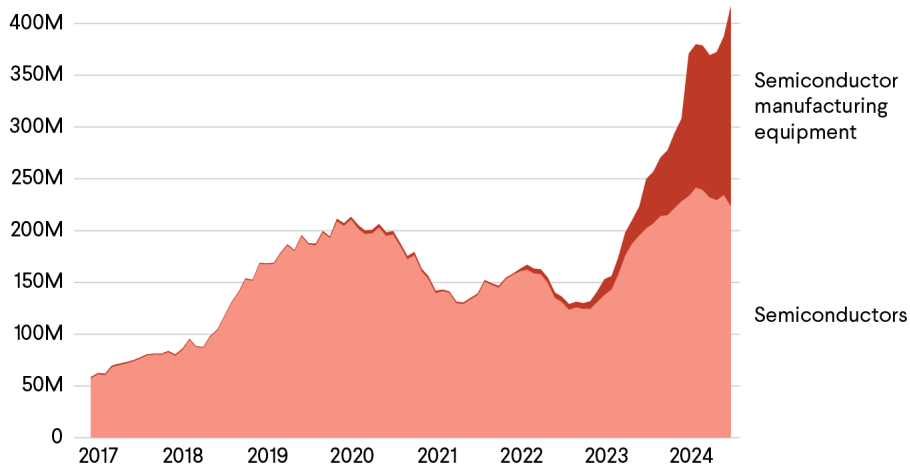
In a meeting with Wang, at the UN General Assembly in late September 2024, Secretary of State Antony Blinken condemned China’s dual-use technology support to Russia and later reiterated the dangers of this China-Russia partnership at a news conference, saying “insofar as that relationship involves providing Russia what it needs to continue this war, that’s a problem for us, and it’s a problem for many other countries.”¹⁶⁹

China’s support has effectively sustained Russia’s war in Ukraine. This crucial assistance has allowed the Kremlin to “almost completely” reconstitute its military, Deputy Secretary of State Kurt Campbell stated. “With the support of China in particular,” he said, “dual use capabilities . . . [and a] variety of other efforts, industrial and commercial, Russia has retooled.”¹⁷⁰ A State Department spokesman similarly observed, “What we have seen over the past months is that there have been materials moving from China to Russia that Russia has used to rebuild [its] industrial base and produce arms that are showing up on the battlefield in Ukraine,” and, “If the PRC were to end its support for exporting these items, Russia would struggle to sustain its war effort.”¹⁷¹

Figure 3

China Is Exporting More Semiconductor Equipment to Russia

China's exports to Russia, rolling twelve-month sum



Source: China Customs.

ECONOMIC COLLABORATION

The China-Russia quasi-alliance has been cemented by strong economic ties. Between 2000 and 2021, China's annual trade with Russia grew eighteen-fold, and this process only accelerated after the further imposition of sanctions against Russia in 2022.¹⁷² Since then, Sino-Russian trade has provided vital support for the Kremlin amid increasing economic pressure imposed by the West.

After the February 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO governments applied sanctions to punish Russia and attempted to grind its military operations to a halt. The United States froze \$5 billion of the Russian central bank's assets, barred Russian banks' access to the financial messenger service SWIFT, and suspended U.S. investors' ability to trade Russian securities.¹⁷³ By the end of 2022, Moscow was unable to conduct commerce with much of the Western world, and its economy contracted by 1.2 percent.¹⁷⁴ To offset these economic strictures, Russia pivoted to China for support. In the first year of the war, China provided Russia with just over 40 percent of its total imports, and during the following two years bilateral trade surged from \$146.9 billion to an

all-time high of \$240.1 billion as Chinese exports met newfound Russian demand.¹⁷⁵

Without European imports, the sale of Chinese goods has soared in Russian markets: Chinese phones now make up 95 percent of Russia's phone market, its washing machines and refrigerators lead the Russian household appliance sector, and its cars are the new norm on Russian streets.¹⁷⁶ Chinese auto exports to Russia alone exploded by 594 percent in 2023.¹⁷⁷ Trade with China has thus helped ease the sting of sanctions in the Russian economy, which grew by 3.6 percent in 2023.¹⁷⁸ Since May 2023, China has sold more to Russia per month than the European Union (formerly Russia's largest trading partner) ever did.¹⁷⁹ Given this vital economic support for Russia, it is no wonder that Finnish President Alexander Stubb has asserted that China could end the war with "one phone call."¹⁸⁰

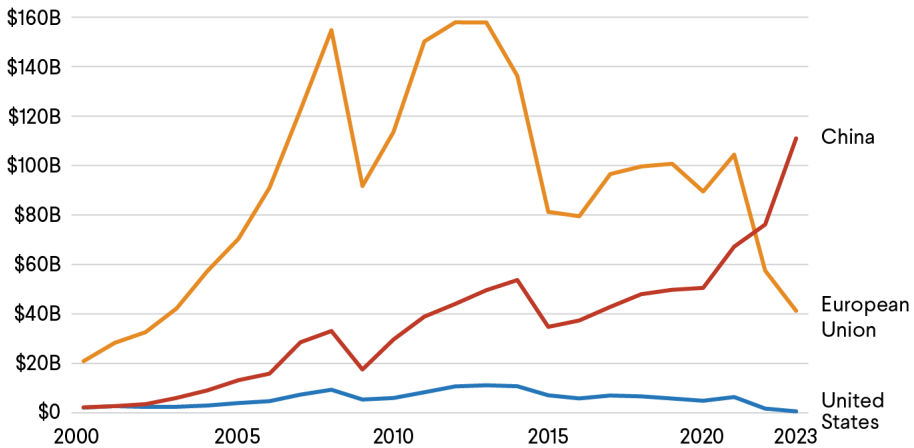
In addition to trade, Beijing has provided Moscow with critical financial lifelines. Circumventing Western financial institutions, Russian banks have signed on to China's Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS), which saw its average transaction volume rise 50 percent in 2022 and another 25 percent in the first three quarters of 2023.¹⁸¹ Using CIPS and other platforms, trade between the two countries is increasingly conducted in Chinese yuan, which supplanted the U.S. dollar as the most used currency on the Moscow Exchange in 2023.¹⁸² The renminbi has since become the de facto reserve currency in Russia, despite not being fully convertible. Even as Putin complains about the dominance of the dollar, his regime has reduced the diversity of holdable currencies.¹⁸³ The share of yuan payments in Russian exports has grown from 0.5 percent in 2021 to 34.5 percent in 2024, and includes Russian trade with states beyond China.¹⁸⁴ In 2024, the share of bilateral trade denominated in yuan or rubles passed 90 percent, according to official figures.¹⁸⁵

The yuan's lack of convertibility has raised transaction costs for Russian trade, and Chinese monetary policy has already produced damaging side effects on the Russian economy, such as in March 2022 when Beijing relaxed exchange rate controls, causing the ruble to fall.¹⁸⁶ In the second quarter of 2024, Chinese banks reduced assets and halted some trade in Russia under U.S. threats of secondary sanctions, driving up transaction costs by 6 percent.¹⁸⁷ Russian sinologist Vasily Kashin has acknowledged that Beijing will have greater influence in Russian politics and economics in the future: "China," he writes, "will have the opportunity to use the levers of economic diplomacy to influence our political positions . . . [China] will have the opportunity to dictate prices. And we will have to live with this."¹⁸⁸

Figure 4

China's Exports to Russia Have Risen While Exports From the EU and U.S. Have Declined Since the Invasion of Ukraine

Exports to Russia



Source: UN Comtrade.

The two nations have also integrated their Arctic economic strategies. For decades, Beijing's ambitions in the region were checked by Moscow's insistence that only the Arctic Council (of which China is but an observer) is entitled to shape policy in the High North.¹⁸⁹ As noted above, however, Russia's opposition to China's Arctic presence has significantly relaxed since the invasion of Ukraine in 2022, as Russia's economic dependence has given China a much stronger bargaining position. In a shift from Russia's previous approach, Putin stated in March 2023 that "we see cooperation with Chinese partners in developing the transit potential of the Northern Sea Route as promising."¹⁹⁰ China has invested \$90 billion in energy extraction and infrastructure projects along the Russian Arctic coast, and investments include \$300 million for a coal terminal in Murmansk by a state-owned Chinese defense company, and a deep-water port in Arkhangelsk.¹⁹¹ Similarly, China and Russia have expanded their influence in Antarctica. In February 2024, China established a new research station close to an American one, which has raised concerns that the station will be used to collect intelligence.¹⁹² In October, Beijing and Moscow partnered

to block every proposal at the annual meeting of the Commission for the Conservation of the Antarctic Marine Living Resources, arguing it would limit their ability to use and develop in the region.¹⁹³

China has further benefited from the discounted rate of Russian hydrocarbons. In March 2022, the United States prohibited imports of Russian crude oil, liquified natural gas, and coal. Later that year, the European Union and Group of Seven (G7) embargoed most Russian oil and established price caps; this was followed by bans on diesel and gasoline the following year.¹⁹⁴ China immediately took advantage of the subsequent deflated price of Russian energy and bought 45 percent of all Russian coal exports from December 2022 through April 2024. By the end of 2023, China had become the largest importer of Russian crude oil at 2.3 million barrels per day, up from 1.6 million barrels per day just two years prior.¹⁹⁵ In 2023, despite an 11 percent increase in Chinese oil imports, China was able to cut its spending on oil by nearly 8 percent through discounted Russian supplies.¹⁹⁶ “Russian natural gas is fueling numerous Chinese homes and Chinese-made automobiles are running on Russian roads,” remarked Wang.¹⁹⁷ This has led the U.S. intelligence community to conclude, “Beijing is balancing the level of its support to Moscow to maintain the relationship without incurring risk to its own economic and diplomatic interests. In return, China is securing favorable energy prices.”¹⁹⁸

The prevailing narrative around the China-Russia economic relationship often paints it as a one-sided affair, with Russia cast as the dependent partner relying heavily on its eastern neighbor. Yet in reality, Russia is a crucial player in China’s energy security strategy and in 2023 overtook Saudi Arabia as China’s largest oil supplier.¹⁹⁹ A steady flow of gas and oil from Siberia offers an alternate source of energy for China, and greater security in case supplies from the Middle East traveling via the Indian and Pacific maritime routes are cut off in a conflict with the United States.²⁰⁰ Russia could be “the only foreign source of oil—that China could conceivably continue to preserve,” as Zhao Huasheng, professor at Fudan University, has stressed.²⁰¹ In short, the China-Russia economic relationship is a dynamic partnership built on mutual advantage, where both nations are reaping the rewards of their growing collaboration.

The rapid ascent of the China-Russia strategic partnership is reshaping the global landscape, creating ever-growing threats to the United States. As they work together to undermine Western influence, Xi and Putin are not merely tactical allies of convenience but rather joint architects of a revisionist international order. Their surge of diplomatic

engagement, military cooperation, energy deals, and technology transfers illustrates their deepening strategic ties and manifests their future intent. Over the long term, China and Russia mean to diminish the United States and its allies as the most important arbiters of global policies, rules, and practices. In sum, their surge in diplomatic engagement, military cooperation, and economic interaction is to ensure that the international system promotes their authoritarian practices and protects their preferred spheres of influence.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The United States today faces an aggressive Russia and assertive China, each powerful in different ways and collaborating more closely than ever before. They lead a collection of dissatisfied states aiming to overturn the principles, rules, and institutions that underlie the prevailing international system. Working together, they enhance one another's military capabilities; dilute the efficacy of U.S. foreign policy tools, including sanctions; and hinder the ability of the United States and its partners to enforce global rules. Their collective aim is to create an alternative to the current order, which they consider to be dominated by the United States.²⁰² As CIA Director William Burns stressed in October 2024, "It would be a huge mistake for us at CIA and the U.S. government, or anyone watching that relationship, to underestimate the strength of the partnership right now: the sort of strong personal relationship between Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, their sense of shared determination to undermine an international order that the United States has played a very large role in helping to shape."²⁰³

As a result, Washington needs to compete with—and if necessary, confront—both Moscow and Beijing simultaneously and indefinitely. It amounts to a daunting geopolitical reality. In 1880, the Prussian leader Otto von Bismarck contended that "as long as the world is governed by the unstable equilibrium of five great powers," Germany should "try to be one of three." Among today's three great powers, two are far closer to each other than to the United States. There is little prospect of any near-term change in this basic strategic equation. As a result, how the United States should operate in a world with two great-power antagonists is the central question in U.S. foreign policy.²⁰⁴

THE FANTASY OF WEDGE-DRIVING

As noted earlier, the first task is to reject neat but fanciful solutions. Some in recent years have imagined a grand diplomatic move that would flip Russia to the United States' side in its competition with China; others have proposed somehow siding with China to balance and marginalize Russian power. Unlike President Richard Nixon's opening to China in the 1970s, however, which took advantage of a Sino-Soviet split to draw China further away from Russia, there is no equivalent ideological or geopolitical rivalry for the United States to exploit today. The price of trying would likely involve U.S. recognition of a Russian or Chinese sphere of influence in Europe and Asia—regions central to U.S. interests and ones that the United States should not allow a hostile foreign power to dominate.²⁰⁵ Russia and China represent neither chess pieces to be moved through assiduous acts of wise statesmanship nor great-power challengers that can be handled effectively without American activism. They are, rather, enduring and differentiated challenges that should be managed simultaneously.²⁰⁶

More modest hopes of driving wedges between the two are equally unrealistic. Attempting to enhance Russia-China tension in Central Asia, for instance, or over North Korea or on some other issue, is likely to fail, for a simple reason: their real differences with each other pale in comparison with those they have with the United States. Moscow and Beijing manage disagreements and tensions in pursuit of their larger strategic aims. There is nothing Washington can offer either, at least at acceptable cost, that would meaningfully open a gap between the two.

As a result, containing Russia and deterring China are the twin tasks of U.S. policy today. For much of its history, the United States has sought to prevent the emergence of a hostile power that could dominate either end of Eurasia. Today, in both Europe and Asia, such hostile powers seek to influence, if not dominate, regions of vital importance to the United States—and they are increasingly collaborating in the attempt.

TACKLING THE TWIN TASKS

Crucial to managing the advancing China-Russia axis are clarifying objectives, setting priorities, and making difficult trade-offs across regions and issues. Strengthening alliances, building up domestic strength, and taking advantage of time are critical. Yet even by doing all

this, the United States will still be unable to counter Chinese and Russian influence everywhere, and on every issue, indefinitely—nor should it try. It needs to selectively engage in the areas, and on the issues, that are most important.

To that end, the United States should take the following steps:

Leverage allies such as NATO, the five Pacific allies, and the G7, and strengthen connections to and among new partners. China and Russia's economic weight and military strength are formidable, as are their connections with North Korea and Iran—but the combined might of the United States and its allies is greater still. The U.S. alliance structure, augmented by new and non-allied partners, represents a central advantage for the United States. The world's most powerful democracies are on the United States' side.²⁰⁷

A key to the success of this strategy is not only to work with partners but also to acquire new ones and make the ties among them stronger—hence Sweden and Finland's joining NATO, AUKUS, and the ascent of the Quad.²⁰⁸ Russia and China are engaged in their own efforts to enlist like-minded partners such as Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela; the United States has more to offer others and should do so.

Increase defense spending, investments in domestic innovation, foreign aid, and other sources of U.S. strength. Washington today spends less than 3 percent of its gross domestic product on defense, approaching the lowest level since the late 1990s—the height of the post-Cold War peace dividend.²⁰⁹ A significant increase in defense spending is necessary to deal simultaneously with Russia and China alongside other threats. Efforts to enhance domestic innovation, make supply chains more resilient, invest in advanced technology, increase foreign aid, strengthen the defense industrial base, and defend U.S. election infrastructure are similarly required.²¹⁰

Exploit temporal asymmetries between Russian and Chinese actions. China employs economic coercion and diplomatic pressure but has yet to fully exercise its military option; Russia is using nearly all instruments of national power to conquer Ukraine. This suggests that a major effort to punish Russian transgressions now could render that country weaker, poorer, and far less militarily capable in the future—precisely when China could wish to match its growing strength with overt aggression. The United States should focus a great deal of energy and resources on the Russian threat in its current

acute phase while resolving to devote the lion's share of both to China over the long run.²¹¹

Adopt measures to offset the Axis of Upheaval. China and Russia are also increasingly working in concert with Iran and North Korea.²¹² The four powers identify common national interests, match up their rhetoric, and coordinate their military and diplomatic activities. Russia has been one of Iran's top weapons suppliers over the past two decades, provides it with intelligence, is Iran's largest source of foreign investment, and supplies weapons to Hezbollah and other Iranian proxies to undermine U.S. policies throughout the Middle East.²¹³ Similarly, China has emboldened Iran through joint naval exercises in the Gulf of Oman for three consecutive years, most recently in March 2024, and continues to be a key economic partner for Iran, representing the number-one buyer of its oil.²¹⁴ At the same time, North Korea has expanded its nuclear and missile capabilities without further Security Council sanctions because of Russian and Chinese vetoes, Russia has released millions of dollars in North Korean assets previously frozen in Russian banks, and China remains North Korea's largest trade partner.

These four governments are fundamentally altering the geopolitical landscape. U.S. efforts to deter key activities by China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia failed for fifteen years across multiple administrations.²¹⁵ During this period, Russia annexed Crimea without a consequential U.S.-NATO response. China militarized the South China Sea without an effective U.S. response; expanded its defense, economic, and diplomatic reach throughout Asia and beyond; and now puts ever-greater pressure on Taiwan.

These autocratic regimes increasingly collaborate and have seemingly concluded that they pay an acceptable price—or no price at all—for their destabilizing actions. It is, therefore, no surprise that they currently see little value in geopolitical accommodation with a United States that they perceive is in permanent decline.

Until the United States and its allies give them sufficient reasons to relent, they will persist in their malignant designs, diplomacy will hold limited promise, and war will be more likely. As George Shultz wisely observed, “Negotiations are a euphemism for capitulation if the shadow of power is not cast across the bargaining table.” The West's strategy has been too cautious, uncertain, and episodic to reverse these perilous trends.

One approach will obviously not fit all these hostile states, but policies should exact harsher penalties against China for its support

for Russia's war in Ukraine, violations of freedom of the seas, trade malpractices, geoeconomic coercion, theft of intellectual property, and interference in the domestic politics of others. The United States should also

- accelerate arms sales to Taiwan,
- increase substantially and quicken security assistance to Ukraine,
- allow Ukraine to attack Russian bases that launch weapons against it,
- impose wider and tighter economic sanctions against Russia,
- end Iran's sanctuary from U.S. retaliation for its attacks through proxies on American and allied forces,
- impose tougher sanctions against Iran, and
- substantially strengthen U.S. military presence in Northeast Asia.

This will not be easy. In sum, this approach will require a U.S. administration willing to take more risks than its recent predecessors. It will require a U.S. domestic majority in favor of steps such as these and a grand strategy in which they are embedded. It will require consistent and resolute leadership by the American president. It will require a revitalization of the U.S. defense industrial base, for the United States to once again become an arsenal for democracy. It will require the United States to finally pivot to Asia where its vital national interests are so decisively engaged. It will require a long-term major growth in U.S. and allied defense spending. These countermeasures will not produce victory through regime change in Communist China or in the others, but they could well reestablish a stable world order through sustainable regional and global balances of power and adroit negotiation.

Focus on places and issues that could disproportionately damage U.S. national interests and substantially benefit China or Russia. Assessed individually, every region—Asia, Europe, the Global South, the Middle East, the Western Hemisphere—has a claim to priority, and many issues have constituencies inside or outside government that argue for their importance. Actions by Moscow or Beijing that would contest key principles of international order, constrict

Washington's freedom to act, or undermine the domestic functioning of foreign countries should broadly define what is most important. The large remainder of Russian and Chinese activities around the world that are undesirable, offensive, and even contrary to U.S. interests should be relegated to a lower tier of priority and receive a significantly smaller share of American national security resources and attention.²¹⁶

Defend key principles and institutions in regions that matter most, such as East Asia and Europe. Russia's invasion of Ukraine violates the cardinal rule against the forcible theft of foreign territory and shakes a crucial foundation of the rules-based order. The United States has a strong interest in ensuring that such a transgression is not only punished but rendered unsuccessful, not least so that the next would-be aggressor is discouraged from pursuing a similar course.

Chinese activity in the South China Sea threatens the maritime rules that allow for vital commercial operations and so should represent a key area of focus for U.S. policy. The protection of American democratic practice against malign interference by Russia or China is critical to the functioning of the U.S. political system.²¹⁷

China's Belt and Road Initiative poses potential debt-trap dilemmas for all recipients, but the United States should contest its expansion in Southeast Asia (where increased Chinese influence could lead to naval bases that could impede U.S. interests) to a much greater degree than in Central Asia (where the United States' ability to operate will not be affected). Similarly, the United States should focus more on blocking the creation of a Chinese naval facility in the South Pacific than in West Africa, though China seeks bases in both regions, as the downside costs of Chinese military influence are substantially greater in the Indo-Pacific theater than elsewhere.

Redeploy U.S. military forces to the Indo-Pacific to deter China from using force. Here too the United States has a solid foundation on which to build, including a strengthening U.S.-Japan alliance (and significantly increasing Japanese defense capability), new base access in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea, the AUKUS defense technology-sharing platform with Australia and the United Kingdom, and innovative efforts in the Department of Defense such as the Replicator Initiative.²¹⁸ The United States should relocate U.S. air and naval assets from Europe and the Middle East to Asia, surging only for significant operations such as the Israel-Gaza conflict. As the United States transforms its defense forces to one focused on

a conventional Indo-Pacific contingency, it should be possessed by a sense of urgency: the regional military balance continues to shift away from the United States and its allies.

Establish a dynamic U.S. trade policy toward Asia. Following the collapse of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Washington watched as each nation in the region became ever more dependent on trade with Beijing and more vulnerable to Beijing's geoeconomic coercion. Joining the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership would increase U.S. access to lucrative Asian markets and give the United States the ability to shape rules in the region and beyond. More politically palatable steps toward reentry, such as pursuing a bilateral or regional digital trade deal, could help in the near term. In the meantime, the United States should identify areas of economic dependence with China that incur national security risk and pursue alternative arrangements. Above all, developing a robust U.S. trade policy in Asia would send a broad signal of sustained American leadership and presence in the region.

Prepare for opportunistic aggression by Beijing or Moscow. In a conflict with either China or Russia, simultaneous aggression by the other party represents a real threat. If a Chinese invasion of Taiwan prompts U.S. military intervention, for instance, Russia could be tempted to move against another European country. A widening conflict in Europe could prompt China to make a long-awaited move on Taiwan. Even concurrent, non-coordinated conflicts could overwhelm the West. The United States will therefore need to press allies to invest in capabilities that it could not provide if it were already engaged in another military theater.²¹⁹

Contain Russian expansionism through military collaboration with NATO allies and, as pertinent, sanctions on China. The United States should continue and augment many of the policies put into place since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. It should enforce sanctions on Russia, especially export controls that aim to prevent dual-use goods from entering the country, and impose secondary sanctions on Chinese or other companies providing alternatives to Western components. The United States should encourage NATO allies to spend more on their own defense and work with them to deploy forces closer to Russian borders. It should also enhance its efforts, through sanctions, diplomatic pressure, and information releases, to limit China's

support for Russian military activities and the eventual reconstitution of its defense forces.

Improve and better fund U.S. public diplomacy and messaging.

Russia and China each boast sophisticated, well-financed broadcasting, print, and social media efforts available around the world and in many languages. Their efforts attempt to draw attention to the United States' domestic flaws and rally support for alternatives to U.S. foreign policy leadership. Beijing and Moscow have reinforced each other's efforts as well, parroting each other's talking points, supporting the other's policy positions, and defending each other from criticism.

The United States should far more actively contest the information environment. It should consistently draw public attention in Europe to Chinese support for Russia's war of aggression. It should highlight in Asia the provision of Russian military equipment that threatens China's neighbors. Congress should fund programs that support democracy and help like-minded countries protect themselves against external meddling. Articulating the positive case is critical as well; the United States should stand for freedom, sovereignty, independence, and a stable world order based on liberal values and the rule of law.²²⁰

Cultivate the “global swing states.” In the competition between the United States and China and Russia, six global swing states will be particularly important: Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey are all middle powers with enough collective geopolitical weight for their policy preferences to sway the future direction of the international order. Washington should make it a priority to deny advantages to Moscow and Beijing in these countries, encouraging their governments to choose policies that favor the prevailing order. In practice, that means using trade incentives, military engagement, foreign aid, and diplomacy to prevent swing states from hosting Chinese or Russian military bases, giving them access to technology infrastructure or military equipment, or helping them circumvent Western sanctions.²²¹

Engage in bilateral diplomacy with Beijing and Moscow. Much inherent in the U.S. relationship with China and Russia provokes tensions, and many of the recommendations in this report could increase rather than reduce them. It is worth remembering that China and Russia are each powerful, nuclear-armed great powers. Should competition and containment become crisis and conflict, the price would

be extraordinarily high and potentially catastrophic. The United States should endeavor mightily to avoid such a dire outcome.

This requires intensive diplomacy with both adversaries. Diplomatic engagement with China and Russia is not in opposition to a competitive approach but rather a necessary element of it. Washington should discuss matters including strategic stability, outer space, artificial intelligence safety and stability, and more with Beijing and Moscow.

Pursue domestic political unity and international leadership. China and Russia are emboldened by the sense that political divisions at home or exhaustion with international engagement will keep the United States distracted, inwardly focused, and unable to develop national solutions to critical problems. A comprehensive, well-resourced U.S. strategy with bipartisan support would help counter that impression. This should be coupled with an affirmative articulation of the United States' international role and then vigorous actions to make it real. The alternative—a reduction in the U.S. global presence—would leave the fate of crucial regions in the hands not of friendly local powers but of axis members seeking to impose their revisionist and illiberal preferences.²²² The United States has the power, economy, population, geography, allies, and values necessary to prevail in a long-term contest with Russia and China. The only question is whether it will muster the unity and political will necessary to do so.

CONCLUSION

Russia and China have been clear about the world they seek. They want no further NATO enlargement, no color revolutions, no globe-spanning U.S. missile defense system, and no American nuclear weapons deployed abroad. They wish to resist actors “representing but the minority on the international scale”—that is, the United States and its allies—who continue to interfere in other states and “incite contradictions, differences and confrontation.”²²³ In the world to come, no one would pressure China or Russia on human rights or interfere in their internal affairs. Democracy itself would be redefined and subject to no universal standard. Russia and China would support reunification with Taiwan and oppose alliances in Asia that China finds threatening.²²⁴ They would together oversee the transition to a world in which great powers dominate their regions and no one attempts to impose or enforce global rules.

The upshot, as former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates puts it, is that a “new American strategy must recognize that we face a global struggle of indeterminate duration against two great powers that share authoritarianism at home and hostility to the United States.”²²⁵ Because of Russian-Chinese collaboration, the war in Ukraine is longer and more brutal than it would otherwise be, the Indo-Pacific military balance of power has shifted away from the United States more quickly, and more countries dissatisfied with the constraints of Western-led world order are increasingly vocal and active in resisting it.

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022 erased any last vestiges of the post-Cold War era and ushered in a new, more dangerous era. Moscow and Beijing had long coordinated and increasingly aligned their efforts, but the war gave rise to a new, more active and more determined

alignment. For all the real limits to their partnership, the two are bound by shared opposition to a U.S.-led world that, they believe, affords them too little security, status, and freedom of action.

The era is daunting but also contains real strains of hope. Ensuring that Europe and Asia remain free of hostile domination is, of course, not a new objective of U.S. foreign policy. In this fresh effort, the United States and its allies have everything they need to succeed. Their combined economies are larger than China's and Russia's, and their militaries more powerful. Their values are more attractive and their democratic system more stable.²²⁶ U.S. leaders should add to those advantages a clarity of purpose, resolve, and confidence in their system and in the American future. Some critics will say that all this is just too hard for the United States at such a contentious and divisive period in its history. That conclusion, however, would profoundly test the Churchillian theorem that the United States always wakes up late to far-reaching external dangers, but never too late.

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