



Navigating the Deepening Russia-China Partnership

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Executive Summary

Ties between China and Russia have grown. In virtually every dimension of their relationship—from the diplomatic to defense and economic to informational realms—cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has increased. Political observers in Washington and beyond have noted their alignment, yet they remain divided over what these growing ties portend.

Perhaps the most concerning—and least understood—aspect of the Russia-China partnership is the synergy their actions will generate. Analysts understand well the challenges that Russia and China each pose to the United States. But little thought has been given to how their actions will combine, amplifying the impact of both actors. As this report highlights, the impact of Russia-China alignment is likely to be far greater than the sum of its parts, putting U.S. interests at risk globally.

The synergy between Russia and China will be most problematic in the way that it increases the challenge that China poses to the United States. Already, Beijing is working with Moscow to fill gaps in its military capabilities, accelerate its technological innovation, and complement its efforts to undermine U.S. global leadership. Simply put, Russia is amplifying America's China challenge.

Russia's amplification of the China challenge will be most consequential for the United States on two fronts: the defense domain and the democracy and human rights domain. There are also several broader implications their cooperation will create for U.S. global influence:

Defense. Looking across all dimensions of their relationship, Russia-China cooperation is likely to create the most significant challenges for the United States in the defense domain. China is leveraging its relationship with Moscow to fill gaps in its capabilities. Deepening Sino-Russian defense relations amplify Russia and China's ability to project power and more visibly and credibly signal to onlooking countries their willingness to challenge U.S. dominance in key regions. Their joint naval maneuvers with countries like Iran allow competitors to increase their power projection and force U.S. strategists to account for new scenarios.

Their cooperation accelerates their efforts to erode U.S. military advantages—a dynamic that is especially problematic for U.S. strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. Russia already provides China advanced weapons systems that enhance China's air defense, anti-ship, and submarine capabilities and better equip the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to keep the United

States out of its backyard. The two countries are also increasing their technology cooperation, which could eventually allow them to innovate collectively faster than the United States can on its own, straining an already-stressed U.S. defense budget. Ultimately, sustained—and more problematically, deepening—Sino-Russian cooperation would put at risk America's ability to deter Chinese aggression in the region and uphold its commitment to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific.

Democracy and human rights. Russia-China alignment poses significant risks to liberal democracy and the American way of life. The two countries have long sought to push back against Western democracy promotion, but since 2014 and again in the wake of COVID-19, it is apparent that China and Russia are doing much more than countering perceived support for “color revolutions” in their respective peripheries. They have gone on the offensive to undermine democracy and universal rights as the foundation of the current liberal order, and are learning from each other how to increase the efficacy of their tactics. Already, Russia and China are popularizing authoritarian governance, exporting their best practices, watering down human rights norms, backing each other up to defend strategic interests in multilateral forums, creating norms around cyber and internet sovereignty, and bolstering illiberal leaders and helping them stay in power. Some of this is more alignment than coordination. But the point is that they are singing from the same sheet of music, which increases the dose of their messaging. They legitimize each other's actions, making them more persuasive with swing states, which will be crucial in determining the future trajectory of democracy.

Looking forward, policymakers should expect their anti-democratic synergy to continue. Washington will need to remain vigilant against the countries' overlapping and potentially compounding efforts to interfere in America's domestic politics. As Russia remains persistent in its drive to undermine U.S. democracy, China grows increasingly bold, and U.S.-China relations remain fraught. Beyond the United States, Russian narratives designed to undermine trust in institutions will create fertile ground for Chinese narratives about the failings of democracy and the superiority of authoritarian systems to take root. Beyond polluting the global information environment, Beijing and Moscow are likely to set forth alternative platforms by which information can be disseminated. This type of synergy is also likely to move into new spaces like artificial intelligence (AI) and other emerging technologies. In particular, Russia and China

both offer models and different approaches to digital authoritarianism. Although they are pursuing different paths to utilizing technology to more effectively control their people, together they offer an array of options that make digital control more accessible and flexible for a broader swath of countries. Working together, they may also make advances in approaches to surveillance and predictive analysis.

Global influence. Russia and China are aligned in their efforts to weaken cohesion among U.S. allies and partners and dilute U.S. sway with countries and international institutions. Moreover, Russia and China are working to reduce the centrality of the United States in the global economic system. Already, Moscow and Beijing are cooperating to obviate U.S. sanctions and export controls, mitigating the effects of U.S. economic pressure. If their partnership deepens, or even if each country individually builds up resilience to U.S. pressure, it would have the potential to dilute the efficacy of U.S. coercive financial tools, especially sanctions and export controls, which have been a key part of the U.S. foreign policy arsenal. The United States would have less ability to use such financial measures to isolate and constrain the unwanted actions of not just China and Russia, but other countries that could tap into their networks to bypass U.S. pressure. If their efforts at de-dollarization accelerate, for example, it would weaken Washington's ability to enforce sanctions globally and impair U.S. anti-corruption, anti-money laundering, and other efforts that strengthen the global system.

To be successful in meeting this challenge, Washington will need to prioritize and advance several actions designed to collectively limit the depth of Russia and China's partnership and mitigate the challenges their cooperation poses to U.S. interests and values. First, the United States should seek to change Russia's calculus such that Moscow views some cooperation with the United States and Europe as possible and preferable to its growing subservience to China. The current realities in U.S.-Russia relations mean that moving in this direction would take time. Russian actions, including the Kremlin's persistent efforts to target U.S. elections, amplify U.S. social divisions, and undermine U.S. faith in democratic institutions, will be the key factor limiting what is possible in the near term. The difficulties of lifting U.S. sanctions on Russia in the event that Moscow changes its policy course will be another obstacle. In the meantime, then, the United States should monitor and plan for, create headwinds to, and—where possible—pull at the seams in Russia-China relations. This report identifies policy recommendations in each of these categories.

The United States should not write off Russia-China relations as just an uncomfortable or unnatural partnership. But nor should Washington seek to counter their cooperation in every dimension of their partnership or compete intensely in every region. Instead, policymakers must be equipped with a more concrete understanding of how Russia-China relations are likely to evolve, an understanding of those areas where their cooperation (or even their aligned independent policy) would be most damaging to U.S. security and foreign policy interests, and a plan for navigating and disrupting the challenge. This report addresses these critical gaps in U.S. foreign policy thinking and planning.

Introduction

Ties between China and Russia have grown. In virtually every dimension of their relationship—from the diplomatic to defense and economic to informational realms—cooperation between Beijing and Moscow has increased. Political observers in Washington and beyond have noted their alignment. Yet policymakers and pundits remain divided over what these growing ties portend. Skeptics argue that relations between China and Russia are simply a marriage of convenience—that Beijing and Moscow self-interestedly work together where their interests align, but there is little that positively unites them. The skeptics cite a litany of barriers—deep-seated mistrust, Russian insecurity about its territory in the Far East, economic asymmetry, and a lack of cultural consonance—that make the Sino-Russian partnership an unnatural and unlikely one. According to this view, there is little that Washington needs to do to address their deepening partnership, as it is likely to be limited and fleeting.

This report argues that this line of thinking is misguided and ahistorical. Already, the trajectory of Russia-China relations demonstrates that the obstacles to their cooperation have not prevented their ties from growing. Instead, the extent of their cooperation has far surpassed what anyone

thought was possible just five years ago. In the defense realm, Russia continues to sell increasingly sophisticated weapons systems to Beijing, including the S-400 missile defense system, that enhance China's military capabilities and ability to keep the United States out of its backyard. The two countries also have increased technology cooperation, aligned their efforts in the information domain, used their partnership in efforts to obviate U.S. sanctions and export controls, and worked in unison in multilateral organizations to water down human rights norms and rewrite norms and standards in areas like the internet and cyber to advance their authoritarian worldview.

Sustained—and more problematically, deepening—Russia-China cooperation would have real implications for the United States. In particular, their cooperation would amplify the challenge that each country poses to the United States. The implications would be most profound in the case of China, which is likely to continue to look to Moscow to fill gaps in its military capabilities, accelerate its technological innovation, and complement its efforts to undermine U.S. global leadership. Beijing's ability to maintain and benefit from partnerships with like-minded countries like Russia will only intensify

America's competition with an adversarial Communist Party-led China. Simply put, Russia is amplifying America's China challenge.

Russia, too, is using its growing ties with Beijing to offset vulnerabilities in its relationship with the United States. Already, Moscow has worked with Beijing to mitigate the effects of U.S. and European sanctions and other efforts to isolate the Kremlin in the wake of its illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent occupation of Ukraine in 2014. Russia is also likely to look to China to legitimize Moscow's role as a great power on the global stage. As the two countries work to advance shared goals, even if uncoordinated, their alignment constitutes a more potent force working in opposition to the United States and its values and interests.

The United States should not write off Russia-China relations as just an uncomfortable or unnatural partnership. But Washington also should not seek to counter their cooperation in every dimension of their partnership or compete intensely in every region. Instead, policymakers must be equipped with a more concrete understanding of how Russia-China relations are likely to evolve, an understanding of those areas where their cooperation would be most damaging to U.S. security and foreign

policy interests, and a plan for navigating and disrupting the challenge. This

report addresses these critical gaps in U.S. foreign policy thinking and planning.

This report is premised on the assessment that Russia-China relations will continue, if not deepen, over the next five to ten years. This assessment recognizes that Russia and China are not fully aligned in all areas. Moscow and Beijing compete in areas like arms sales and nuclear energy, for example, and their interests diverge in key places like India, the Arctic, and Central Asia. Some foreign policy thinkers in Moscow are also increasingly attuned to the risk that Russia may become overly reliant on Beijing and are considering approaches for Moscow to hedge against this possibility. Yet despite their differences and concerns in Moscow, the two countries are unlikely to diverge in the foreseeable future as the factors facilitating their alignment are poised to persist over the horizon. In other words, even if diverging interests push Russia and China apart in the long term, their continued collaboration—if left unaddressed—has the potential to undermine U.S. influence and interests in the near term. This report is designed to equip policymakers to prepare for, mitigate, and where possible disrupt the risks this growing alignment would pose to the United States.

Simply put, Russia is amplifying America's China challenge.

The Future of Russia-China Relations

Cooperation between Russia and China has been deepening since the waning days of the Cold War. During this period, Russia and China steadily eliminated territorial disputes, signed military cooperation agreements, inked policy alignment frameworks, and increased defense cooperation. Both Moscow and Beijing were intent on avoiding confrontation that would undermine both of their prospects for development and limit their ability to focus their efforts on other fronts.¹ Ties between Moscow and Beijing have only continued to expand across key dimensions of their partnership, including in the defense, democracy and human rights, technology and cyber, and economic realms. Below, we identify the factors that have driven their closer coordination and that are likely to sustain their partnership moving forward.

Desire to counterbalance U.S. global influence. Russian and Chinese values and views of the way the world should be ordered have converged. Russian and Chinese interests converge most prominently on their desire to serve as a counterweight to what they perceive as a preponderance of U.S. influence and to constrain U.S. power. Both countries see the United States as their most significant security challenge. But they also perceive that U.S. power is declining and seek to accelerate the shift to a multipolar world and reshape international rules and norms in ways that are more advantageous to their interests. Especially as U.S.-China relations continue to deteriorate, Russia and China are likely to lean into—and increasingly coordinate—their efforts to accelerate that change.

Efforts to counter Western democracy promotion. Russia and China view efforts to support democracy, especially U.S. efforts, as thinly veiled attempts to expand U.S. influence and as threatening their power. Moscow and Beijing consider criticism of their domestic political arrangements as interference in their internal affairs. They have found common cause in convincing other countries that U.S. efforts to support democratic governance are destabilizing and a pretext for U.S. geopolitical expansion. Although their efforts to counter democracy promotion are not new, they are changing in scope and intensity. Since 2014, Russia in particular has been taking the fight to Western democracies. Chinese leaders, too, blame the United States as the instigator of massive pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong—a rationale more palatable than the reality of popular distaste for the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) dismantling of the last vestiges of Hong Kong's autonomy.

Personal rapport and shared regime type. The camaraderie between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping has provided much of the impetus for cooperation.² The two leaders have a close personal relationship—Xi has called Putin his “best and bosom friend”³—and they meet with remarkable frequency. As both leaders are positioned to remain in power for some time, their personal affinity is likely to continue to drive deeper engagement. Moreover, the growing similarity between the Putin and CCP regimes is also likely to provide a basis for growing cooperation. Xi has consolidated power and dismantled the consensus-based decision-making that has characterized China's post-Mao political system. While meaningful distinctions between the governments remain, Xi's increasingly personalistic dictatorship has come to more closely resemble the Putin-dominated Russian regime. Research suggests that shared regime type enhances cooperation between states.⁴

U.S. posture toward China and Russia. U.S. actions have reinforced Russia and China's readiness to align. This has been true both at the geopolitical level and in more practical ways, as both sides have sought ways to work around and/or mitigate U.S. pressure. For example, the two countries seek to reduce Washington's centrality in global trade and finance and identify opportunities to obviate U.S. sanctions and export controls. Similarly, current geopolitical conditions have convinced Russia and China of their need to decrease their reliance on the West, creating incentive to work together to produce their own indigenous replacements for foreign, particularly American, technologies. For Russia, in particular, Putin and the elite around him anticipate prolonged confrontation with the West, making Russian actors ever more likely to concede to Chinese interests to maintain a strong relationship with Beijing. As U.S. tensions with China grow, the CCP too will view Moscow as an increasingly valuable partner.

Repeated interaction. Russia and China may have initially banded together in discontent with the United States and its dominant position, but their repeated interactions are fostering a deeper and enduring partnership. As they continue to work together on mutual areas of interest, from North Korea to Iran and in international institutions, they are building a foundation that will support a strong partnership. Even at the more micro level, exchanges between the two countries are growing. As they increase their number of technology exchanges and engagements at the local government level, and as more students study in each other's universities, the prospects

increase that the two countries can overcome historical mistrust and negative perceptions of each other, as described in greater depth below.

Not only are the key drivers of bilateral relations strengthening, but many of the factors that observers long assessed would constrain the relationship are eroding.

Russian concerns about insecurity. Analysts have long held that Russian concerns about insecurity in its far east would stymie cooperation. However, the Kremlin's concerns about insecurity have diminished, in part due to the two states having settled their territorial disputes. According to Alexander Gabuev, senior fellow and chair of the Russia in the Asia-Pacific Program at Carnegie's Moscow Center, the Russian government conducted a confidential interagency process in 2014 reviewing challenges to deeper engagement with China. Gabuev states that the Kremlin concluded that "although China would ultimately be more powerful than Russia, its rise does not pose an immediate challenge to Russian interests."⁵ Ultimately, Putin views the United States as a far more immediate threat to his hold on power. In particular, he views the United States as intent on regime change in Russia. He fears that U.S. support for democracy and the universality of human rights may embolden sympathetic constituencies with Russia and ultimately weaken his grip on power. Therefore, he is intent on working with China to oppose this more urgent challenge from the United States, while calculating that he will ultimately be able to manage the more distant threat that China poses.

Lack of cultural consonance. Cultural factors and historical enmity are likely to be enduring constraints on Russia-China relations. However, Xi and Putin dominate the media environments in their countries and are capable of slowly turning public opinion over time. Such a process would be hard and slow, but Beijing and Moscow have the capacity to reshape public attitudes, including through amplification of positive narratives about the countries' growing partnership, should they decide to.⁶ Already, Russian attitudes toward China have changed. According to Levada polling, in 2010 only 16 percent of Russians considered China a close ally. As of August 2020, 40 percent do.⁷ In a different poll conducted by Ipsos in September 2020, more than 80 percent of Russians think China will have a positive influence on global affairs in the next decade—the highest share among the 28 countries surveyed.⁸ A 2019 YouGov poll found 71 percent of Chinese viewed Russia as having a positive impact on world affairs, compared to a 2015

Pew poll that found only 51 percent of Chinese viewed Russia favorably. A sustained increase in interactions between the two countries—including through technology dialogues, academic exchanges, and lower-level government interactions—could also, over time, help overcome the negative views they hold of each other.

Economic and military asymmetry. As strongmen, Putin and Xi prioritize their survival in office above all else. For Putin, this means that a far-off and uncertain threat from a more powerful China is more acceptable than the immediate and certain threat he perceives from Washington or the instability that could stem from Russia's own stagnant economy. China helps Putin on both accounts. In his State of the Nation address in February 2019, Putin underscored that ties with China help bolster Russian security and prosperity, in particular through "harmonizing" his Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) plan with China's massive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Although China's Belt and Road infringes on Russian economic interests, Moscow appears to calculate that it cannot turn it back, and instead seeks benefit where it can, even if Beijing benefits more. This type of thinking stands in stark contrast to the more zero-sum calculus that the Kremlin applies to its relationship with the United States. Instead, the prevailing trend shows Moscow becoming ever more dependent on and accommodating of China and its concerns. Concurrently, Beijing has carefully avoided a direct challenge to the Kremlin's conception of itself as a great power as it works together with Moscow on a wide range of common concerns.

For Putin, a far-off and uncertain threat from a more powerful China is more acceptable than the immediate and certain threat he perceives from Washington.

For its part, Beijing may downgrade its relationship with an unpredictable and increasingly dependent Moscow in the long term. China's companies still benefit from access to U.S. capital markets and rely on U.S. demand in a way Russian companies do not, and Beijing remains less interested in antagonizing the United States than Moscow. Ultimately, however, China's leadership appreciates Putin as an immediate partner in its opposition to U.S. attempts to impede China's rise, efforts to reform global governance, and undermining of the values

that underpin the existing liberal order. The downturn in U.S.-China relations is likely to endure, raising the likelihood of Chinese approval of aggressive Russian tactics against the United States.

Beyond these broad, overarching drivers of Russia-China relations, there are several more pragmatic factors that facilitate cooperation in the different domains of their relationship. The next section describes the current state of Russia-China relations in four key dimensions of their relationship: defense, democracy and human rights, technology and cyber, and the economic realm. Each subsection identifies the drivers and constraints on their cooperation in that area and sketches out how their cooperation could evolve in the coming years. The goal is to make more concrete the risks that U.S. policymakers would confront if current trends in Russia-China relations persist.

Defense

Looking across all dimensions of their relationship, Russia-China cooperation is likely to create the most significant challenges for the United States in the defense domain. Already, there is clear evidence that Russia-China defense cooperation has deepened, including in ways that are detrimental to U.S. interests. Today's trend toward deeper cooperation dates back to the end of the Cold War, when the two countries initiated efforts to overcome long-standing tensions and reduce the potential for conflict along their shared border.⁹ Since then, the two countries have engaged in confidence-building measures, built consultative mechanisms and defense cooperation frameworks, and looked to reduce competition between them. Cooperation dramatically accelerated in 2014, when U.S.-Russia relations turned overtly adversarial. For Russia, the Ukraine crisis increased the importance the Kremlin placed on China as a market for arms exports, a supplier of components it could no longer access in the West, and a partner in opposing the United States. Today, Putin and Xi describe the bilateral relationship as a "comprehensive strategic partnership."¹⁰ Although this partnership falls short of a traditional military alliance, the two countries are engaging in militarily meaningful cooperation that creates challenges the United States must navigate. This section outlines the current status of their defense partnership in two key areas: arms sales and joint military exercises.

ARMS SALES AND DEFENSE TECHNICAL COOPERATION

Since the late 1990s, Russian military technology has flowed into China, enhancing People's Liberation Army

(PLA) capabilities. While Russian arms sales to China declined in the 2000s—in part due to Kremlin fears that weapons sold might one day be used against it and concerns about China's tendency to reverse-engineer Russian equipment—arms sales have rebounded, especially in the wake of the Ukraine crisis. Since then, Russian fears of insecurity in its far east have diminished, paving the way for Russia to provide Beijing with increasingly advanced weapons systems. Between 2014 and 2018, Russia provided Su-27 and Su-35 fighter aircrafts (it is notable that Beijing was the first foreign customer for this advanced system), S-300 and S-400 air defense systems, and anti-ship missiles. Russian arms now account for 70 percent of China's total arms imports and have played a meaningful role in the PLA's efforts to augment its air defense, anti-ship, and submarine capabilities.¹¹ Russian missile and fighter technology, in particular, enhances the PLA's readiness through better strategic air defense capability and improved ability to contest U.S. superiority, which is critical in a Taiwan or South China Sea scenario.

Since 2014, Russian-Chinese defense-industrial cooperation has also become more of a two-way street than it has been historically.¹² Western sanctions imposed on Russia in the wake of its illegal annexation of Crimea and subsequent occupation of eastern Ukraine limited Russia's access to Western technology, on which Moscow depended. Instead, Russia has turned to China for electronic components and naval diesel engines that it previously bought in the West, blunting the impact of Western sanctions.¹³

EXERCISES AND MILITARY EXCHANGES

Russian and Chinese joint military exercises have grown in frequency, scope, and complexity.¹⁴ Russia's first large-scale exercise with China was Peace Mission 2005, which became a recurring air and ground exercise, usually held under the auspices of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In 2012, this exercise regimen was bolstered by Joint Sea, an annual naval exercise used in part for geopolitical signaling. In recent years, Joint Sea has taken place in the Mediterranean and the South China Sea, with Chinese ships visiting the Black Sea and the Baltics. In 2016, the two countries also began simulated missile defense drills and added an exercise for internal security forces. That regimen intensified with Chinese participation in Russia's annual strategic command-staff exercises, starting with Vostok-2018 and Tsentr-2019—both significant developments from the Russian standpoint.

These joint exercises provide benefits to both countries that contribute to their security partnership. First and foremost, the exercises enable Russia and China to illustrate that U.S. efforts have not isolated either country. Instead, the two countries use exercises to signal their willingness and capacity to stand together, including in opposition to the United States. In August 2019, for example, Russia and China conducted a joint strategic bomber patrol in the Indo-Pacific, signaling their political convergence and willingness to push back against U.S. influence in the region. The recently expanded geographic scope of Sino-Russian military exercises suggests the two governments are more openly signaling support for each other's security priorities, both to each other and to third parties.¹⁵

More practically, Russia-China joint exercises help the Chinese and Russian armed forces improve their tactical and operational capabilities and enhance their ability to pursue unilateral and joint operations.¹⁶ And although Russia and China are unlikely to seek interoperability in the traditional sense, the two countries are working together in ways that enable them to divide a military theater of operations into fronts and deploy two separate operational combat groupings to fight in their preferred manner but toward the same goal.¹⁷ The exercises also signal mutual trust and build defense-military contacts that are important for mil-mil cooperation to gain traction at senior levels and serve as important expositions for future potential arms sales.

Finally, China's participation in Russian exercises also confers benefits to Chinese officers, who have no real combat experience. These officers gain valuable operational experience through exercising with and learning from Russian counterparts who have now seen combat in Ukraine and Syria, potentially offsetting one of the PLA's most significant weaknesses relative to the United States. In addition to the exercises, Russia has invited several thousand PLA service members to train at Russian Ministry of Defense universities.¹⁸

DRIVERS OF DEFENSE ALIGNMENT

Looking forward, two sets of drivers are likely to facilitate, if not deepen, Russia-China defense cooperation.

Convergence of threat perceptions. Russia and China view the United States as their primary geopolitical threat, and the persistence—if not escalation—of their antagonistic relationship with Washington will fuel their future defense cooperation. Both Putin and Xi view the U.S. military presence on their respective peripheries as a threat and share concerns about the

U.S. deployment of Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) and long-range strike capabilities, U.S. surveillance flights along the Russian and Chinese borders, and U.S. Navy Freedom of Navigation Operations. Moreover, both countries share concerns about the militarization of space, transnational terrorism, and regional security challenges such as the Korean Peninsula. Even in Central Asia—a region that appears ripe for competition between them—Russia and China both prioritize ensuring the stability of countries in the region. Russia and China share concerns that terrorism and instability in Central Asia could spill over and destabilize their own countries. Moreover, as China's economic interests in Central Asia have grown through its BRI, Beijing is committed to ensuring the security of its BRI investments, including by working with Russia.¹⁹ The growing alignment of Russian and Chinese security interests and the likely persistence of their view of the United States as an adversary will be the most significant factors driving their future defense cooperation.

Complementary needs and capabilities. More practically, China and Russia have complementary capabilities and interests in the defense domain. As discussed above, the PLA benefits from the advanced weapons systems it receives from Russia, as well as the operational experience it gains by exercising with Russia's combat-tested forces. Conversely, Russia benefits from Chinese capital, including investments needed to finance major Russian projects, and Beijing's purchase of energy products and military equipment that U.S. sanctions prevent Russia from selling elsewhere. In some areas, such as shipbuilding and unmanned aerial vehicles, China has strengths where Russia has weaknesses or is behind. Russia has also turned to China in the wake of Western sanctions to access technology like electronic components that it previously obtained from the West. Moreover, both countries likely view cross-collaboration on a number of fronts—such as guided missile technology, unmanned systems, and training data for artificial intelligence (AI)—as opportunities to fill gaps and accelerate progress.

Despite these drivers, however, there are limits to how far Russia-China defense cooperation will develop. The two powers, for example, are unlikely to enter a formal military alliance. This is in part because, as Mike Kofman has noted, the two powers' ambitions are not aligned geographically. Moreover, as two military superpowers, they have no need to provide each other with extended security guarantees. In addition, the following more tactical constraints are likely to bind their future defense cooperation.

The PLA benefits from the advanced weapons systems it receives from Russia, as well as the operational experience it gains by exercising with Russia's combat-tested forces.

Mistrust. Although defense cooperation has deepened, Russia-China defense cooperation is still characterized by distrust. Some analysts have highlighted Russian frustration with China's intellectual property (IP) theft, especially concerning weapons systems.²⁰ The fact that Russia continues to sell advanced weapons to China, however, indicates that IP concerns are unlikely to be deterministic of the relationship. For Russia, the benefits of access to Chinese markets will likely continue to outweigh the detriment of potential design theft.²¹ Moreover, arms sales between Russia and China are more heavily focused on things that would make them more capable against their primary adversary—the United States—rather than items that would be of major significance in a conflict against each other. Russia and China, in other words, will find ways to work together that do not aggravate historical mistrust, although some distrust remains and will likely continue to place constraints on the depth of their defense cooperation.

China's own military modernization. The more advanced the Chinese military becomes, the more challenging it will be for Russia to offer Beijing anything new.²² Russia is already finding it increasingly difficult to sell military technology to China given the substantial increase in PLA capabilities and Chinese technical knowledge. For example, China now has its own fifth-generation stealth fighter, the J-20, which is more technologically advanced than the Russian SU-35s. Given that for decades the flow of military technology has been from Moscow to Beijing, it remains to be seen whether the two countries can find other ways to collaborate in the military capabilities arena. Looking forward, China's growing defense-industrial potential is likely to change the nature of its cooperation with Russia, from transactional arms sales to greater joint development and technology transfer.²³

Nationalism within defense industries. Russian and Chinese defense industries are largely autarkic and the military establishments deeply nationalistic, which means they will seek, where possible, to protect defense-related technologies and limit co-development

and deeper engagement. In both cases, domestic actors are likely to be willing to invest outsized resources to maintain autonomy in certain sectors rather than seek efficiencies. Ultimately, domestic stakeholders who want the procurement dollars will serve as important constraints.²⁴

SCENARIOS FOR GREATER DEFENSE COOPERATION

The factors fueling Russia-China defense cooperation are likely to persist over the next five to ten years, creating conditions conducive to their deepening defense relations. Although Beijing and Moscow are unlikely to enter into a formal military alliance, their cooperation is likely to evolve in ways that will create challenges for the United States. Russia-China defense cooperation would be most likely to develop in the following ways:

Expanded technology exchanges and joint development. Russia and China have already worked together in ways that enhance their military capabilities, especially Beijing's. Looking forward, the United States should expect such cooperation to continue and eventually to move into increasingly sensitive domains. Most immediately, Russia is likely to look to China for ship production and naval capabilities, as the Russian Navy will face hull shortages in the near future and the PLA will increase its expeditionary maritime forces. Russia has also expressed interest in Chinese unmanned aerial vehicle technology.²⁵ China is likely to seek further air defense and missile deals with Russia, and the continued provision of jet engines—at least until China learns to make its own—would positively shape Chinese capabilities in the aerospace domain.²⁶ Other, more sensitive joint development projects could include counter-stealth technology, improved undersea detection, submarine quieting, and/or anti-satellite capabilities.²⁷ Cooperation in these domains could further erode U.S. military advantages, but because they are more sensitive they are less likely than the other types of cooperation described above.

Expanded joint exercises. Russia and China are likely to conduct future exercises that signal their intentions and capabilities to challenge regional balances of power or that support each other's regional objectives. For example, Russia and China conducted joint naval drills with Iran in the Indian Ocean in 2019. The exercise took place amid escalating tensions between the United States and Iran and were almost certainly intended to signal the countries' alignment and protect their shared interests in the Indian Ocean.²⁸ The United States should expect increasingly complex naval and combined arms exercises

that occur further afield from either Russian or Chinese coastal waters. While China and Russia are unlikely to seek the level of interoperability the United States enjoys with its allies, expanded joint exercises would signal both states' abilities to project power and could advance their great-power claims. Moreover, exercises will likely involve more advanced capabilities. Russia and China already shared command and control information during the 2017 Aerospace Security exercise, and they are likely to expand on signaling new counter-space and anti-access/area denial (A2AD) capabilities that challenge U.S. forces.²⁹

Joint operations. Russian and Chinese military-to-military exchanges, exercises, and training programs are ultimately likely to permit Russia and China to execute three potential contingencies: a joint intervention in Central Asia, a joint expeditionary operation in Africa or the Middle East, and a coordinated deployment of forces along separated operational fronts in the event of a military crisis in the Asia-Pacific region. While the U.S. may be least concerned about a joint Russian-Chinese operation in Central Asia, in other contexts China brings resources and scalability that when combined with Russian experience could change the regional impact of such an operation.³⁰

Aligning efforts to challenge U.S. policy. In regions or countries where Russian and Chinese interests align, Moscow and Beijing could eventually coordinate their combined capabilities to challenge U.S. foreign policy. Already, China and Russia combined their efforts to oppose U.S. pressure on Venezuela. Russia provided arms transfers on credit that gave Venezuela updated armored and air capabilities, while China provided some arms, surveillance technology, and capital investment to keep Nicolás Maduro's regime in power.³¹ Going forward, Russia and China could increase their efforts to combine their complementary capabilities to oppose U.S. interventions and signal their status as great powers. Africa, in particular, may be ripe for such alignment given that both countries have military footholds and operations on the continent.

Operations or assistance countering U.S. forces. A less likely but higher-impact scenario for future Russia-China defense cooperation would involve Chinese and Russian forces cooperating to directly counter the United States in a crisis. A scenario in which Russia and China confront the United States, however, does not need to be as extreme as a two-front, combined-arms

conventional campaign. In the event of a crisis, either Russia or China could take actions in a given domain to free up its counterpart's resources. For example, if the United States intervened in a Taiwan crisis, Russia could provide support to China by interfering with U.S. space surveillance capabilities or providing China with Russian intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets, without contributing combat forces. Alternatively, China could leverage its growing ownership of European infrastructure to slow a NATO response to Russian aggression. In a crisis, for example, China could assist Russia by finding "technical reasons" for a port to be unusable for cargo operations, thereby slowing U.S. reinforcements.³² Both Russia and China have incentives to see the United States pay a maximum cost in a conflict, even if they are not necessarily committed to seeing their counterpart win or lose. The possibility that Russia and China will act jointly to counter the United States presents major challenges to American strategic planners.

Democracy and Human Rights

Beyond the defense realm, Russia-China cooperation is likely to have the most profound implications for the United States in the democracy and human rights domain. Much of the recent acceleration of Russia-China relations stems from the countries' increasingly shared vision of a less democratic world more hospitable to the continued rule of each country's authoritarian regime and its expanding global interests. Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent occupation of Ukraine drove Russia toward a China increasingly concerned about Western efforts to foment "color revolutions" in the wake of the Arab Spring and growing international criticism of the People's Republic of China (PRC) efforts to undermine the autonomy of Hong Kong.

Putin and Xi both judge that the United States and its efforts to support democratic political processes, transparent and pluralistic institutions, the rule of law, and access to information present a threat to their hold on power. Moreover, they have a common interest in pushing back against what they see as increasingly assertive efforts by a range of democracies to support a human rights and anti-corruption agenda, including the use of more coercive policies like the European Union's newly created global human rights sanctions regime. More broadly, Beijing and Moscow judge that the U.S.-dominated international order disadvantages them and fails to accommodate their interests.

Chinese and Russian collaboration in international institutions and remarkably frequent high-level engagements reflect their growing agreement about how

the world should be ordered. A central pillar of their worldview is the shared insistence on the principle of sovereignty and non-interference in the domestic affairs of states, at least when it serves each regime's interests. Both Moscow and Beijing judge that weakening democracy can accelerate the decline of Western influence and advance both Russia's and China's geopolitical goals. The two countries are finding common cause in undermining liberal democratic norms and institutions, weakening cohesion among democratic allies and partners, and reducing U.S. global influence.

This section outlines the current status of their cooperation in the democracy domain, including their shared efforts as the leading illiberal powers in the international system to weaken democratic governance, promote and sustain authoritarianism, and undermine democratic norms and universal human rights.

WEAKENING DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Russian and Chinese foreign policy tactics are converging in new and synergistic ways to increase challenges to democratic actors around the world. While the two countries' approaches are different and seemingly uncoordinated, taken together, they are having a more corrosive effect on democracy than either would have single-handedly. Russia's assaults on democratic institutions, including attacks on elections, the spread of corruption, and disinformation campaigns, weaken some actors' commitment to democracy. But it is the alternative model of success that China provides and, more importantly, the investment it offers vulnerable governments that give weak democracies the capacity to pull away from the West. Likewise, China's engagement would likely be less potent without Russian efforts to weaken democratic institutions and loosen commitment to democracy.

This dynamic is most apparent in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, where long-standing Russian efforts to discredit democracy and the EU exist in tandem with major infrastructure investments from China. For example, Serbia, where Russia has long projected influence to undermine democratic progress, now has a central role in China's plans to fund transport projects in Europe as part of the Belt and Road Initiative. Serbian leaders view Chinese financing as an opportunity to promote themselves domestically by delivering improved infrastructure without abiding by the strict regulations that come with European funds. China is also offering training and technology to enhance the increasingly illiberal Serbian government's internal security and surveillance capabilities.

Both countries are actively interfering in the political processes of countries around the world, even as China lets Russia take the lead on more aggressive and discoverable measures.

The Kremlin seeks to spread disinformation, sow confusion, and exploit divisions to polarize public debates. China, in contrast, traditionally has used a subtler and more risk-averse strategy, preferring stability that is conducive to building economic ties and influence. Beijing has also historically sought to create positive perceptions of China and to legitimize its form of government.

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China's disinformation during the COVID-19 pandemic, however, has evinced a newfound willingness to deploy Russian techniques. Beijing has promoted elaborate conspiracy theories to inject confusion into global narratives about the pandemic's origins in China.

The two countries are also bolstering the fortunes of aspiring illiberal leaders deemed friendly to Chinese and Russian interests by indirectly funding their electoral campaigns, timing investments to benefit them politically, and targeting information operations.

PROMOTING AND SUSTAINING AUTHORITARIANISM

Beyond weakening democracy, China and Russia have long pursued a number of direct actions to prop up friendly dictatorships, enhancing the durability of these regimes. Most visibly, they use loans and investment to reinforce besieged regimes, as both have done in Venezuela. They offer no-strings-attached financial aid and weapons, diluting Western leverage to press for human rights and rule-of-law reform, as with China's assistance to Hun Sen's regime in Cambodia. Russia fashions itself as a "sovereignty provider," helping authoritarian states defend themselves from liberal forces that might cause regime change.

Moreover, the Kremlin and the CCP are collectively popularizing authoritarian governance as an alternative to democracy, particularly in developing countries. Chinese President Xi has publicly and repeatedly explained that China's approach to development under

authoritarian governance offers a viable alternative model for countries impressed by China's rapid modernization and rise to become the world's second-largest economy. China and Russia are offering officials around the world training on authoritarian governance methods and how to monitor, censor, and control their own populations. Through such methods, and the provision of surveillance and monitoring technology and training on internal policing and security, China and Russia are also ensuring that illiberal actors have the tools necessary to retain power even in the face of popular pressure. In most cases this is not the result of China and Russia pushing their tactics and methods on others, but rather leaders seeking out best practices for shoring up their domestic control. In other cases, Russia and China simply offer a model that other leaders seek to emulate. Moscow and Beijing's alignment confers greater legitimacy to the authoritarian models they offer.

UNDERMINING DEMOCRATIC NORMS AND UNIVERSAL HUMAN RIGHTS

Even as their efforts combine to corrode democracy in individual countries, Russia and China are together weakening norms and international institutions central to democracy and human rights protections. China and Russia are bending the United Nations (U.N.) to their anti-rights agenda, downplaying individual rights and emphasizing state-led development, national sovereignty, and nonintervention as norms above protection of human rights. The countries have targeted hundreds of human rights posts spread across numerous U.N. peacekeeping and political missions, for example, working in the U.N. General Assembly's budget committee to defund as many posts with the words "human rights" in the job description as possible. U.N. posts in Russia's and China's crosshairs include those focused on monitoring, investigating, and reporting on the abuse of women and children and other rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, Mali, Haiti, and elsewhere.

China has pressured members of the Human Rights Council, especially those economically dependent on China, to submit only positive reviews of China during its Universal Periodic Review—a process in which the council examines countries' human rights records every five years. China's growing heft as the second-biggest contributor is more fundamentally causing U.N. bodies to remain silent on China's abuses in Xinjiang and elsewhere. The countries also routinely use their powerful, veto-wielding positions on the U.N. Security Council (UNSC) to block action to prevent or address gross

human rights abuses. In 2018, for example, China and Russia successfully mobilized UNSC members to prevent then-High Commissioner for Human Rights Zeid Ra'ad al-Husseini from addressing the council on Syria.

DRIVERS OF DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ALIGNMENT

Russia and China view democracy—and especially U.S. efforts to support it—as thinly veiled U.S. attempts to expand influence and topple their (and other "unfriendly") regimes. Both countries have consistently sought to counter Western democracy promotion by preventing "Western infiltration" from encouraging domestic dissent and by engaging with like-minded dictatorships. These efforts are not new, but several factors are likely to continue to drive Russia-China alignment, if not more overt coordination, going forward:

Shared desire to capitalize on democratic weaknesses and exacerbate them. Because Moscow and Beijing gauge their status in relation to the United States, they view weakening democracy as a means of enhancing their own standing and regime legitimacy. The Kremlin's attack on the 2016 U.S. presidential election, for example, was intended, at least in part, to tarnish U.S. democracy and allow Moscow to claim that Washington has no right telling other nations how to conduct their elections. PRC official propaganda and information operations on global social media undertaken by entities linked to the PRC increasingly highlight the failings of U.S. democratic processes and social divides, seeking to paint as hypocritical U.S. criticism of China's repressive policies and system of governance. Both countries have also attempted to highlight the United States' and some European countries' ineffective responses to COVID-19 as evidence of the failings of democracy.

Unseating established norms, legitimizing authoritarianism. Both Beijing and Moscow view eliminating the normative underpinnings of the international system, specifically liberal democracy and universal human rights, as critical to gaining a greater voice in global governance and, in China's case, smoothing its path to true great-power status under CCP leadership. Chinese leaders have sought to gradually weaken democratic norms to enhance the international legitimacy of China's Leninist-capitalist brand of governance and enable Beijing's rise. Each country expects the United States to cynically use existing norms and the nature of their regimes as a ploy to prevent them from having a greater say in international institutions and to preserve a system that advantages Washington.

Defending against regime change. The CCP and the Kremlin each expect that the United States is bent upon undermining regime control, including through democracy promotion they view as causing color revolutions in their regions. Washington's mounting focus on China's repressive human rights policies at home and targeting of the CCP specifically will further convince Beijing that the United States is bent upon regime change as a solution to containing China's rising power and emergence as a peer competitor. This conviction is likely to lead Beijing to view Russia as an increasingly valuable partner in pushing back against the United States. To this end, the Chinese and Russian regimes will continue to share tools and best practices on authoritarian control and possibly look for opportunities to jointly innovate new approaches for citizen control.

While there are numerous constraints on the development of the Russia-China relationship and cooperation in discrete areas such as defense and cyber, there are few factors limiting their collaboration to undermine democracy and universal rights. Russia's role as a disrupter, willing to brazenly undermine democracies and interfere in their political

processes, and China's lower risk tolerance, as it seeks the mantle of a responsible great power, remain potential constraints

on their future cooperation in this domain. But the two countries have used this difference in tactics to their advantage, and, as noted above, China is already moving to take a more aggressive approach to advance its interests in ways that undermine democracy abroad.

Indeed, the common strategic approach to these issues indicates virtually unlimited potential for close collaboration to refashion an international order less democratic and more suited to Russia and China's interests, forming the foundation for a more robust relationship going forward.

SCENARIOS FOR GREATER COOPERATION

There is little visible evidence to suggest that the Kremlin and Beijing are explicitly coordinating their influence operations or other efforts to subvert democracy. But even if there is not intentional coordination between them, the result is much the same. Because of their alignment, they are rowing in the same direction, creating a more potent anti-democratic force. Looking

forward, the longer they are aligned, the more saturated the impact of their alignment will become. Moreover, it will become increasingly likely that where they see their interests overlap, the two countries will explicitly coordinate their actions in the democracy and human rights domain. Their relationship in the democracy and human rights space could evolve in the following ways:

Russia and China increase the dose of their shared messaging and extend the reach of their propaganda and disinformation campaigns. Russia and China are likely to increase the coordination of their global efforts at information manipulation, including through the media. Already there is evidence that Russian outlets in some European media markets amplify CCP messaging. The two countries are also institutionalizing their coordination through efforts such as the Media Forum, where they coordinate and share best practices to improve their capacity to promote their point of view—what China calls “discourse power.” Moreover, Russia and China's success in their complementary disinformation campaigns could drive the two actors to coordinate more closely

and intentionally.

In particular, the exchange of Russian and Chinese best practices and cross-border learning on digital information operations will become increasingly

hardwired into interactions between the countries. China will adopt more Russia-style disinformation tactics, actively coordinating messages, deploying them selectively in different countries, and benefiting from dissemination across mutual platforms. The impact of greater coordination would only be supercharged by the dominance of China's social media applications. Russia and China could use these platforms, along with the BRI, to further control the information environment and expand the reach and effect of their disinformation campaigns beyond their own borders.

More robust support for digital dictatorship. China and Russia are both convinced of the utility of digital tools to increase their control over their citizens. They recognize the role that social media and other emerging technologies have played in overthrowing repressive and unaccountable leaders, and proactively sought to coopt these same tools and use them in ways that actually tighten their grip on power. But Russia and China have

The Chinese and Russian regimes will continue to share tools and best practices on authoritarian control, and possibly look for opportunities to jointly innovate new approaches for citizen control.

approached digital authoritarianism differently, in large part because they started from very different places domestically. Beijing is capable of blocking information before it ever reaches citizens and is creating a pervasive system of surveillance that can integrate vast amounts of data to aid citizen control. Russia is creating its own less technologically sophisticated model of digital authoritarianism, based in large part on a system of legal mechanisms, discreet online surveillance, and efforts to alter and manipulate online discourse and narratives. Russia is likely to learn from and adopt Chinese tools, further refining its brand of digital dictatorship. But just as importantly, the differences in the Chinese and Russian toolkits for digital dictatorship will offer aspiring autocrats a grab bag of options to tailor an approach to digital control that is best suited to their own domestic context. In some cases—most likely in full autocracies—China’s model will dominate. In hybrid regimes where leaders cannot get away with such blatant repression, leaders may rely more heavily on Russia’s model. Once again, the alignment of Russian and Chinese objectives—even when they pursue them differently—is likely to amplify the effect of their individual actions by making digital authoritarianism more accessible for a broader swath of regimes.

Collectively shaping a new normative landscape. China and Russia are already shaping international institutions and global narratives to undermine the liberal foundations of the international order. The two countries will likely step up these efforts, seeking to dilute commitment to democratic principles, chip away at norms and standards governing the free flow of information, weaken rights protections at the U.N. and other institutions, and fundamentally remove citizen voices from such institutions by freezing out civil society organizations and advocates for individual rights. China and Russia will also push ahead with creating alternative cyber, AI, and digital economy domains that will not be constrained by democratic norms, civil liberties, and privacy standards. Lastly, the countries will push a moral equivalence between traditional Western democracy and governance assistance and their support for authoritarian solutions, with China in particular using new foreign assistance institutions to offer competing governance assistance bereft of democratic principles.

Technology and Cyber

Technology cooperation has become another significant pillar of Russia-China relations. As in the other domains of their partnership, cooperation between Moscow and

Beijing dramatically accelerated post-2014. Starting with Xi’s state visit to Moscow in May 2015, the two countries have signed a series of agreements deepening cooperation in areas such as AI, 5G, biotechnology, and the digital economy. In August 2020, the two countries embarked on a “Year of Russian-Chinese Scientific, Technical, and Innovation Cooperation.” The two countries’ increased focus on science and innovation is due in part to their increasingly antagonistic relationship with the United States and Europe—Russia remains under U.S. and European economic sanctions as a result of its aggression in Ukraine, and Beijing faces trade tensions with the United States and growing Western concern about its tech industry. Deepening cooperation in this domain bolsters each country’s ability to compete with U.S. technological developments and alleviates the pressure that the United States and Europe have sought to impose.

Just as Moscow and Beijing recognize the imperative to compete with the United States in the technology realm and drive their own domestic development, so too do they share a view of the threats that emerging technologies pose. The CCP and Putin regime see the information revolution and spread of digital tools as a threat to national sovereignty and their hold on power. These governments view the internet and digital technologies as conduits for the United States to destabilize their regimes and as tools for citizens to overthrow oppressive and unresponsive regimes. They are therefore taking steps and aligning efforts in the cyber and digital realms to solidify control over their populations internally and use their cyber and digital tools to project their influence outward.

Although important limits remain on the depth of their technology cooperation, as described below, Russia and China appear to recognize the potential synergies of joining forces in the technology realm. This section outlines how Russia and China are joining efforts to accelerate their technological innovation, while also taking steps in the cyber domain to limit the potentially destabilizing internal effects of these developments.

INNOVATION

Russia and China view the technology domain as a critical battlespace in their competition with the United States. Moscow, for its part, is focused on establishing Russia as a leader in technology and the digital economy. In addition to investing in AI, Russian leaders likely view efforts to develop the country’s digital economy as critical for generating investment, economic growth, and global prestige in a rapidly digitizing world. China, meanwhile, has been acutely focused on accelerating its

innovation-focused development strategy. Made in China 2025—a broad umbrella industrial plan China introduced in 2015—seeks to boost the country’s economic competitiveness by advancing China’s position in the global manufacturing value chain, leapfrogging into emerging technologies, and reducing reliance on foreign firms.³³ The plan emphasizes technology advancement and innovation as drivers of growth and productivity, calling for breakthroughs in 10 sectors including aerospace, robotics, and advanced medical devices.

Russia and China view each other as useful partners in advancing their objectives, especially as confrontation with the United States grows. In recent years, the two countries have launched a number of new forums and mechanisms to promote deeper collaboration and foster greater joint innovation, including the development of science and technology parks, dialogues and exchanges, and expansion of academic cooperation.

They are taking steps and aligning efforts in the cyber and digital realms to solidify control over their populations internally and use their cyber and digital tools to project their influence outward.

The most tangible area of Russia-China technology cooperation has been the development of science and technology (S&T) parks. Many of these projects are nascent, making it difficult to gauge their progress. Nonetheless, the growing number of these initiatives creates an infrastructure and foundation for sustained cooperation. The research being executed in these technology parks spans a wide number of areas, including AI, information technology, robotics, biomedicine, and space. The China-Russia Innovation Park that was completed in 2018, for example, includes enterprises focused on AI, biomedicine, and information technology, with a particular focus on research aimed at integrating new tech with the social infrastructure of both countries. In 2017, S&T parks from China and Russia agreed to promote the construction of a Sino-Russian high-tech center at Skolkovo, a high-tech business area modeled after Silicon Valley. This high-tech center is intended to serve as a platform to promote new startups, including by attracting promising Chinese companies, although it remains to be seen how much such ventures actually produce.

Along with these centers, China and Russia are creating joint funds to promote research and facilitate their companies’ ability to move away from reliance on U.S. technologies.³⁴ The Russia-China Investment Fund, for example, was created in 2012 by the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the China Investment Corporation to invest in opportunities linking Russia and China, though actual spending and projects supported have had implementation issues. Since then, Russia and China have established several joint funds. The Sino-Russian Joint Innovation Investment Fund, for example, was established in 2019 with the Russian Direct Investment Fund and the Chinese Investment Corporation financing the \$1 billion project.

Russia and China have also increased the number of technology dialogues and exchanges between them. These initiatives have the potential to create a network of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) cooperation that will facilitate even greater engagement and information sharing across their respective scientific communities. The Sino-Russian Engineering Technology Forum of 2019, for example, produced 15 agreements on various development projects, including space debris clearing and unmanned vehicles, worth more than \$1 billion.³⁵ On the academic front, some of the largest Russian and Chinese academic and research institutions have expanded research collaboration and personnel exchanges. In July 2018, for example, the Russian and Chinese academies of sciences agreed to increase engagement, including on brain function research that will be relevant to AI development. Moreover, as tensions have increased with the United States, students from both countries perceive fewer opportunities to study in the United States and instead are increasingly learning and studying in each other’s universities—a factor likely to fuel their joint innovation in the future.

Finally, Russian and Chinese industries are also deepening their cooperation. In particular, as Huawei has faced resistance in the United States, Australia, and some European countries, it has expanded operations in Russia. Huawei has opened several research and development (R&D) centers in Russia, making Russia, alongside Europe and the United States, a top-three destination for R&D. Huawei has engaged closely with Russian universities and other Russian scientific communities, and it is particularly focused on AI development. Huawei signed a deal with telecom company MTS to develop 5G networks, and the two launched a 5G test zone in Moscow in October 2019. Huawei is planning to invest \$7.8 million in training 10,000 Russian 5G

specialists over the next five years. The company expects to quadruple its R&D personnel in Russia by 2024, bringing the total to 2,000 engineers. Huawei has also reportedly advertised to recruit engineers experienced in offensive skills such as vulnerability exploitation and penetration testing.³⁶ Huawei also recently purchased rights from a Russian startup called Vocord for facial recognition technology, agreed to work with a Moscow-backed AI research center, and announced its intent to build an AI ecosystem in Russia by 2025.³⁷ Even beyond Huawei, cooperation in AI continues to expand. China's Vinci Group and Russia's Jovi Technologies, for example, entered an agreement to jointly develop AI products.³⁸ China's Dahua Technology and Russia's NtechLab have also released a camera with facial recognition software.

CYBERSECURITY AND GOVERNANCE

Russia and China are separately and together serious competitors to the United States in cyberspace. There is a high degree of overlap between their interests and threat perceptions in this space, although there are limits to how closely the two sides will work together. So far, their cooperation has been primarily defensive, focused on technical exchanges designed to improve controls on the domestic internet. There is no evidence of the two actors coordinating on offensive operations, in large part because Russian and Chinese offensive cyber tools are built in the intelligence communities of each country, so there is inherent secrecy that stymies cooperation on this front.³⁹

Instead, the thrust of their cooperation in this domain has been to work together in the United Nations and other multilateral organizations to legitimize their shared interest in imposing greater state control over the internet and information flows. Russia and China work together through diplomacy to promote cyber sovereignty—norms on cybersecurity, or in their terms “information security,” that emphasize countries’ “sovereignty” over content and communication tools that may threaten regime stability. In 2011, China and Russia submitted their first letter promoting cyber sovereignty as an international norm to the U.N. General Assembly. In 2011 and 2015, China and Russia pushed the International Code of Conduct for Information Security at the U.N., alongside representatives of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, which calls on states to crack down on “dissemination of information” that incites terrorism or extremism or “undermines other countries’ political, economic or social stability.” They also proposed changes at the International Telecommunications Union that would allow individual governments to take greater control over internet regulation functions.⁴⁰

Much of their work has taken place within the Group of Government Experts (GGE) on the Developments in the Field of Information and Telecommunications in the Context of International Security. In 2013, Moscow worked with Beijing in the GGE to include language in the GGE’s consensus report that “state sovereignty” and the international norms and principles that flow from sovereignty apply to state conduct in cyberspace. They expanded this sovereignty norm in the 2015 report, which stated that sovereignty applies to states’ “ICT [information and communications technology]-related activities and to their jurisdiction over ICT-related infrastructure within their territory.”⁴¹ After facing pushback from the United States in the GGE, Russia and China in 2017 created an Open-Ended Working Group open to all member states, where they have advanced a similar agenda and successfully marshaled U.N. member states to their cause. In December 2019, Russia led an effort supported by a consortium of illiberal countries, including China, to replace the Budapest Convention framework with a new cybercrime treaty. Several large democracies, including Nigeria and India, were persuaded by Russian arguments that a new treaty was needed to fight cybercrime and terrorism, even as the United States warned the treaty could be a veiled effort to legitimize internet surveillance and crackdowns on online dissent.⁴²

Beijing and Moscow have also cooperated bilaterally on cybersecurity and governance. In 2015, Putin and Xi signed a bilateral agreement on cybersecurity that affirmed shared cyber sovereignty norms, ostensibly agreed to mutual nonaggression and cooperation on developing information security tools and promised a joint response to acts that threaten the territorial integrity and stability of either state.⁴³ The two countries continue to work in the framework of that agreement, primarily by jointly developing technology and processes for internet control. In 2019, they entered an agreement on combating illegal internet content, which would enable the leaders to tighten their grip on and control of the internet.⁴⁴ As Beijing and Moscow pursue similar goals, many actions taken independently reinforce each other’s interests. Both are pursuing an independent root server system, pushing hosts to remove root servers from the United States to limit America’s ability to cut off internet access.⁴⁵ Following China’s lead, Russia recently passed a law calling for the creation of “RuNet,” an off switch for domestic internet networks that analysts have compared to China’s Great Firewall.⁴⁶

DRIVERS OF TECHNOLOGY AND CYBER ALIGNMENT

Russia and China view their coordination in the technology domain as enhancing their ability to compete with the United States, spurring their own domestic development, and better positioning them to shape the global governance system. Looking forward, the factors below are likely to facilitate, if not deepen, Russia-China technology and cyber cooperation.

Sustained confrontation with the United States. Over the past several years, U.S. policy has increasingly sought to limit Russian and Chinese access to the global technological ecosystem. For China, greater cooperation with Russia is useful given increasing U.S. and European efforts to block the access of Chinese technology firms and research to Western markets—which the CCP regards as key to its economic development—due to security concerns. It is important, however, not to overstate the extent to which China values the Russian technological ecosystem, as the amount Beijing spends in Russia pales in comparison to local spending and the importance for Beijing of China-dominated supply chains. For Russia, U.S. and European sanctions have restricted its access to technology markets and constrained the Russian economy. Beijing, therefore, is useful in offsetting these challenges and helping to catalyze the digital development that Putin seeks to increase economic growth. Similarly, both countries view each other as useful in creating their own indigenous replacements for foreign, especially American, technologies, enabling them to reduce their dependence on the United States and Europe.⁴⁷

A shared worldview. Not only are Russia and China united in their opposition to the United States, but their views in the technology domain increasingly align. Both governments share a view of the information revolution—including a free and open internet—and the spread of digital tools as posing a threat to their national sovereignty and their hold on power. Both seek to achieve greater sovereign control over content and communication over networks and to harness digital tools to more effectively maintain regime stability. They view the structure of governance and the internet as a source of U.S. power and influence, and they seek to shape norms around the internet and other emerging technologies like AI in ways that advance their own illiberal interests—and counter those of the United States.

Complementarity. More tactically, Russia and China bring different capabilities in the technology domain, facilitating their cooperation. As a Chinese spokesman noted in 2019, “[Russia and China] can use our best qualities, expanding our technological potential and competitiveness.”⁴⁸ Russia, for its part, has a long history of talent in science and engineering,

Russia and China bring different capabilities in the technology domain, facilitating their cooperation.

which Beijing views as valuable for its tech and defense industry giants that are hungry for talent and face increasingly unfavorable conditions in the United States and Europe. China’s resources, markets, and greater proficiency in commercializing its scientific developments, in turn, are extremely useful for Moscow.⁴⁹

Despite these drivers, important constraints remain.

Persistent distrust. Despite the close personal relationship between Putin and Xi, mutual distrust lingers at lower levels of their governments. In August 2020, for example, the Russian security services announced the arrest of the president of the St. Petersburg Arctic Social Sciences Academy, who was accused of passing classified submarine detection information to Chinese intelligence. Russians have also expressed concerns about China’s IP theft. As in the defense domain, however, these concerns are unlikely to significantly limit future cooperation. Moreover, as more dialogues and exchanges take place and more Russian students and researchers work in Beijing, increasing interactions between Russia and China may help overcome the historical mistrust between them.

In the cyber domain, however, mistrust is likely to be more entrenched. The two countries perceive each other as potential cyber threats and conduct cyber espionage operations against each other, including operations focused on obtaining intellectual property and trade secrets. Russian cybersecurity firm Kaspersky, for example, has noted that Russian firms have fallen prey to Chinese cybertheft in recent years.⁵⁰ Given the strong connection of cyber capabilities to each country’s respective intelligence services, it is unlikely that the two sides would share offensive capabilities.

Asymmetries in the relationship. The long-term issue for Russia is its technological asymmetry with China, especially in commercial and communications technologies. China's technology investments far outweigh Russia's investments, in both the government and private sectors. For example, the Chinese AI market in 2017 saw more than 300 startups and several billion dollars of government spending, second only to the United States, while Moscow invested just over \$12 million in AI research.⁵¹ China also generates far more scientific patents than

The Kremlin could grow more reluctant about its technology partnership with Beijing, as Chinese leaders view partnership with Russia in this domain as one of diminishing utility.

Russia.⁵² Moreover, there are no Russian companies with the global reach of the big Chinese firms. Chinese tech and Beijing—and not Russia—will shape global technology developments and gain the intelligence benefits. Over time, then, the Kremlin could grow more reluctant about its technology partnership with Beijing, as Chinese leaders view partnership with Russia in this domain as one of diminishing utility.

Protectionism and sovereignty concerns limit cross-border data flows. Prospects for further integration on tech are hampered by both governments' preference for tight control of information flows. Both countries' requirement that all citizens' personal data be stored domestically and their visions for "internet sovereignty" create limits on the scope for cross-border activity.⁵³ Seven of China's eight long-distance international terrestrial cables run through Russia, which could otherwise serve as a larger communications hub between Europe and China. Russia's networks are less centralized and more difficult to censor than China's, but the Russian government is moving unmistakably in the direction of greater control. In addition, the nature of Russia's patronage network system ensures that entities will demand that Chinese ventures in Russia involve local partnerships that guarantee Russian profits.

SCENARIOS FOR GREATER COOPERATION

In the years to come, Russia-China scientific and technological cooperation will likely continue to deepen and progress. Although constraints in the technology

domain will limit the extent of what is possible, their technology cooperation nonetheless could evolve in the following ways:

Deepening cooperation on dual-use and military-relevant technologies. Russia and China will be least likely to deepen cooperation on technologies with dual-use applications. Still, as the two countries' relationship deepens, Western policymakers and defense planners need to understand and plan for those areas where their combined efforts might lead to new capabilities. Russia-China cooperation on space-based capabilities illustrates this dynamic. If Russia-China cooperation in some fields of science leads to improvements in microelectronics, this could directly impact Russian military-related technology. For example, the recently announced Russia-China initiative to create a multi-part interferometer—used in this case to obtain data on astrophysical phenomena such as gravitational waves—could provide secondary and tertiary advances in technology with implications for military technology.⁵⁴

Creating a bloc of states that can erode liberal norms in international institutions. Russia and China have already made progress on this front, and they are likely to continue to push a broader swath of states to back their idea of internet sovereignty over openness. While the Sino-Russian view on internet governance does not currently enjoy majority support in most institutions, it is foreseeable that a larger plurality of states could join the cause in the future.

Accelerating AI innovation, including for surveillance and predictive policing. Already, engagements and exchanges between Russia and China indicate that their collaboration in AI is a priority that should be expected to expand. Advances in AI depend upon massive computing capabilities, enough data for machines to learn from, and the human talent to operate those systems.⁵⁵ Complementarity between Russia and China in these areas could allow them to combine their strengths and accelerate progress. Russia and China are already seeking to expand the sharing of big data, for example, through the Sino-Russian Big Data Headquarters Base Project. As highlighted earlier, Russia's NtechLab, one of Russia's leading developers in AI and facial recognition, and Dahua Technology, a Chinese manufacturer of video surveillance solutions, jointly produced a wearable camera with a facial-recognition function. Beyond sharing their best practices, Sino-Russian cooperation has the potential to accelerate the development of illiberal technologies.

Given Russia's difficulties in implementing tracking systems to combat COVID-19, some analysts believe the Kremlin will look to lean more heavily on Chinese know-how to develop surveillance techniques.⁵⁶

Increasing opposition to the United States in the cyber realm. Russia and China are highly unlikely to cooperate on offensive cyber operations. However, as the United States gets more aggressive with the operations of U.S. Cyber Command (which includes U.S. efforts to help allies and partners), Russia and China could step up similar efforts to work with their “like minded” group to push and spread their cyber tactics. If Russia and China increase efforts to share their capabilities with other countries, it would increase the complexity of protecting U.S. interests in this space. To be effective in the cyber domain, regimes have to be sophisticated in multiple areas, including hacking and electrical engineering (knowing how to keep a system down, for example). If Russia and China share capabilities, cyberattacks could get more unpredictable and dangerous. Either China or Russia could also steal technology from the United States, including cyber weapons, via cyber industrial espionage and proliferate it to the other.

Alternatively, and perhaps more significantly, Russia or China could use a military contingency between the other country and the United States to opportunistically seek to impose greater costs on Washington in the conflict. While a joint offensive operation remains unlikely, one could conduct an offensive cyber operation on behalf of the other to impair the United States or another adversary.

Economy

China and Russia have sought to portray their expanding economic ties as a key pillar of the countries' deepening relationship. “Economic cooperation and trade, as a key pillar of our relations, is crucial to the common development and revitalization of China and Russia,” Xi said during a visit to Moscow in June 2019.⁵⁷ “This is an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership. This is reflected in the economy,” Putin said several months later.⁵⁸ Indeed, the two countries have set and ultimately accomplished goals to expand bilateral trade and strike deals for cross-border infrastructure. In 2019, more than two million Chinese tourists visited Russia, up from 158,000 a decade earlier, and spent over \$1 billion.⁵⁹

However, the economic dimensions of the Russia-China partnership remain less substantial than political messaging would suggest, with significant structural barriers preventing greater economic integration.

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Despite sharing a 2,600-mile border, China and Russia have only a handful of railway crossings and roughly 25 crossing points in total. The growing economic asymmetry between Russia and China is likely to pose a particular challenge to their burgeoning partnership. More than the imbalance in the size of their economies, the asymmetries that will likely matter most are Russia's low economic complexity and dependence on resource extraction relative to China's diverse economy, desire to maintain an array of energy suppliers, and access to consumer and capital markets. Nonetheless, as long as both countries remain alienated from the West, they will maintain incentive to overcome the barriers between them.

EXPANDING BILATERAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT

In 2018, bilateral trade between Russia and China surpassed \$100 billion. Last year, Putin and Xi announced a new goal of \$200 billion by 2024.⁶⁰ China has now surpassed Germany as Russia's largest trading partner. Russia participates in China's massive BRI, but as with all BRI statistics, any estimates of Moscow's participation require a careful eye. One flagship BRI project, the Moscow-Kazan high-speed railway, has been repeatedly delayed and, like other projects, pre-dates the BRI's announcement. The railway's astronomical price tag, \$22 billion, has inflated overall estimates of BRI project activity in Russia. In March, Russian officials announced the project would be “postponed,” and it would not be surprising if the project is delayed indefinitely.⁶¹ Russian and Chinese officials have little incentive to publicly terminate joint projects, especially those that have taken on symbolic value.

ENERGY

Much of Russia and China's overlapping economic interests are in oil and gas. Western sanctions deprived Russia of access to capital for greater investment in the energy sector, while China's growing energy demand made Russia more attractive as a major supplier, especially given Beijing's desire to diversify its energy sources. The

structural increase in oil and gas exports between them reflects China's demand and new pipeline and liquefaction infrastructure, as well as Russia's interest in boosting its Asian trade at a time when European buyers were more concerned about over-reliance on Russian supplies. The two countries have, with some difficulty, struck deals on infrastructure necessary to grow their trade in fossil fuels. They finished a deal to build the East Siberia Pacific Ocean (ESPO) oil pipeline in 2009, after difficult negotiations characterized by mutual distrust and Russia's concerns over dependence on the Chinese market.⁶² Despite difficult negotiations and an early price dispute, ESPO ultimately benefited both China and Russia. In 2014, they proceeded with a contract for a gas pipeline called Power of Siberia.⁶³ The gas pipeline project was more economically challenging and prevailed largely because of keen political interest, especially in Moscow, where leaders had an urgent need to show Russia could not be isolated by Western sanctions imposed after the illegal annexation of Crimea.⁶⁴ The Power of Siberia story reveals the inherent difficulty of concluding such deals, as well as the importance of political will in making them happen. Russia's Gazprom, which holds the world's largest natural gas reserves, is already heralding a second and a third major gas pipeline to China, presenting the Chinese market as a future equivalent to its large gas exports to Europe. Finally, Chinese loans and investment through the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and other companies have been critical to the success of the Yamal liquefied natural gas (LNG) project in the Russian Arctic—a high-priority region for Putin given its importance for the Russian economy and defense. China received its first shipment from Yamal LNG via the Northern Sea Route in 2018, cutting transportation time and reinforcing the relationship between resource extraction in the Russian Arctic and shipping along the Northern Sea Route that underpins Moscow and Beijing's shared commitment to building a "Polar Silk Road."⁶⁵

REGIONAL COOPERATION

Russia and China have a shared interest in increasing regional trade and improving infrastructure across the Eurasian supercontinent, particularly in Central Asia. Both countries lead initiatives aimed at integrating cross-border markets: Putin's EAEU lowers customs barriers among Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan, while Xi's global BRI has spurred Chinese companies to build transportation and communications infrastructure across Eurasia and beyond.⁶⁶ Three of the BRI's six proposed corridors pass through the EAEU. Xi

and Putin have jointly unveiled a number of infrastructure projects to facilitate greater trade between them and among other countries in the region, though projects often fall short of expectations. Despite more ambitious promises, only a handful of cross-border infrastructure projects have been completed, most notably the Power of Siberia pipeline and two bridges in Russia's far east.⁶⁷

FINANCE

Another growing area of partnership for the two countries is finance. Both are eager to reduce their dependence on Western financial systems. They began using their own currencies for bilateral trade in 2010, though the volume involved remained low, and opened a currency swap line in 2014, though there is little evidence it was used. China also extended direct loans pre-paid for commodity purchases in 2014 when the U.S. and EU sanctions programs came into effect. Russia's central bank has shifted some reserves from dollars to euros, yuan, and gold, but private companies and households in Russia have been less eager to abandon the dollar. Russia's official de-dollarization campaign, ongoing since 2008, accelerated as a result of sanctions on the Russian company Rusal. Chinese reserve holdings of U.S. assets have fallen more modestly and reflect global capital flows more than national security decisions. Major Chinese banks and companies continue to raise capital in U.S. dollars and in euros, and companies continue to list on U.S. exchanges.

Officials have also discussed linking the two countries' national payment systems.⁶⁸ Cooperation on digital payment has been expanding but remains limited by Russia's comparatively small market and aversion to digital currency. Last year, Yandex.Checkout, a joint venture between the tech company Yandex and Sberbank, Russia's largest bank, became the first online retailer in Russia to accept China's WeChat Pay. China's Alipay is working on a joint venture with Mail.ru to offer digital payment services to Russian users.⁶⁹

China and Russia's efforts to create alternatives to the Brussels-based SWIFT system are nascent, though Russia has increasingly advocated for the development of a settlement system disconnected from a SWIFT system dependent on "unreliable" Western entities.⁷⁰ Russia's version, the System for the Transfer of Financial Messages (SFPS), expanded to include members of the EAEU only last year.⁷¹ China has been more successful in attracting international participation to its system, the Cross-Border Interbank Payment System (CIPS). As of April 2020, CIPS has participants in 95 countries.⁷² After Japan, Russia has the second-largest number of banks

using China's CIPS payment system.⁷³ So far, the volumes used remain relatively small, and many involve banks that also use USD-based payment systems, which keep them vulnerable to U.S. sanctions. Nonetheless, greater use of such alternative systems, as well as coordination on central bank digital currencies, remains an area where Russia and China could continue to coordinate.

DRIVERS OF ECONOMIC ALIGNMENT

Russia and China have aligned interests that drive their mutual efforts to increase economic cooperation. Each country offers the other an alternative to the West in key trading sectors, and their cooperation allows them to offset vulnerabilities in their relationship with the United States. A deepening trade relationship in oil and gas, in particular, serves both countries' perceived security interests, as they seek to reduce their dependence on Western energy and free themselves from geopolitical constraints. Both countries also have an interest in a stronger trade infrastructure on the Eurasian continent. Moreover, leaders of the two countries hope to entice potential partners and, especially in the case of China, to develop new markets by projecting an image of economic strength and technological dominance.

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Energy alignment. Russian and Chinese energy interests are aligned in several ways. The Kremlin, for its part, is highly reliant on oil and gas revenue to run its patronage-based political system. Russia has traditionally relied on Europe as an export market for its oil, but while Russia is seeking to expand its oil production and exports, European demand for oil is stagnating. China provides a lucrative customer for its oil and gas exports. China prioritizes having diverse sources of oil and gas. Not only has China's import dependency for oil reached an exceptionally high level of 70 percent, but nearly all of that imported oil comes from distant sources and is transported through maritime routes over which China as yet has little control. Russia mitigates that vulnerability by offering its energy exports over land routes. Moreover, buying more Russian oil and gas allows China to rely less on relatively unstable regimes in the Middle East and Africa.

Isolation from the West. Worsening relations with the West add urgency to both countries' needs to diversify their trade, investments, and financial systems. Russia has looked to China for new markets for its oil and gas as oversupply from North American unconventional supplies and the return of Iranian oil post-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) led to a price collapse. Moreover, Russia has faced increased need for new energy sector financing since the United States and Europe imposed debilitating sanctions in 2014. Expanding (or at least maintaining) exports to China allows Russia to avoid the most debilitating impacts of the sanctions on its economy, and therefore to blunt the sanctions' political effect. Western sanctions have also forced Russia to look toward China for investment opportunities, such as those financed via the Russia Direct Investment Fund. High-profile Russian projects like the Yamal LNG project would have been difficult, if not impossible, without Chinese support and financing.⁷⁴ China also used the Silk Road Fund and another state-owned enterprise to invest in Sibur, Russia's largest petrochemical company. Chinese investments also help Russia because they are often, in turn, amplified by co-investments. For China, increasing U.S. and European vigilance against Beijing's global ambitions, and particularly worsening trade relations with the United States, could increase the risk to China of remaining reliant on open international markets.

Weakening U.S. influence. China and Russia seek to build finance infrastructure that reduces the dominance of the United States and the U.S. dollar and, thus, Washington's ability to engage in extraterritorial financial sanctions. Similarly, they share an interest in building resilience against U.S. extraterritorial export controls or investment restrictions. Broadly speaking, Russia and China would both like to reduce their direct exposure to the USD financial system, including through de-dollarization, which would reduce the countries' collective exposure to the U.S. business cycle and, more importantly, reduce Washington's ability to deploy coercive policies against Chinese and Russian interests. While China has an interest in boosting resilience to U.S. measures, Beijing's interest is tempered by its reliance on the United States as an export market, capital raising on global debt and equity exchanges, and concerns about greater currency volatility that would be involved in greater global use of its currency.

Regional trade infrastructure. For both China and Russia, developing trade infrastructure in Eurasia is an economic priority. China's BRI includes plans to develop a number of trade corridors that would be helpful to Russia as it pursues an integrated market with friendly neighbors. Putin has proposed a "Greater Eurasian Partnership" and suggested "linking" the BRI and EAEU, notions which serve immediate political purposes even if they overlook economic fundamentals that could produce more friction in the years ahead.⁷⁵

Projecting economic power. Xi and Putin are putting forward ideas that are designed to resonate with third countries, especially developing economies.⁷⁶ The two countries' economic pitch to important emerging markets is made stronger through the appearance of a strong partnership between them amid a growing rift with the United States and developed democracies over the future economic and technological landscape. Though many Russia-China initiatives turn out to be less significant than billed, they suggest that their growing partnership could be an alternative to the Western-dominated economic system. On the technology front, Russia and China have made displays of developing plans to include Huawei technology in Russia's 5G networks—a help to the Huawei brand globally as it receives more scrutiny in Western countries, and an opportunity for the two countries to claim global leadership in technologies expected to be key to future digital economies.

CONSTRAINTS ON ECONOMIC ALIGNMENT

Despite shared economic interests, any push for closer Sino-Russian economic cooperation will face limits. Russia has shown a degree of caution in its dealings with China out of concern for China's rising power and potential coercive leverage. Weaknesses in the Russian economy limit the potential for profitable trade and investments. The two countries' interests are aligned in this field for the short and medium term, but they may diverge. Looking forward, the depth of their economic alignment will depend, in part, on both countries facing sustained tensions with the West.

Strategic caution. The Kremlin is increasingly attuned to its growing economic dependence on a more powerful neighbor, particularly given Beijing's tendency to use its economic strength to coerce partners. China's rising power and ambitions are cause for concern for Moscow, much as they are in the West. The Russian leadership recognizes that deeper economic integration with China could be deeply disruptive, as evidenced by its cautious

approach to trade agreements to protect its weaker industries. China has become more important for Russia in recent years, accounting for 15.5 percent of its total trade in 2018. Russia, in contrast, only accounted for 0.8 percent of China's total trade in 2018.⁷⁷ This potential imbalance is apparent in the energy sector. Although there is leverage on both sides, in recent years China has commanded more influence as a buyer than Russia has as a seller. Russia has resisted Chinese ownership of oil and gas fields where Central Asian countries have welcomed it and could limit cross-border transport connections to limit China's capabilities and influence.

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Russia's strategic caution and relative uninterest in free-trade agreements also limits the most ambitious proposals for deeper regional integration. The EAEU-China trade agreement, which went into force last year, does not lower tariffs. Russian officials have also resisted establishing a free-trade area that covers members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Russia is likely to continue avoiding deeper free-trade arrangements—a strategy that is politically understandable but economically self-defeating. The longer Russia waits, the more sophisticated China's production of higher-value goods becomes. As a result, Russia may find it has less and less to protect.

Structural barriers to investment. Investment in Russia is hampered by persistent problems, including red tape, poor infrastructure, and corruption. Chinese investors are leery of deals with Russian state-owned oil companies, in part because the terms haven't been attractive and in part because Russian energy companies haven't been interested, except in the case of rare financing deals. Russia's business environment carries far more risk compared with developed economies and offers less promise than developing economies due in part to its declining population. In 2014 and 2015, Russia created 20 special economic zones to attract foreign investment to its far east. Only six have attracted Chinese investment, which totaled a mere \$38 million between 2015 and 2018.⁷⁸

Moreover, while the grand oil and gas deals that China and Russia have sought to strike are strategically desirable for both countries, they are difficult to complete and may not be affordable. For Russia, exporting oil and gas to China rather than Europe has geopolitical advantages, but it requires building expensive new trade infrastructure across three times the distance. Bargains between Russia and China to build these facilities can be difficult to strike, and the projects come with high cost and financial risk. Moreover, such costly oil and gas deals make little financial sense under low commodity prices, which are likely to persist for at least the short to medium term amid what is expected to be a grinding global economic recovery. Russia, however, appears to be betting that locking in market share through such deals will pay off over the longer term as China's massive economy continues to grow.

Russian reliance on oil and gas. Despite Russian efforts to expand exports in other sectors, economic cooperation between Russia and China is increasingly concentrated in raw materials. When energy prices were at their peak, oil and gas represented half of Russian federal government revenue and two-thirds of the country's export earnings. Even with lower oil and gas prices today, petroleum plays a preeminent role in the Russian economy, and control of the sector is a major instrument of state power domestically and internationally. Despite efforts to expand trade across sectors, including arms and nuclear power, trade over the past two years has become more concentrated in raw materials.⁷⁹ Russia has made efforts to replace U.S. agricultural exports to China with its own, although its output is limited by rising land costs, poor infrastructure, and red tape.⁸⁰ Russia's limitations could leave it with little to offer China in the long term if Beijing, still heavily reliant on coal, eventually transitions away from all fossil fuels decades from now. Although China and Russia's energy interests converge in the short to medium term, they may well diverge in the long run. China wants to be the global leader in a post-oil-and-gas world. Russia wants the petroleum era to last for as long as possible. Not only is it the key sector of its economy, but it helps Russia to punch above its economic weight internationally.

SCENARIOS FOR THE FUTURE

Increased cooperation that accelerates de-dollarization. China and Russia could significantly increase the use of their own currencies in bilateral trade and with third countries due to concerns about the widening of U.S. sanctions and export controls and the dollar's volatility. Looking out five years, for example, it is probable that transactions between Russia and China will no longer be in dollars. This would blunt the

impact of U.S. sanctions and other restrictions and reduce the asymmetric power the U.S. holds in the global financial system to impose costs on those acting counter to U.S. interests and values. Russia could succeed in getting China, which has been less active on de-dollarization, to conduct trade in a wider array of currencies (including the yuan) and encourage other countries to shift away from use of the U.S. dollar in trade and savings. This trend, coupled with a rising U.S. debt load and U.S. external deficit, could increase the cost of capital in the United States, put more pressure on the U.S. Federal Reserve to purchase U.S. assets, and exacerbate any ongoing financial decoupling.

Popularization of alternative payment systems. China and Russia could develop new payment systems that circumvent SWIFT and other systems linked to the USD financial system. This would reduce exposure to U.S. sanctions, anti-money laundering rules, and other policies. China and Russia have each been focused on centralizing and nationalizing domestic payment systems, giving less priority to the development of international systems such as China's CIPS. Development and centralization of such local payment systems, and digitalization and information sharing with and between the two governments, could increase the political and other benefits of a more integrated approach. China's system may become more frequently used in Russia, where distrust and concerns about how Chinese entities could use leverage over transactions and information thus far has limited adoption of Chinese systems. Russian entities, especially larger banks, may see a greater incentive to use these platforms given the economic benefits implied. Moreover, both Russian and Chinese governments would see a benefit from additional consolidation, monitoring, and control.

Reduced vulnerability of Russia to U.S. pressure. Significant increases in Chinese investment in Russia via its state-linked companies could bolster the companies' resilience to U.S. pressure by reducing reliance on both U.S. and European capital and expertise. The most likely areas for development are in the domains of agriculture, metals, and energy, though some cooperation in e-commerce, pharmaceuticals, and emerging technologies are possible if Russian and Chinese partners can overcome distrust. This trend could be reinforced through even greater bilateral trade as concerns about U.S. and European reshoring prompt both countries to shore up their supply chains. China could eventually become a much more important supplier of capital and equipment to Russia, helping boost productivity and concentrating in areas of priority to the Russian government, including bolstering Russia's sovereign fund, the Direct Investment Fund.

Implications for U.S. Policy

Crafting an effective U.S. response to expanding Russia-China cooperation will require zeroing in on core areas where their partnership amplifies risks to U.S. interests. Russia-China collaboration does not negatively impact the United States in every instance, and the United States has a long list of competing policy priorities. Moreover, narrowing U.S. efforts to address the countries' partnership will be key to avoiding overly generalized approaches that would fail to effectively counter challenges that are unique across domains.

Perhaps the most concerning—and least understood—aspect of the Russia-China partnership is the synergy their actions will generate. Analysts understand well the challenges that Russia and China each pose to the United States. But little thought has been given to how their actions will combine, amplifying the impact of both actors. As this report highlights, the impact of Russia-China alignment is likely to be far greater than the sum of its parts, putting U.S. interests at risk globally.

The synergy between Russia and China is likely to be most problematic in the way that it increases the challenge that China poses to the United States. Russia's amplification of America's China challenge will be most acute

on two fronts: the defense domain and the democracy and human rights domain. There are also several broader implications their cooperation will create for U.S. global influence. This section identifies those areas where Russia-China cooperation is likely to be most problematic for U.S. interests.

Defense

The robust nature of Russia-China collaboration in the defense domain and its potential impact on U.S. military dominance in the Indo-Pacific and its related alliance commitments makes this area of collaboration the most consequential for U.S. vital interests. Expanding coordination between Beijing and Moscow is likely to result in numerous challenges for Washington and military planners in particular, but three key implications stand out:

Eroding key U.S. military advantages. Sustained Sino-Russian cooperation would put at risk America's ability to deter Chinese aggression and uphold its commitment

to maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific. This process is already underway, as the United States is struggling to update force structure to meet A2AD challenges to air and sea power around Taiwan. Russia's sales to China of highly capable weapons like the S-400 surface-to-air missile systems and Su-35 fighter jets, for example, help Beijing create a "no-go zone" around Taiwan to deter U.S. forces from intervening in a contingency. Further erosion of U.S. advantages would be especially problematic for strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific. Russia already played an integral role in modernizing China's surface combat capabilities by providing *Sovremenny*-class destroyers, advanced anti-ship cruise missiles, and naval air defense systems, and sharing design expertise for China's indigenous ship production. Moreover, through military exercises and training, Russia is providing China with valuable operational know-how, potentially offsetting one of the PLA's most significant weaknesses.

Out-innovating the United States. If the levels of technology coordination between China and Russia increase, the countries may be able to innovate more rapidly together than the United States can alone. Moscow and Beijing

likely view collaboration on a number of fronts—including space, missile defense, various missile technologies, unmanned systems, and training

data for artificial intelligence—as opportunities to fill mutual capability gaps and accelerate development of innovative technologies. Recently, Russia and China announced that they are pooling knowledge to develop a new generation of non-nuclear submarines.⁸¹ Future development of accurate hypersonic missiles or advanced submarine quieting, for example, would threaten U.S. Navy platforms more directly than China's current capabilities.

Moreover, Russia and China are working together to obviate U.S. sanctions and restrictions on technology exports. Russia and China can leverage each other's resources, networks of suppliers, or partners to avoid falling behind the United States in military technology or defense-industrial output.⁸² Their trade relationship also facilitates technological exchange. Although their bilateral trade remains modest, it is concentrated in areas that pose security risks, including emerging and dual-use technologies. If Russia and China continue to coordinate and benefit from their partnership in the technology realm, U.S. efforts to keep pace with Russia-China joint innovation would place tremendous strain on an already-stressed U.S. defense budget.⁸³

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Upending the U.S. calculus on deterrence and force structure. Overt defense cooperation between Russia and China could also upend U.S. defense plans and capacity. One could imagine, for example, a future Gulf crisis in which Russia and China both send a squadron of ships to “observe” the situation, which would seriously complicate the U.S. calculus. In a less likely but more significant scenario, Russia and China could coordinate aggressive actions along their peripheries, challenging the current U.S. force structure.⁸⁴ If, for example, Russia and China conducted concurrent grey-zone or hybrid operations in the Baltics or the South China Sea, U.S. forces would be hard-pressed to respond to both threats. The resources required to fight in either theater are costly, and major upgrades to U.S. readiness and capacity are likely required to be successful on either front today.⁸⁵ Ultimately, Russia and China seek to contest the United States “together, but separately,” effectively requiring the United States to compete on both fronts at the same time.⁸⁶

Democracy and Values

The most natural domain for collaboration between a Chinese Communist Party-led China and Putin’s Russia is around the undermining of democracy and existing liberal norms underpinning the current international order. The regimes’ shared commitment to neutralizing perceived U.S. and allied efforts to undermine their grip on power, popularizing authoritarianism, and propagating a values-neutral order better suited to their strategic interests is a key challenge for U.S. interests, particularly in four key areas:

Producing anti-democratic synergy. The synergy between Russia and China will be most pronounced in the democracy space. Already, Russia and China are popularizing an authoritarian governance model, exporting their best practices, actively watering down human rights norms, working together in multilateral forums to back each other up, creating norms around cyber and internet sovereignty, and bolstering illiberal leaders and helping them stay in power. Some of this is more alignment than coordination. But even if the two countries do not coordinate, they are increasingly singing from the same sheet of music, increasing the dose of their messaging.

Looking forward, policymakers should expect this anti-democratic synergy to continue. Russian narratives designed to undermine trust in institutions, for example, will increasingly create fertile ground for Chinese narratives about the failings of democracy and superiority of authoritarian systems to take root. Beyond

polluting the global information environment, Beijing and Moscow are likely to set forth alternative platforms by which information can be disseminated. This type of synergy is also likely to move into new spaces like AI and other emerging technologies. As discussed above, Russia and China have different approaches to digital authoritarianism, but together they are creating an array of options that make digital control more accessible and flexible for a broader swath of countries. Looking forward, Russia, with its willingness to accept confrontation and risk, could further push the boundaries on AI applications that do not conform to the ethical standards of liberal democracies or democratic norms. Russia’s breaking of such boundaries will allow China to press ahead with its export of AI-enabled controls while drawing less attention.⁸⁷

Lastly, while China’s interference in the U.S. political landscape remains very different from Russia’s persistent drive to undermine American democracy and exploit societal divisions, an increasing partnership between the two countries may also result in overlapping and potentially compounding efforts to interfere in America’s domestic politics, particularly if U.S.-China relations remain fraught under the Biden administration and China grows increasingly bold in employing Russia-style online disinformation efforts.

*A rising tide of “authoritarianization.”*⁸⁸ China’s growing global influence poses a challenge to democracy. Even if the CCP is not primarily intent upon spreading its authoritarian model out of ideological fervor, its growing influence and global ties dilute the influence of liberal democracies and create dynamics that work to the detriment of liberal democracy. China’s rise, along with Russian assertiveness, sends a powerful signal to other leaders about the success of their models and alters perceptions about what constitutes a legitimate regime. China is also expanding its networks of trade and patronage with many states at once—as the United States did in the aftermath of the Cold War—creating greater opportunities to encourage authoritarian tendencies.

Although China is the more consequential actor, Russia is amplifying China’s impact on global democracy. Russia legitimizes China’s actions, making Beijing more persuasive with swing states, which will be crucial in determining the future trajectory of democracy. Likewise, China is learning from Russia’s approach, which has grown more assertive and confrontational since 2014. Although the Kremlin historically was content with efforts intended to blunt Western democracy promotion, it has instead gone on the offensive,

seeking to undermine liberal democracy. The CCP's incorporation of some of the Kremlin's tools into its foreign policy arsenal amplifies the challenge that Beijing poses to liberal democracy.

China's adoption of Russian disinformation tactics and Russia's adoption of PRC-style internet controls is about more than "authoritarian learning" or the passive diffusion of tactics, but instead indicates that the increasing interaction between the countries' institutions is facilitating the sharing of best practices and building a foundation for sustained cooperation. China's and Russia's mounting adoption of each other's more effective means of authoritarian governance and control—and sharing of tools to ensure each regime's grip on power—also further reduces the likelihood of collapse of either or both regimes as a result of their inherent weaknesses as authoritarian systems.

Undermining openness to democracy assistance. As China and Russia endeavor to weaken democracy's appeal and fundamentally delink democracy and development—as well as coopt a growing set of elites around the world—it may become increasingly difficult for the United States, allied development aid agencies, and nongovernmental organizations to deliver democracy and governance assistance. China and Russia are likely to step up efforts to capitalize on the rising global tide of nationalism and discourse about sovereignty to cynically portray Western support for democratic institutions as foreign influence that must be resisted. China has long peddled this narrative in Southeast Asia, particularly among authoritarian-leaning governments, as has Russia in the Middle East. China's development assistance—through both investments untied to democracy and rights standards and a greater willingness to offer a competing vision of governing solutions not predicated on democracy—will challenge a key pillar upholding U.S. influence and values globally.

Mounting competition over cyber governance and norms. Given the support Russia and China have already garnered in the U.N. and through the BRI, the United States should expect a long-term global competition over cyber norms. Cooperation among Russia, China, a number of middle and emerging powers, and one or more European countries on cyber governance is also a foreseeable possibility. Beijing's and Moscow's efforts to establish norms in this domain contrast with limited effort to rally support for a free and open internet among the United States and like-minded countries in the U.N. and elsewhere.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Expanding Chinese and Russian collaboration across so many domains is already contributing to a gradual but perceptible decline in U.S. global influence that is attributable primarily to self-inflicted wounds. Many of the foundations of that influence—a robust alliance network, relative economic strength, sway over global narratives and norms, and soft power—will likely face a growing assault from Russia, China, and their combined efforts.

Weakening cohesion among U.S. allies and partners. Beijing and Moscow will continue to look to delegitimize support for democratic values as the foundation for the transatlantic alliance. Moscow seeks to amplify the narratives of illiberal populists and anti-EU forces and paint them as patriotic defenders of national sovereignty, magnifying European divisions and making the EU a less cohesive and decisive actor and partner for Washington. China seeks to use growing economic leverage, co-optation of elites, and diplomatic initiatives to stymie the EU from joining with the United States to act upon a growing recognition of the gravity of the China challenge to European interests and values. Chinese and Russian actions also have combined to reduce the attractiveness of EU membership and related participation in the democratic West. For example, in Serbia, perceptions of China's growing economic leverage and willingness to invest in the country's future combine with the sustained drumbeat of Russian messaging about the EU's failings to effectively temper the resolve to pursue reforms required for EU accession.

Blunting the impact of U.S. financial tools. Already, Russia and China are working together to obviate U.S. sanctions and export controls and reduce the centrality of the United States in the global economic system. If their partnership deepens, it could dilute the efficacy of U.S. coercive financial tools, especially sanctions and export controls, which have been a key part of the U.S. foreign policy arsenal. The United States would have less ability to use financial measures, such as export controls and sanctions, to isolate and constrain the unwanted actions of not just China and Russia but other countries that could tap into their networks to bypass U.S. pressure. For example, de-dollarization and efforts to avoid U.S.-linked payment systems would increase the resilience of Russian, Chinese, and other governments to U.S. sanctions and other restrictions. The USD-based financial system has been critical to Washington's asymmetric ability to sanction third parties who do not trade with or invest directly in the United States, but who use

global financial channels. The more transactions that occur in currencies other than the dollar, the less ability the United States would have to prevent Russia from making payments to China and vice versa, and hence Washington's ability to enforce sanctions would deteriorate.

Eroding U.S. sway with countries and international institutions. Expanding Chinese and Russian influence would cause more countries around the world to fall into an orbit of friendly illiberal states inhospitable to U.S. engagement and opposed to its interests. Political and business elites would become more beholden to China economically, citizens would be deluged by Chinese and Russian information operations and propaganda rather than objective international news sources, and governments would be encouraged to employ sophisticated authoritarian methods to silence democratic actors in civil society and independent media. For some state-led economies, the involved surveillance and consolidated financial channels would be a plus, not a negative. The United States and its allies could lose relative influence in international institutions as China and Russia repurpose them, using their growing influence in the bodies—and within the individual countries of which they consist—to shape a multilateral agenda favorable to their interests and denuded of commitments to norms around democratic governance and the protection of individual rights.

Fragmenting the information space. Symbiotic relationships between Chinese and Russian media and diplomatic institutions could support the creation of an entirely alternative information ecosystem, including on popular Chinese-designed social media apps, in which truth is called into question. While many countries on each country's periphery would rely heavily on exclusively Chinese or Russian-led information sources and platforms, many across Eurasia would access a mix of each country's government-sanctioned content. Countries in Africa and elsewhere reliant on Chinese providers of digital television or subject to significant Chinese investment in struggling media outlets are already receiving information tilted towards the PRC perspective and lacking critical content about authoritarian repression at home and aggression abroad. China and Russia will seek to increase their influence on current Western social media platforms, undermining the documentation of human rights abuses and possibly the platforms' use for popular protest.

Recommendations

U.S. policymakers remain unclear as to how to approach Russia and China's emerging entente. The sheer breadth of the countries' partnership and the challenges posed to U.S. interests documented in this report invites both policy paralysis and a tendency toward overly simplified solutions—such as peeling one country away from the other—that are unlikely to succeed in the near term. To be successful in meeting this challenge, Washington instead will need to prioritize and advance several actions designed to collectively limit the depth of Russia and China's partnership and mitigate the challenges their cooperation poses to U.S. vital interests and values. To this end, the United States should pursue the following approaches:

Change Russia's Calculus

This report has identified numerous factors fueling Russia-China alignment, many of which are related to the complementarity of Moscow and Beijing's own interests and capabilities. Still, the U.S. posture towards both countries has reinforced the Kremlin's readiness in particular to work more closely with Beijing. With no sense that economic options will be available in the West and growing economic challenges at home, the Kremlin has grown more willing to conform with China's goals in exchange for China's economic support. Over the long term, then, the United States should seek to convince Moscow that some cooperation with the United States and Europe is possible and preferable to its growing subservience to China. Shaping Moscow's calculus will not prevent Russia-China cooperation, but it would likely limit the extent to which Russia is willing to go along with Beijing, constraining the depth of their partnership.

Critically, a U.S. approach designed to change Russia's calculus is not the same as the so-called "reverse Nixon" strategy of cozying up to Russia and choosing to ignore Moscow's direct assaults on U.S. interests and democracy to pull it away from Beijing. The costs to the United States of such an approach would outweigh the benefits of mitigating the effects of their alignment. Such a strategy would compromise the long-standing U.S. commitment to supporting countries' right to pursue their self-defined interests and signal to onlooking countries that the costs associated with efforts to undermine democracy are short-lived. Moreover, there is no guarantee that efforts to lure Russia away from China would be successful. This is because Putin views the United States and not Beijing as the central threat to his hold on power. After 20 years in office, Putin is unlikely to change

his views of the United States. Xi, for his part, views Russia as useful in undermining U.S. global dominance and countering U.S. efforts to limit Chinese leverage in multilateral institutions. Approaches designed to drive a grand wedge between Russia and China, in other words, are unlikely to work.

Instead, efforts to change Moscow's calculus should be incremental and the ultimate goal far more modest than peeling either one away from the other. Rather than attempting to split Russia from China, the goal should be to show Moscow the benefits of pursuing a more balanced foreign policy, thereby preventing the most malignant implications of their alignment. Most immediately, the United States could take the following actions:

The United States should seek to convince Moscow that some cooperation with the United States and Europe is possible and preferable to its growing subservience to China.

Differentiate between China and Russia in U.S. strategy, rhetoric, and practice. The United States should more clearly differentiate between Russia and China in its strategy documents and rhetoric. Lumping Russia and China together is overly generous to Russia, especially economically, and it reinforces Russia's readiness to align with China. U.S. strategy should also resist simple framing such as "taking on the authoritarians." Although some of the challenges they pose are overlapping, the two countries often employ very different tactics and pose distinct threats to the United States. By more clearly differentiating them in U.S. thinking and policy approaches, it would create more room to maneuver and exploit the important fissures between them.

Message to Moscow privately and publicly how China disadvantages Russia. Diplomacy should not be a reward, but rather a tool among others that Washington uses to protect and advance its security and interests. In the case of Russia, the United States should resuscitate and regularize communications with Moscow. Doing so would advance critical goals, including mitigating the risk of unintended escalation with Russia. It would also provide an opportunity for the United States to underscore how China is undermining Russian interests on key issues and in particular regions. But U.S. efforts should not stop there. U.S. policymakers should be far more vocal in publicly highlighting Russia's growing subservience

to Beijing in an effort to raise questions among the people surrounding Putin and the Russian people about the wisdom of Putin's approach. Such messaging could focus on China's growing economic ties with countries the Kremlin views as firmly within its so-called "sphere of influence," like Ukraine, Belarus, and Serbia.⁸⁹ Putin would be unlikely to change course in the near term, but such messaging could raise the chances that future leaders would seek to chart a more neutral course.

Cooperate with Russia when it is in the U.S. interest.

Regular communication between the United States and Russia would also facilitate dialogue on issues where the United States and Russia have shared interests. Most immediately, the United States should extend New START, and importantly use this agreement as an opportunity to launch broader arms control and strategic stability discussions. Arms control on its own will not be sufficient to change Moscow's calculus about the benefits of cooperation with the United States, but it can serve as a foundation for additional engagement. Other potential areas for greater U.S. engagement with Russia include climate, including in the Arctic where the United States and Russia have engaged productively in the Arctic Council, and non-proliferation. Through increased communication between Washington and Moscow, the United States could also present additional incentives—economic and diplomatic—where the United States would increase cooperation if Russia moderated its actions. In this way, the United States could underscore that some cooperation is possible and make clear for future Russian decision-makers that an alternative course is available.

The current realities in U.S.-Russia relations mean that moving in this direction would take time. Russian actions, including the Kremlin's persistent efforts to target U.S. elections, amplify U.S. social divisions, and undermine U.S. faith in democratic institutions, will be the key factor limiting what is possible in the near term. The difficulties of lifting U.S. sanctions on Russia in the event that Moscow changes its policy course will be another obstacle. In the meantime, then, the United States should monitor and plan for, create headwinds to, and—where possible—pull at the seams in Russia-China relations.

Monitor and Plan for Growing Russia-China Cooperation

As Russia-China relations deepen, more of their cooperation is likely to take place out of plain sight. The announcement that Russia will provide China with an

early-warning missile detection system, for example, surprised many observers and underscores the increasingly discreet nature of their cooperation. Moving forward, the United States should increase efforts to gain insight into Russia-China cooperation, including technology transfer between them. Likewise, efforts to forecast and think through how their cooperation is most likely to evolve and affect U.S. interests would help inform approaches to preventing its most pernicious effects. To these ends, the United States should:

Increase intelligence collection and sharing on Russia-China cooperation. The U.S. intelligence community lacks consistent insight into the leadership intentions of these hard-target regimes. Rising hostility between the United States and both Russia and China has led these countries to enhance their counterintelligence, likely to include greater intelligence sharing and joint targeting of U.S. intelligence operations in each country, hurting U.S. collection efforts. Gaining insight into the intentions of both regimes, therefore, will remain difficult. In addition to efforts to penetrate their leadership circles, the U.S. intelligence community through the National Intelligence Priorities Framework should increase its focus on monitoring Russia-China military cooperation, technology transfers, and efforts to coordinate information operations. Exposing relationships between Russia and China in these domains, including through greater intelligence sharing, would also help European allies and partners better assess the challenges that China poses in Europe. Washington and its allies should also broaden conversations about shared challenges posed by Chinese and Russian partnerships on topics such as payment systems and supply chains.

Wargaming, simulations, and scenario planning. The United States government, especially the intelligence community and Department of Defense (DoD), needs to continue to proactively think through how Russia-China cooperation could evolve, much as this report has started to do. Such analysis is useful for identifying actions that can be taken now to thwart or limit the depth of their cooperation in the future and ensure the United States is not perpetually in response mode. To increase preparedness, the DoD and other agencies should continue to conduct wargames with scenarios involving the United States opposite both China and Russia together, to better understand the strengths and potential vulnerabilities of such cooperation. DoD should also conduct in-depth net assessments of both countries' military strategies and capabilities. While it is tempting to use

the defense concepts of one nation to apply to both, each poses unique threats to the United States—each has, for example, its own approach to escalation management and a theory of victory. These disparate strategies will require different responses from DoD.

Prepare for digitization of financial infrastructure.

Washington should support research in cryptocurrencies, digital payment systems, and associated areas to allow the United States to stay atop new developments and keep ahead of enforcement issues posed by the Russia-China partnership in this domain. While the Federal Reserve, Securities and Exchange Commission, and others are now focusing more on these areas, it remains critical to ensure that China and Russia do not set the standards on development and export of payment systems, digital assets, and other institutions. The United States should work with allies and European and Asian central banks as well as organizations like the Bank of International Settlements to protect critical financial and cyber architecture and adapt existing regulations to address the challenges of digitization, especially the centralization of digital payment systems from countries like Russia and China.

Create Headwinds

This report has argued that the United States must consider Russia and China separately, to increase room to maneuver between them, as well as together. In some cases, especially on democracy and human rights issues, Russia and China have overlapping interests. There is therefore a set of actions that the United States can take that are effective at addressing this convergence between them. Such “two-for-one” actions are an efficient way to mitigate the effects of Russia-China alignment. The United States can mitigate the effects of Russia-China collaboration by:

Reasserting U.S. global leadership. A large part of the United States' ability to mitigate the effects of deepening Russia-China alignment is showing up on the international stage and renewing U.S. leadership and commitment to upholding democracy and universal human rights. Russia and China are most effective at challenging U.S. interests and values when they can amplify and then take advantage of perceptions that the United States is withdrawing and disengaging.

Washington must also resume leadership in multi-lateral institutions, working to catalyze greater efforts among like-minded partners to address critical domains such as climate change, global health, and standards

around emerging technologies. The United States should place particular emphasis on increasing efforts to shape and advance norms and ethical frameworks for the appropriate use of next-generation technologies, especially artificial intelligence.

The United States, along with concerned democracies worldwide, should mount a more coordinated response to Russian and Chinese promotion of the concept of cyber sovereignty as a means of justifying repressive approaches to managing the internet and their advancement of artificial intelligence for censorship and surveillance.

Recommitting to alliances. To counter the aligned efforts of China and Russia, the United States will have to recommit to important partnerships. For DoD, for example, this should include steps to reaffirm commitments to key military partnerships such as the U.S.-Japan-South Korea trilateral defense cooperation. Enhancing it will help push back against Russian and Chinese actions such as the joint air patrol in 2019, intended to challenge U.S. operations and norms in the region. The U.S. military can lead trilateral defense discussions and military exercises that build confidence and deconflict agendas.

In Europe, the United States should reaffirm its commitment to NATO and work to more fully enlist the alliance in efforts to address the China challenge. Growing cooperation between Russia and China raises the risk that China could share with Russia intelligence pulsing through 5G networks or collected at ports controlled by Chinese companies, use its growing ownership of European infrastructure to slow a NATO response to Russian aggression, or use its economic leverage to quietly dissuade an already-reluctant NATO member state from responding to Russia's hybrid tactics. Strengthening NATO and better equipping the alliance to address new challenges stemming from China is necessary for preventing some of the most pernicious implications of Russia-China alignment.

Washington should also work with allies to develop common sanctions, investment screening, and export control standards to increase the costs of Russian and Chinese behavior. Together with its allies, the United States should reset rules on disclosure and reporting standards—including on listed equity and debt—and insist all listers on exchanges follow auditing rules and reporting guidelines.

Supporting democratic resilience. In addition to upholding a positive model of democratic governance at home,

the United States and its partners should dedicate resources to bolstering the resiliency of countries most at risk from PRC or Russian malign influence. In the main, this will mean simply doubling down on support for good governance, anti-corruption, transparency, and the rule of law, depriving China and Russia of the opportunity to capitalize on governance gaps in vulnerable democracies. The stronger a country's regulatory environment, civil society, political parties, and independent media, the less effective authoritarian powers' attacks on democratic institutions will be, and the less appeal the authoritarian narrative and model will have. The United States should leverage its role in key global and regional development institutions to address unsustainable debt burdens in third countries and, together with other developed democracies, offer alternative financing to reduce their reliance on Chinese lending. The United States should also support the cultivation in key countries of greater expertise on PRC and Russian influence operations, both traditional and digital, to stymie the countries' increasingly compounding efforts to employ disinformation and coopt foreign elites. Empowering domestic constituencies to stand up against foreign subversion of their own democracies is a relatively low-cost way for Washington to blunt China and Russia's drive for greater global influence.

"Trilateralizing" arms control and strategic stability dialogues. Arms control and strategic stability dialogues could serve as another "two-for-one," providing the United States with an opportunity to limit both Russian and Chinese capabilities and/or develop rules of the road that would benefit U.S. interactions with both countries. While efforts to trilateralize New START are unlikely to be successful, other areas where there is greater parity between the United States, Russia, and China—for example in the cyber, space, or AI domains—could be promising. The United States could start with softer arms control, like dialogue mechanisms ("we saw you do X in space last month and want to talk to you about it"), declarations of weapons stockpiles, prohibitions on the export of hypersonic missiles, and rules of the road for cyber intrusions or the use of AI with existing weapons systems. These would all be areas for discussion that the three countries could benefit from.

In the more traditional arms control space, the United States should consider an agreement to replace the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty that the United States withdrew from because

of Russian non-compliance with the treaty. While unlikely that China would entertain these discussions in the near-term, the United States could seek to bring China to the table alongside Russia to pursue an INF 2.0 that would allow all three countries to have some land-based ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and missile launchers with ranges of 500–1,000 kilometers, but cap the number. This would allow the United States to limit China’s huge dual-capable missile force and limit Russia’s expansion of INF-range missiles after the original INF treaty died. This approach would require Russia to admit its 9M729s violated the INF treaty with the United States (or new definitions would have to be created), and Russia and China would likely ask the United States to include sea- and air-launched missiles, which the United States would be unlikely to do.

Conversely, the United States could instead explore the Russian proposal for a moratorium on land-based missiles in Europe only. This could cause some friction between Russia and China as this approach would allow the United States to deploy INF-type missiles in the Indo-Pacific while also forcing Russia to deploy all of its intermediate-based systems in its far east against China. There are also challenges associated with this approach, including the fact that Russia would be able to more rapidly redeploy such missiles given that the United States would first need to secure allied agreement. In either case, engaging the Kremlin on these issues will be critical.

Attracting Chinese and Russian talent to the United States. China has increased efforts to attract Russian talent to China. In order to disrupt exchanges of scientists between Russia and China, which would facilitate their joint innovation efforts, the United States must attract Russian and Chinese talent to the United States. In addition to a public diplomacy campaign, the United States should create pathways to make it easier for Chinese and Russian students to keep their technological and scientific expertise in the United States. Specifically, the United States should increase H-1B visas offered for employers and expand the Optional Practical Training Program for STEM workers who wish to become permanent residents and citizens. Increasing pathways should occur in tandem with increased coordination between U.S. law enforcement and American universities to mitigate risks on campus and with more rigorous visa screenings to investigate potential ties to foreign militaries, including the PLA and the Russian Armed Forces.⁹⁰

Exploit Fissures

Russia and China are not aligned on all issues or in every region. For example, the two countries compete for arms sales, and China is encroaching on Russian interests in Central Asia and the Arctic, as well as expanding its footprint in countries like Ukraine and Belarus. Russia is also likely to look to countries such as India and Japan to hedge against its growing reliance on Beijing—relationships that have the potential to upset Beijing. As previously noted, Russia and China also go about pursuing their interests in very different ways, with Russia being far more risk-tolerant than Beijing. The Kremlin’s comfort with low-level instability stands in stark contrast to the CCP’s strong preference for the stability that is required to protect and facilitate its economic equities, especially in the growing number of countries with Belt and Road-linked projects. At the same time, Beijing’s increasingly strident messaging and use of coercive military and economic measures in defense of its expanding global interests is likely to produce mounting friction with Russia, particularly in Asia, where Russia seeks to maintain the status quo and preserve its freedom to maneuver despite mounting Chinese power projection.

But while there are numerous tensions between Russia and China, the United States has limited ability to exploit these divergences. In other words, in most cases, the United States has little leverage to exacerbate the tensions between Russia and China. This does not mean that Washington should not try. Moving forward, U.S. policymakers must be mindful of the tensions between Russia and China and look for ways to pull at the seams of their relationship. The goal of driving such mini-wedges will be to amplify tensions between Russia and China and/or sow doubt in their relationship such that both sides seek to limit what they are willing to do together. Although each “mini-wedge,” on its own, would have limited effect on the overall trajectory of Russia-China relations, if pursued in concert such an approach could limit the depth of their cooperation. Examples of efforts that would pull at the seams of Russia-China relations include:

Allowing Russia to sell arms to India and Vietnam. U.S. policymakers will have to consider how policies designed to confront one country could inadvertently hinder efforts to confront the other. The Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, for example, was designed to deter Russian aggression by limiting the Kremlin’s revenue from arms exports. Yet these sanctions have prevented some countries with territorial

disputes with China, including India and Vietnam, from purchasing Russian arms. India, in particular, has experienced an uptick in tensions with China as the two countries remain engaged in a standoff over their long-standing border dispute in the Himalayas. Continuing to allow Russia to sell arms to India, therefore, could create some tension in Russia-China relations. Where possible while upholding U.S. interests and values, Washington should seek to avoid creating rifts with those countries that it can work with to exploit fissures in Russia-China relations.

Working with allies and partners to communicate to China about Russia's destabilizing actions—especially in the Middle East and the Arctic—where China has economic investments. In communicating with Beijing, Washington and its partners in Europe and the Middle East should underscore Russia's proclivity for actions that raise the risk of instability, especially where such instability would pose challenges for Beijing's economic investments abroad. Russian actions and approaches have the potential to conflict with China's preference for stability in the many countries where it is engaged economically.

Ultimately, exploiting tensions in Russia-China relations will be difficult to do and Russia and China will be highly attuned to U.S. efforts to drive such wedges. In many cases, the United States will be best served by getting out of the way and allowing the frictions in the relationship to play out on their own, while pursuing the other approaches outlined above designed to monitor, plan for, and mitigate the effects of their alignment. In the coming years, the United States will need to prioritize its foreign policy efforts and avoid the impulse to compete in every region opposite Russia and China. Not only is such prioritization necessary amid competing challenges and limited resources, but it would also allow Russia and China to compete with each other rather than join forces against Washington.

Conclusion

The growing partnership between China and Russia poses a challenge to the United States, particularly across key areas where Beijing is likely to threaten vital national interests in the years ahead. Deepening Sino-Russian defense relations have the potential to amplify China's ability to project power and credibly signal to onlooking countries its willingness to challenge U.S. dominance, accelerate China's efforts to erode U.S. military advantages particularly in the Indo-Pacific, accelerate China's research and development efforts, and complicate U.S. defense plans and capacity. Meanwhile, Russia is a key ally in China's drive to subvert the values and rules that define the existing liberal order, collaborating to undermine support for democracy and human rights protections at the U.N. and other multilateral institutions, as well as weaken democracy and prop up illiberal actors in countries around the world. In so doing, the countries look to accelerate the perceived decline of the United States, establish an alternate information ecosystem free from democratic norms and control, and ultimately ensure a world more hospitable to the continued rule of each country's authoritarian regime and their expanding global interests.

Washington will not find solutions to this challenge through simplistic efforts to split China and Russia, nor in mounting a quixotic effort to lump together and take on both countries at once across all domains of geostrategic rivalry. Instead, the United States must, together with its democratic allies and partners, prepare for and tackle the most significant threats the Russia-China partnership poses to American interests and values while laying the groundwork for the natural fissures in the relationship to grow over the longer term. Time is of the essence—interactions and collaboration between Beijing and Moscow are increasing rapidly, cementing working relationships and furthering common objectives in areas of dire importance to the United States. Policymakers, equipped with a concrete understanding of how Russia-China relations are likely to evolve and where their cooperation will be most damaging to U.S. interests, must act quickly to navigate and disrupt the challenge posed by the countries' emerging entente.

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