AXIS OF AUTHORITARIANS

Implications of China-Russia Cooperation

Edited by
Richard J. Ellings and Robert Sutter

Chapter 5

China-Russia Cooperation:
How Should the United States Respond?

James B. Steinberg

RESTRICTIONS ON USE: This PDF is provided for the use of authorized recipients only. For specific terms of use, please contact <publications@nbr.org>. To purchase the volume in which this chapter appears, visit <http://www.nbr.org> or contact <orders@nbr.org>.
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides a comprehensive view of Sino-Russian cooperation across the security, economic, and political realms and considers policy options for the United States.

MAIN ARGUMENT
Cooperation between China and Russia has advanced considerably in the past decade. Their cooperation is driven both by shared interests, including the preservation of their authoritarian regimes and statist economic policies, and by opposition to the perceived U.S. efforts to impose a liberal international political and economic order. Their coordination in the political realm focuses on opposing U.S. efforts in existing international organizations to institutionalize liberal norms and on creating alternative political and economic organizations that are more conducive to their interests. The principal challenges to the U.S. stem from the individual policies of China and Russia rather than their combined efforts, but their increased willingness to coordinate policies complicates the U.S. ability to respond effectively to those dangers.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS
• Explicit U.S. policies designed to try to slow down or reverse this coordination are not likely to be effective without a substantial reorientation of U.S. policy in ways that would harm fundamental U.S. economic, political, and security interests.

• The U.S. can best meet the challenge posed by Sino-Russian cooperation by strengthening international engagement and support for U.S. allies and partners who share its interests and values.

• While the U.S. should not accommodate China’s or Russia’s demands solely for the sake of disrupting their cooperation, it should be prepared to take steps (consistent with core U.S. interests) to reduce the danger of an unintended security spiral with both China and Russia.
Chapter 5

China-Russia Cooperation: How Should the United States Respond?

James B. Steinberg

On June 8, 2018, in a ceremony held in advance of the 18th annual Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) summit, President Xi Jinping presented President Vladimir Putin with the Medal of Friendship, hailing the Sino-Russian relationship as the “most significant relationship between major countries in the world.” As the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) approaches, ties between China and Russia appear to have come full circle: from the PRC’s early days when Mao Zedong announced the policy of “leaning to one side,” to the brink of war in 1969, back to what Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi has termed “the best period of history.”

The Sino-Russian rapprochement has triggered alarm bells in Washington. In his forward to the recent NBR Report “Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines,” Robert Sutter observed: “Russian-Chinese relations [have] advance[d] in ways that seriously affect the interests of the United States and its allies and partners.”

JAMES B. STEINBERG is University Professor of Social Science, International Affairs, and Law in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University. He can be reached at <jimsteinberg@syr.edu>.

The author would like to thank Elise Roberts for her invaluable research assistance.


This threat perception has led policymakers and analysts, with increasing urgency, to criticize past failures to address this problem and to propose a variety of policy measures to respond to the perceived threat.

Advocates for this approach in effect advance a complex syllogism: (1) cooperation between China and Russia is increasing dramatically, (2) this cooperation seriously harms U.S. interests, (3) their cooperation stems in important part from U.S. policies that are driving them together, (4) the U.S. interests served by these policies are small in comparison to the costs to the United States of their deepening cooperation, and (5) if the United States stops doing those things, China and Russia will stop cooperating with each other and the United States will be better off.

Each of these premises is debatable. A strong case can be made that the extent of Sino-Russian cooperation faces real constraints; that its impact (beyond the individual challenges posed separately by Russia and China) is limited; that what is driving them together is only partly due to U.S. policies; that to the extent that U.S. policies are driving Russia and China together, the United States is motivated by very important interests that would be costly to sacrifice; and that even if the United States were to reverse these policies, this would be unlikely to have a significant impact on their cooperation. This chapter explores the underlying arguments in support of each of these perspectives and concludes by drawing implications for U.S. policy going forward.

There is little doubt that in recent years ties between China and Russia have grown closer. Their leaders increasingly tout the importance of the bilateral relationship as a central focus of their national strategies. The rhetoric is matched by an impressive array of activities across the security, economic, and political domains. By almost any metric—looking at the frequency, breadth, and intensity of their interactions—cooperation between China and Russia is on the rise. The question for U.S. policymakers thus is twofold. First, how worried should the United States be about these developments? Second, to the extent that there is cause for concern, what can and should the United States do?

To answer these questions, the chapter will begin by examining the historical evolution and contemporary developments in Sino-Russian relations before offering an assessment of the implications of that cooperation for U.S. security, economic, and political interests. The analysis will then review a range of proposed U.S. strategies suggested by other practitioners and analysts to respond to the perceived risks to the United States and provide a “net assessment” of the costs and benefits of the proposed courses of action. The chapter concludes by considering
an alternative approach, drawing on historical U.S. policy strengths that would allow the United States to respond to the real challenges while reinforcing its core interests and values.

The Shadow of the Past

Any assessment of the importance of contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation must contend with the shadow of the past, which looms large over the current policy debate. Fear of a Sino-Soviet condominium was an important factor in the debates over U.S. policy during China’s civil war: advocates of the United States providing support to China’s nationalists focused on the danger that a Communist China would join hands with the Soviet Union to pose a global threat to the West. Events following the triumph of the Chinese Communist Party in 1949, from the Korean War to Soviet support for China’s nuclear program, seemed to confirm those fears. By contrast, President Richard Nixon’s bold move to open U.S. relations with the PRC at the same time that he pursued nuclear arms negotiations with the Soviet Union was seen as a way to advance U.S. interests by exploiting the growing split in the Communist world to lessen the danger to the United States and to provide the United States with leverage in its negotiations with each country. The apparent success of the idea of “trilateral diplomacy”—positioning the United States so that its ties with both China and Russia were “better” than their ties

---


with each other—became a hallmark of U.S. strategy.\textsuperscript{6} The approach was deepened during the Carter administration when the United States not only formalized diplomatic ties with the PRC and supported its entry into the United Nations but also launched a range of efforts to build bilateral security, economic, and political cooperation with Beijing while at the same time conducting arms control negotiations with Moscow.\textsuperscript{7}

Events of the early 1990s seemed to offer a further opportunity to pursue this approach. The end of the Cold War and the ascension of the democratic and pro-Western leadership of Boris Yeltsin offered the prospect of better political ties between Russia and the United States. At the same time, Deng Xiaoping’s “reform and opening up” revealed new and potentially vast vistas of Sino-U.S. economic collaboration, even as political tensions fueled by the Tiananmen Square events plagued political and security ties. Sino-Russian relations, which had warmed slightly following the death of Mao and improved further following the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev,\textsuperscript{8} remained difficult, in part because China’s Communist leaders feared the implications of democratic reform in Russia for their own hold on power. In the early post–Cold War years of the Clinton presidency, it was thus not difficult to imagine that the United States would have better relations with both China and Russia than they had with each other.

But in the early 2000s the landscape began to change, bringing China and Russia closer together and the United States farther apart from both. The rise of Vladimir Putin and an increasingly authoritarian leadership in Russia widened the political gap between the United States and Russia, while narrowing Moscow’s differences with Beijing. A series of developments, from Russia’s actions in Chechnya to its military intervention in Georgia, further strained ties. U.S. sanctions in response to the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 accelerated both trends, further distancing Russia from the West, while enhancing the value of China as an economic partner to lessen the impact of Western sanctions. Russian meddling in the U.S. presidential election


\textsuperscript{7} Michael B. Yahuda, “The Significance of Tripolarity in China’s Policy toward the United States since 1972,” in Ross, China, the United States, and the Soviet Union, 21–24.

\textsuperscript{8} See Chi Su, “The Strategic Triangle and China’s Soviet Policy,” in Ross, China, the United States, and the Soviet Union, 48–57.
in 2016 sent U.S.-Russian relations to a level of conflict not seen since the height of the Cold War.

At the same time, a comparable process was unfolding in Sino-U.S. relations. Trade frictions mounted between China and the United States following China’s accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. Job losses in the United States due to Chinese competition and protectionism, compounded by allegations of China’s theft of American intellectual property, clouded the landscape, especially following the 2008–9 financial crisis. China’s military modernization, fueled by the country’s economic growth, became an increasing cause for concern in Washington. More “assertive” Chinese policies in the South and East China Seas seemed to foreshadow a more confrontational approach to China’s relations with the United States and its East Asian allies. The failure of China’s economic modernization to translate into domestic political reform, including the festering human rights concerns about Chinese policies in Tibet, Xinjiang, and Hong Kong, also served to cloud U.S.-China ties, as did escalating tensions across the Taiwan Strait following the election of Chen Shui-bian, the independence-minded Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) candidate, in Taipei. Cross-strait tensions moderated following the election of the Kuomintang candidate Ma Ying-jeou in 2008 and then re-emerged with the DPP’s victory in 2016. Although there have been bright spots, and China-U.S. relations have been more mixed than the tense relations between Washington and Moscow, both Washington and Beijing increasingly view each other with mistrust and a growing emphasis on elements of competition, rivalry, and even conflict rather than cooperation.

This reversion to early Cold War patterns among the three powers has led some to call for a revival of the Nixon/Kissinger playbook. Andrew Kuchins, for example, recently gave voice to that sentiment in counseling the newly elected Donald Trump: “The incoming administration would be well advised to review some of the principles of triangular diplomacy as practiced by Henry Kissinger in the Nixon administration.”

While history can provide valuable analogies, it is vital to examine them closely. To the extent that Nixon’s strategy was successful, it hinged

---


on some very specific features of the time. Hindsight has shown that the Sino-Soviet bond was never as close or durable as many had thought during the early years following the Communist victory in China; common interests were matched with areas of deep tension, and the shared ideological rivalry with the United States was not enough to ensure common action by the two Communist giants. Moreover, the United States had something important to offer both sides that they could not provide each other—in the case of the Soviet Union, détente and the easing of the Cold War arms race; in the case of China, an economic outlet to fuel its growth, as well as security cooperation against Soviet dominance. Moreover, historians and analysts continue to debate whether U.S. engagement with China really provided the United States an advantage in dealing with the Soviet Union.11

Although there are important similarities between circumstances today and that earlier era, the differences are pronounced.12 Only through carefully examining the nature of contemporary Sino-Russian cooperation and its implications for the United States can we evaluate what if any lessons can be learned from the prior era to inform contemporary policy.

The Reality of the Present

A growing literature, both scholarly and journalistic, has documented the deepening engagement between China and Russia. Before assessing the extent to which this trend poses a threat to U.S. interests, it is useful to review the evolution of the relationship over the past decade or so.

Security

From the earliest days of the PRC, cooperation between China and the Soviet Union included a security dimension.13 Indeed, military support from Russia to the Chinese Communist Party contributed to its victory in China’s civil war and its engagement in the Korean War. But from the beginning, the Soviet Union was cautious in the amount and type of military support provided to the PRC, particularly in high-end capabilities, including nuclear weapons. This caution stemmed in part from a desire to retain the upper hand in the relationship and also because of persistent tensions between the

11 See the discussion in fn. 6 above.
12 See Yahuda, “The Significance of Tripolarity,” 15. Yahuda argues that “the strategic triangle, far from being a permanent fixture on the international landscape, was of transitory significance.”
13 See ibid.
two countries, especially over their shared border. Indeed, these restrictions were an important source of friction. As the overall relationship began to improve in the Gorbachev era, security cooperation too began to improve but restrictions on transferring systems like state-of-the-art fighters and air defense systems remained.

Security cooperation experienced a step-wise improvement in the last decade, driven by a range of factors, including Russia’s need for export income from arms sales, a recognition that China would soon be able to develop its own indigenous capabilities (so that any Russian restraint was self-defeating), and overall improvement in bilateral relations. This cooperation now extends beyond highly capable military systems to include exchanges, joint exercise, and training.

Since the 1990s, China has been one of Russia’s largest arms importers, providing much-needed revenue to support state finances and the overhead costs of the Russian arms industry.\(^\text{14}\) These arms sales have played an important role in China’s quest to modernize its military quickly by supplying it with the high-tech weapons and equipment that the West has refused to sell. Between 2006 and 2010, Russia supplied over 80% of China’s imports. However, as China’s capacity to develop and produce its own weapons systems grows—due in part to reverse engineering of Russian technology—arms sales have declined.\(^\text{15}\) In response to this trend, Russia has been increasingly willing to open up sales of advanced technologies like surface-to-air missiles, jet fighters, and submarines to gain more Chinese sales.

Exercises and exchanges between China and Russia have likewise increased. The first large-scale joint military exercises involving China and Russia occurred in 2005 with the SCO’s Peace Mission drills. Although the scale of the exercises declined significantly in the early years, they have grown in size since 2014. Russia and China have also conducted a number of bilateral maritime exercises with an emphasis on search and rescue, antisubmarine warfare, and amphibious assaults.\(^\text{16}\) In addition to their land and sea cooperation, Chinese and Russian defense agencies have worked together to counter U.S. military advances in the region, staging two computerized missile defense simulations in May 2016 and December 2017 in response to the installation of the Terminal High Altitude Area

---


Defense (THAAD) missile defense system in South Korea.\(^{17}\) In addition, representatives from both countries have held private meetings to discuss missile defense issues during international summits.\(^{18}\)

**Economic**

Economic ties, too, date to the early days of the PRC, when the Soviet Union provided not only a model for China’s own development strategy but also critical technology, expertise, and capital. With “reform and opening up,” however, China’s economic focus in all three dimensions turned to the West, which provided not only crucial inputs for China’s development but also markets for its burgeoning manufacturing sector. That pattern continues today. As Charles Ziegler discusses in his chapter for this volume on energy and trade cooperation, with the important exception of the energy sector and military technology, Russia has relatively little to offer China, while China’s economic ties to the United States and U.S. allies (including the European Union, Japan, and South Korea) are central to the country’s economic growth.\(^{19}\)

Even in energy, where Russia has been China’s primary supplier of crude oil since 2016,\(^{20}\) China has taken advantage of Russia’s need for alternative markets in the wake of Western sanctions to strike favorable deals, while at the same time diversifying its own sources of energy and commodities among Central Asia, Myanmar, the Middle East, and even Western partners like Australia and Chile. On investment, despite repeated high-level pledges to enhance engagement, Chinese investment in Russia has slowed in recent years. Chinese investors remain extremely distrustful of the business environment in Russia, including its opaque regulatory system,


\(^{19}\) After a decline in trade and investment between the two countries beginning in 2012, bilateral trade has increased significantly since 2015, with year-on-year growth increasing by 20% in 2017 to a total of $84 billion. These trends are likely to continue, with recent pledges by Moscow and Beijing to boost trade volumes to $200 billion by 2020. Nonetheless, these volumes pale in comparison to U.S.-China trade flows, which amounted to $636 billion in goods (import and export) in 2017. “Russia-China Trade Volume Exceeds Expectations, Hitting $84 Bn,” RT, January 12, 2018, https://www.rt.com/business/415692-russia-china-trade-turnover.

\(^{20}\) Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia in energy trade and is likely to maintain its position. The volume of its exports increased in 2017 and is likely to continue to increase in 2018, following the completion of a second East Siberia–Pacific Ocean pipeline in January and increased imports across the board. “Russia Remains China’s Top Oil Supplier as Pipeline Expands,” Reuters, February 24, 2018, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-economy-trade-crude/russia-remains-chinas-top-oil-supplier-as-pipeline-expands-idUSKCN1G808M.
high levels of corruption, and potential for greater economic instability.\(^{21}\)
The majority of investment that does occur comes from Chinese sovereign wealth funds like the Russia Direct Investment Fund and the Russia-China Investment Fund. With the exception of some notable infrastructure projects (like a high-speed rail connecting Moscow and Beijing), these investments have focused primarily on developing the energy and raw materials sectors and the Russian Far East.

By contrast China looms larger in Russia’s economic calculus. Following the end of the Cold War (and with it the end of the Cold War–based constraints on trade, technology, and investment in Russia), Russia, like China, initially focused on the West as both a model and economic partner. However, the disruptive effects of the Yeltsin years soured many Russians on Western economic liberalism,\(^ {22}\) and new restrictions on Russia’s trade with the United States, stemming from concerns about human rights (the Magnitsky Act), corruption, and most dramatically events in Crimea, led Russia to seek alternative economic partners. China is Russia’s most important export market and is the fourth most important source of FDI.\(^ {23}\) Thus, the relationship is highly asymmetrical: China is Russia’s largest bilateral trading partner, but Russia rarely makes it into China’s top ten.\(^ {24}\)

In addition to efforts to strengthen bilateral economic cooperation and therefore reduce dependence on the United States and its allies, Russia and China have also worked to lessen the influence of the dollar in international economic governance, in part to reduce U.S. leverage over each of them. This includes promoting the reform of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank, establishing alternative economic forums such as the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) summit and the associated New Development Bank, and proposing the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). An additional aspect of this campaign is to promote the use of the renminbi as an international currency and reduce the primacy of the dollar.\(^ {25}\) Russia and China conduct a large proportion of their trade in rubles and renminbi following a currency swap agreement


\(^{22}\) During the period of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency, Russia again began to look to strengthen economic ties with the United States and the West (including by joining the WTO and active participation in the G-8), but these efforts lapsed with the return of Putin in 2012.


in 2014. The Bank of Russia nearly tripled its holdings of renminbi in the fourth quarter of 2017 from just 1.0% percent of its foreign exchange to 2.8%.\textsuperscript{26} China and Russia have also been developing an alternative payment system that would lessen the impact of Western sanctions.\textsuperscript{27}

**Political**

Political cooperation between Russia and China has also increased in recent years. During the Cold War, despite the U.S. tendency to see the two Communist powers as a monolithic force in global affairs, their agendas frequently diverged. From China’s own role in trying to forge a third force of neutral and developing countries in the Bandung Conference and the Non-Aligned Movement to Mao’s support for radical revolutionary movements in the third world, which diverged from Moscow’s more cautious approach, and the Sino-Russian competition for preeminence in the developing world, the two were frequently at odds in the international arena. This tendency was reinforced following the rapprochement between China and the United States in the 1970s and Deng Xiaoping’s decision to focus China’s external policy on improving the climate for economic growth—which meant easing tensions with the United States and the West at a time when Washington and Moscow were engaged in a range of proxy confrontations around the world, from Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa.

The end of the Cold War and the emergence of the United States as a self-proclaimed “sole superpower” gradually began to change the calculations of the two. A shared interest in countering perceived U.S. hegemony caused each to consider supporting the other as a counterweight to the assertion of U.S. power. The impulse began as early as 1997 with the signing of the Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order and was codified in the (largely rhetorical) Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation (signed in 2001).

Sino-Russian cooperation in the international political arena is perhaps most evident in the countries’ shared effort to counter U.S. efforts to extend the “liberal international order,” particularly on issues such as the promotion of human rights and democracy, which both countries see


as a direct threat to their regimes. Both place considerable emphasis on the inviolability of sovereignty as embodied in Article 2(4) and 2(7) of the UN Charter (though clearly selectively applied by Russia in the cases of Georgia and Ukraine) and opposition to international intervention as embodied in doctrines such as the Responsibility to Protect. Similarly, they have worked together to influence the international rules governing cyberspace, with an eye to maximizing sovereign control over the internet and limiting protections for free speech and international commerce.

More broadly, China and Russia have a shared interest in reducing the role and influence of the United States in international institutions, working together either to reduce the United States’ clout within those organizations (e.g., IMF and the World Bank) or to build alternative institutions in which the U.S. voice is either excluded or has limited weight, such as the SCO, the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), and the AIIB.

To date, each of these organizations has had limited impact. The SCO has at times aspired to play a broad role in managing regional security and has expanded its membership and geographic scope to include South Asia.


29 This view was formalized in the Declaration of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the Promotion of International Law, June 30, 2016, available at http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/position_word_order/-/asset_publisher/6S4RuXfeYlKr/content/id/2331698.


and parts of the Middle East, but its concrete achievements have been limited. The addition of India (as well as Pakistan) in 2017 to the membership further reduces the chances that the SCO will become an anti-U.S. security and political organization (although India does share some of Russia’s and China’s concerns about U.S. trade policy). The CICA is largely a Chinese creation designed to provide an “Asia only” counterpart to trans-Pacific organizations like the East Asia Summit, which includes the United States and its allies (Japan and Australia) as well as Russia and China. By contrast, the United States is only an observer in CICA. Development-oriented organizations like the BRICS New Development Bank and AIIB (as well as China’s own Belt and Road Initiative) fill a niche by potentially meeting infrastructure investment needs without the transparency safeguards required by U.S.-dominated development agencies. Taken together, these organizations represent a theoretical challenge to U.S. interests, but their achievements to date have been modest. Even within these organizations, China’s and Russia’s views are not always aligned.

On global issues, the degree of mutual political support remains rather limited, even in areas of key importance to each of the “partners.” Given its deep reservations about international intervention, China has been cautious about Russia’s actions in Georgia and Ukraine. While it sees benefits in tensions between Russia and the West, it has refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, or Crimea. The Middle East illustrates the complex mix of shared and divergent interests between the two countries with areas of cooperation as well as rivalry. Both are concerned with the threat posed by Islamist terrorist organizations to their respective countries and have opposed Western efforts

---

32 President Xi has described the union as promoting both security and development in the region, stressing the organization’s support for free trade and the WTO. “China’s Xi Welcomes India, Pakistan to SCO, Hails ‘Unity,’” Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, June 10, 2018, https://www.rferl.org/a/china-russia-putin-xi-welcomes-india-pakistan-sco/29281818.html.


34 Analysts disagree about the significance of China’s and Russia’s mutual political support. Robert Sutter, for example, argues that “the independent goals of both China and Russia have been accepted by the other state, as can be seen by China’s support for Russian involvement in Syria and Russian support for China’s action in the South China Sea.” See Robert Sutter, “America’s Bleak View of Russia-China Relations,” Asia Policy 13, no. 1 (2018): 42. Others focus on the lukewarm nature of the support. See, for example, Bolt, “Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order,” 53.


to support democracy movements like the Arab Spring, which threaten the region's autocracies. China has given limited support to Russia’s role in Syria, and the two jointly vetoed six of seven UN Security Council resolutions relating to Syria’s use of chemical weapons. But China’s actual involvement in the country has largely been limited to the provision of humanitarian aid and support for a political settlement. More broadly, analysts have suggested that Beijing has offered only tepid support for Russia in the Middle East, in part due to China’s growing economic interests, especially access to energy and increasingly arms sales, which have led to close ties with Saudi Arabia (Russia’s adversary in the region).

Similarly, Russia has given only limited support to China’s position in the South China Sea—for example, by refusing to back the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) arbitral panel decision in the case brought by the Philippines and by supporting China’s position that the disputes should be resolved by the claimants without “outside” (i.e., U.S.) interference—while not explicitly endorsing China’s sovereignty claims. On North Korea, there has been a fair degree of cooperation between Russia and China. Both countries have stressed the need for a political solution, opposed the U.S. deployment of THAAD, and jointly offered the “freeze for freeze proposal.” Russia has recognized China’s vital interests in the future of North Korea and has been generally respectful of China’s lead role. China and Russia jointly vetoed the UN Security Council action on North Korean human rights in 2014 and issued a joint statement on the North Korean nuclear situation in 2017. Here, too, their positions are not identical. At least until recently, Russia has taken a somewhat stronger anti-proliferation line, driven in part by concerns about horizontal proliferation in the region and the erosion of its role as one of the five “authorized” nuclear powers under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. At least until 2014, when North

37 It is noteworthy that on the seventh resolution, where China abstained while Russia vetoed, the vote took place shortly after a meeting between Presidents Trump and Xi. See Lavi and Fainberg, “Russia and China in the Middle East,” 52.
38 In May, China held an international symposium on the prospect of a political settlement of the Syrian issue in Shanghai, which involved a number of international actors, including the special envoys to Syria from the United Nations, UK, and France. There are reports that China has also provided some military training and advice to the Syrian army. See ibid., 63.
Korean–Russian ties intensified, Russia appeared more willing to support Korean unification under the leadership of Seoul.\textsuperscript{42} Ironically, as China began to crack down on North Korea, Russia evolved slightly in the opposite direction as it sought to take advantage of deteriorating Sino–North Korean relations to improve its economic position in the North.

Net Assessment

\textit{Outlook for Sino-Russian Cooperation}

There continues to be a wide range of views about the nature and significance of cooperation between China and Russia. While many see a dramatic change in the scale and importance of their collaboration, especially in the security sphere,\textsuperscript{43} others offer a more cautious assessment. Gilbert Rozman, for example, concludes that “Sino-Russian relations may be warm on the outside, tepid on the inside, and chilly underneath.”\textsuperscript{44} As Richard Weitz argues, “The leaders of both countries view their changed security relationship as a major success that they strive to sustain. Nonetheless, their mutual defense commitments are tenuous and their engagements remain below that found in a traditional military alliance.”\textsuperscript{45}

It is difficult to know whether the trend to greater Sino-Russian cooperation has natural limits and the current level represents an apex or whether deeper engagement may be possible in the future. Many analysts have identified key remaining barriers, and mutual suspicions continue


\textsuperscript{43} In his foreword to the 2017 NBR report on Russia-China relations, Robert Sutter notes: “One hundred leading U.S. specialists on Russia and China participating in the NBR project ‘Strategic Implications of Russia-China Relations’ are in broad agreement on the causes of the challenges that Russia and China pose to the United States. They agree that Sino-Russian relations increasingly undermine U.S. interests and that past views of the relationship as an ‘axis of convenience’ with little significance for the United States no longer hold.” Sutter, “America’s Bleak View of Russia-China Relations,” 39.


to constrain ties. The two countries compete for political influence and economic leverage in Central Asia, a competition intensified by China’s expanding activities under the Belt and Road Initiative. They also have different interests in the Middle East: Russia is motivated by arms sales and access to Mediterranean geopolitical influence, which has led to a de facto alignment with Iran, while China seeks to maintain good ties with all of the region’s energy producers. In addition, there are profound differences in their approach to globalization (which is vital to China’s economic development, while Russia remains highly autarchic economically) and transnational challenges such as climate change. Moreover, Russia continues to maintain important political and security ties to potential Chinese adversaries, including Vietnam and India.

Nonetheless, it seems clear that some U.S. policies are driving China and Russia closer together. U.S. support for democracy and human rights in third countries is seen as a direct threat to the leadership of both Russia and China and gives them an incentive to work together. Both see U.S. alliances in Europe and East Asia as an element of a containment strategy. Each challenges U.S. support for neoliberal economic policies on trade and investment in international organizations like the IMF, World Bank, and WTO, and they have worked together to build alternative institutions that do not embrace U.S. values. Both are concerned about Washington’s use of extraterritorial legislation, especially third-country sanctions.

But in the end, the key question for U.S. policymakers is not the extent of cooperation per se, but rather how problematic is the current and potentially even greater future Sino-Russian partnership for U.S. interests? More specifically, is the United States worse off if China and Russia are working together or in parallel? To answer this question, it is important to go beyond the simple enumeration of where they are acting in concert to assess whether and how their common efforts could adversely impact U.S. interests.

Bolt asserts that “while the Chinese-Russian strategic partnership is substantive and productive, it is based on both dissatisfaction with a U.S.-led world order and very practical considerations. The relationship is not grounded in a shared long-term positive vision of world order, and the conditions that have given rise to the partnership will also limit it and perhaps even erode it in the long term, as seen in disagreements over energy, weapons sales, and Russia’s annexation of Crimea.” In addition, he states that “the foundations of the Sino-Russian partnership may not be stable for the long term. As China rises in power, its conception of the ideal world order is likely to diverge from Russia’s viewpoint.” One of the potential sources of friction in the partnership may arise over a competition for influence in Central Asia. Bolt, “Sino-Russian Relations in a Changing World Order,” 49, 52.

Sutter, “America’s Bleak View of Russia-China Relations,” 42.
The Impact of Sino-Russian Cooperation on U.S. Interests

There are a number of ways that Sino-Russian cooperation might harm U.S. interests: by enhancing their mutual capabilities, emboldening them to act knowing they will have each other’s support, enhancing the perceived legitimacy of their “alternative” world order in the eyes of third countries, and reducing the United States’ ability to influence their policies (through sanctions, for example).

Capabilities. One way in which Sino-Russian cooperation might affect the United States would be by increasing their mutual capabilities to harm U.S. interests. After all, one of the key arguments for alliances is that combining forces makes the alliance stronger than the sum of individual parts. On an operational level, it is challenging to imagine circumstances in which the two countries would fight together against the United States—for example, China participating in a Russian invasion of the Baltics, or Russia engaging in naval operations in the South or East China Sea.48 It is also true that China’s military capability has been enhanced by arms and technology transfers from Russia.49 However, as China improves its own technological capabilities (both military and civilian), the value of this is likely to wane significantly in the relatively near future. Intelligence sharing is another area where cooperation could enhance mutual capabilities against the United States, especially to the extent (which seems plausible) that Chinese and Russian intelligence assets are complementary rather than duplicative.50

Emboldenment. Another reason the United States might fear a deeper partnership is the idea that each country might be emboldened to act more forcefully against the United States because it can count on the backing of the other. China might not send volunteers to Eastern Ukraine or Syria, but it can still back Russia politically in international forums like the United Nations. Similarly, China might be more willing to aid Iran or North Korea knowing that its actions might be supported by Russia. Each side clearly takes comfort in numbers (for example, in their mutual efforts in the

48 Weitz contends that “despite closer security ties, it is unlikely that there will be a scenario where a combined Sino-Russian fleet engages in joint military action.” See Weitz, “Sino-Russian Security Ties,” 34. Some, however, have suggested that Sino-Russian rapprochement provides a “secure rear area,” which allows each to concentrate its full capabilities against the United States. For further discussion, see Weitz, “Sino-Russian Security Ties,” 33.

49 See ibid., 28.

50 To date, there is no publicly available evidence that the two countries are sharing military or political intelligence directed against the United States, though the two participate in antiterrorism intelligence sharing with others under the aegis of the SCO and other organizations. See Shubhajit Roy, “Intel Chiefs of Russia, China, Iran and Pakistan Discuss IS Threat,” Indian Express, July 12, 2018, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/intel-chiefs-of-russia-china-iran-and-pakistan-discuss-is-threat-5255825.
UN Human Rights Council), but it is difficult to assess how much this might affect decision-making. We have seen in recent U.S. history, both under President George W. Bush and President Trump, that the fear of political isolation has not necessarily been a brake on U.S. action, especially where the U.S. interests at stake are high and there is domestic support. Russia’s actions in Georgia and Ukraine demonstrate a similar willingness to act despite a lack of international support, including from China.

To the extent that the two countries see their partnership as “strategic,” they may be prepared to support each other even when their interests diverge, as well as when, in the absence of the partnership, one or the other might abstain or even support the U.S. view (what some might call “backscratching”). China’s responses to Russian actions in both Georgia and Crimea are possible examples of this phenomenon: given its strong attachment to sovereignty, China might have been expected to oppose these cross-border interventions. Its reticence to join others in criticizing Russia can be seen as an effort not to antagonize its partner.

Legitimation. A number of analysts have suggested that Sino-Russian cooperation in the political realm could enhance the spread of anti-liberal norms, just as Communism provided an alternative model during the Cold War. By working together, China and Russia can block liberal initiatives in existing institutions, create alternative institutions that embody their shared approach, and provide political, economic, and even military support to nondemocratic regimes that resist liberal reforms. As a result of these combined efforts, the credibility and legitimacy of this nonliberal alternative is arguably more convincing than if it were promulgated by either country alone.

Reduced U.S. leverage. A related concern is that Sino-Russian cooperation will reduce the United States’ leverage to influence Russian and Chinese policies. The most obvious example is in the case of sanctions, where the availability of alternative partners can make a big difference in the efficacy of economic measures. This can be seen in Russia’s turn to China to reduce the impact of Western energy sanctions, or China’s reliance on Russia to mitigate the post-Tiananmen limits on U.S. arms and technology sales to China. Under what circumstances the availability of an “alternative” might reduce the efficacy of sanctions depends on a number of factors, including the issues at stake and how much of an alternative the other offers. For example, the partnership with Russia does not offer China much relief in cases where sanctions restrict China’s access to the U.S. consumer market or international banking system. In a number of important cases such as human rights and democracy, experience shows that even in the face of
strong U.S. economic pressure, China and Russia are extremely unlikely to change their approach, whether or not they have each other as an alternative.

**Most Likely Future Scenarios and the Bottom Line**

Sino-Russian cooperation is primarily driven by both countries’ interest in promoting an international order that is conducive to the survival of their authoritarian, economically mercantilist regimes and thus is deeply rooted in their national strategies. Putin and Xi command strong domestic support, and to the extent that this support continues, their cooperation is likely to continue. At the same time, the growing asymmetry of power (both military and economic), differences in their level of engagement in the global economy, and persistent tensions in their interests in Central Asia, the Middle East, and the Russian Far East suggest limits to the further development of Sino-Russian cooperation. In particular a formal military or political alliance is unlikely. China and Russia will continue to coordinate their positions in existing international institutions, but the alternatives they have promoted are unlikely to gain much more traction, given the many other countries (the European Union, India, Japan, and Australia, for example) that will be reluctant to abandon current organizations in favor of those dominated by China and Russia.

There are three kinds of developments that might alter this scenario. First, despite the strengths of the current regimes, both face serious domestic problems. A significant change to the current system is conceivable in both countries, which would have a profound effect on their cooperation. Second, if U.S. policy were to become more willing to accommodate Russia’s or China’s security and political interests (such as by abandoning support for democracy or conceding regional spheres of influence), this would weaken the rationale for their cooperation, which would have achieved the goals it was designed to achieve. Although there appears to be some support for this approach from President Trump, bipartisan congressional opposition makes this scenario less likely. Finally, the United States could adopt a more determined “regime change” strategy toward both countries, which would drive them even closer together, to include the possibility of a defensive military alliance.

The most likely scenario suggests that the Sino-Russian partnership will make it somewhat harder for the United States to achieve its goals. In most cases, however, the problems would arise whether or not the two countries were cooperating (or working in parallel), and thus the effect of their cooperation is on the margin. Put another way, in deciding to pursue
policies that are inconsistent with U.S. interests, neither China nor Russia is influenced significantly by the support (or the absence of support) from the other. Nonetheless, in a number of areas both countries are pursuing similar policies opposed to the United States (either in cooperation or in parallel), which makes the achievement of U.S. goals somewhat more difficult. For this reason, it is important to explore what, if anything, the United States can do.

Policy Options

Analysts have suggested a number of strategies to put a brake on or even reverse the trend toward increasing cooperation between China and Russia. Ian Bond has suggested four possibilities: (1) oppose both Russia and China, (2) oppose China and seek a partnership with Russia, (3) oppose Russia and seek a partnership with China, and (4) seek partnerships with both Russia and China. The first option is similar to the approach presented in the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy. Edward Luttwak and (and to some extent) former U.S. ambassador to China Stapleton Roy propose the second, while Bond himself advocates for the third choice. Bobo Lo’s prescription tracks the fourth option.

The Trump National Security Strategy sees China and Russia as presenting a common challenge: “China and Russia want to shape a world antithetical to U.S. values and interests.” While not fully ruling out the possibility of cooperation, the strategy focuses on measures that the United States should take to counter each country across the full range of security, economic, and political realms.

Luttwak makes a classic balance-of-power argument: “In the 1970s, the United States embraced China to offset the Soviet power upsurge.

53 White House, National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 25. The report argues that “China and Russia challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity….These competitions require the United States to rethink the policies of the past two decades—policies based on the assumption that engagement with rivals and their inclusion in international institutions and global commerce would turn them into benign actors and trustworthy partners. For the most part, this premise turned out to be false.” Ibid., 2–3.
Now, Trump should do the opposite: Focus U.S. strength against an increasingly militaristic China, and enlist Russia in that effort. It is Geopolitics 101 not to confront both countries at the same time, and Russia is clearly less of a threat to the United States.”

Roy argues that U.S. policy in Eastern Europe has played a central role in fostering Sino-Russian cooperation (“an avoidable confrontation whose consequences drove Russia into the arms of China”) and that China now occupies the privileged position of having better relations with both Russia and the United States than they have with each other. He further argues that the United States can and should redress this balance: “To the extent that Western actions in Europe partly explain the current unnaturally close alignment between Moscow and Beijing, then easing tensions between the West and Russia in Europe could help restore a more normal and limited pattern of cooperation between Russia and China.”

In contrast, Bond’s argument for “tilting” toward China is based on an assessment that Russia poses the greater threat to the United States and its allies: “China may be revisionist in the sense of wanting a stronger position on the global chess board, but it has shown less inclination than Russia to tip over the board entirely.”

Bobo Lo offers a different strategy, suggesting that the United States show more deference to both countries: “it is vitally important to treat China and Russia as individual great powers.”

Rather than favor China or Russia, some have proposed as a fifth alternative that the United States might seek to drive a wedge between the two countries by siding with one where their interests diverge or by casting doubt on the reliability of the other as a partner, perhaps building on the inherent

---


56 Roy also argues that tensions between the United States and Russia are “diverting scarce U.S. resources away from the western Pacific, where China has assumed the role of the United States’ major strategic competitor.” Roy, “Sino-Russian Relations in a Global Context,” 48. In addition to advocating a new approach to Russia on Ukraine/Eastern Europe, Roy also recommends restoring confidence in U.S. engagement and leadership in fostering strategic stability. Ibid., 49.


58 Lo, A Wary Embrace, 76.
tensions and suspicions in their bilateral relationship.\textsuperscript{59} Weitz has sketched out how this option might be implemented in his chapter for this volume.

*Can Any of These Options Work?*

Do any of these strategies have a reasonable chance of success? After all, the split between China and Russia during the Cold War was not a product of U.S. policy; rather, the United States was able to take advantage of underlying differences between the two Communist powers. Today, the opposite is true. Most analysts argue that shared interests, at least as much as if not more than U.S. policy, are the critical factor in the rapid improvement in Sino-Russian relations.\textsuperscript{60} Even to the extent that U.S. policy does contribute to Sino-Russian cooperation, there are reasons to question whether the United States could succeed at a self-conscious strategy designed to slow down or reverse this trend. As several regional experts have argued, “an attempt…to drive a wedge between Russia and China would be so transparent as to be understood by Moscow and Beijing for what it is—a clumsy geopolitical ploy.”\textsuperscript{61}

Success in improving bilateral ties with either China or Russia—for example, by accommodating them on important issues such as Ukraine or the South China Sea—might produce benefits, but this would not necessarily lead to reduced cooperation. These accommodative moves might simply be pocketed by one or both countries, or even used as leverage to achieve objectives in their bilateral relationship with each other. For example, a more accommodative stance by the United States on Russian energy exports to Europe might simply allow Russia to extract a higher price for gas from China. As Eugene Rumer notes, “the unintended consequences of outreach to Russia….could enable Russia to engage in its own geopolitical maneuvering in the European theater while doing little to weaken China.”\textsuperscript{62}

He goes on to argue that “a renewed partnership is unlikely to result in Russia being willing to forgo its close relations with China and side with the

\textsuperscript{59} For example, during the Cold War, the Nixon and Ford administrations’ pursuit of détente and arms control with Moscow created uncertainties among China’s leaders about the reliability of U.S. opposition to the Soviet Union.

\textsuperscript{60} Offering a Russian perspective, for example, Alexander Lukin writes that “the Sino-Russian rapprochement is a natural result of broader changes taking place in world politics, while the U.S. policy hostile to both countries has had the effect of accelerating that process.” Alexander Lukin, “A Russian Perspective on the Sino-Russian Rapprochement,” Asia Policy 13, no. 1 (2018): 19. For a more comprehensive statement of the argument, see Alexander Lukin, China and Russia: The New Rapprochement (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

\textsuperscript{61} Eugene B. Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy: This Bear Hug Is Real,” in “Russia-China Relations,” 15, 22.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 13.
United States, should the Trump administration challenge Beijing’s position on Taiwan, trade, the disputes in the South China Sea, or North Korea—the major issues identified by the new team as its priorities with China.”

To address this risk, the United States could try to condition improvement in Russian-U.S. or Sino-U.S. relations on distancing from the other partner. For example, Weitz suggests that the United States might condition sanctions relief for Russia on restraining arms sales to China. But such conditionality would be hard to specify (what would the United States ask either China or Russia to stop doing with each other?) and even harder to enforce. Moreover, the effort might simply accelerate China’s already strong determination to improve its indigenous capabilities. To have any chance of success, the conditional inducement that the United States would need to offer would have to outweigh the benefit of cooperation. This leads to the core question: what price would the United States need to pay and is the benefit worth it?

Is It Worth It?

Given the many positive factors that are driving Russia and China together, a strategy designed to thwart their cooperation against the United States faces a dilemma. Small accommodations are unlikely to affect either country’s calculus, while the larger ones that might—such as concessions on support for democracy, human rights and the rule of law, alliances in Europe and East Asia, and the liberal economic order—would require a fundamental rethinking of U.S. national strategy.

Would the United States be better off if it were to modify these policies—or to put it more sharply, to accede to Russia’s and China’s preferred views on these questions? Throughout U.S. history there have been those who have argued that the United States would be better served by an approach to international relations based solely on considerations of balance of power, a Palmerstonian view that “we have no eternal allies, and

---

63 Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy,” 22.
64 See Weitz, “Sino-Russian Security Ties,” 36. This would probably require at least the acquiescence, if not approval, of Congress, which thus far has set strict conditions for sanctions relief.
65 Others have noted the potentially high price that the United States would need to be pay to lessen Sino-Russian cooperation: “A change in Russian arms sales policy toward China would require major shifts in the U.S. defense posture—such as abandoning missile defense programs in Europe and Asia—that would be highly improbable under any U.S. administration, no matter how favorably inclined toward Russia.” Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy,” 25.
we have no perpetual enemies. Our interests are eternal and perpetual.”

Up until now those arguments have failed to carry the day, not only because that is not “who we are” but because we have learned that the United States’ greatest strengths derive precisely from the principled grounding of our leadership.

Nonetheless, there are elements of the Trump administration’s approach that would suggest that President Trump thinks the answer is yes. This perspective was on full display in the president’s address to the UN General Assembly, where he argued that respect for national sovereignty is at the core of international stability, implicitly accepting that the United States was prepared to mute its call for domestic political reform in return for better state-to-state relations. But this view is at odds with the administration’s own National Security Strategy, which sees relations between the United States and the other two powers not simply in great-power terms but as a contest over the nature of the international order.

Although Sino-Russian cooperation certainly complicates the U.S. calculus, there is little reason to believe that a strategy whose raison d’être is designed to reduce their cooperation would really benefit the United States. Such an approach risks the worst of both worlds—a strategy that fails to derail cooperation between China and Russia while sacrificing core U.S. values and interests. Indeed, to adopt such a strategy would be a vindication of their strategy, as the threat of cooperation would be seen as a successful ploy to force the United States to modify its course.

What Then Is to Be Done?

Rather than seeking a way to discourage Sino-Russian cooperation, U.S. strategy should focus on how the United States can deal with Russia and China from a position of strength. Policies that might please them—conceding one or both a regional sphere of influence, abandoning U.S. convictions about the universality of fundamental human rights, or acquiescing in a mercantilist international economic order—are precisely those that jeopardize the United States’ most precious assets—its allies and

---

66 This realpolitik view is often attributed to John Quincy Adams, as well to Kissinger, although in both cases it represents an oversimplification of their approach. See John Bew, Realpolitik: A History (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016), especially chap. 15.


68 “In America, we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone, but rather to let it shine as an example for everyone to watch.” Donald J. Trump (remarks to the 72nd Meeting of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 19, 2017), https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-72nd-session-united-nations-general-assembly.
its principles. Rather than prioritizing ways to placate Moscow or Beijing, the United States needs to strengthen its partnerships with those who share its values and interests. If it is looking for others to “accommodate,” Washington should focus first on those who will likely reciprocate rather than alienating its natural allies by shortsighted policies of “America first” or “raison d’état.” Rejoining the Trans-Pacific Partnership, strengthening the North American Free Trade Agreement, and recommitting to a strong, cohesive NATO and a constructive partnership with the European Union are far more important for meeting the challenge posed by China and Russia, singularly or together. In addition, as so many have observed, the United States should cultivate its domestic strengths—a vibrant open economy that affords opportunity for all, political tolerance, and innovation. By strengthening the appeal at home and abroad of the economic and political order it has helped create since World War II, the United States will be better positioned to counter the alternative narrative offered by China and Russia.

At the same time, there may be areas where seeking to find common ground with Russia or China could reap meaningful benefits, and U.S. policymakers can and should factor that possibility into their decision-making. Just because the United States should not capitulate on core matters of national interest, the country is ill served by a view that sees any understanding between the United States and either Russia or China as a sign of weakness. The National Security Strategy’s Manichean view of Russia and China as strategic adversaries not only risks driving the two closer together but also alienates U.S. allies and friends that do not wish to be forced into a binary choice of “with us or against us.” Similarly, a strategy that emphasizes U.S. dominance or primacy forecloses any possibility of meaningful cooperation between the United States and either Russia and China and simply reinforces their own felt need to work to counter it. Such an approach is both counterproductive and ultimately unsustainable, likely triggering an arms race and security competition that will make all three countries worse off.

How might the United States better approach relations with China and Russia in a way that lessens their need to work together to counter the United States without sacrificing core U.S. interests? Effectively managing


the long-term competition between the United States and both China and Russia requires a selective exercise of power that recognizes that neither China nor Russia will willingly acquiesce to all U.S. preferences, and that the United States’ power is not great enough, even with its allies, to insist on its way in all cases. The management of Taiwan over the past four decades reflects the kind of nuanced calculation that is needed. The United States has not acquiesced to China’s effort to impose “reunification,” but at the same time it has carefully managed sensitive issues such as arms sales and official visits. The Obama administration’s effort to address Russian concerns over European theater missile defense is another example. A similar effort could be made vis-à-vis both China and Russia with respect to theater missile defense in Northeast Asia. Economic policy is another area where nuance could be helpful: rather than simply opposing initiatives like the AIIB, on the grounds that they undermine the United States’ preferred institutions (the World Bank and Asian Development Bank), Washington could have chosen to work within the new entity to encourage policies consistent with the U.S. worldview. Such an approach, which blends reassurance and resolve in dealing with these two important powers, requires an element of judgement more complex than a simplistic balance-of-power prescription but is likely to prove more successful and sustainable over the long run.