



Facing Down the Sino-Russian Entente

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“Great power competition” has, at least on paper, become the orienting principle for American strategy. That competition is usually defined as being between the United States and China as well as between the United States and the Russian Federation. Or it lumps them together in the vague category of “great powers,” without much additional context. But a critical and underexamined factor in the current global geopolitical landscape is the relationship *between* Beijing and Moscow and how their ties affect US strategy toward each of them individually and together.

To succeed in this environment, Washington needs two things. The first is a richer understanding of the relationship between Beijing and Moscow as well as how they compare in their ends, ways, and means. What are their common goals, and where are the potential fault lines? The second is policies suited for today’s global landscape. American strategists generated ideas for dealing with two Eurasian behemoths during the Cold War, namely the concept of the “strategic triangle.” But many of those have become shibboleths that do more to dampen than enlighten strategic thought. The current global balance of power calls for shedding that framework in favor of one that takes into account the collective strength of major allies and emerging partners.

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This article aims to address the gaps identified above. It starts by elucidating the recent history of relations between China and Russia and outlining how the Cold War and the years since set the stage for a new era of relations. It then explains how the two powers cooperate and coordinate with each other and globally. Important limits remain, of course, and the next section explores the fault lines between Beijing and Moscow and considers which ones might develop into actual fissures. The article then explores the primary analytical considerations that should inform US policy, and lastly, urges Washington to abandon antiquated frameworks and pursue a new approach for the Sino-Russian entente.

Origins of the Sino-Russian Entente

Understanding today's Sino-Russian relationship starts with recognizing that the roots of their alignment run deep. Relations between the Soviet Union and China were a whirlwind during the Cold War. They were curious but wary of each other during the Chinese civil war and after the founding of the People's Republic of China, tightly bound in the early 1950s, squabbling later in the decade, and finally cratering into total rancor, known as the Sino-Soviet split, during the 1960s, culminating in their brief March 1969 border conflict, through the early 1980s.¹

Beijing and Moscow began to explore a thaw in the waning years of the Cold War as both countries sought to navigate the shifting landscape for great power politics. When then-Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev flew to Beijing in May 1989 for the first bilateral leader-level summit since the 1950s, protestors already gathered in Tiananmen Square disrupted the initial plans for a welcoming ceremony in Tiananmen.² The next month, the Tiananmen Square massacre took place, demonstrating that the Chinese Communist Party would maintain its grip on power through brute force and not countenance the type of political liberalization Gorbachev instituted that ultimately led to the Soviet Union's collapse.

Moscow's response to Tiananmen was muted, and following the USSR's demise, bilateral ties began to warm when the two countries undertook efforts to demilitarize and demarcate their 2,600-mile shared border, which had been a flashpoint during the Cold War. The end of that contest led both Beijing and Moscow to try to mend fences with former adversaries. Following plodding progress during the 1990s and early 2000s, the 2001 Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation helped set the stage for a final border demarcation agreement in 2008.³ By alleviating the most acute source of bilateral security competition, the pair began to develop a degree of strategic trust that both powers lacked with other neighbors. Meanwhile, a China newly flush with cash and

cut off from access to Western defense technology after Tiananmen sought weapons from a Russian defense industry that desperately needed customers.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's rise to power in 2000 propelled relations further. He was skeptical of the West and, like Chinese leaders, saw the end of the Soviet Union as a tragedy, not a triumph (although Beijing was more worried about the apparent implications for communist governments like its own than the collapse of Soviet power itself). Putin viewed the unipolar moment of unchecked American power as a threatening historical aberration that needed to be resisted wherever possible. The Sino-Russian relationship continued to pick up momentum, albeit still from a low base. Both Chinese and Russian leaders worried about—and looked to counter—the twin challenges of “color revolutions” and US-led regime change campaigns in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The pair saw themselves, their partners, and client regimes as potential US targets.

When CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping took the helm of China in late 2012, the relationship began to gather more speed. Xi elevated the role of ideology and nationalism in both domestic and foreign policy, adopted a more assertive line toward relations with the United States, and in a move heavy with symbolism, chose Russia as the destination for his first foreign trip.⁴

Under Xi and Putin, Sino-Russian relations have blossomed. The pair have met more than 30 times—more than any two leaders—and have reportedly developed a strong personal rapport, with Xi even calling Putin his “best friend.”⁵ The level of *bonhomie* matters because both leaders now sit atop increasingly personalized governance systems that they are intent on preserving, possibly indefinitely.⁶ Both of them have undertaken efforts to consolidate power, either by extending term limits or abolishing them altogether. Maintaining their position as the two most powerful authoritarian leaders on earth is a goal they both share, which shapes both oppression at home and adventurism abroad. Moreover, having consolidated power around themselves, they can pursue their commitment to deepening Sino-Russian relations with minimal internal debate or bureaucratic foot-dragging.

Bilateral relations went into overdrive in 2014 when Moscow dispatched “little green men” to annex Crimea and sparked a war in Eastern Ukraine, which triggered extensive sanctions from the West. Invading Ukraine marked a turning point in Russia's embrace of China, both out of necessity due to financial and political constraints as well as in terms of global norms. Moscow's desire for a sphere of influence meant it asserted the right to change borders by force—especially when provoked by perceived Western political aggression close to home. With Russia

Under Xi and Putin, Sino-Russian relations have blossomed.

convinced that the United States was behind the Euromaidan protest movement in the streets of Ukraine's capital, Kyiv, which called for closer ties to the European Union and an end to government corruption, it felt both compelled and justified to take action.⁷

Beijing adopted a similar view in the South China Sea, although it expanded incrementally rather than with lightning moves. Neither power necessarily approved of nor cheered the other's decision to grab territory—both undermined their exhortations about sovereignty—but they struck a neutral tone regarding the other, indicating recognition of certain rights in their near-abroad. Irrespective of how they talked about it publicly, though, their actions altered global norms on the use of force as Washington and its allies failed to construct an effective response.

Despite good relations, China and Russia do not officially identify as allies. They want to avoid declaring outright confrontation with the United States, and Chinese foreign policy forbids alliances, deriding them as relics of the Cold War. Instead, the pair employs the colorless moniker “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination for a new era,” asserting that “enhancing the China-Russia relationship is the call of history, and a firm strategic choice by both sides.”⁸

In the US lexicon, the alliance threshold is so high—the term suggests mutual defense treaties and deep societal bonds—that the Sino-Russian relationship could be better described as a quasi-alliance. Therefore, the more artful terminology is that of an “entente,” or broad-based strategic understanding about the preferred direction of world politics.⁹

It's Not Just a Convenience Anymore

The Sino-Russian relationship rests on a shared vision for global order. It prioritizes state sovereignty while simultaneously presuming that both big powers are

The Sino-Russian relationship rests on a shared vision for global order.

entitled to spheres of influence in their near-abroad. Beijing and Moscow see each other as being “back to back,” each facing outward toward a bloc of US security allies.¹⁰ They both oppose American power generally and democracy and human rights promotion in particular, and they seek to accelerate a transition to a multipolar world order away from a US-centric order.¹¹ They share a desire to blunt

democracy globally—although Moscow does this more actively than Beijing, which, at least until recently, has relied more on making the case for its model and aiding would-be authoritarians than interfering in democracies directly.¹²

This vision has led China and Russia to build on their resolution of border issues and expand cooperation across a broader geographic area. They have officially

linked China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)—Xi's signature infrastructure-building project—and Russia's much weaker counterpart initiative, the Eurasian Economic Union.¹³ Integrating some infrastructure projects supplements the common approaches developed through coordination on Arctic Initiatives and within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, especially regarding Central Asia.¹⁴ Beijing and Moscow also consult on policy across several hotspots—including Iran, North Korea, and Venezuela—to help support illiberal governments and provide a bulwark against Western pressure, while partially cooperating on nuclear nonproliferation.¹⁵

China and Russia have also built up tangible cooperation across different areas of their bilateral relationship. They see digital technologies, tactics for how to use them, and international norms as potential authoritarian vulnerabilities that they are converting into a strength. Instead of technology enabling free-flowing information that undermines illiberal regimes, as Western policymakers once assumed, they are instead constructing a panopticon of tightly monitored and manipulated information that helps them maintain control. Both powers advocate for the doctrine of “cyber sovereignty,” or allowing countries to maintain total control over information and communications technology inside their own borders. Both have also sought to establish norms for cybercrime at the UN that make it easier to suppress dissent, even as they have been caught sponsoring malicious cyberactivity.¹⁶ Russia has committed to using systems from Chinese telecommunications champion Huawei for its 5G wireless infrastructure, and the pair are developing extensive private collaborations across a range of technologies.¹⁷ Huawei plans on hiring a thousand Russian technology specialists over the next five years for research and development, which will affect both civilian and military cooperation.

Russia and China have common goals of censoring their domestic media environments at home and manipulating narratives abroad.¹⁸ Their tactics can differ, and while they might never share exactly the same playbook, they appear to be learning and adopting tactics from one another for both purposes. For example, Russia is improving its integration of facial recognition for domestic surveillance, and China has begun to promote conspiracy theories in foreign media as part of its disinformation protocols.¹⁹ Even in cases where Russia and China are not coordinating their messaging, their respective disinformation policies can have a compounding effect on the durability of democratic institutions.²⁰

Military and defense issues form another cooperative pillar that encompasses arms sales and military-technological cooperation, joint exercises, and defense exchanges. After a downturn in Russian sales to China in the late 2000s and early 2010s, in 2014 China became the first foreign buyer for Russia's advanced

S-400 Triumph surface-to-air missile system and in 2015 purchased the Russian Sukhoi S-35 aircraft. The pair are jointly developing heavy-lift helicopters as well as diesel electric submarines and sharing equipment for their own alternatives to the American global positioning system (GPS). Russia is also reportedly helping to enhance China's ballistic missile early warning system.²¹ Russia's earlier concerns about Chinese theft of Russian weapons designs have waned as China's own defense industry catches up in many areas. Russian leaders are consequently less worried about ceding an advantage.²²

The pair have held more than 25 joint exercises since 2003, including Russia's massive Vostok exercises in September 2018, which hosted 3,200 Chinese troops, 900 tanks and armored vehicles, and 30 aircraft and featured an interstate conflict scenario for the first time.²³ Military exchanges have also deepened at the top- and working-levels: approximately 1,000 PLA officers joined the 2016 International Army Games hosted by Russia, which provided them with valuable training.²⁴ When Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe visited Moscow in April 2018, he bluntly explained that he was there to "show Americans the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia."²⁵ These exercises started as relatively shallow interactions but have slowly advanced in sophistication over time. They increasingly provide important operational insights for China's military, the People's Liberation Army (PLA), which has not fought a war since 1979.²⁶

Perhaps the clearest complementarity between Beijing and Moscow comes in the energy sector. China became a net oil importer in 1993 and now imports more than any other country. In 2016, Russia edged out Saudi Arabia as China's top supplier, helped along by the completion of expanded pipeline capacity—much of it financed by Beijing—that, by virtue of running overland, helps alleviate Beijing's worry about interdiction for sea-borne supplies during a crisis. Chinese imports of Russian oil grew 600 percent between 2008 and 2018, which has kept the Eastern Siberia-Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline and its spur into China busy.²⁷ Similarly, the bilateral natural gas trade is poised for a major expansion over the next decade through liquified natural gas (LNG) facilities on Russia's Yamal Peninsula and the 1,900-mile Power of Siberia gas pipeline. China has contracted to receive Russian gas for the next 30 years as part of a US\$400 billion deal signed in 2014.²⁸

Relative to energy and military sales, the broader Sino-Russian trade and financial relationship has struggled. Headwinds caused by Russia's anemic economy have not stopped officials from trying to goose the bilateral trade relationship, though. China is now Russia's largest trade partner after eclipsing Germany in 2010. Bilateral trade topped US\$100 billion in 2018 for the first time, and leaders aim to reach US\$200 billion by 2024 after falling short of their original goal of that amount for 2020.²⁹ Beijing and Moscow are also

pursuing deeper financial integration, including settling more trade in their national currencies and expanding the architecture for financial settlements.³⁰ These nascent measures will help circumvent US sanctions and the dollar-based financial system, although both powers are far from being able to avoid the dollar system entirely.

Surveying the full vista, it is clear that the Sino-Russian relationship extends well beyond an “axis of convenience.”³¹ China and Russia have instead identified a sustained and structural set of complementarities, enhanced by common geopolitical goals.

Probing the Limits of Sino-Russian Cooperation

To be sure, the convergence since the late 1980s has not erased the traditional fault lines that run through Sino-Russian relations. The two countries’ interests continue to diverge in several places. Starting with the bilateral relationship, Russian policymakers recognize China’s revanchist streak on territorial issues. While Sino-Russian territorial disputes are currently dormant, Russia is party to “unequal treaties” of 1858 and 1860, so it is conceivable that China might reopen this issue at some point in the future.³² Beijing’s sizeable investments in the Russian Far East, along with an accompanying influx of Chinese migrants, have led more than a third of Russians to view Chinese behavior as a form of territorial expansion, according to a 2017 poll by the Russian Academy of Sciences.³³ Unsurprisingly, people-to-people ties remain weak, and there are few signs of mutual cultural affinity.

Russia resents its status as the so-called junior partner in the relationship, seeing the early Cold War tables now turned and the material underpinnings of its power in tatters. Russia also worries about becoming a resource appendage for China, where trade boils down to commodities flowing to China and only higher value-added finished goods going to Russia when Moscow also wants technical assistance, investment to modernize its economy, and markets for higher-end Russian products. Similarly, China’s insatiable demand for Russia’s precious water and lumber resources—as it has moved to protect its own natural resources—has fueled deep resentment among both Russian nationalists and environmentalists that feel China is taking advantage of their country.³⁴ But China bends over backward to ensure the *symbolism* of their relationship connotes equality, especially when the material reality shows a large disparity. Moreover, Moscow can hardly object to the current arrangement, given its dire economic straits and overreliance on commodity exports.

Classic geopolitical concerns lurk beneath the surface of China-Russia relations.

Beyond their bilateral relationship, classic geopolitical concerns also lurk beneath the surface. Both China and Russia increasingly find themselves expanding their presence in each other's claimed spheres of influence. For example, China, as part of its BRI, has made sizeable investments in recent years in Central Asia, the Balkans, Central and Eastern Europe, and even the Middle East. In most of those places, Russia and China have either actively worked to foster cooperation in the name of maintaining regional stability or have reached some sort of an implicit agreement not to interfere with each other's most important interests.³⁵ In Serbia, for example, there is no question that China is the economic powerhouse, making critical investments in telecommunications and transportation; Russia, by contrast, provides the Serbs with important security assistance while serving as Serbia's cultural, historical, and religious ally.

Challenges can arise, though, when either Russia or China drift too far into the other's lane. Russia believes Belarussian President Alexander Lukashenko's arms deals with the Chinese are encroaching directly on Russian interests.³⁶ Similarly, Russian policymakers view China's expanding presence in the Arctic, frequent use of the term "near-Arctic state," and its new ice breakers as further evidence of China eroding Russia's dominant role in yet another region.³⁷ Looking ahead, the question is how Moscow will respond if Chinese investments and engagement end up creating a slew of pro-China regimes across Russia's neighborhood.

As Russia closely monitors China's activities to its west, China's keeping a watchful eye on Russian engagement in Asia. Although Moscow tends to be more deferential to Beijing as it engages the region, there are exceptions, such as Moscow's cultivation of southeast Asian states like Vietnam and the Philippines or ongoing arms sales to India.³⁸

But at least for now, the two powers appear to have found a way to compartmentalize their grievances and even find ways to work together to do things like shielding Syria's Assad regime at the UN or flying joint air patrols near Korea and Japan.³⁹ That cooperation could change, however, if Putin is replaced with a Russian leader that looks at China with suspicion and mistrust.

Evaluating US Strategic Options

While the Trump administration, Congress, and analysts on both sides of the US political aisle commonly refer to "great power competition" with Russia and China

when framing US foreign policy objectives, Washington continues to debate the risks associated with the Sino-Russian entente. Some analysts still consider the China-Russia relationship to be an “axis of convenience” and remain skeptical that the two countries are capable of sustaining a partnership for a meaningful amount of time.⁴⁰ Former Defense Secretary James Mattis famously said they have a “natural non-convergence of interest.”⁴¹

There are signs, however, that the debate is shifting both in and out of the Trump administration. In testimony he delivered on worldwide threats in January 2019, then-Director of National Intelligence, Dan Coats, said that China and Russia are more aligned than they have been at any point since the mid-1950s.⁴² The National Bureau of Asian Research also put out a report in 2018 warning about the “strategic axis” between China and Russia that “aims to undermine the United States and other liberal nations while expanding Chinese and Russian influence abroad.”⁴³ That report and others point to a growing body of research that rightly acknowledges the scope and depth of the bilateral relationship and the impact that the relationship could have on US and allied interests as well as global governance at least in the short and medium term, if not the long term.⁴⁴

The bigger challenge is obviously determining how US policymakers should respond to this Sino-Russian convergence. Removing the option of ignoring or downplaying the problem altogether, there are essentially two commonly cited paths forward. The first is to adopt a present-day version of “triangular diplomacy,” the strategy that President Richard Nixon and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger practiced during the Cold War with China and the Soviet Union.⁴⁵ In doing so, Kissinger sought to build a closer relationship with each power than they had with each other.

Proponents of this approach, notably including some former national security advisors, make a couple of key assumptions.⁴⁶ First, they assume that China and Russia are united by complementary grievances with the West. Second, they assume that US policy has pushed China and Russia into an alignment that would not have existed otherwise. Those same proponents of triangular diplomacy then conclude that heavy diplomatic engagement with both sides, along with certain policy concessions, would naturally erode their common bond.

To be sure, their grievances with US policy sit at the heart of Sino-Russian relations, but the United States is not the sole driver in that relationship. Beijing and Moscow have been converging for decades now, including during the Obama administration’s Russian reset and regular attempts to engage China as a responsible power on the world stage. More unites them than their common interest in weakening US positions or reshaping the rules-based order. And even if they are not bound by a sincere zeal for communism, their shared authoritarian model and accompanying toolkit still play an important role that

goes beyond even meaningful shifts in US policy. In this context, it is hard to imagine realistic steps that the United States could take to make China and Russia forget their common interests.

Driving a wedge between Beijing and Moscow is equally unrealistic. The Hoover Institution's Niall Ferguson has argued that "the ultimate goal of American strategy in the 2020s must be to achieve a mirror image of [Nixon's] maneuver,

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driving Putin and Xi apart" by courting Russia.⁴⁷ Kissinger himself reportedly advised President Trump to follow that course of action shortly after Trump assumed office.⁴⁸ This approach, however, seems to overlook China and Russia's record of managing the latent tensions in their relationship.

Leaders of both countries are highly conscious of the geopolitical result of Cold War divisions between them and remain committed to avoiding a repeat of that history.⁴⁹ Further, the list of issues that the United States would concede to Russia or China as an enticement that would be valuable enough to incentivize them to swap sides would no doubt be very costly to US strategic aims.⁵⁰ Would the United States consider giving up on Ukraine and rolling back NATO? Stop contesting Beijing's claims to the South China Sea or Taiwan? Cease support for democracy? Those bars seem high. That doesn't mean Washington should stop thinking about how to plant the seeds of division, but it shouldn't be under any illusion that it can make them grow.

A second approach, found more in practice than in academic journals, might be called "with us or against us." This approach takes the form of US policymakers confronting other states over their engagement with China and Russia, demanding they side with the US position, and sometimes threatening punitive measures if they don't.⁵¹ It is predicated on an unrelenting Manichean struggle that, in its most extreme form, requires approaching nearly every global issue as a zero-sum battle with China and Russia. Glimpses of this model can be seen when US officials engage third-party states less on the substance of particular issues—such as energy projects, pandemic response, or infrastructure development under the BRI—than on the optics of whether they appear to support or oppose policies favored by Beijing and/or Moscow.

This approach toward the Sino-Russian entente goes beyond a basic (and correct) acknowledgement that the two illiberal major powers are honing authoritarian governance models at home and, at least on some level, promoting them abroad. The model takes the contest much further and focuses on pressuring third states, or groups of states, to actively, definitively, and many times publicly, side with Washington or be subject to retaliation. Countries that might otherwise

lean toward the United States are criticized for not totally aligning, while longtime allies and partners must endure a series of purity tests, even when their overall commitment to liberal democracy and/or fidelity to protecting US interests otherwise is clear and deep-rooted.

Defenders of this approach argue that China and Russia make inroads globally by getting their proverbial camel's nose under the tent in capitals and organizations around the world. For example, China has spent the last two decades joining an array of international organizations (the WTO in 2001 and the Arctic Council as an observer in 2013 to name just two). Beijing has also increased its profile in several organizations to which it has belonged for decades. The UN system has fifteen major technical organizations of which China leads four. No other country leads more than one. Small steps presage big moves, so vigilance is essential, the argument goes. The total confrontation approach tries to make clear to third states by threatening them to make a black-and-white choice and arguing that they cannot have it both ways; liberal democracy, and the benefits of aligning with the United States, is not an *a la carte* proposition. It likewise tells China and Russia that the West, led by the United States, is tracking their every move and will confront them at every turn, so they should assume bids for global leadership will be costly and difficult.

The dangers of this approach are manifold. It clings to assumptions from the unipolar moment when US power peaked, not the messier and more decentralized world US policymakers confront today. It also focuses more on enforcing rigid alignment with Washington's dictates than on building a durable coalition with genuine shared visions for domestic and global governance systems. In practice, it means American policymakers must spend their limited time and resources browbeating like-minded states into submission, which often only makes them less interested in developing and implementing common positions on complex issues. For their part, developing countries who are mostly seeking to deliver material gains for their people often want any help they can get, especially when the West is not offering an alternative (something to which democratic states are, ironically, often tone-deaf).

In sum, neither the tactical capitulation needed to actively drive wedges in the Sino-Russian entente, nor the total confrontation that alienates allies, partners, and fence-sitters alike are well-suited for the world Washington faces today.

Changing Strategic Geometry: From Triangle to Hexagon

The United States needs a policy for facing down the Sino-Russian entente that addresses the myriad challenges posed by greater alignment between Beijing and Moscow without ceding critical interests or descending into a full-blown

confrontation. At its core, that policy needs to be situated inside a broader conception of global power that includes countries often left off lists of great powers but that bring massive economic, diplomatic, and military heft, both individually and collectively, sufficient to merit that title based on the most critical metrics of state power.

In other words, American strategists need to jettison the outdated “strategic triangle” model and replace it with a “strategic hexagon” that brings in three additional powers: Japan, India, and Europe, which anchor the Eurasian continent

Strategists need to consider a strategic hexagon that brings in Japan, India, and Europe.

on all sides. For Europe, we primarily mean the European Union and the United Kingdom, although on certain issues, the United States will find engaging the three largest countries of the UK, France, and Germany to be most effective. Countering the Sino-Russian quasi-alliance’s goals to undermine American interests, US alliances, and the rules-based international order will require the United States to marshal the collective strength of Japan,

India, and Europe. As a group, they eclipse China and Russia on nearly every facet of global power. In military spending, technological prowess, population, soft power, or share of global GDP, the United States, Japan, India, and Europe outperform Russia and China by nearly every indicator.

Some might construe this group as simply a rehashed “League of Democracies” along the lines proposed in 2007 by Senator John McCain.⁵² That is the wrong frame, though, because it evokes a muscular—and, occasionally, militarist—vision for democracy promotion that united pro-intervention liberal internationalists with neoconservatives. Their collective vision, forged in the unipolar moment, is no longer feasible or advisable, if it ever was. The League of Democracies concept also suggests that ideology should be the group’s organizing principle. To be sure, the United States, Japan, India, and the major European powers are all democratic states that consider representative government a geopolitical asset. But fundamentally, aligning with those powers within the “strategic hexagon” constitutes a means for achieving a preponderance of power across mostly material dimensions. It’s more of a realist than a normative project. In that sense, it adapts, rather than refutes, the logic of the original strategic triangle.

Further, the League framing often would be ill-suited for India’s historic non-aligned foreign policy orientation and for all these powers’ diplomacy in the developing world and/or with middle powers that are not democracies. By contrast, our proposal accounts for the reality that, in some cases, domestic political trajectories within the bloc led by the United States are trending in illiberal directions. Washington should not ignore those developments, but it also should not

predicate strategic cooperation on pristine democratic practice, especially where American democracy itself falls short. Lastly, there is a tradeoff between size and functionality. We propose more of a contact group of like-minded powerful states rather than an inclusive summit of global democracies.

Actualizing the “strategic hexagon” approach means, first and foremost, improving consultations and developing detailed understandings of the positions between Washington, Tokyo, Delhi, and Brussels (as well as individual European capitals like Paris, Berlin, and London) across the range of issues, from military to diplomacy to economics and technology. The most effective way to do that is through two new institutional arrangements, one that convenes all four of the democratic powers inside the hexagon and another that convenes all six. The United States meets and consults regularly with Japan, India, and Europe but almost always does so bilaterally, missing an important opportunity to strengthen the collective hand of this group of great powers. By convening regularly on issues such as trade, global standards, security, or connectivity, the four powers could exert considerable influence to balance China and Russia. One such idea would be to set up a US-India-Europe-Japan forum to actively coordinate on Indo-Pacific issues.

The United States will have to be careful, however, not to confuse the goal of strengthening economic, diplomatic, and even security cooperation among the four democratic poles in the “strategic hexagon” with trying to force policies into lockstep or requiring states to pick sides. Japan, India, and Europe would no doubt welcome more coordination and cooperation with the United States, but none of them are in a position to exchange that cooperation for a complete or even partial separation from either China or Russia. The challenge for American policymakers will be working toward coordination among a diverse set of states while also tolerating different approaches toward similar aims.

The challenge will be coordinating among diverse states while tolerating different approaches.

Washington will need to avoid creating unnecessary and counterproductive rifts with Japan, India, and Europe that further weaken their respective sides of the hexagon. More specifically, the United States should refrain from targeting any of those states for actions they take locally to balance China and/or Russia, even if it means transactional engagement with a US competitor. Tokyo’s engagement with Moscow on the Northern Territories, which Russia calls the Kuril Islands, provides an illustrative example. India’s continued acquisition of some Russian defense systems like the S-400 and Delhi’s support for Chabahar port in Iran as a potential counter to China’s development of Gwadar port in Pakistan under BRI are other instances. The United

States also needs to be careful about adopting aggressive counterbalancing measures against China or Russia that have second-order effects on our closest allies. One example is the 2018 steel and aluminum tariffs, which were chiefly designed to hit imports from China but ratcheted up trade tensions with the EU as well.

A second way to actualize the “strategic hexagon” approach is by encouraging and empowering this group of four to disrupt, deter, and defend against Chinese and Russian tactics. As stated above, those two powers routinely share lessons on how to effectively employ everything from disinformation campaigns to economic coercion. The United States and its allies need to do the same thing when it comes to countering such tools. For example, learning from Estonia’s experience of living through and then recovering from Russia’s 2007 cyber attack by improving defenses and resilience, and tightening “cyber hygiene,” might shape Japanese cyber defenses against China. Or the Baltic States and Japan can learn from one another as they both grapple with an uptick in foreign aircraft entering their airspace. Individual allies and partners are threatened in different ways by China and Russia, but their increasingly close coordination on tactics makes allied consultations across multiple regions more important than ever. The United States is in a unique position to lead such efforts.

Fortifying allied responses to Sino-Russian tactics has the added benefit of preventing the United States from trying to counter the two powers in every corner of the globe and consequently falling prey to overstretch. Of course, Washington needs to stand firm on vital national interests and many simply important interests, too. But it should not try to turn every issue into a test case for global competition with China and Russia where one side wins. By helping allies monitor their respective regions and enhance their offensive and defensive toolkit, the United States can, at least in select cases, exercise restraint, let allies take the lead, and avoid giving Beijing and Moscow the opportunity to exploit US overreach. Here, American strategists should hew closely to twentieth century geopolitics scholar Nicholas Spykman’s theory that the “rimlands” of Eurasia are the real fulcrum of power, rather than trying to command a majority of the Eurasian landmass. US policymakers should also emulate the late-nineteenth century father of US naval strategy Alfred Thayer Mahan’s focus on commanding the global commons, especially the high seas, a notion that has been reaffirmed by contemporary scholars.⁵³ Simply put, the United States should maintain an active presence in the world, but avoid inserting US troops or other precious resources into conflicts for less-than-vital goals.

Finally, US leaders can't mistake the strategic hexagon for a square. In other words, the United States must engage selectively with China and Russia—both on their own and together—on both the core issues of war and peace and global challenges like climate change. As opposed to the Cold War practice, though, where US engagement with those two powers—often in the form of secret shuttle diplomacy—left allies on the sidelines, these talks should be done in conjunction with Japan, India, and Europe. The “strategic hexagon” grouping, with India on the list, brings more collective weight than the G7 but isn't as unwieldy as the G20, which has struggled in recent years to even issue communiques to showcase members' shared interests and common resolve. A far-reaching dialogue on strategic stability issues would be the best place to start. But it would need to go beyond counting nuclear warheads and launchers to include explorations of how cyber, space, and emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and unmanned systems affect both steady-state and crisis stability.

The US must also engage selectively with China and Russia.

The Trump administration has expressed a desire for arms control talks in principle with the stipulation that they include China and even appointed a special envoy to spearhead the negotiation.⁵⁴ But so far, it has failed to develop a detailed substantive proposal or sufficient support from allies and partners to pursue it fruitfully. Managing hotspots around the world could be another topic for coordination, even if cooperation in places like Afghanistan currently feels largely out of reach,⁵⁵ although doing so will require acknowledging the geopolitical elements of each crisis instead of trying to pretend they can be de-linked from broader relations with either Beijing or Moscow. This type of diplomacy will require a deeper understanding of the contours of Chinese and Russian positions on relevant issues and where the two powers might differ.

Dealing with the Sino-Russian entente in its present heyday does not require wishfully downplaying its relative strength or making ill-advised compromises in hopes of trying to drive wedges between them. Cultivating a broader counter-balancing coalition within a “strategic hexagon” can bolster the US position, husband American power, fortify allied relationships, and ensure the protection of American interests and values in a fast-changing world.

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