



Chapter 6

Russia–China: Putin Turns to the East

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Introduction

The Russia–People’s Republic of China (PRC) partnership is perhaps the most important relationship of the 21st Century because it multiplies the already formidable threat from two capable strategic competitors and therefore enhances the challenge to the United States. This chapter will seek to outline Russia’s objectives for the relationship, means it is using, and how the United States should address this challenge.

Russia pursues various strategic ends in its relationship with the PRC, including goals related to economics and its place in the international system, but Vladimir Putin’s primary strategic goal for Russia remains regime survival, which includes maintenance of the oligarchic and elite power capitalism that forms Putin’s base of power. Early in his presidency, Putin explored closer relations with the West, but a series of events in the 2000s such as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, followed closely by color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, EU expansion to Eastern Europe, and NATO overtures to former Soviet states, convinced Putin the West was irrevocably hostile to Russian interests. Western criticism of, and perceived interference in, Putin’s disputed 2011 re-election proved a breaking point, convincing Putin the West was committed to Russian regime change.¹ Western liberal values supporting an open political system, active civil society, free media, independent legislature, transparency in governance, and removal of trade and investment barriers became the primary perceived threat to Putin’s regime. Russia’s corresponding accelerated outreach to the PRC can be viewed through the lens of providing non-Western options to support regime survival.

Russia sees the PRC as key to its ability to achieve its desired economic end state of increasing Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while expanding state influence in the economy and improving prosperity for its citizens. Specifically, Russia announced its near-term economic goals in May 2018 of sustaining a three percent annual GDP growth rate and halving its domestic poverty rate to 6.6 percent by 2024.² The validity of using the PRC to help meet these goals is not unfounded, as the PRC was Russia’s sixth largest export destination and eighth largest source of imports in the year 2000, and now occupies the top spot in both categories by a fair margin.³ This growing economic cooperation between Russia and the PRC is partly due to structural reasons.

¹ Eugene B. Rumer, “Russia’s China Policy: This Bear Hug is Real,” in *Russia–China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, (Seattle: The National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2017), 16-17.

² “The World Bank in Russia: Overview,” The World Bank, last updated April 16, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/overview>.

³ Daniel Workman, “Russia’s Top Trading Partners,” *World’s Top Exports*, March 16, 2020, <http://www.worldstopexports.com/russias-top-import-partners/>.

Russia is flush with natural resources and the PRC needs them. Russia's export-driven economy also requires import of finished goods to satisfy consumer demand, and the PRC nicely fills that role. In the whole, the balanced trade arrangement suits both partners. Any ideological socialist underpinnings to this arrangement are probably now historic artifact.

Finally, one of Russia's strategic ends that coincides with aims of the PRC is an overall focus on resisting and reforming the U.S.-led international system, ultimately creating a multi-polar system that advantages Russia as one of several poles in this system. This strategic end both supports other objectives and in some cases encompasses them, whether this includes ensuring regime survival, working around or eliminating debilitating sanctions, or enhancing Russian prestige on the international stage. A perceived threat in the current international system to both Russia and the PRC are the aforementioned liberal values that underlie many of these institutions, especially as they pertain to human rights and transparency. Both Russia and the PRC see these values in particular as pretexts for other countries to criticize or even interfere in their respective domestic affairs. The color revolutions and other perceived Western influences that caused regime change in other countries remain a prime concern, and both countries strive to insulate themselves from such an eventuality.

Russian Ways and Means

Vladimir Putin intended to use the emerging 21st century Great Power rivalry between the United States and the PRC as an opportunity to extract economic and political benefits from both sides while maintaining an independent Russian foreign policy.⁴ However, a decade of deteriorating relations with the West, punctuated by the sharp break after the Crimea crisis in 2014, changed this calculus and prompted Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's "Pivot to Asia" strategy, which forced a closer alignment with the PRC out of necessity to protect Russian interests and regime stability. An examination of Russia's interactions with the PRC provide some insight into the various ways and means being leveraged to achieve Russia's strategic objectives of regime stability, economic advancement, and reform of the international system into a multi-polar structure. Frequently the interests of these two countries align, but Russia has also demonstrated a willingness to subordinate certain matters of greater national economic, security, and political interest in order to establish a higher baseline for the PRC relationship to benefit overall regime stability.

Russia is now bandwagoning with the PRC to demonstrate geopolitical and economic centrality. The PRC is the world's rising economic star and provides a partner of convenience in countering the U.S.-led world order. In economic, military, and political spheres, the relationship is strengthening. Extensive collaboration in technology, telecommunications, artificial intelligence, biotechnology, and digital economy is now taking place.⁵ The expanding economic partnership enables both states to collectively gain more global market share, and therefore influence, in promoting a model for future growth at the expense of the West, rather than being led by it.

The complementary economic relationship centered on natural resources is a key driver of this relationship, and an exemplar of this is the Power of Siberia natural gas pipeline that opened in December 2019. Connecting gas fields in Siberia to North East China, this pipeline turns Russia into the PRC's largest natural gas supplier. The PRC's interests in this project are

⁴ Vasily Kashin, "Russia-China Cooperation: A Russian Perspective," in *Sino-Russian Relations: Perspectives from Russia, China, and Japan*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, May 2019), 20.

⁵ Samuel Bendett and Elsa Kania, "A New Sino-Russian High-Tech Partnership," *Australian Strategic Policy Institute*, October 29, 2019, <https://www.aspi.org.au/report/new-sino-russian-high-tech-partnership>.

clear, which are providing energy for its growing market while diversifying supply away from the Middle East and the Malacca security dilemma.⁶ For Russia, as an energy-producing nation, this pipeline represents security of markets and a shift away from its heavy reliance on European sales. A clear win-win scenario between the two neighbors, this pipeline had actually been under discussion since the 1970's without resolution. Distrust between the Russian and Chinese states influenced the business negotiations, and up until 2014 had prevented agreement on a fixed pricing contract. The deal was quickly finalized in May 2014, just months after the Crimea annexation. The exact details of the pricing agreement have not been released and Russian natural gas provider *Gazprom* has publicly stated that the terms are mutually beneficial, but analysts suggest that implied terms give the PRC a fixed gas supply at a reduced price of twenty-five percent and forty percent lower than the cost of importing overseas liquid natural gas.⁷ The Power of Siberia pipeline is an example of Russian alignment with the PRC on mostly Chinese terms, and Russian willingness to accept less than maximized economic and political return on investment in order to bolster a relationship that is proving essential for short-term regime stability. However, plans for a Power of Siberia 2 pipeline were announced in March 2020, with a larger throughput, and using Moscow's preferred route through Mongolia to the PRC which affords Russia flexibility between its Asian and European markets. This new deal indicates greater recent leverage on Russia's part due to increasing demand in the PRC.⁸

Implementation of Russia and the PRC's economic engagement plans, the Eurasian Economic Union and the One Belt One Road initiative, is potentially another way Russia can work with the PRC to improve their economies, while also creating economic and political structures that support their objectives. Both of these programs are intended to increase economic activity in areas proximate to Russia and the PRC, among other purposes, and there have been agreements to integrate the two efforts to benefit both parties.⁹ Optimally, joint investments into a common region would secure markets, expand infrastructure links, and perhaps even elevate the stature of both currencies, making both parties less vulnerable to sanctions and other outside interference. However, there are significant obstructions to this integration—not even including the current and future effects of COVID-19—and any significant progress is likely to be made in the mid to long-term, if at all.¹⁰

Arms sales are critically important to the Russian economy and to Russia's ability to maintain its own military capacity at current scale, while also extending Russian influence with

⁶ Chinese Premier Hu Jintao first used the term Malacca Dilemma in 2003 to describe China's reliance on energy imported by sea through the Strait of Malacca. Eighty percent of China's energy currently passes through that chokepoint in Southeast Asia. China has since been trying to diversify its sources of energy and routes by which energy is shipped, which China perceives as a strategic vulnerability. For more information, see Navya Mudunuri, "The Malacca Dilemma and Chinese Ambitions: Two Sides of a Coin," *Diplomatist*, July 7, 2020, <https://diplomatist.com/2020/07/07/the-malacca-dilemma-and-chinese-ambitions-two-sides-of-a-coin/>.

⁷ Brian Spegele, Wayne Ma, and Gregory L. White, "Russia and China Agree on Long-Sought Natural Gas Supply Contract," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 21, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/russia-and-china-agree-on-long-sought-natural-gas-agreement-1400683490>.

⁸ Elizabeth Buchanan, "There's No (New) China-Russia Alliance," *The Strategist*, June 26, 2020, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/theres-no-new-china-russia-alliance/>.

⁹ Oleg Remyga, "Linking the Eurasian Economic Union and China's Belt and Road," *Reconnecting Asia*, November 9, 2018, <https://reconnectingasia.csis.org/analysis/entries/linking-eurasian-economic-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

¹⁰ Vladislav Inozemtsev, "Integrating the Eurasian Union and China's Belt and Road: A Bridge Too Far," *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 16, no. 91, June 21, 2019, <https://jamestown.org/program/integrating-the-eurasian-union-and-chinas-belt-and-road-a-bridge-too-far/>.

the arms recipients. Russia is the world's second largest arms exporter, after the United States, and South and Southeast Asia are central to Russia's exports. These regions account for sixty percent of Russia's total weapons sales, and by many estimates, Russia is the Indo-Pacific region's largest arms provider.¹¹ As evidence of the importance of arms sales in the Indo-Pacific, Russia backed India in the days leading up to the fatal clash along the tense Line of Actual Control with the PRC, and quietly worked behind the scenes afterwards to facilitate the release of captured Indian soldiers.¹² The importance of Russia's arms exports, especially in the Indo-Pacific region, shows that Russia will even take some risk with the 'China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination' to preserve these sales.¹³

Russian arms sales to the PRC itself represent another aspect of this dynamic. Arms sales between the two countries' surged in the 1990s as Russia unloaded surplus Soviet stock to a PRC market restricted by Tiananmen sanctions, but plateaued in the early 2000s and began declining as the PRC's domestic arms industry became more capable, and Russia was stung by intellectual property (IP) theft. The PRC's violation of the 1996 production agreement for the SU-27SK Flanker and IP theft to design the indigenous J-11B was particularly galling, and Russia stopped selling its most advanced technology. After the Crimea crisis, however, Russia reversed course and agreed to sell the PRC more advanced technology, to include the Sukhoi SU-35 aircraft with some of the world's most advanced engines, and the S-400 Triumph air defense system. While Russia received assurances for more robust intellectual property protection prior to these sales, Chinese deficiency in domestic engine technology presents a significant risk for IP theft.¹⁴ Russia's decision to allow these sales suggests a willingness to accept potential future loss in exchange for a short-term financial support and regime stability in a time of need.¹⁵ Other ongoing security cooperation efforts also present a tale of collaboration with caveats. Sino-Russo military engagement has been steadily increasing, both bilateral and multilateral; to now represent Russia's most robust engagement with any foreign country. This includes dialogues, educational exchanges, competitions, and exercises. A maritime cooperation exercise established in 2012 now rotates between Russian and Chinese waters, and Russia has begun inviting PLA participation in national defense exercises, as showcased in the massive *Vostok 2018*.¹⁶ Notably, Putin announced in 2019 that Russia was helping the PRC develop a missile attack early warning system, and furthermore labeled the relationship as, "an allied relationship in the full sense of a multifaceted strategic partnership."¹⁷ While some of this cooperation represents more signaling over substance, it all focuses on challenging the U.S.-led security order. The trust deficit between

¹¹ Matt Bartlett, "Russian Arms Flood Southeast Asia," *The Interpreter by the Lowy Institute*, February 8, 2019, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/russian-arms-flood-southeast-asia>.

¹² Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "Russian Envoy to India Meets Foreign Secretary in Show of Support amid LAC Stand Off," *The Economic Times*, June 4, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/russian-envoy-to-india-meets-foreign-secretary-in-show-of-support-amid-lac-stand-off/articleshow/76162439.cms>; Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, "How Russia's 'Quiet Diplomacy' Helped in Reducing Tensions Between India and China," *The Economic Times*, July 6, 2020, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/how-russias-quiet-diplomacy-helped-in-reducing-tensions-between-delhi-and-beijing/articleshow/76802915.cms>.

¹³ Buchanan, "There's No (New) China-Russia Alliance."

¹⁴ Richard Weitz, "Sino-Russian Security Ties," In *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*, (Seattle: National Bureau of Asian Research, July 2017), 30-31.

¹⁵ Richard Weitz, "Sino-Russian Security Ties."

¹⁶ Kashin, "Russia-China Cooperation: A Russian Perspective," 10-13.

¹⁷ Jonathan E. Hillman, "China and Russia: Economic Unequals," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

the two militaries appears to be narrowing through increasingly substantial engagement but remains an inhibitor to full alignment.

Russia has collaborated with the PRC in various ways to further its goal of reforming the international system to better serve its interests. The two countries have effectively cooperated in a variety of global and regional fora to re-write existing rules and norms and influence emerging global standards. For instance, as with the PRC, Russia also holds one of the five permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) and thus can veto any proposal that is contrary to its interests.

The United Nations Human Rights Council is another forum where Russia and the PRC have collaborated within the existing system for mutual benefit. From 2009 to present, Russia and the PRC have worked to minimize the Council's impact on their human rights practices, accomplishing this in two ways. First, they have actively tried to dilute the mechanisms available to the Council and its member states to draw attention to human rights abuses. Second, they have tried to redefine human rights to be more in line with how Russia and the PRC define the term, in an effort to systematically remove the possibility of UN criticism of these countries' practices.¹⁸ Removing human rights concerns, or ameliorating their effects, addresses one of the major concerns Russia and the PRC have with the current international system, as it minimizes the potential of human rights abuses to be used as a justification for foreign interference in their domestic affairs, especially if abuses approached a Responsibility to Protect threshold. This is perceived as an effective mechanism for protecting regime stability.

Russia has also been active regionally with the PRC in creating organizations and mechanisms that support their objectives. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization was created in 1996 as the Shanghai Five group, ostensibly to address the terrorism threat in the region. Since its founding, it has grown to eight countries with several observers and has taken on roles outside of counter-terrorism, to include broader security activities, economic cooperation, and cultural events.¹⁹ The SCO represents an alternative to the existing U.S. alliance structure for supporting regional stability.

Another organization that allows Russia to advance its economic and political interests is the BRICS, a dialogue of five large and emerging economies: Brazil, Russia, India, the PRC, and South Africa. Together these states comprise forty-two percent of the world population and twenty-three percent of global GDP. In particular, the PRC and Russia, the world's second and sixth largest economies, respectively, are using this forum to degrade the international institutions that underpin the current U.S.-led world order. Methods such as questioning the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, quarreling over the effectiveness and funding of the World Health Organization, and building alternative financial instruments, including new ways to provide grants and loans during the pandemic, are being used to advance political legitimacy and erode the current multilateral systems.²⁰

¹⁸ Geoffrey Roberts, "Russia and China's Assault on the International Human Rights System," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, February 6, 2020, <http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/russia-and-chinas-assault-on-the-international-human-rights-system/>.

¹⁹ Shanghai Cooperation Organization, accessed June 12, 2020, <http://eng.sectsc.org/>.

²⁰ Nazia Hussain, "BRICS in Time of Pandemic: Leadership from Emerging Economies?," *S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies Commentary* No. 102/2020, May 22, 2020, <https://www.rsis.edu.sg/rsis-publication/cms/global-health-security-covid-19-and-its-impacts-brics-in-time-of-pandemic-leadership-from-emerging-economies/>.

Opportunities, Limits, and Challenges

In 2019, U.S. Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats testified to the Senate that Russia and the PRC are more closely aligned now than at any point since the mid-1950s and the relationship is likely to strengthen in the coming year.²¹ Both Russia and the PRC have permanent seats in the UNSC, stature in the UN, and thus are strong partners for each other in international organizations. They also share a concern about the underlying values in these organizations, and how these values could threaten their domestic situation, especially as it affects regime stability. In this sense, they have strong reasons to work together, even if they differ in some of their approaches. In doing so, they are eroding once well-established security norms and increasing the risk of regional conflicts.

Russia has several economic opportunities, especially as it concerns the PRC. In particular, the PRC has incentives to increase its oil, and especially gas, imports from Russia to mitigate its Malacca dilemma, but market access and production infrastructure limits are hampering further development. The opportunity for Russia to exert leverage over a PRC dependent on Russian hydrocarbons would indeed be an appealing prospect for President Putin, as a way to gain some influence in the partnership. As it currently stands, however, collaboration in technology development is a more positive aspect of the relationship. Russia and the PRC are cooperating, through their strategic partnership, in the development of non-Western technology. These technologies, intended to replace Western modernism and particularly American ingenuity, present the prospect for Russia and the PRC to eliminate dependence on external sources of expertise.²²

While the aforementioned opportunities drive these two countries together, there are factors that limit this association. Both sides studiously refuse to label the relationship an alliance despite the vague verbiage Putin used in 2019; Wang Yi called it a “bilateral strategic cooperation,” and Putin and Xi upgraded the relationship to a “comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination” in June 2019.²³ In any case, the relationship is an asymmetric one driven by economic and demographic factors that pre-determines Russia’s role as junior partner in the relationship, though neither side wants this appellation. Taken to its logical conclusion, that role undermines the Putin regime’s ability to rally national pride or stake a role as a global Great Power. In the same vein, while aligning closer with the PRC can help shape global norms to better insulate Russia from threatening Western influence and ideology, it will not moderate other existing friction points in the relationship. Public opinion still reflects a strong historic distrust between the two countries, where according to one 2018 poll sixty percent of Russians in Eastern Siberia consider the PRC’s rise to be a threat, and a popular conspiracy theory whispers that a secret agreement gifts the PRC a small piece of Russian territory annually.²⁴ For its part, memories linger in the PRC of Russia’s land grab and role in the Unequal Treaties in the 19th Century, which form the core of the Century of Humiliation narrative the CCP pushes domestically to legitimize its rule.

²¹ Daniel R. Coats, “Statement for the Record: Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community,” *Senate Select Committee on Intelligence*, January 29, 2019, 4, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR--SSCI.pdf>.

²² Bendett and Kania, “A New Sino-Russian High-Tech Partnership.”

²³ Buchanan, “There’s No (New) China-Russia Alliance.”

²⁴ Eugene Chausovsky, “The Ever-Shifting Strategic Triangle Between Russia, China, and the U.S.,” *STRATFOR*, June 4, 2019, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/ever-shifting-strategic-triangle-between-russia-china-and-us>.

Similarly, Russian reluctance to back the PRC's expansive territorial claims in the East and South China Seas for fear of alienating other potential economic and security partners in Asia is mirrored by Chinese reluctance to support Russian sponsored popular uprisings, referendums, and threats to sovereignty in Eastern Europe for fear of losing control in Chinese controlled territories.²⁵

There are also limits economically. The Russian economy is overly reliant on hydrocarbon exports, and lack of economic diversification, infrastructure constraints, and internal corruption will leave the Russian economy at the mercy of global oil process for the foreseeable future. This prospect should be fresh in the memories of Moscow leadership, who saw the market flooded with oil with a simultaneous significant decrease in demand during the beginning of the pandemic, which resulted in extremely low oil prices in the international marketplace for a period. This Russian vulnerability provides an opportunity for the PRC to sign potential long-term deals at extremely low prices at opportune times. While the Russian economy and citizens have been hardened to these economic downturns, this situation does not bode well for long-term economic growth. Moreover, though technology development with the PRC is seemingly a positive step to keep pace with Western innovation, continuous Russian exposure to the PRC's aggressive intellectual property theft scheme may not result in sustained indigenous advancement in technology. These limits, when combined, may see a future Russia reduced to being a resource appendage of the PRC.

COVID-19 has played the role of disruptor across the globe, and its ultimate effects will not be clear for some time. In this sense, opportunities for Russia are potentially balanced with challenges. For instance, global discussions about diversifying supply chains before the pandemic have only been accelerated as countries now see the security implications of this lack of diversification, in addition to the pre-existing business implications. Although it is highly unlikely that globalization would see reverses to the extent of bipolar arrangement as during the Cold War, some movement into separate economic camps is possible which would potentially drive Russia and the PRC closer together.

Implications for United States, Friends, and Allies

The implications of the Russia-PRC strategic partnership for the United States, and its friends and allies, are significant and varied. Russia and the PRC both place regime stability as their foremost priority, and while both parties will do whatever it takes to ensure regime survival, they both seek economic growth as the most accessible method of pacifying the populace to enable this outcome. Furthermore, providing an alternative to the U.S.-led international order, one in which they are two more poles in a multipolar arrangement, is the desired outcome for both states. Both Russia and the PRC are significant strategic challenges in their own right, and multiply in complexity when paired. Addressing this extraordinary danger will be the strategic challenge of our age.

Russia's complex economic condition, and burgeoning strategic partnership with the PRC, will present equally complex repercussions for the United States and its friends and allies. In particular, the complementary trade relationships, overland energy transfers, and growth of regional trade and security initiatives and organizations will insulate both parties to an extent if faced with future diplomatic actions or economic sanctions from Western countries or intergovernmental organizations.

²⁵ Ian Storey, "Moscow, Beijing and the South China Sea Dispute: Convergence and Divergence," *China US Focus*, October 19, 2017, <https://www.chinausfocus.com/peace-security/moscow-beijing-and-the-south-china-sea-dispute-convergence-and-divergence>.

Both Russia and the PRC share common interest in weakening the U.S. alliance system to disrupt systemically Western liberal influence. While Russia focuses on disrupting the NATO alliance in Europe, and the PRC prioritizes unsettling the Japan and Korea alliances with the United States in Asia, there is enough overlap in intent to enable both to exert pressure in the opposing regions. The PRC's One Belt One Road economic inroads into Eastern Europe provide a tool for creating dissent within NATO and weakening the consensus against Russia. Likewise, Russia has a role to play in exploiting Korean-Japanese tensions over unsettled historic grievances in a way that splits those alliances in the PRC's favor. The July 2019 joint Russian-Chinese military overflight of the disputed Dokdo islands, which triggered a military response from both Korea and Japan but then devolved into political squabbling between the two over who owned the territory and therefore the right to respond, best exemplifies this capacity. Closer alignment of Russian and Chinese political and security objectives will only continue to increase stress on the U.S. alliance system.²⁶

More broadly, Russian and PRC goals to reform the international system have significant implications in multiple theaters. In short, this is the system that the United States, along with its friends and allies, created after World War II. This system reflects the values of its founders and provides significant advantages to the West. While these systems are in many ways meant to be democratic, the changes Russia and the PRC want to make would alter some of the foundational values in these organizations. A related concern is that by changing the system to make it more in line with Russian and PRC values and priorities, it would provide a safe space for other authoritarian governments that would legitimate or at least permit behaviors inconsistent with the current structure. With COVID-19 potentially enabling various countries' leaders to assume more power under the pretext of fighting the virus, it is not unreasonable to assume the world may have more authoritarian governments after COVID-19 has run its course than before, so this is a real concern.

Recommendations

While initial statements from the Biden administration suggest continuity with the Trump administration's Russia and PRC policy, some evolution of the U.S. strategic approach could affect more positive outcomes in region. These recommendations seek to help that effort.

To provide effective recommendations to the United States and its allies, it is first important to note which actions are unlikely to work. Policy makers must recognize that **splitting the partnership of the two countries through U.S. actions may not be fully possible in the near term**. This recognition follows from acknowledging the vital interests of each regime as they see it. If Russia's alignment with the PRC centers on a shared recognition that regime survival is their top priority, and that it is threatened by Western ideology and color revolutions, then both countries are in agreement that their primary security threat comes from the United States. Unlike during the Cold War, when the toxic relationship between the two countries opened space for Henry Kissinger's realignment of the strategic triangle, today there is far less motivation for Russia and the PRC to readjust as any move toward the West would only heighten the internal threat against the ruling regimes. Only security guarantees to the Putin

²⁶ Brad Lendon, "Why Russia and China Are Wading into a Centuries' Old Dispute over a Tiny Island Cluster," *CNN*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/26/asia/south-korea-russia-japan-china-warplanes-analysis-intl-hnk/index.html>.

regime and economic relief from Crimea sanctions would yield any impact on Russia's assessment of the Western liberal threat to regime stability. However, this is impossible to do while still upholding U.S. values with regard to Crimea, and it is unlikely that Putin would trust the West after a decade-plus of mistrust in any case.

While it may not be possible to split this partnership, **it may be possible to incentivize Russia to moderate its support of the PRC in the Indo-Pacific.** Economic integration between the Russian Far East and non-PRC partners in Asia that could be accomplished without violating Crimea sanctions would create political and economic considerations that may lead to this effect. In particular, if Japan resolved the Kuril Islands dispute and normalized trade relations with Russia, however unlikely, it could allow Japan to prioritize its defense planning against the PRC threat, while creating ties between Russia and a PRC competitor.

To address the challenge presented by Russia and the PRC, the Biden Administration has proposed that the **United States needs to show positive world leadership and substantively re-engage globally.** A model for this engagement is the U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy, which is nominally not against anything, but instead champions each state's sovereignty, fair trade, and the role of regional institutions. U.S. government leadership and other figures need to support this positive approach by taking visible action. This is achieved by visibly engaging partners and allies at all levels, and expanding engagement with countries beyond the military domain. This is not only good practice because it has demonstrably been shown to work in the post-World War II era, but also because Russia and the PRC engage where the United States does not. Failing to provide this global leadership opens the door to Russia and the PRC, who are more than willing to lead.

As part of this engagement, **the United States needs to redouble its efforts to support and strengthen its existing alliance system.** Scholars and policymakers wistfully reference the strategic triangle, though with our alliance partners we expand beyond just these three vertices into a different shape that advantages the United States. A multinational approach to Russia and the PRC is more effective than a unilateral response, and regular alliance maintenance will be critical to resisting revisionist pressures. This effort to strengthen the alliance system needs to expand beyond military exercises, arms sales, and senior leader dialogues to encompass the diplomatic, economic, and, in some cases, development communities. The United States and its allies, when appropriate, should also prioritize and increase spending on joint research and development, especially in emerging technologies. A whole of government approach, across the alliance network, will be necessary to address the burgeoning Russia-PRC relationship.

Beyond the U.S. Alliance system, **the United States and its friends and allies need to support the international system they themselves created through statements and actions – both word and deed.** The international system has proven to be resilient, even if it is not perfect. Instead of focusing on negative aspects of the system, the United States and its partners would gain more by continuing to be strong supporters of the system and reminding constituent states why they joined and how it has benefited them. This support of the international system has practical applications during the COVID-19 pandemic, when its members can best observe its utility, and its value can be immeasurable to countries that need its support. All of this can be done while concurrently calling out Russian and PRC efforts to change or circumvent a system that is largely working for its members.

Finally, **the United States needs to improve its external messaging,** both to partners and allies as well as to potential adversaries. Consistent, unambiguous messaging to partners and allies reassures them of U.S. commitment and helps build consensus necessary to address large challenges. Consistent, unambiguous messaging also provides very clear policy positions to adversaries, which prevents misunderstandings from spiraling into conflict.

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