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SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION TOWARD REVISIONISM

by

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SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION TOWARD REVISIONISM

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ABSTRACT

The increasing strategic cooperation between China and Russia has grown into a major threat to the current global order and U.S. interests in Europe and Asia, particularly in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and the declaration of a “no-limits” partnership between these two revisionist powers. This thesis assesses the potential scope and limitations of the Sino-Russian strategic alignment from a historical perspective and through the lenses of the relevant theories of international relations dealing with alliances and interstate competition. It also examines the key policy options available to the United States and its allies to limit Chinese and Russian attempts to undermine the Liberal International Order (LIO), and to displace the U.S. in Europe and Asia. The thesis finds that the option of driving a “wedge” between Russia and China through détente with Russia is not feasible if President Putin remains in power; similarly, opportunities for selective cooperation with a resurgent China remain limited. Because Russian and Chinese strategic cooperation and aggressive behavior are primarily driven by the internal threat to their authoritarian systems posed by the LIO, the most appropriate response is to contain these regimes with a U.S.-led global coalition of democracies.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

A2/AD	anti-access, area denial
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
BRICS	Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
DIME	Diplomacy, Information, Military, Economic
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EU	European Union
FSR	Former Soviet Republic
KMT	Kuomintang
LIO	Liberal International Order
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PLA	People's Liberation Army
PRC	People's Republic of China

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. MAJOR RESEARCH QUESTION

China and Russia are both considered revisionist powers in the U.S.-led international order, and it seems natural that they cooperate in challenging it. Still, while close cooperation between Russia and China poses a significant strategic challenge for the United States, their alignment also faces substantial constraints. This brings up two crucial questions, which will be explored by this thesis: what is the scope for a Sino-Russian strategic cooperation in challenging U.S. dominance, and how do different policy options measure up against the goal of limiting the impact of this alignment?

B. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

While China or Russia's revisionist ambitions are cause for concern in the West, their cooperation in that effort is even more so, given their complimentary economic, technological, and military capabilities. For example, Russia can provide China with advanced missile systems and sensor technology to strengthen their Anti-Access, Area Denial (A2/AD) efforts, as well as access to natural resources and Arctic shipping lanes. This access would substantially increase China's energy security and maritime transportation options and insulate them from U.S. sanctions or interdiction.¹ Russia, in turn, looks to China for investments to offset the crippling effects of Western sanctions on the Russian economy.² In addition to the material interests, China and Russia are constrained by American hegemony in Europe and Asia—both by the hard power threat of the American military, and the soft power threat of democratically inspired internal revolt.

In the event of a conflict with the United States, coordinated military actions between Russia and China may overwhelm the United States's capacity to respond

¹ "Russia Gains Fresh Opportunities to Ship Crude to China," *Warsaw Institute*, July 29, 2020, <https://warsawinstitute.org/russia-gains-fresh-opportunities-to-ship-crude-to-china/>.

² Jonathan E. Hillman, "China and Russia," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, July 15, 2020. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-and-russia-economic-unequals>.

effectively. War game scenarios³ of a Baltic invasion by Russia, or a Taiwan invasion by China have demonstrated that either scenario independently exposes the limits of American hard power.⁴ If those scenarios play out simultaneously, challenges against key U.S. interests in Asia and Europe might become very difficult to contain. This demonstrates that the margin for error in handling the revisionist challenge from China and Russia is small, with even limited strategic cooperation between these two states creating the possibility to overwhelm the United States militarily, and to pose a decisive challenge to the U.S.-led liberal international order (LIO). Miscalculations and poor policy choices aimed at limiting China and Russia's global influence can end up driving the two to a closer partnership by giving them a common opponent against whom they can rally and pool their resources through security cooperation.⁵

The stakes are high enough to raise this issue to the top of the U.S. strategic priorities. A full Sino-Russian alliance would pose a major challenge to the U.S.-led international order not just in Asia, but also in Europe, where the United States has the largest number allies and significant economic and major security interests. In particular, the coupling of the Russian and Chinese strategic threats would pose a security and economic threat with the potential to create major rifts between the United States and its European allies. While Europe is aligned with the United States politically, it also has significant and growing energy and economic ties to China and Russia, which might complicate the efforts to contain these revisionist powers from within the frameworks of the NATO alliance and the relationship between the United States and European Union (EU). Still, Russia's invasion of Ukraine may persuade some European states to seek alternative supplier for hydrocarbon resources.

³ Michael Johnson and David A. Shlapak, Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank, RR1253 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2018), 1, https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.

⁴ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation." War on the Rocks, August 5, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/navigating-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/>.

⁵ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and David Shullman, "China and Russia's Dangerous Convergence," *Foreign Affairs*, May 5, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-03/china-and-russias-dangerous-convergence>.

Finally, this research question is important because there is a lack of consensus in the United States and among its allies on how to deal with Russia or China individually, let alone when the two are cooperating. President Biden recently stated that the world is at an inflection point and that Great Power Competition between the United States, China, and Russia will be the defining theme of international relations for decades to come.⁶ Another reason for the importance of this topic are the shifting views on the role of American global leadership within the United States. In recent years, significant divisions about the United States' global posture have emerged across the political spectrum, undermining domestic consensus on how to respond to the rising great power competition. The lack of consensus is evident in the diverging postures of the Trump and Biden administrations. The Trump administration had taken a more nationalistic approach, eschewing traditional liberal doctrines and alliances, and adopting a more unilateralist stance in containing the threat from China in order to preserve the United States relative power advantage. On the other hand, the Biden administration has doubled down on the "Democracy Agenda," focused on promoting and preserving democracy around the world and resuming the mantle of American leadership among like-minded liberal democracies.⁷ Either approach would face a serious challenge from collaboration between Russia and China. Understanding the implications of these approaches, as well as of the different policy proposals for dealing the trilateral great power competition challenge articulated by experts, will therefore be critical for U.S. decision-making.

C. LITERATURE REVIEW

This section examines the prominent literature on the Sino-Russian relationship, each state's individual strategic trajectories and global ambitions, and options available to the United States to limit the effects of cooperation between the two.

⁶ Frederick Kempe, "Biden's 'Inflection Point' for Democracies Poses Historic Challenge for the U.S. and Allies," The Atlantic Council, February 21, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/inflection-points/bidens-inflection-point-for-democracies-poses-historic-challenge-for-the-us-and-allies/>

⁷ Robert Manning and Matthew Burrows, "The Problem with Biden's Democracy Agenda," War on The Rocks, July 27, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/the-problem-with-bidens-democracy-agenda/>.

1. Defining Chinese and Russian Revisionist Ambitions

The renewed emphasis on Great Power Competition as the key strategic focus for the United States, with China and Russia singled out as the key competitors, suggests that both adversaries are rising great powers, vying for global dominance. However, a more nuanced perspective, offered by Dobbins et al., suggests that the status of a traditional rising challenger can only be attributed to China, while Russia behaves more like a “rogue” power, seeking to “punch above its weight” despite its declining relative power and capacity.⁸ Still, even though Russia may not wield China’s growing potential, due to its substantial resource base, Russia: (1) rivals the U.S. nuclear arsenal and has an otherwise large and relatively capable military; (2) has proven adept at operating in grey zone conflicts; and (3) boasts a regime that has been increasingly hostile to the United States and NATO. This still makes Russia a major threat that must be taken seriously,⁹ as evidenced by the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

While there is much debate on the sources of Russia’s revisionist ambitions, many scholars, analysts, and officials believe that Russia seeks to preserve its status and international recognition as a great power. This is underscored by a persistent feeling of insecurity stemming mainly from Russia’s geopolitics and the proximity of many actual or potential adversaries. Furthermore, the contention that Russia believes it has the right to a sphere of influence that includes many former Soviet states—especially those which are now NATO member states—is widely held among the Russian elites and population.¹⁰ The expansion of NATO is often cited by Moscow as an aggressive move to attempt to

⁸ James Dobbins, Howard Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia Is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China Is a Peer, Not a Rogue* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), 2; Bobo Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” *China International Strategy Review* Iss 2 (September 2021), 307. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42533-020-00063-7>.

⁹ Robert Pearson, *Russian Strategic Intentions: A Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper*, (Department of Defense, 2019), vii.

¹⁰ James Dobbins, Howard Shatz, and Ali Wyne, *Russia is a Rogue, not a Peer; China is a Peer, not a Rogue*, 2; Ales Karmazin and Nik Hynek, “Russian, U.S. and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics,” *Routledge, Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol 72, No 6 (2020), 955–975. 961.

encircle Russia and destabilize it.¹¹ These fears are also rooted in the psychological trauma from the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting economic woes that Russians endured in the 1990s. As result of these events, Russians draw parallels between their international status and domestic stability.¹²

Russia's aggressive international posture is also considered to have major domestic sources. The Russian regime led by Vladimir Putin is primarily concerned about the threat to his power coming from "color revolutions," which have displaced similarly corrupt and repressive regimes in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s. Russian attempts to undermine not only the LIO, but the appeal of democracy itself, is widely held as a means of maintaining regime stability by preventing further color revolutions in and around Russia.¹³ In this context, the Kremlin's revisionist ambitions may be primarily seen as means of maintaining control over its own population—by diverting the attention of the Russian people from the domestic issues that threaten the legitimacy of Vladimir Putin and his regime.¹⁴ This motivation is consistent with the idea that Russia seeks to undermine the existing international order—but not lead a new one. By undermining democracy and the LIO, domestic threats to the regime in the form of democratic movements or challenges are weakened. This follows from the perception highlighted by Bobo Lo that, "external criticism of Putin's policies...is viewed as an assault on Russian sovereignty."¹⁵ Taken together, these arguments suggest that Russia lacks both global leadership aspirations, and the capacity to represent an independent tier of a multipolar world, and the purpose of its

¹¹ Clunan, Ann, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," *Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs*, 2018, 45. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679418000096>.

¹² Matt Herring, "Strategy of Spectacle: Russia's War's Give Vladimir Putin a Big Boost at Home," *The Economist*, March 19, 2016, <https://www.economist.com/briefing/2016/03/19/a-strategy-of-spectacle>; John J. Mearshimer, "Reckless States and Realism," *International Relations* 23, no. 5, 2009, 245. <http://ire.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/23/2/241>.

¹³ Ann Clunan, "Russia and the Liberal World Order," 45; Dobbins, Shatz, and Wyne, *Russia is a Rogue, not a Peer; China is a Peer, Not a Rogue*, 10.

¹⁴ Matt Herring "Strategy of Spectacle: His Willingness and Ability to Act Abroad Give Putin a Big Boost at Home."

¹⁵ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Washington, DC, Brookings Institution Press, 2015. 49.

revisionist ambitions is directed at regime survival and curbing the further spread of liberal democracy and U.S. influence.¹⁶

While both Russia and China seek a multipolar world where each can rival the United States, Russian ambitions for international leadership are generally constrained to its “near abroad” which consists of the former Soviet republics (FSR) of Eurasia. The FSRs that joined NATO and the EU in the 1990s and 2000s—the three Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania—have been more insulated from Russian coercion (the 2008 Russian cyberattack on Estonia is a notable exception). On the other hand, the more consistently autocratic FSR in Central Asia and the Caucasus have more closely band-wagoned with Russia as a means of maintaining stability. That leaves the former Soviet republics that are not covered by the NATO and EU security umbrellas, but have expressed ambitions to join these institutions, as the most likely targets of Russian aggression—as evidenced by Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, and the 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine.¹⁷

As China continues to grow in power, it also seeks a greater degree of exceptionalism within the status quo.¹⁸ Many analysts and policymakers interpret this ambition toward exceptionalism as outright revisionism, believing that China seeks to displace the United States and create a world order of its own.¹⁹ That concern has been shared across the Trump and Biden Administrations, demonstrating a rare degree of continuity and bipartisan consensus in perceiving China as a revisionist power.²⁰ The Trump administration perceived China primarily as a threat to the rules-based economic order because of its trade practices. The Biden administration also went a step

¹⁶ James Dobbins, Howard Shatz, and Ali Wyne, Russia is a Rogue, not a Peer; China is a Peer, not a Rogue, “21.

¹⁷ Kathryn E. Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2021. 32.

¹⁸ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracies,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2019. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2019-06-11/world-safe-autocracy>.

¹⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracies.”

²⁰ White House, Interim National Security Strategy of the United States of America (Washington, DC: White House, 2021) <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

further in framing the competition with China in ideological terms: as a core authoritarian threat to Western liberal democracy.²¹

Accounts of China's revisionist ambitions attribute it to a deep-seeded nationalist reflex to the "Century of Humiliation."²² This period in Chinese history began with the Opium Wars, continued through foreign domination of China at the hands of Western powers and Japan in World War II, and according to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), ended with its victory over the nationalists in China's Civil War in 1949. Since the CCP took power in 1949, it has controlled the direction of China's development with mixed success, but always with great ambition. A constant goal has been restoration of Chinese greatness, which is well underway with China set to surpass the United States as the world's largest economy, as well as China already displacing the United States as the largest trading partner for much of the world, including key U.S. allies.²³

In light of the debate among policymakers and analysts over China's ambition to displace the United States, two camps generally exist: one side which argues that China seeks to displace the United States as a global hegemon, and another that argues China seeks a to undercut American hegemony to its own benefit.²⁴ The former point claim that "Beijing's aim is nothing less that preeminent status within the global order."²⁵ The latter claim that China is attempting "selective revisionism," in which China more or less

²¹ Elizabeth Economy, "China's New Revolution: The Reign of Xi Jinping," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2018. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2018-04-17/chinas-new-revolution>; Matthew Burrows and Robert Manning, "The Problem with Biden's Democracy Agenda," *War on the Rocks*, February 27, 2021. <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/the-problem-with-bidens-democracy-agenda/>.

²² Alison A. Kaufman, "The 'Century of Humiliation' and China's National Narratives," *Testimony to U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 10, 2011. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/3.10.11Kaufman.pdf>.

²³ Zheng Wang, "The Chinese Dream: Concept and Context," *Journal of Chinese Political Science* 9, no. 1: (March 2014) 1. <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11366-013-9272-0>.

²⁴ Cevallos, Astrid Stuth, Timothy R. Heath, and Michael Mazarr, "China and the International Order," RR2423, *RAND Corporation*, (2018) 21. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2423.html; And Rush Doshi. *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2021. 7.

²⁵ Daniel Tobin, *How Xi Jinping's 'New Era' Should Have Ended the Debate on China's Ambitions*, *Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission*, March 13, 2020. <https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/testimonies/SFR%20for%20USCC%20TobinD%2020200313.pdf>.

complies with certain established norms and does not comply with others.²⁶ China, from this perspective, seeks a greater competitive advantage within the status quo and will only attempt revision in specific aspects where it stands to benefit most.

While there is a broad consensus that China is a strategic competitor of the United States, scholarship on the issue ranges from sensational, headline-grabbing claims that China seeks to lead a new global order, to more nuanced analysis of China's global ambitions. For instance, hardline pundits like Michael Pillsbury posit that China's ambition to displace the United States as the global superpower are rooted in a long-term plan that China's leaders hope to realize in 2049, the centennial of the CCP's victory in the Chinese Civil War.²⁷ Pillsbury's work derived from his U.S. government experience and Mandarin fluency has been highly influential in U.S. government and civilian circles. Some prominent scholars believe Pillsbury's claims are overstated. Iain Alistair Johnston argues that China may make modest attempts to revise certain aspects of the current world order where China stands to benefit from the revision but will comply with others if they do not inhibit China from gaining a competitive advantage.²⁸ This more nuanced interpretation is shared by other prominent scholars such as Jessica Chen Weiss, who claims that the "China Model" is neither meant for export, not easily implemented by other authoritarian countries due to China's massive economy and population.²⁹ Weiss' argument runs counter to that of Aaron Friedberg, who claims that CCP officials are trying to, "make the world safe for authoritarianism."³⁰

As in Russia, domestic stability and improvements in living standards in China are tied to its international clout. President Xi Jinping's "China Dream" narrative, unveiled

²⁶ Iain Alistair Johnston, "China in a World of Orders," *International Security* 44, no 2, (Fall 2019). 10. <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/44/2/9/12242/China-in-a-World-of-Orders-Rethinking-Compliance?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.

²⁷ Michael Pillsbury, *The Hundred-Year Marathon: China's Secret Strategy to Replace the United States as the Global Superpower*. Henry Holt and Company. New York, 2015. 13.

²⁸ Iain Alistair Johnston, "China in a World of Orders."

²⁹ Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracies."

³⁰ Aaron Friedberg, "Competing With China," *Global Politics and Strategy* 60, Issue 3, 7–64, June 1, 2018, 32. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2018.1470755>.

after he came to power in 2012, is continually reinforced through major speeches like the one he gave to the 19th Communist Party Congress in 2017, and more recently in a speech made in July 2021 on the centenary of the CCP's founding. The recurring theme is one of national rejuvenation, which combines domestic unity and economic growth, as well as increased military strength and continued technological innovation.³¹ These speeches provide insight into the CCP's ambition for China. They demonstrate that the country's international rise gives credibility to the regime and the CCP, promotes domestic stability, and enables socioeconomic modernization. According to scholars like Cevallos, Heath, and Stuth, the China Dream—and its components like the BRI, the Maritime and Cyber Silk Roads, and “Made in China 2025”—are not aimed at revising the world order, but instead focused on changing world's perception of China.³² As the size of the PRC's economy overtakes that of the United States, other countries may be interested in following suit in hopes that they will experience similar growth; but, as explained by Jessica Chen Weiss, the “China Model” is not easily replicated elsewhere due to China's unique population size, system of government, and manufacturing capacity.³³ Furthermore, Elizabeth Economy argues the autocratic methods of the CCP under Xi Jinping serve as a safeguard to the regime domestically.³⁴

As with Russia, a range of scholarship on China suggests that regime security is the preeminent motive of Xi Jinping's CCP. From a “social credit” system to unprecedented state-monitoring of Chinese citizens, loyalty to the CCP is carefully measured. The Hong Kong protests presented a threat to China's aim of fully reintegrating this region, which enjoyed a special degree of autonomy under the “one country, two systems” framework.³⁵ In this realm, authors have noted that both Russia and China were seriously alarmed over the color revolutions that spread across Eurasia, as well as the uprisings of the Arab Spring.

³¹ Zheng Wang, “The Chinese Dream Concept and Context,” *Journal of Chinese Political Science*, Seton Hall University. Vol 19, (December 2013) 1–13. <https://www.shu.edu/diplomacy/upload/The-Chinese-Dream-Concept-and-Context-JCPS-Zheng-Wang.pdf>.

³² Cevallos, Heath, and Stuth, “Russia is a Rogue, Not a Peer; China is a Peer, Not a Rogue.” 31.

³³ Jessica Chen Weiss, “A World Safe for Autocracies.”

³⁴ Elizabeth Economy, “China's New Revolution.”

³⁵ Elizabeth Economy, “China's New Revolution.”

For this reason, as Bunce and Koessel show, both regimes responded to this threat of democratic diffusion with “countermeasures” that have thus far proven effective at preventing such popular revolts from spreading in Russia or China.³⁶ Still, Fallows highlights that while President Xi Jinping appears to have been successful in maintaining domestic stability on the Chinese mainland, the CCP had serious concerns about this threat following the Arab Spring in 2011, which prompted a greater emphasis on domestic control by China’s security apparatus.³⁷ These observations point to a significant potential convergence of interest between the Chinese and Russian regimes when it comes to undermining democracy and preventing its spread. Many analysts have also noted that China and Russia share their resentment of the United States over its interventionist policies and criticism over domestic matters that the two authoritarian states claim violates state sovereignty.³⁸

2. Sino-Russian Cooperation

a. Opportunities

Considering different versions of international relations theories on alignments, Sino-Russian cooperation is not surprising. Neoclassical realism prescribes that countries group together to balance against the most powerful state in the system,³⁹ and from this point of view, it is only natural for China and Russia to align against the threat of U.S. hegemonic power. The logic behind their alignment becomes more complicated however, from the standpoint of Stephen Walt’s refinement of realist alignment theories, which asserts that alliances are made to balance not the most powerful state, but the most

³⁶ Karrie J Koessel and Valerie J. Bunce, “Diffusion-Proofing: Russian and Chinese Responses to Waves of Popular Mobilizations against Authoritarian Rulers.” *Perspectives on Politics* Vol 11, Iss 3, (2013) 756.

³⁷ James Fallows, “Arab Spring, Chinese Winter.” *The Atlantic*. September 2011.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/09/arab-spring-chinese-winter/308601/>

³⁸ Eleanor Albert, “China and Russia Show Solidarity at Meeting of Foreign Ministers.” *The Diplomat*. March 24, 2021.

³⁹ Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*. Columbia University Press. New York. 1979. 132.

threatening one.⁴⁰ Here, a Sino-Russian alliance remains the natural choice only while United States is still the preponderant threat to both parties; Russia's alignment incentives reverse as soon as China's raising power turns its partner into a more proximate threat on its borders. Harknett and VanDenBerg's omnialignment theory, in turn, contends that alignments may come not just from the need to balance against external threats, but also from internal threats to regime stability.⁴¹ From this standpoint, which combines the international realpolitik and domestic threat perspectives, the Russian and Chinese regimes might pragmatically overcome even substantial fears of each other because they feel more threatened domestically by the U.S. model of governance and promotion of democracy, as evident in the February 4, 2022 joint declaration from President Putin and President Xi before the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing.

Research into the long trajectory of the Sino-Russian relations seem to point in this direction. While briefly aligned during the Cold War as the two preeminent communist powers, ideological differences and the perceived internal and external threats from each other brought China and the Soviet Union to the brink of war, and the resulting friction opened the opportunity for the United States to balance with China against the Soviet Union.⁴² With an understanding of the ideological component of the Sino-Soviet split, the Russian relationship with China after the Cold War became a more pragmatic, ideologically agnostic one. Instead of communism as a unifying factor, common interests and a common adversary in the United States drove cooperation between Russia and China. According to Steven Lee Meyers, with the rising authoritarianism under Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, the Sino-Russian relationship assumed a new alignment incentive as mutual support mechanism for securing their authoritarian systems of governance against democratization threats stemming from the U.S.-led international order.⁴³

⁴⁰ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 1987. 21.

⁴¹ Richard J. Harknett and Jeffrey A. VanDenBerg, 120. Also see Steven R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*. Vol 43, No 2, (Jan 1991) 233.

⁴² Odd Arne Westad. *The Cold War*. Basic Books, New York. 2017. 406.

⁴³ Stephen Lee Myers, "An Alliance of Autocracies: China Wants to Lead a New World Order."

Most accounts in the literature trace the current Sino-Russian cooperation to a relatively modest start in 2001, with the “Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation” that thawed what had previously been a contentious coexistence over the centuries and reduced the “near threat” the two countries posed for each other. Though traditionally wary of each other’s strength, China and Russia began to view the external and internal threats of U.S. hegemony as greater than the threat they potentially posed to each other, leading to greater cooperation to balance against the United States

Analyses suggest that overlapping ideological interests further contribute to the current Sino-Russian cooperation. Although both Russia and China avoid values-based policy in favor of pragmatic, self-preservation policies, both stand to gain by undermining the value system of the West and the challenge to U.S. hegemony. While Russia and China stop short of declaring a formal alliance, their anti-U.S. messaging has become increasingly synchronized in tone and content, accusing the United States of interfering in the internal affairs of other states and employing a confrontational foreign policy that threatens world peace.⁴⁴ Thus, in March 2021, the Chinese foreign minister received his Russian counterpart for a conference that took a much friendlier tone than his meeting earlier in the month with the U.S. Secretary of State. Furthermore, Putin and Xi have expressed serious concerns over democracy-promotion, which represents a significant threat to both regimes and is supported by the United States and the West.⁴⁵ These observations suggest that Russia and China may have found common ground for cooperation in undermining democracy and the U.S.-led LIO. Furthermore, the joint statement from Putin and Xi hours before a sensational opening ceremony at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing signaled that the relationship between both the individual leaders and their countries was stronger than ever. The two declared that Russia and China had a friendship with no limits on the eve of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, with China echoing Russia’s claims that NATO is an

⁴⁴ Yang Chen, Li Xuanmin, and Bai Yunyi, “China-Russia Partnership ‘Key to Balance U.S. Hegemony,’” *Global Times*. March 22, 2021. <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219129.shtml>

⁴⁵ Thomas Wright, “The Return to Great Power Rivalry was Inevitable,” *The Atlantic*. September 12, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/>

aggressive alliance responsible for destabilizing Europe.⁴⁶ The two leaders condemned what they called, “interference in internal affairs” in reference to the global influence of the United States⁴⁷ This joint statement has been widely seen as the most profound declaration of cooperation between the two states in the Post-Cold War era.⁴⁸

Arguably the most tangible bedrock of a potential strategic Sino-Russian alignment has been in the defense sector. Here, analyses suggest that cooperation opportunities may be borne out of a growing symbiotic relationship, where Russian technological advances represent opportunities for China, which may be lacking such sophisticated systems, but has the money to buy them from Russia—a willing seller. This willingness, according to Kendall-Taylor, Shullman, and McCormick, can be attributed not only to a financial interest, but also the shared interest of limiting the influence of the United States in the Pacific.⁴⁹ Defense cooperation, from this standpoint, is also relatively easy to achieve and can take several different forms, from personnel exchanges in military education, to joint exercises and the accompanying messaging campaigns that are aimed at demonstrating the strength of the partnership. More importantly, as Kofman highlights, a mutual commitment to non-aggression enables both Russia and China to focus on competing with the United States and not each other.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Robin Wright, “Russia and China Unveil a Pact Against America and the West,” *The New Yorker*. February 7, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/daily-comment/russia-and-china-unveil-a-pact-against-america-and-the-west>

⁴⁷ Ken Moritsugu, “Russia, China Push Back Against U.S. in Pre-Olympic Summit.” *Associated Press*. February 4, 2022. <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-putin-xi-meet-0e9127176250c0cab19b36e75800052e>

⁴⁸ Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, “Putin and Xi Frame A New China-Russia Partnership,” *The Diplomat*. February 15, 2022. <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/putin-and-xi-frame-a-new-china-russia-partnership/>

⁴⁹ Kendall-Taylor, Shullman, and McCormick. “Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation.” *War on the Rocks*, August 5, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/navigating-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/>

⁵⁰ Michael Kofman, “The Emperor’s League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation.” *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/>

b. Constraints

Although many opportunities for Sino-Russian alignment exist, the existing literature points to several friction points, imposing constraints on such levels of cooperation. The departure point of such analyses is that conflict has been the defining feature of Sino-Russian interaction over the centuries, with frequent border disputes. Today, the two countries continue to compete over the same sphere of influence in Eurasia, where China's BRI has earned it significant influence in what Russia considers its "near abroad." Furthermore, China's growing interest in the Arctic is a potential source of insecurity for Russia.⁵¹ These factors may be a particular cause for concern for Russia, which is the weaker partner in an asymmetric relationship. As authors like Charles Kupchan have highlighted, such fears may present opportunities to be exploited by the West as a "wedging strategy" to limit cooperation between Russia and China. Timothy Crawford echoes Kupchan's wedging strategy, taking it further by claiming the United States has driven Russia and China to cooperate by encircling them, and that "selective accommodation" can ease tensions with Russia, which could disincentivize their relationship with China.⁵² In addition, Russia's military aid to China in the form of arms sales and technological assistance has the potential to elevate China's military capability to a level Russia is not comfortable with, which relates to an enduring Russian concern over foreign military build-ups near Russian borders.⁵³

Thus, in line with Walt's balance of threats perspective on alignment, time may prove to be a constraint on Sino-Russian cooperation. The immediate threat of American hegemony in Europe and Asia may give way to the greater threat posed by China's future dominance in Eurasia, the Arctic, and the space domain. The current alignment is based on current power dynamics between the United States, China, and Russia. As the power

⁵¹ Charles Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia," *Foreign Affairs*. August 5, 2021. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-04/right-way-split-china-and-russia>

⁵² Timothy Crawford, "How to Distance Russia from China," *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol 44. Issue 3. (2021) 178. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903?needAccess=true&journalCode=rwaq20>

⁵³ Charles Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia."

dynamic shifts, Russia may be compelled to “bandwagon for profit” with a rising China as a means of gaining the spoils of victory against the democratic west, as opposed to doing so simply for security reasons.⁵⁴ Conversely, Russia could align with the United States and balance against China, if China’s continued rise begins to threaten Russia externally or internally. As Stephen Walt explains, “weak states are more sensitive to proximate power,”⁵⁵ and the growing power imbalance between China and Russia can lead Russia to view China as a bigger threat than the United States over time, particularly if the United States is able to convince or coerce Russia to cooperate on certain issues. Furthermore, if Harknett and VanDenBerg’s model balancing external versus internal threats is applied to this situation, the external threat of growing Chinese power in the Arctic and Pacific may, over time, outweigh the domestic threat from Western democracy, potentially driving a wedge between the two.

3. Response of the United States and NATO

The renewal of Great Power Competition, particularly against the backdrop of a strategic alignment between Russia and China is a new problem for the United States, and the literature has noted both divergences and continuities in policy responses across different administrations. In particular, many analysts have stressed that the fundamental differences between the Trump and Biden administrations, particularly as they pertain to efforts to tackle the resurgence of China and Russia. While the Trump administration’s approach was nationalistic, and focused on trade protections and economic competition, the Biden administration adopted an a more ideological and liberal institutionalist basis, emphasizing the competition between democracy and autocracy.⁵⁶ The Trump administration’s “America First” approach drew harsh rebuke from critics who argued that distancing from allies reduced both America’s standing in the world, and its relative power.

⁵⁴ Randall L Schweller, “Bandwagoning for Profit: Bringing the Revisionist State Back In,” *International Security: The MIT Press*. Vol 19, No 1, (Summer 1994). 73.
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/2539149?seq=3>

⁵⁵ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 30.

⁵⁶ Hal Brands, “The Emerging Biden Doctrine,” *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2021,
<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine>.

Those same critics cautioned against a “with us or against us” approach to alliance maintenance, as American allies also have economic ties to Beijing.⁵⁷ In contrast, the Biden administration’s hardline ideological approach was criticized by realists who argue that it can become divisive as disproportionate commitments to the perseverance of democracy may initiate “ideological quarrels”⁵⁸ in the West when choosing where to compete and where to cooperate. Furthermore, as Robert Manning and Matthew Burrows argue, democracy alone is not enough to unify countries in the current multipolar world, where international problems like climate change require a degree of competition with China.⁵⁹ Furthermore, the ideological underpinnings of Biden’s approach have been critiqued for limiting America’s options and the possibility that it will strengthen the incentive for Russia and China to cooperate.⁶⁰ Also, some analysts have argued that the global and interconnected nature of the world precludes competition along firm ideological lines, and instead argues in favor of an approach that pursues issue-dependent cooperation or competition, along with flexible alliances based on realpolitik—not ideology.⁶¹

More broadly, three general approaches to tackling the threat of a Sino-Russian entente have emerged from scholarly analyses. The first has been labelled as the “reverse Nixon,”⁶² and it proposes to pry Russia away from China—just like President Nixon and Secretary of State Kissinger opened relations with Beijing in 1972, exploiting their ideological differences and realpolitik frictions with the Soviet Union during the Cold War to drive a wedge between the two. Critics of the “reverse-Nixon” approach, however, warn that the situation today is quite different than it was during the Cold War, and Russia and

⁵⁷ Kori Schake et al. “Why U.S. Security Depends on Alliances—Now More than Ever,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-11-23/defense-depth>.

⁵⁸ Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, 36.

⁵⁹ Robert Manning and Matthew Burrows, “The Problem with Biden’s Democracy Agenda,” *War on the Rocks*, July 27, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/the-problem-with-bidens-democracy-agenda/>.

⁶⁰ Robert Manning and Matthew Burrows, “The Problem with Biden’s Democracy Agenda.”

⁶¹ Robert Manning and Matthew Burrows, “The Problem with Biden’s Democracy Agenda.”

⁶² Kupchan, “The Right Way to Split China and Russia.”

China—aware of the past—are keen to avoid friction points and ideological differences.⁶³ Second is the “hardline approach,” which frames global great power competition as an irreconcilable struggle that between democracies and autocracies.⁶⁴ This approach is criticized as polarizing, and for its potential to harden the convergence of both Russia and China by increasing the threat coming from their mutual opponent.⁶⁵ The third approach strives to provide a middle-ground strategy that proposes limited cooperation between the West and China and Russia on some global issues of common interest, such as climate change, as well as limiting the potential for unwanted escalations, but still insists on resolutely containing Russian and Chinese aggressive behavior, and protecting human rights and respect for international law.⁶⁶ This kind of selective cooperation is lauded for opening a way to reduce tensions between China, Russia and the United States, and stabilizing the competition between the three countries.

Conspicuously absent from most existing policy recommendations for managing the emerging trilateral great power competition is the role of Europe. American allies have demonstrated a degree of solidarity with the United States recently, but have largely refrained from taking a strong stance against China or Russia on an ideological level until the Russian invasion of Ukraine galvanized the West against Russia. Along with several non-European allies, NATO and the EU members have joined the United States in condemning China for cyberattacks directed against Microsoft,⁶⁷ and the U.K. ultimately

⁶³ Sergei Radchenko, “Driving a Wedge Between Russia and China Won’t Work,” War on the Rocks, August 24, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/driving-a-wedge-between-china-and-russia-wont-work/>.

⁶⁴ Hal Brands, “The Emerging Biden Doctrine”

⁶⁵ Sun Yun, “China’s Strategic Assessment of Russia: More Complicated Than You Think,” War on the Rocks, March 4, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/chinas-strategic-assessment-of-russia-more-complicated-than-you-think/>; David Bandurski, “China and Russia are Joining Forces to Spread Disinformation,” *The Brookings Institute*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>.

⁶⁶ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Shullman, “China and Russia’s Dangerous Convergence,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-05-03/china-and-russias-dangerous-convergence> And Manning and Burrows, “The Problem with Biden’s Democracy Agenda.”

⁶⁷ Doina Cichau and Steve Holland, “U.S. and Allies Accuse China of Global Hacking Spree,” *Reuters*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/us-allies-accuse-china-global-cyber-hacking-campaign-2021-07-19/>.

rejected Huawei's bid to build their national 5G infrastructure.⁶⁸ In NATO's "NATO 2030" strategic vision document, confrontation with Russia and systemic rivalry with China are highlighted as emerging challenges, but the document stopped short of indicating a fully-fleshed response.⁶⁹ So far, much of the response across the Atlantic has been largely rhetorical, as European allies have taken a very measured approach in hopes of avoiding being "chain-ganged"⁷⁰—drawn into a costly conflict or competition against their interest on behalf of an ally—by supporting the U.S. efforts to contain China.

What Snyder called the "Composite Security Dilemma"⁷¹—the fear of being chain-ganged into a conflict, or conversely, being exploited by a free-riding ally when confronting an adversary—is clearly at play in U.S.-European relations when it comes to containing China and/or Russia. Despite the Trump administration's pressure on European allies to "pay their fair share" in the common defense, European allies have yet to assume greater responsibility for their own security. In this sense, studies suggest that the economic ties between most NATO member states and China,⁷² coupled with a weariness to engage in out-of-area operations make a strong, coherent response from NATO unlikely against China. It remains to be seen whether the shock from the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in increased willingness among NATO allies to boost their defense capabilities and contain Russia to some extent, will result in a more permanent shift in this sense.

D. POTENTIAL EXPLANATIONS AND HYPOTHESES

In order to analyze the potential impact of the strategic cooperation between China and Russia, I will trace how the different scenarios for Sino-Russian alignment correspond with the key policy proposals in the West for their containment. Specifically, the thesis will

⁶⁸ Leo Kelion, "Huawei 5G kit Must be Removed from UK by 2027," *BBC News*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-53403793>.

⁶⁹ "NATO 2030: United for a New Era." November 2020, 22.

⁷⁰ Glenn Herald Snyder, *Alliance Politics*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York. 1997. 29.

⁷¹ Glenn Herald Snyder, *Alliance Politics*. 29.

⁷² Ivan Krastev and Mark Leonard, "Europe's Shattered Dream of Order." *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2015.

explore the following core hypotheses, which loosely correspond to the international relations theories on alignment:

Hypothesis 1: balancing against the most powerful external threat scenario: Russia and China have a prevailing interest to pursue strategic cooperation to balance against the United States as long as it is the dominant global power, limiting possibilities to pry the weaker Russian partner away. A successful Chinese rise to dominance, however, would reverse the Russian rationale, incentivizing Moscow to realign with the West.

Hypothesis 2: balancing against the most immediate external threat scenario: China and Russia have a dominant short-term interest to cooperate in checking U.S. global power, but the “near threat” that rising China poses to Russia’s sphere of influence will outweigh the benefits of their alignment much before China approaches global dominance. A “reverse Nixon” policy could therefore turn Russia into an ally of the West in containing China.

Hypothesis 3: balancing against the internal threat: Russia and China have a prevailing long-term interest to cooperate in balancing against the internal threat that the spread of Western democracy poses to their regimes. As this threat outweighs their external fears from each other, no Western policy aimed at driving a wedge between them is likely to be successful and the two autocracies can only be contained with the “hardline” approach of isolating them from the world’s liberal democracies.

E. RESEARCH DESIGN

This thesis will combine insights from historical and contemporary analyses, as well as theoretical perspectives on great power competition, to assess the likely scope of the Sino-Russian alignment and the potential United States and allied policy approaches to containing this challenge. The thesis will begin with an analysis of the revisionist ambitions of China and Russia in the context of their recovery from their recent pasts, and how these processes affected their posture toward the U.S.-led world order. In particular, analyzing their past trajectories will help determine how Russia and China have benefitted or were constrained by the current world order, and their incentives and disincentives to revise it. Next, the thesis will examine the Chinese and Russian foreign policy trajectories to explore

the scope for their strategic cooperation. In this analysis, I will explore the different incentives and constraints to their alignment in challenging the U.S.-led global order, as well as the implications that the declining American relative power may have on their relationship.

This segment will draw on the history of Sino-Russian relations, as well as perspectives on alliance politics from international relations theory to define the conceptual landscape and broad contours of the Sino-Russian strategic cooperation. The history of Sino-Russian relations provides numerous examples of constraints on the relationship, which has been tenuous over the centuries. This historical context of the relationship, coupled with the analysis of Russia's and China's contemporary interests and opportunities to cooperate will provide the basis for analyzing the nature of their relationship. In turn, the theoretical perspectives on alliance formation and maintenance will provide an additional analytic layer to unpack the trajectory of the relationship between China and Russia.

Building on this foundation, the thesis will analyze the performance of the three different perspectives on the scope and motivation of the Sino-Russian alignment, as well as the different policy prescriptions associated with these perspectives. I will first look at the realist reverse-Nixon strategy—which aligns with the external threat scenarios in hypotheses 1 and 2—and claims that existing constraints on the Sino-Russian relationship can be leveraged to drive a wedge between the two, turning Russia into a counterbalance against China's rising power. Next, I will examine the hardline ideological approach, which, in line with hypothesis 3, frames the competition with Russia and China as one between democracy and autocracy, seeking to contain them both from undermining the liberal international order. This option is preferred if China and Russia are balancing against the internal threat of democratic or pro-Western revolution in addition to the external threat posed by American hegemony—a phenomenon that Harknett and VanDenBerg refer to as “omnibalancing.” Finally, I will examine the “middle ground” approach which proposes that containment of Russia and China should avoid the ideological element and mix competition with selective cooperation aiming to reduce the pressure for their alignment and mitigate against the threat posed by it.

II. CHINESE AND RUSSIAN STRATEGIC TRAJECTORIES

This chapter tracks the internal and external factors that shaped Russia's and China's international standing and strategic postures. Both countries experienced significant turmoil in the wake of WWII and sought opportunities to achieve what they perceive as lost greatness. The end of the Cold War devastated Russia, while China was able to manage unprecedented economic growth in its aftermath due to its place in the globalized economy. Nevertheless, the trajectory of each country has put them at odds with American hegemony in Asia and Europe which, along with mutual material interests, has driven the two to cooperation in recent decades.

A. FROM THE COLLAPSE OF THE SOVIET UNION TO PUTIN'S REVANCHISM

Former Russian Empress Catherine the Great's statement that she could, "only protect her borders by expanding them" has underscored Russian foreign policy for centuries, and the sentiment remains today. Russia's geopolitical exposure that have made it an insecure state for centuries. This insecurity manifested itself in the 2014 invasion of eastern Ukraine and annexation of Crimea, which President Putin claimed to be a response to the expanding influence of the United States and allies who felt entitled to expand at Russia's expense after winning the Cold War.⁷³ Furthermore, military intervention in the Syrian Civil War in 2015 boosted Putin's domestic legitimacy as the 2014 operations in Ukraine had as many Russian citizens were led to believe that Russia was surrounded by threats and needed strong leadership to protect the country.⁷⁴ Such sentiments are felt by many Russians as a sense of resentment for lost prominence and international status more so than a belief that interventions abroad are serving Russian national interests.⁷⁵ Even in the globalized 21st century, geography still matters, especially for Russia. The Putin regime

⁷³ Kathryn Stoner, *Russia Resurrected: Its Power and Purpose in a New Global Order*. Oxford University Press, New York. 13.

⁷⁴ Matt Herring, "Strategy of Spectacle: His Willingness and Ability to Act at Home Give Putin a Big Boost at Home," *The Economist*. March 19, 2016.

⁷⁵ Ghia Nodia, "Reading Russia: the Wounds of Lost Empire," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol 20, Iss 2. April 2009. <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/reading-russia-the-wounds-of-lost-empire/>.

exploits the presence of NATO, and frames it as a security threat when in fact it is the influence of Western democracy that threatens his regime—not Russian security.⁷⁶ The existence of an external security threat (real or imagined) gives Putin the ability to attempt to rally the population around the flag by stoking fears of past trauma returning to Russia in the absence of strong leadership.⁷⁷

The collapse of the Soviet Union, in particular, brought about significant turmoil in Russia. While many celebrated the “end of history,” and America’s unipolar moment, the new Russian Federation experienced extreme hardship economically, and trauma to the national psyche after the collapse.⁷⁸ As of 2017, Russia’s per capita wealth was still roughly one-quarter that of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average.⁷⁹ Additionally, the Russian economy is subject to the rise and fall of oil prices, making Russia reliant on oil and gas exports and therefore vulnerable to sanctions.⁸⁰ The loss of geopolitical status also dealt a blow to the collective Russian psyche, as a former source of national pride had fallen and great power status remains a driver toward achieving Russian national identity.⁸¹ Once again, Russia found itself in turmoil, and Russians were left craving a strong leader who could guide them out of the chaos. Vladimir Putin’s regime was consolidated by taking advantage of these grievances and demands for stability among the Russian population.⁸² This reinforced what Russia scholar Bobo Lo

⁷⁶ Adam Roberts, “Sir Adam Roberts Rebuffs the View that the West is Principally Responsible for the Crisis in Ukraine,” *The Economist*, March 26, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2022/03/26/sir-adam-roberts-rebuffs-the-view-that-the-west-is-principally-responsible-for-the-crisis-in-ukraine>.

⁷⁷ Robert Person and Michael McFaul, “What Putin Fears Most,” *Journal of Democracy*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/what-putin-fears-most/>.

⁷⁸ Aleksandar Matovski, “It’s the Stability, Stupid! How the Quest to Restore Order After the Collapse of the Soviet Union Shaped Russian Popular Opinion,” *Comparative Politics* Vol. 50, No. 3, (April 2018) 349.

⁷⁹ “How Wealthy is Russia?” The World Bank, 2021. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/russia/publication/how-wealthy-is-russia>.

⁸⁰ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Brookings Institution Press, 2015. 38.

⁸¹ Anne L. Clunan, “Russia’s Pursuit of Great Power Status and Security,” *Routledge Handbook of Russian Security*, 2018. 4.

⁸² Aleksandar Matovski, *Popular Dictatorships: Crises, Mass Opinion, and the Rise of Electoral Authoritarianism*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2021. 50.

characterized the domestic predilection for strong foreign policy, based on an “abiding conviction in the importance of hard power.”⁸³

This newfound assertiveness in Russian foreign policy is borne out of weakness, however. While Russia is a major player in the renewed Great Power Competition, its soft power is relatively weak compared to the United States and even China, forcing the Kremlin to rely more on hard and sharp power tools to advance its own interests and check the West’s influence.⁸⁴ Russia today seeks a return to a multipolar world order, where American influence is balanced by other competing blocs.⁸⁵ It anchors its national security strategy around defending against three major perceived threats: “Internal revolt, disruption to the stability of allied governments, and Western encroachment.”⁸⁶ Crucially, Russia’s aggressive international posture has become a key pillar of the domestic legitimacy of the Putin regime. President Putin gained prominence through an assertive policy that relied on military force: his rise to power was enabled by the brutal prosecution of the second Chechen war in 1999; later, the campaigns in Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 reaffirmed his leadership position, dramatically increasing his approval ratings as they “rallied” the population behind Putin’s leadership.⁸⁷ This is because demonstration of Russian military and geopolitical strength restore a sense of national pride among many Russians, traumatized by the collapse of the 1990s.⁸⁸ As result, an assertive foreign policy

⁸³ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 41.

⁸⁴ James Dobbins, Howard Shatz, and Ali Wyne. “Russia is a Rogue, not a Peer; China is a Peer, not a Rogue,” 2; Bobo Lo, “The Sino-Russian Partnership and Global Order,” *Center for Global Security Research*, September 21, 2021.

⁸⁵ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 42.

⁸⁶ Raphael S. Cohen, Ben Connable, Katya Migacheva, Stephanie Pezard, Andrew Radin, James Sladden, and Stephanie Young, “Russia’s Hostile Measures: Combatting Russian Gray Zone Aggression Against NATO in the Contact, Blunt, and Surge Layers of Competition,” RR2359, *RAND Corporation*. 2020. xiii. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2539.html.

⁸⁷ Henry E. Hale, “How Crimea Pays: Media, Rallying ‘Round the Flag, and Authoritarian Support,” *Comparative Politics*. Vol 50, No 3. (April 2018) 370.

⁸⁸ Matt Herring, “Strategy of Spectacle: His Willingness and Ability to Act Abroad Give Putin a Big Boost at Home.”

translates into regime stability and popular support for President Putin, offsetting domestic concerns such as stagnant pensions and rising food costs.⁸⁹

What does Russia strive to achieve with this posture? Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the bipolar world order that went with it, Russia remains in an uncomfortable position where it seeks engagement with other states without giving up the vaunted great power status—without subjecting itself to being just one member among many in the international system—which is the core of the country’s current political system and identity.⁹⁰ Bobo Lo claims the attempt to form a multipolar world is, “a geopolitically motivated construct, centered in the principle of the balance of power. While it does not preclude cooperation with the United States, the main thread running through it is one of soft containment through a “consensus of the rest”—that is, the other poles in the international system”⁹¹ The “soft containment” refers to the Western powers and the “consensus of the rest” effort represents not an attempt to replace the LIO with a different international order led by Russia, which lacks such a capacity, but rather to obtain a degree of veto power over what many Russians believe is an overly assertive American hegemon that seeks to shape the world in its own favor.

President Putin’s regime has encountered little difficulty in convincing the Russian public that the West (which is generally defined as the United States, EU, and NATO) is encroaching on Russia’s backyard. NATO’s rapid expansion in the 2000s to include several former Warsaw Pact states took place at a time when Russia was at its weakest in over a century.⁹² A relative combat power analysis in a flash point like the Baltics shows that Russia still has the stronger hand along the border with NATO member states,⁹³ and that

⁸⁹ Matt Herring, “Strategy of Spectacle.”

⁹⁰ Rachel Salzman, *Russia, BRICS, and the Disruption of Global Order*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, DC, 2020. 1.

⁹¹ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*. 42.

⁹² Michael McFaul, “Russia as it Is: A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin,” *Foreign Affairs* 97, No 4, (June 2018) 84. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44822215?seq=1>.

⁹³ Michael Johnson and David A. Shlapak, “Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO’s Eastern Flank,” RR1253, *Rand Corporation*, (Santa Monica, CA: 2016) 4. https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR1200/RR1253/RAND_RR1253.pdf.

the Alliance is not a threat to Russian broader national interests. But the opportunity to present an external threat to Russian security gives the Putin regime an opportunity to play up the need for unchecked executive leadership to keep such threats at bay. It is this opportunity to consolidate domestic power along with the reality that NATO does not directly threaten Russian security that suggests Russia's military actions abroad are aimed at regime stability rather than protecting Russia from actual threats. This gives credence to hypothesis 3 which assumes Russia is balancing against internal threats to the Putin regime, not external threats from NATO.

Regime stability is a significant factor in the President Putin's foreign policy decisions, especially since his return to the presidency in 2012. Foremost in the potential threats to Putin's regime were the widescale demonstrations in Russia that year that protested unfair elections; the color revolutions in Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine; and the Arab Spring, which led to a focus on foreign threats to build the case for legitimacy.⁹⁴ The peaceful color revolutions demonstrated a shift toward the West for both Georgia and Ukraine, and increased the likelihood of such pro-Western, anti-authoritarian sentiments spilling over into Russia.⁹⁵ The threat of either country joining NATO and the EU signaled the Kremlin's waning control and influence not only over former Soviet satellites, but also over Russia's population itself. Russia responded by attacking Georgia in 2008, annexing Crimea in 2014 and staging a wholesale invasion of Ukraine in 2022; following each invasion, President Putin's approval rating soared to over 85%.⁹⁶ Those invasions caught the West by surprise, but they followed a predictable logic and should inform policymakers to predict and preempt future aggressive behavior when similar circumstances are presented to Moscow.⁹⁷ The aggressive response to these pro-democracy movements in

⁹⁴ Michael McFaul, "Russia as it Is: A Grand Strategy for Confronting Putin." 84.

⁹⁵ Michael Kofman, "The August War Ten Years On: A Retrospective on the Russo-Georgian War," War on the Rocks, August 17, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/08/the-august-war-ten-years-on-a-retrospective-on-the-russo-georgian-war/>.

⁹⁶ Mikhail Sokolov and Claire Bigg, "Putin Forever? Russian President's Ratings Skyrocket Over Ukraine," *Radio Free Europe; Radio Liberty*, June 3, 2014, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-putin-approval-ratings/25409183.html>.

⁹⁷ Stephen Blank, "America and the Russo-Georgian War," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 20, 2009, 425. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09592310902975547>.

Russia's near abroad further suggests that Russia's main concerns are regime stability and balancing against the internal threat of democratic influence in domestic politics.

B. RUSSIA'S INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL PARTNERS

A major source of strength for the U.S.-led LIO is the sheer number of allies and partners that are aligned with the United States—no other country in the world can compete with the number of states aligned with the United States politically. Russia's most notable attempts to counter that influence is the establishment of the BRICS membership association, the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO),⁹⁸ and the recent defense cooperation between Russia and China. Such initiatives are centered around creating a multipolar world in which the primacy of the United States is checked by coalition of non-Western geopolitical actors. But initially, the Kremlin tried the opposite approach of cooperating with the United States to secure its interests. In the decade after the fall of the Soviet Union, relations between the United States and Russia were hopeful. Russian-U.S. relations actually reached their peak under Putin's leadership in the aftermath of September 11, centering around cooperation in combatting Islamic terrorism—something both countries were focused on at the time.⁹⁹ The prospects of friendly relations between Russia and the United States seemed possible. However, the relationship took a decisive turn to the worse as the Kremlin became increasingly concerned that Western democracy promotion was becoming an internal threat against the Putin regime, with President Putin blaming “NATO expansion, U.S. intervention in the Middle East, and the West's support for ‘destabilizing revolutions’ such

⁹⁸ The Economist Explains, “What Is the Collective Security Treaty Organization? The Russian-led Alliance is Flexing Its Muscles in Kazakhstan,” *The Economist*, January 6, 2022. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains>

⁹⁹ Angela Stent, “The Impact of September 11th on U.S.-Russian Relations,” *Brookings Institute*, September 8, 2021, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2021/09/08/the-impact-of-september-11-on-us-russian-relations/>.

as the Arab Spring.”¹⁰⁰ Instead of further aligning itself with the West, Russia has spent much of the last decade forming its own competing blocs.

One of them is Russia’s BRICS initiative, which represents an association of the top five emerging economies (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) that seek a greater influence in international affairs and a buffer against American influence in their own regions. The group of non-Western economies represents an alternative to the Western-dominated international economic system and has a degree of political influence as well. While all BRICS countries benefit significantly from “global economic integration,” they can remain outside the realm of obligation to it, giving Russia and the other BRICS countries an opportunity to criticize the system while still reaping its benefits.¹⁰¹ The BRICS group, however, has not turned into a major threat to curb U.S. global economic influence, as Russia might have preferred, because it did not replace any U.S.-led institutions or norms with any of its own.

This weakness of global partnerships to counterbalance Western influence has led Russia to explore regional arrangements. The principal one among them, EAEU is a trading bloc much smaller than BRICS that is undoubtedly aimed at balancing against the economic power of the EU and presenting an alternative for the former Soviet Republics. Russia is by far the strongest member state (other members include Kazakhstan, Belarus, Armenia, and the Kyrgyz Republic), and it has been using that position to continue to exert influence over the states in its near-abroad. But the Eurasian Union itself of little regional influence due to member states weariness over the benefits of alignment with Russia. Additionally, the imbalance between the EU and the EAEU is vast, with the EAEU lacking the strong institutions and trade liberalizations that make the EU strong.¹⁰² Therefore, the

¹⁰⁰ Alexander Cooley, “Whose Rules? Whose Sphere? Russian Governance and Influence in Post-Soviet States,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 30, 2017. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/06/30/whose-rules-whose-sphere-russian-governance-and-influence-in-post-soviet-states-pub-71403>.

¹⁰¹ Rachel Salzman, *Russia, BRICS, and the Disruption of Global Order*, 16.

¹⁰² Duncan Allen et al. “Myths and Misconceptions in the Debate on Russia,” *Chatham House*, May 13, 2021, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2021/05/myths-and-misconceptions-debate-russia/myth-10-eurasian-economic-union-genuine>.

EAEU is not a competitor or an equal of the EU, making this tool for checking Western influence severely limited.

These dynamics make Sino-Russian partnership the best fitting alignment for the Kremlin both in terms of scope and commonality of interests. Russia's deepening relationship with China is based on defense cooperation and mutual economic interests and appears to be aimed at a common adversary in the United States. In particular, though China and Russia have vacillated between allies and enemies in the past century, they have been driven closer together in recent decades due to the common interest in undermining democracy as a means of regime stability, and pragmatic, mutually beneficial military and economic cooperation. President Biden, like President Trump before him, has attempted to define the competition between the United States and its democratic allies against a rising authoritarian ideology that is most prominent in Russia and China.¹⁰³ On the other hand, Russia and China are unlikely to bond over any common substantive ideology, as their previous attempt to do so nearly led to war between the two largest communist countries during the Cold War. On the other hand however, the very public relationship between Putin and Xi combined with their unified front decrying liberal internationalism, acts as a legitimizing factor for their respective authoritarian regimes.¹⁰⁴ Furthermore, China's need for Russian hydrocarbon and defense technology imports, coupled with Russia seeking new investments and markets for its exports after Western sanctions in 2014, drove the two countries to cooperate.¹⁰⁵ The connective tissue between these different alignment motives is that both Russia and China feel constrained by American influence in the Pacific and Eurasia; they both see the United States as a threat to their security and sovereignty and they share a desire to undermine the United States and attempt to limit America's influence internationally.

¹⁰³ Hal Brands, "The Emerging Biden Doctrine," *Foreign Affairs*, June 29, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-06-29/emerging-biden-doctrine>.

¹⁰⁴ David Bandurski, "China and Russia are Joining Forces to Spread Disinformation," *The Brookings Institute*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/techstream/china-and-russia-are-joining-forces-to-spread-disinformation/>.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Kofman, "The Emperor's League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," *War on the Rocks*, August 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation>.

C. CHINA'S REVIVAL FROM THE CENTURY OF HUMILIATION TO XI'S CHINA DREAM

The realization of President Xi's lofty goals for Chinese prosperity and global prominence in the 21st century must be understood in the context of a national revival and a return to the imperial status that China endured before the First Opium War and the "Century of Humiliation" that followed it.¹⁰⁶ China went from a "Middle Kingdom" around which lesser states orbited and paid tribute to the Chinese Emperor, to a country brought to its knees by European and then Japanese imperial conquest. After World War II, when the Japanese and Europeans were gone, China underwent a brutal Civil War after which the Communists eventually took power. While the "Century of Humiliation" is generally accepted as ending with the CCP's consolidation of its rule in the mainland, the Great Leap Forward and Cultural Revolution further rattled China before economic reforms kickstarted China's economy and began propelling it to its current status today as the world's second largest—and soon to be largest, economy. Along with the rise in national power has come a desire for a greater leadership role internationally and a resistance to the perceived subordination to the Western influence brought about through the Century of Humiliation.

Like in Russia, China's rise to international prominence has a strong connection to domestic political stability.¹⁰⁷ Domestic political stability is of far greater importance to the CCP because popular opinion matters even in an autocracy where regime stability is a top priority. The urban-rural divide remains a source of political instability in China. While it is impossible to ignore the unprecedented economic growth that China has experienced in recent decades, this growth is almost entirely limited to large urban areas. Roughly 300-million rural Chinese still live in poverty without access to sufficient healthcare or education opportunities that offer a way out of poverty, which could derail China's national

¹⁰⁶ Zheng Wang, "The Chinese Dream Concept and Context."

¹⁰⁷ Ales Karzamin and Nik Hynek, "Russian, U.S., and Chinese Revisionism: Bridging Domestic and Great Power Politics."

rejuvenation and threaten to keep the country in the middle-income trap.¹⁰⁸ While attainment rates of secondary education in urban areas of China have risen significantly in recent decades, those in rural areas have lagged behind, creating a potential friction point domestically with the urban-rural divide.¹⁰⁹ These domestic problems figure prominently in China's international rise because they detract from the narrative of National Rejuvenation and have the potential to destabilize China from within. As in Russia, domestic and international aspirations are closely linked in China, even though the former is a declining and the latter a rising power.

China's rapid economic rise and significant increase in military expenditures causes concern about the likelihood of war that often results when a rising power eclipses the reigning hegemon in a phenomenon known as the "Thucydides Trap."¹¹⁰ The Thucydides Trap is an interesting and informative concept, but it is not a guarantee of future conflict. War between the United States and China would significantly harm both countries and is not desired by either the American or Chinese publics. In fact, a study published in a 2020 edition of *The China Quarterly* shows that while there is widespread support in China to increase military spending, it was the fifth highest priority out of five choices, ranking behind income equality, international prestige, social welfare, and education.¹¹¹ That same study demonstrated that a preponderance of Chinese citizens place a high priority on avoiding war.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ Martin Chorzempa and Tianlei Huang, "China Will Run Out of Growth if It Doesn't Fix Its Rural Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, February 8, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/02/08/china-rural-crisis-economy-growth-middle-income-trap/>.

¹⁰⁹ Lei Wang, Mengji Li, Cody Abbey, and Scott Rozelle, "Human Capital and the Middle Income Trap: How Many of China's Youth Are Going to High School?" *The Developing Economies* 56, No 2, (June 2018).

¹¹⁰ Graham Allison, "The Thucydides Trap: Are the U.S. and China Headed for War?" *The Atlantic*, September 24, 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/09/united-states-china-war-thucydides-trap/406756/>.

¹¹¹ Xiao Han, Michael Sadler, and Kai Quek, "Guns and Butter in China: How Chinese Citizens Respond to Military Spending," *China Quarterly*, (March 2020) 251.

¹¹² Xiao Han, Michael Sadler, and Kai Quek, "Guns and Butter in China: How Chinese Citizens Respond to Military Spending," 251.

These attitudes reflect the limitations of military power as a tool for sustaining the Chinese global rise—its key national objective and the main pillar of the CCP regime. While China’s military investments are substantial, a strong military cannot provide the economic growth that is so important to the CCP and Chinese people. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and “Made in China 2025” plan are aimed at international infrastructure investment and Chinese dominance in a number of high-tech industries respectively.¹¹³ Even more so that military modernization, BRI and “Made in China 2025” are central to achieving President Xi’s “China Dream.”¹¹⁴ Instead, China’s military plays a supporting role by “supporting diplomatic efforts to shape a favorable international environment by building strong security ties with client states and discrediting or weakening the appeal of the United States as an alternative.” This support required military modernization that China sought to achieve through defense cooperation with Russia—through exercises and the purchase of high-end defense technology aimed at limiting U.S. military influence in Asia.

¹¹³ James McBride and Andrew Chatzky, “Is Made in China 2025 A Threat to Global Trade?” *Council on Foreign Relations* May 13, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/made-china-2025-threat-global-trade>.

¹¹⁴ Asha Clark, Derek Grossman, and Timothy R. Heath, “China’s Quest for Global Primacy: An Analysis of Chinese International and Defense Strategies to Outcompete the United States,” RRA447-1, *The RAND Corporation*, (Santa Monica, CA: 2021) xx. https://rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA447-1.html.

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III. SINO-RUSSIAN COOPERATION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CONSTRAINTS

China and Russia share long borders and long history together, marked mostly by competition, with the notable exceptions of the early Cold War and present day. The close proximity and shared borders have resulted in territorial disputes over the centuries, the most prominent of which nearly resulted in war in 1969. Still, the ideological bonds of communism united the countries for a short time during the Cold War. In the 21st century, the common threat of Western democracy and American hegemony have combined with mutual material interests to drive Russia and China to cooperation once again.

A. RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND CHINA IN THE 20TH CENTURY

The Sino-Soviet Split was a watershed moment in the Cold War. As with most events of such significance, it did not happen all at once, but rather the relationship deteriorated over the course of more than a decade, with multiple significant events that each eroded the relationship. Differences of ideology, border disputes, personal disdain and distrust among the leaders of these countries, and suspicion over power imbalances all played their part in the split. Then, as with now, the relationship between Russia and China is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon, as the state of the international politics and each country's place in it presents opportunities and constraints for cooperation.

Communism came to both Russia and China in the 20th century and the shared ideological bond of Leninist ideology helped improve relations between the two countries who had historically been regional rivals with unsettled border disputes. The positive relationship would prove to be short-lived, however, as Mao Zedong grew increasingly skeptical about Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. Furthermore, disputes over how to handle the Polish and Hungarian crises of 1956 and frictions due to the continued power asymmetry in the Sino-Soviet relationship led to accusations of big-power chauvinism by Mao against the Soviets.¹¹⁵ Against this backdrop, the Sino-Soviet relationship continued

¹¹⁵ Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*. University of North Carolina Press, Charlotte. 2001. 75.

to deteriorate for the next decade and land and border disputes caused by what China considered unfair treaties forced upon a weak China by a strong Russia nearly resulted in nuclear war.¹¹⁶ The centuries of border clashes and rivalry between Russia and China in their various shapes is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I will focus on the most essential patterns in the relationship, starting at the end of WWII in Asia.

Mao Zedong, the leader of the victorious CCP in China's civil war had already been frustrated with the slow pace of the Soviet Union's assistance to the CCP. The Soviets delayed their declaration of war against Japan until August of 1945, which was much too late to prove advantageous to the CCP over the rival Kuomintang (KMT) nationalist party led by Chiang Kai-Shek. In this regard, the Soviets prioritized their own post-war objectives over assisting the CCP in establishing itself as the legitimate government of China.¹¹⁷ Stalin's priorities for supporting international communism were self-serving. Communist regimes under direct Soviet control were supported, but those not under direct Soviet control received little assistance. In the case of China, they received advice that would further Soviet interests, not their own.¹¹⁸

Mao Zedong deferred to Stalin as the leader of international communism despite the seeds of distrust that were planted due to Stalin's lackluster support for the CCP during WWII and the Chinese Civil War which followed it. Although Stalin and Mao were skeptical of each other dating back to the 1940s, Sino-Soviet relations improved in the following decade and reached their highest point during the 1950s, where they cooperated internationally in support of North Korea against U.S.-led UN forces, and pressured Vietnam to accept certain terms at the Geneva Conference in 1954.¹¹⁹ Eventually, skepticism turned into mutual distrust as China's hard and soft power increased and came to be viewed as threatening to the Soviet Union. Along with the Cultural Revolution and

¹¹⁶ Igor Denisov, "Aigun, Russia, and China's 'Century of Humiliation,'" *The Carnegie Center, Moscow*, October 6, 2015, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/60357>.

¹¹⁷ Odd Arne Westad. *The Cold War*. 141.

¹¹⁸ Erik P. Hoffman. Hoffmann, Erik P. , "Soviet Foreign Policy Aims and Accomplishments from Lenin to Brezhnev," *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* (Vol. 36, No. 4, 1987), 19. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1173830?origin=JSTOR-pdf&seq=1>.

¹¹⁹ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*. 244.

Great Leap Forward, which Soviet leaders abhorred, pushed Mao to become increasingly critical of the Soviet's revisionist brand of Communism.¹²⁰

Public statements against the Soviet Union began to surface in 1957 when, during a speech, Mao railed against the Soviet Union's "big power chauvinism" toward China and other communist states and made his disagreement over Khrushchev's de-Stalinization public through an editorial in the *People's Daily* newspaper.¹²¹ During Khrushchev's tenure, goodwill toward China vacillated between offering aid and removing advisors from the China which suggests that both sides saw the opportunity and benefit of an alliance but could not put differences aside. China pursued deeper integration and cooperation economically and militarily with the Soviets but sought to avoid the "strings-attached" of being a junior partner. A Soviet offer for stationing early warning and military communications systems in China was met with a sharp rebuke from Mao personally, prompting Khrushchev to intervene in order to calm tensions.¹²² Days after meeting personally with Khrushchev, Mao directed the artillery shelling of KMT-controlled islands off the Taiwan coast, sending a clear message to the United States and Soviet Union that China would act independently as often as it desired.¹²³

Mao now realized that he could not rely on Khrushchev for assistance and China would have to grow stronger from the inside. Demonstration of growing state power was as important for the domestic audience as it was for the international one. On one hand, Mao needed to show that China's power was growing to ensure regime legitimacy, and on the other he wanted to show the world, in particular the Soviet Union and the United States, that China needed to be taken seriously. A border dispute between PLA and Soviet troops on a small, disputed island in the Ussuri River presented Mao with the opportunity to demonstrate his willingness to act unilaterally. This clash was symbolic as it demonstrated

¹²⁰ Minjiang Li, *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split: Ideological Dilemma*. Routledge. New York. 2012. 12.

¹²¹ Mingjiang Li, *Mao's China and the Sino-Soviet Split*, 31. And Chen Jian, *Mao's China and the Cold War*, 65.

¹²² Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*, 245.

¹²³ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*, 245.

China's willingness to push back against the Soviets militarily, which sent the intended message domestically and internationally, but was deescalated before it grew out of hand.¹²⁴ Although this flashpoint did not escalate into full-scale war as many feared, it did leave Mao feeling isolated, and the Soviet Union considered using nuclear weapons in the conflict against China.¹²⁵ The culmination of the Sino-Soviet split and Mao's resulting feeling of isolation created the opening that was famously exploited by U.S. President Richard Nixon when he established formal diplomatic ties with China and recognized the PRC as the legitimate government of the Chinese state. This did not turn the United States and China into allies, but it did alter the balance in the Cold War against the Soviet Union while deepening the divide between the Soviets and China.

This trauma from the Sino-Russian split during the Cold War in many ways shaped the current rapprochement between these two powers. It was not until the American-led unipolar world order became a greater problem for both Russia and China that they began to forge closer ties. Russia and China both aspired to return to great power status, and as of this writing, both have achieved it, even though the United States is still dominant in most respects. American hegemony in Europe and Asia constrained Russia and China respectively, and these constraints have served as the main unifying factor in the Sino-Russian partnership as each sought to avoid confrontation with the other so they can focus on the competition with the United States.¹²⁶ The lessons learned from the Cold War split has not been forgotten as Russia and China today have taken great care to avoid ideological confrontation, instead agreeing to disagree on their respective worldviews. Additionally, both countries have accepted the reality that they will be eternal neighbors and they both

¹²⁴ Odd Arne Westad, *The Cold War*, 255.

¹²⁵ Lorenz Luthi, *The Sino-Soviet Split: Cold War in the Communist World*, Princeton University Press, 2008, 341.

¹²⁶ Michael Kofman, "The Emperor's League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," War on the Rocks, August 6, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation/>.

benefit from a good relationship as a means of preventing conflict and to prevent outside forces from using their differences to divide them.¹²⁷

B. CONTEMPORARY SINO-RUSSIAN ALIGNMENT: THE RESULT OF AMERICAN HEGEMONY IN EUROPE AND ASIA?

The antagonistic relationship between the United States and both China and Russia dates back the Cold War, but close partnership between Russia and China has returned, in part due to shared disdain for U.S. hegemony. The United States was able to successfully “wedge” China away from The Soviet Union in 1972 when President Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger opened relations with Beijing and recognized the PRC as the legitimate government of China. At the time, ideological differences combined with the proximate threat China and the Soviet Union posed to each other, opening the opportunity for the United States to exploit their differences and drive them apart. Currently, American hegemony, in terms of both hard power (given American basing in Europe and Asia), and soft power (influence of Western democracy, leading to anti-authoritarian revolts in places like Hong Kong, Ukraine, and Georgia) eclipse the near threat that Russia and China could pose to each other. They are therefore more likely to continue their strategic partnership and cooperate in undermining the United States and the LIO.

From this standpoint, the Sino-Russian cooperation aimed at limiting U.S. hegemony in Europe and Asia appears to be a clear case of double-balancing (i.e., external and internal) alignment against the U.S. threat, if we are to borrow from the Harknett and VanDenBerg’s alliance framework.¹²⁸ This suggests the current alignment of Russia and China is explained by a combination of hypothesis 1 (balancing against the most powerful threat—the United States) and hypothesis 3 (balancing against the internal threat of pro-democratic revolt) which are articulated in Chapter I. The Sino-Russian cooperation mushroomed from a modest start, with their non-aggression agreements of 2001, to an ambitious economic cooperation agenda following Western sanctions on Russia after the

¹²⁷ Sergey Radchenko, “Driving a Wedge Between Russia and China Won’t Work,” War on the Rocks, August 24, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/driving-a-wedge-between-china-and-russia-wont-work/>.

¹²⁸ Richard J. Harknett and Jeffrey A. VanDenBerg, 125.

invasion of Crimea in 2014, which weakened Russia's economy and forced it to seek a trading partner in China to compensate for the lost investment and trade from the West.¹²⁹ Reflecting both countries strategic priorities, Russia and China signed a deal in 2014 that would provide China with \$400 billion in natural gas over 30 years, while China pledged \$20 billion in hydrocarbon infrastructure investment in Russia.¹³⁰

This entente has also led to increased cooperation on defense and technology, which improves each country's position relative to the United States as their primary adversary. Both China and Russia experienced a decline in relations with the United States over the past decade, and their strategic alignment provided opportunities to divert American attention and resources away from a single focus on one major adversary, increasing America's challenge in strategic competition against each state individually.¹³¹ This cooperation has been and still is limited and does not include a formal alliance or security guarantee, but Russia in particular found a potential key strategic partner in China after alignment with the West failed to materialize after the end of the Cold War.¹³²

Overlapping ideological and diplomatic interests further contribute to Sino-Russian cooperation. Although both Russia and China avoid values-based policy in favor of pragmatic, self-preservation policies, both stand to gain by undermining the value system of the West and the challenge to U.S. hegemony. While Russia and China stop short of declaring a formal alliance, their anti-U.S. messaging has become increasingly synchronized in tone and content, accusing the United States of interfering in the internal affairs of other states and employing a confrontational foreign policy that threatens world

¹²⁹ Nikolay Megits, "The Impact of Russia-China Trade Relationship on the U.S. Economy," *Journal of Eastern European and Central Asian Research* 3, Iss 2, (2016) 2.

¹³⁰ Nikolay Megits, "The Impact of Russia-China Trade Relationship on the U.S. Economy." 2.

¹³¹ Michael Kofman, "The Emperor's League: Understanding Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," War on the Rocks, August 6, 2020. <https://warontherocks.com/2020/08/the-emperors-league-understanding-sino-russian-defense-cooperation>.

¹³² Vasily Kashin, "The Current State of Russian-Chinese Defense Cooperation." *Center for Naval Analysis*, 2018, 11. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, David Shullman, and Dan McCormick, "Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation," War on the Rocks, August 5, 2020.

peace.¹³³ In March 2021, the Chinese foreign minister received his Russian counterpart for a conference that took a much friendlier tone than his meeting earlier in the month with the U.S. Secretary of State. Furthermore, Putin and Xi have expressed serious concerns over democracy-promotion, which represents a significant threat to both regimes and is supported by the United States and the West.¹³⁴ These observations suggest that Russia and China may have found common ground for cooperation in undermining democracy and the U.S.-led LIO. Furthermore, the joint statement from Putin and Xi hours before a sensational opening ceremony at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing—and shortly before the unprecedented Russian invasion of Ukraine—signaled that the relationship between both the individual leaders and their countries was stronger than ever. The two leaders condemned what they called, “interference in internal affairs” in reference to the global influence of the United States¹³⁵

The influence of the West and the perceived threat that influence poses to Putin’s and Xi’s regimes are driving Russia and China to balance politically against the United States, which is consistent with the domestic threat hypothesis developed in Chapter I. Similarly, Russia and China benefit from each other’s diplomatic backing on issues where the two countries differ from the United States, giving them credibility internationally and creating opportunities to demonstrate a united front against the West on issues of human rights, state sovereignty, and democracy—topics that pose a direct threat to both authoritarian regimes.¹³⁶ On the leadership level, mutual concerns about a democratically

¹³³ Yang Chen, Li Xuanmin, and Bai Yunyi, “China-Russia Partnership ‘Key to Balance U.S. Hegemony,’” *Global Times*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202103/1219129.shtml>.

¹³⁴ Thomas Wright, “The Return to Great Power Rivalry was Inevitable,” *The Atlantic*, September 12, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/09/liberal-international-order-free-world-trump-authoritarianism/569881/>.

¹³⁵ Ken Moritsugu, “Russia, China Push Back Against U.S. in Pre-Olympic Summit,” Associated Press, February 4, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/winter-olympics-putin-xi-meet-0e9127176250c0cab19b36e75800052e>.

¹³⁶ Alexander Korolev, “How Closely Aligned are China and Russia? Measuring Strategic Cooperation in IR,” *International Politics*, May 9, 2019.

inspired regime change in Russia or China appear to fuel a personal partnership between Putin and Xi.¹³⁷

Sino-Russian balancing against the Western domestic influence and external threat through mutually beneficial political, economic, and military cooperation reached its highest point so far just before the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing, where President Xi and President Putin declared that there are “no limits” to their country’s strategic cooperation. Furthermore, both leaders took the unprecedented steps of jointly condemning NATO expansion and expressing support on Ukraine and Taiwan.¹³⁸ This mutual rhetorical support signaled a significant upgrade in the nature of the relationship, as both leaders were previously hesitant to comment about what they regard as the internal affairs of the other state. The timing of this announcement with the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympics is unlikely to be a coincidence as the diplomatic boycott of the games by the United States, U.K., Canada, Australia, Denmark, Estonia, Japan, and Lithuania ceded the stage to Russia and China who have capitalized on the spectacle to demonstrate their partnership.¹³⁹ This messaging appears to challenge the notion that China and Russia will not go so far as to form an alliance and instead rely on a cooperative double-balancing approach to limit American hegemony in Europe and Asia mentioned earlier in this section. While it is still early to assess the extent of this cooperation, the lengths to which the Sino-Russian strategic partnership will go is being tested by Russia’s war in Ukraine, and China has thus far not yielded to calls to reign in Russia’s actions.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ Matthew Burrows and Robert Manning, “The Problem with Biden’s Democracy Agenda,” War on the Rocks, July 27, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/07/the-problem-with-bidens-democracy-agenda/>.

¹³⁸ Tony Monroe, Andrew Osborne, and Humeyra Pamuk, “China, Russia Partner Up Against West at Olympic Summit,” Reuters, February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-china-tell-nato-stop-expansion-moscow-backs-beijing-taiwan-2022-02-04/>.

¹³⁹ Sean Ingle, “Vladimir Putin Claims Diplomatic Boycott of Olympics Is About ‘Ambitions,’” *The Guardian*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2022/feb/03/vladimir-putin-claims-beijing-olympics-diplomatic-boycott-about-ambitions>.

¹⁴⁰ Odd Arne Westad, “The Next Sino-Russian Split?” *Foreign Affairs*, April 4, 2022, www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/east-asia/2022-04-05/next-sino-russian-split.

C. CONSTRAINTS ON THE RELATIONSHIP?

The ideological element of competition between China and Russia evaporated overnight at the end of the Cold War, opening an opportunity to mend relations that remained strained due to unresolved border disputes and competition over regional influence. If the international fallout over Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea did not initiate a more cooperative relationship between Russia and China,¹⁴¹ it certainly accelerated it. While Russia has significant hard power capabilities through the military and informational aspects of diplomacy, information, military, and economy (DIME), Russia's economy has faltered since the collapse of the Soviet Union and is undergoing another period of turmoil due in large part to the global pandemic. Inflation and unemployment are rising at the same time average household income has shrunk in 2020.¹⁴² Oil and gas exports are central to Russia's economy, which means they are vulnerable to sanctions as the aftermath of the 2014 invasion of Crimea demonstrates.¹⁴³ The invasion of Crimea shattered hope of Russian alignment and cooperation with the West that seemed promising in the early 2000s, and the sanctions imposed on Russia by Western governments drove Russia closer to China, a willing buyer of Russian oil and gas.¹⁴⁴ This pattern repeated itself on an even greater scale with Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine as China and Russia announced a new contract to sell China ten billion cubic meters of natural gas per year.¹⁴⁵ This may seem like a win-win situation for both countries, but instead Russia is becoming more beholden to China. As Western markets cease buying Russian hydrocarbons, Russia is even more reliant on exports to China.¹⁴⁶ This suggests that Russia

¹⁴¹ Kadri Liik, "It's Complicated: Russia's Tricky Relationship with China," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, December 17, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/its-complicated-russias-tricky-relationship-with-china/>; Michael Kofman, "The Emperor's League: Navigating Sino-Russian Defense Cooperation."

¹⁴² Andrei Semenov, "Political Consequences of the Economic Crisis in Russia," *The Wilson Center*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/political-consequences-economic-crisis-russia>.

¹⁴³ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*: 38.

¹⁴⁴ Alexander Gabuev, "Friends With Benefits: Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, June 29, 2016, <https://carnegiemoscow.org/2016/06/29/friends-with-benefits-russian-chinese-relations-after-ukraine-crisis-pub-63953>.

¹⁴⁵ Ken Moritsugu, "Russia, China Push Back Against U.S. in Pre-Olympic Summit."

¹⁴⁶ Odd Arne Westad, "The Next Sino-Russian Split?"

might be relegated into a junior partner position with China—an irritant which could leave them open to a wedging strategy per hypothesis 2. However, their alienation from the West resulting from the 2022 Ukraine invasion may make this realignment difficult, at least on the short to mid-term.

The core feature of the Sino-Russian relationship, from this standpoint, is its asymmetric nature. For its benefit, China can buy some types of Russian military hardware and technology, which are still cheaper or more readily available than developing their own, or gain access to Russian hydrocarbon resources. Russia, on the other hand, is much more economically and otherwise reliant on China. This asymmetry represents a major long-term challenge for Russia. The mutual benefit of reproachment in the past decade is no guarantee of future civility between Russia and China. For the immediate future, Russian oil and gas exports (which constitute 2/3 of Russia's income from exports)¹⁴⁷ may be a stable source of income, but as developed countries around the world seek clean energy alternatives to oil and gas and avoid Russian gas due to sanctions and boycotts, the demand could dramatically decrease, leaving Russia scrambling for income. China in particular has more opportunities to buy oil and gas from other producers around the world, while Russia's export market for oil and gas is more limited to China, due to sanctions. This means that Russia will depend more on selling to China, than China will depend on buying from Russia. In 2019, Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia to become China's top source of crude oil with nearly 20 percent of imports coming from Russia,¹⁴⁸ but the list of oil importers to China is long, meaning China can import oil from elsewhere if it needs to. This offers China considerable economic leverage over Russia that Russia.

Sino-Russian cooperation is based on mutual benefit through trade and a common antagonistic relationship with the United States. The key takeaway from that relationship is that it lacks an ideologically unifying principal. The closest China and Russia get

¹⁴⁷ Charles Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia."

¹⁴⁸ "Russia is China's Top Crude Oil Supplier Ahead of Saudi Arabia" January 24, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/25/russia-is-chinas-top-crude-oil-supplier-ahead-of-saudi-arabia.html>; Emma Bingman, Kara Greenburg, and Hannah Reale, "Where Does China Get Its Oil?" *Columbia University Press*, July 12, 2020, https://www.energypolicy.columbia.edu/sites/default/files/file-uploads/WhereOil_%20The%20Wire%20China.pdf.

to a shared global ideology is their belief that the world should be multipolar, and that Russia and China should occupy poles opposing the United States as a means of balancing against a hegemonic power. More importantly, a preference for authoritarian rule is shared among these countries, but that does not have the same appeal as a unifying ideology as communism did during the early years of the Cold War. Ultimately, Russia and China can share technology and techniques like the exploitation of Artificial Intelligence and Information Security that are useful to authoritarian rule, but authoritarian rule is simply a means of regime stability, not necessarily an ideology China and Russia seek to export.¹⁴⁹

The Russian aggression against Ukraine provides another point of potential contention with China. The joint statement made by both countries prior to the Opening Ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympics right before the invasion was intended to give the world the impression of a unified front between Russia and China against the West. Previously, China and Russia have abstained from weighing in on each other's border and sovereignty disputes in Crimea and Taiwan until the joint statement in February 2022. China twice abstained from voting in the UN Resolutions over Russia's 2014 annexation of Ukraine, which China regards as an internal matter between Russia and China, and China refrains from involving itself in the internal affairs of other countries.¹⁵⁰ However, China has long dealt with their own separatist movements in Tibet and elsewhere, so the precedent set by Russia's actions in Ukraine could prove threatening to its internal stability.¹⁵¹ For the time being, however, Xi pledged support for Russia's grievances over Ukraine in the February 2022 joint statement with Russia, demonstrating that the two countries regard their mutual antagonism with the West of greater significance than their differences with each other.

¹⁴⁹ Tony Monroe, Andrew Osborne, and Humeysa Pamuk, "China, Russia Partner Up Against West at Olympic Summit."

¹⁵⁰ Zhang Lihua, "Explaining China's Position on the Crimea Referendum," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 1, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2015/04/01/explaining-china-s-position-on-crimea-referendum-pub-59600>.

¹⁵¹ Geoff Dyer, "In the Battle for Crimea, China Wins," *Foreign Policy*, March 12, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/12/in-the-battle-for-crimea-china-wins/>.

Central Asia is another region of potential friction between Russia and China, particularly as the latter gains more power and influence. This region has long been considered Russia's "near abroad" and continued influence in the region after the collapse of the Soviet Union is a high priority for Moscow. Russian infrastructure and economic investment have since been surpassed by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), demonstrating that influence in Central Asia is tilting significantly in China's favor. Russia's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), an association between Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia, aimed to be an alternative trade bloc to the European Union, whose influence Russia seeks to contain. The EAEU has attempted infrastructure investments to promote connectivity between its member states, but its influence has largely been eclipsed by China's BRI initiatives which are often negotiated bilaterally, giving China leverage against the weaker countries.¹⁵² Such leverage increases Beijing's influence (though not to the degree decried by some China hawks) and undermines that of Russia, creating a source of tension between the two countries.¹⁵³ But this competition for influence in Central Asia may not be a major impediment for the Sino-Russian relationship because of the "logrolling" nature of their partnership—the greater focus of each of them on East Asia and Europe, respectively, and their efforts to deconflict in peripheral areas.¹⁵⁴

The Arctic region is another realm of potential cooperation and friction between weakening Russia and rising China. As Arctic Sea routes become more accessible due to the receding sea ice, Russia and China both seek opportunities for new shipping lanes and access to natural resources like fishing and oil and gas extraction from the region. Russia has the largest Arctic coastline of any of the Arctic countries (United States, Canada,

¹⁵² Charles Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split Russia and China." And Jonathan E. Hillman, "A China Model? Beijing's Promotion of Alternative Global Norms and Standards," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*. March 13, 2020. https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-model-beijings-promotion-alternative-global-norms-and-standards#_ftn1

¹⁵³ Paul Stronski and Nicole Ng, "Cooperation and Competition: Russia and China in Central Asia, the Far East, and the Arctic," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*. February 28, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/28/cooperation-and-competition-russia-and-china-in-central-asia-russian-far-east-and-arctic-pub-75673>

¹⁵⁴ Kyle Haynes, "Balancing or Backscratching? Sino-Russian Log-rolling During U.S. Decline," *International Politics* Vol. 57, Iss. 5, (October 2020) 919. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/2442693444>

Denmark, Norway, and Russia, plus Sweden and Finland which have territory in the Arctic, but not along the coast), which provides it with significant access and geopolitical interests in the region. China, in turn, considers itself a “near-Arctic” country and has recently built its own ice-breaking vessel for Arctic exploration.¹⁵⁵ Such efforts are aimed at China’s own version on the North Sea Route: the Polar Silk Road, which is an extension of BRI.

As the Arctic continues to grow in importance as a region of the global commons, China and Russia face a potential frictions over domination of the region. Russia has historically been sensitive to any perceived threat to its sovereignty and incursion on what it believes to be its rightful sphere of influence in the Arctic, and that sentiment will likely remain in the future. This will likely be exacerbated as China would need to rely on stable relationship with the Norway—a NATO founding member whose unique geographical position in the Arctic will serve as the gate through which China must pass on its way to Europe from the Polar Silk Road. Furthermore, the possible addition of Sweden and Finland to NATO in the wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine would continue to tip the balance of Arctic nations in NATO’s favor, meaning China could not operate freely in the Arctic without maintaining stable relationships with multiple NATO member states.¹⁵⁶

Russia’s enormous Arctic coastline and established history in the region give it greater legitimacy to its claims there. China on the other hand, has only recently declared itself a near-Arctic country, despite not having any territory above the Arctic circle. This geographic reality means that China would need Russian cooperation if it is to make any inroads into the region.¹⁵⁷ The asymmetry in economic power between Russia and China could continue to manifest itself in the Arctic, creating an insecure position for Russia if China’s influence there continues to grow. The increasing Russian dependence on China in the wake of the 2022 invasion of Ukraine means that Russia will be left with little choice

¹⁵⁵ Ling Guo and Stephen Lloyd Wilson, “China, Russia, and Arctic Geopolitics,” *The Diplomat*, March 29, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/03/china-russia-and-arctic-geopolitics/>.

¹⁵⁶ Jeremy Greenwood and Shuxian Luo, “Could the Arctic Be a Wedge Between Russia and China?” *War on the Rocks*, April 4, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/04/could-the-arctic-be-a-wedge-between-russia-and-china/>.

¹⁵⁷ Ian Anthony, Ekaterina Klimenko, and Fei Su, “Strategic Triangle in the Arctic?: Implications of China-Russia-United States Power Dynamics for Regional Security,” *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 1, 2021, 10. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep32865>.

but to accept the asymmetry, offsetting potential concerns about China encroaching in Russia's Arctic sphere of influence.

Despite these potential limitations of the Sino-Russian strategic partnership, recent episodes of warming relations, such as the joint declaration of a partnership with “no limits” just prior to the Opening Ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games shows that the benefits of their alignment seem to overcome the constraints for the time being. From a pragmatic standpoint, Russia and China have much to gain by cooperating with one another and capitalizing on opportunities to realize their jointly envisioned multipolar order. The United States has few options available for wedging between the two, as China and Russia view the United States as the greater threat. As a result, the trend of cooperation is likely to continue as it benefits both countries economically, militarily, and diplomatically in their competition with the United States

The “wildcard” in the budding strategic partnership is the role played by the personal relationship between Putin and Xi. Since Xi came to power in 2013, the two leaders have met 38 times and deliberately emphasize their friendship as a means of mutual recognition.¹⁵⁸ The shared vision of a multipolar world and apparent trust the leaders have in each other may be more rooted in personal interest than state interest. The current trajectory with Putin and Xi in power is likely to continue, but there is no guarantee that either's successor will feel the same way.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine has portrayed positively in both state-run Chinese media and on social media with netizens, in part because publicly criticizing Putin over the decision to invade is politically infeasible.¹⁵⁹ This generally positive portrayal of Russia invasion seen in Chinese media suggests that CCP leadership remains focused on playing up support for Russia against the West. These conclusions add further credibility to the hypothesis that Russia and China—both driven more by the aspirations of regime stability

¹⁵⁸ Andrew Roth and Vincent Ni, “Xi and Putin Urge NATO to Rule Out Expansion as Ukraine Tensions Rise.”

¹⁵⁹ Francois Godement and Viviana Zhu, “Ukraine: China's Rock-Solid Pro-Russia Narrative,” *China Trends by Institut Montaigne*, March 2022, <https://institutmontaigne.org/resources/pdfs/publications/china-trends-12-ukraine-chinas-rock-solid-pro-russia-narrative.pdf>.

from their leaders who are not constrained by term limits on their leadership—are balancing against the internal threat of democratic revolt and using competition with the United States to capitalize on nationalist sentiments and galvanize the support of their populations.

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IV. ANALYZING U.S. APPROACHES FOR COUNTERING SINO-RUSSIAN ALIGNMENT

The challenge posed by continued cooperation between China and Russia is widely covered in editorials and think-tank publications, but there is little consensus among policymakers and analysts on how the United States should respond. Building upon the framework and empirical analyses developed in the previous chapters, I assess which of the three hypotheses identified in Chapter I best corresponds to the trajectory of the Sino-Russian relations and why. Each of the three hypotheses are directly related to a prominent policy recommendation, examined in the literature review in Chapter I. The “reverse-Nixon” approach, whereby the United States could entice Russia to shift their alignment back to the West and away from China, is associated with the balancing against the most immediate threat scenario in hypothesis two. In turn, the hardline regime-centric competition perspective, which frames the rivalry between the United States, Russian and China as a competition between democratic and authoritarian regimes, is related to hypothesis three, which maintains that these two powers are driven together by the internal threat posed by the spread of liberal values, championed by the United States. This is the bleakest scenario as it predicts the highest level of animosity between the United States and Russia and China, driven by domestic political survival considerations, as well as little scope for any form of wedging strategies and confidence building measures across the two blocks. Finally, the middle ground option for responding to the Sino-Russia partnership most closely aligns with hypothesis one: the balancing against the most powerful external threat scenario. This is a world in which it is unlikely that a “wedge” can be driven between Russia and China, because of their incentive to counterbalance the United States, but some cooperation on issues of common interest could be pursued to decrease tensions and stabilize the competition. Based on the evidence of the previous chapter and the discussion that follows, I ultimately argue that the hardline regime-centric scenario and policy response is most feasible—particularly since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine closed the door on cooperation with the West, decisively pitting the Russian and Chinese regimes against

the United States and its allies. What follows is an evaluation of each of these ideas, as well as a discussion about the role America's allies can play in great power competition.

A. THE “REVERSE NIXON” APPROACH

The “reverse-Nixon” approach has largely been invalidated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, which effectively burned its bridges to the West, though China may still be convinced to distance itself from Russia over the invasion given the potential global backlash for supporting the Russian aggression. Critics of the reverse-Nixon approach claimed that the concept was flawed from the beginning, since China simply has more to offer Russia than the West does.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, it has been weakened by the fact that the stability of Putin's regime is at least partially grounded in playing up the outside threat posed by NATO, making it difficult for him to change course to establish more amicable relations with the West.

Additionally, the relationship between Russia and China lacks the ideological element and personal disdain between heads of state that acted as a break on their alignment during the Cold War. In stark contrast to the Cold War frictions, Putin and Xi have gone to great lengths to demonstrate their mutual respect and friendship, while the only factor resembling an ideological commonality is their disdain for Western liberal internationalism and commitment to hard sovereignty.¹⁶¹ Taken together, these trends suggests that prying Russia away from China and coaxing it to seek instead align with the West is unlikely to prevail over the strong pull of their mutual interest to counterbalance Western influence.

In particular, Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022 despite the attempts from the West to deter the move diplomatically, demonstrating that the opportunity for Russia to be “wedged” away from China and into the arms of the West has expired. Moreover, this bold aggression showed that Putin remains convinced that the West is a greater threat than China, suggesting that he is acting in the interests of regime stability, rather than long-

¹⁶⁰ Sergei Radchenko, “Driving a Wedge Between Russia and China Won't Work.”

¹⁶¹ Andrew Osborne and Mark Trevelyan, “Russia and China Hail ‘No-Limits’ Partnership to Stand Up to U.S.” Reuters, February 4, 2022; Alexander Korolev, “How Closely Aligned are China and Russia? Measuring Strategic Cooperation in IR,” *International Politics*, May 9, 2019.

term national security. While Putin may claim that the invasion of Ukraine is aimed at protecting Russia and de-Nazifying its Ukrainian neighbor, the move has galvanized both Ukraine and the West against Russia, which presents a greater threat to Russian national security than existed before the war. In this sense, analysts have argued that Putin's invasion of Ukraine is the latest attempt by Putin to portray himself as Russia's "indispensable protector,"¹⁶² as a means of demobilizing the growing opposition in Russia. From this standpoint, Charles Kupchan's argument¹⁶³ that splitting Russia and China would set better conditions for liberal democracy to thrive seems to have been invalidated, at least on the short to mid-term: Russia has little interest in anything that allows the West to "defend liberal values and institutions" because those are a threat to Putin's regime by definition.¹⁶⁴

While the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine closed the door on prying Russia away from China, it may incentivize China to distance itself from Russia. The slow progress of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and that worldwide backlash against Russia may dampen China's commitment to a strategic partnership with Russia. There are already some signs that China has been reluctant to fully commit in supporting Russia economically and diplomatically in the wake of the invasion of Ukraine. China abstained from voting on the UN resolution condemning Russia, and have neither publicly supported nor opposed Russia's actions. China is likely concerned about the strong Western response of boycotts and sanctions against Russia, along with material support to Ukraine, and will seek to avoid any association or perception of direct support for the Russian operations. In contrast to the soft stance on Russia's war in Ukraine taken by China on the international stage, the domestic narrative has been largely supportive thanks to Chinese state-run media and hawkish sentiments among Chinese netizens.¹⁶⁵ Against this backdrop, international pressure may incentivize China into using its relationship with Russia to deescalate the

¹⁶² Aleksandar Matovski, "Why Would Putin Invade Ukraine?" The Washington Post, January 16, 2022. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/01/16/why-would-putin-invade-ukraine/>

¹⁶³ Charles Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split Russia and China,"

¹⁶⁴ Sergei Radchenko, "Driving a Wedge Between Russia and China Won't Work."

¹⁶⁵ Francois Godement and Viviana Zhu, "Ukraine: China's 'Rock-Solid' Pro-Russia Narrative."

situation in Ukraine. Such a move may not help stabilize the situation in Ukraine, but it could expose a rift in the Sino-Russian relationship by using China's reluctance to become press-ganged into a confrontation with the West by directly supporting Russia's aggression, or by highlighting the "junior partner" status to China that Russia undoubtedly wants to avoid. Successfully tying China to Russia's invasion of Ukraine would degrade China's image globally and subject it to similar sanctions and boycotts. This could have a significant negative impact on China's economy and domestic stability, meaning it is a serious threat and a situation that China would like to avoid.

China may share the Russian disdain for the West politically and ideologically, but China is an export-based economy that relies on access to the wealthy European and U.S. markets to keep its economy growing.¹⁶⁶ Therefore, it is likely to attempt to distance itself from Russia's Ukraine invasion in order to avoid the backlash that is currently hurting the Russian economy. This represents a potential fault line in the Sino-Russian partnership that can widen even without direct pressure from the West. After the start of the invasion of Ukraine, however, Chinese media coverage of the war in Ukraine has indicated that Beijing is still cautious about allowing the West to exploit any differences between them and Russia.

Though it is yet to be seen, if boycotts and sanctions stemming from Chinese support for Russia's Ukraine invasion spill over into China and begin adversely affecting China's economic well-being, CCP leaders may be forced to reconsider the closeness of the partnership with Russia. Domestic instability would almost certainly be of greater concern for the CCP than maintaining the close alignment with Russia as it fumbles through an invasion that is massively unpopular internationally. That outcome would align with hypothesis three which asserts that the internal threat to the CCP regime is a prime mover in their international alignments.

Furthermore, China may seek to avoid showing support for Russian operations in Ukraine, instead they may try to deescalate it in a manner favorable to their interests.

¹⁶⁶ Agatha Kratz and Janka Oertel, "Home Advantage: How China's Protected Market Threatens Europe Economic Power."

Ukraine is a key location for China's Belt and Road (BRI) infrastructure initiative, and they have a stake in the stability of that country.¹⁶⁷ From this standpoint, China could prefer to negotiate the details of the BRI with an independent Ukrainian government, not one influenced by Russia. Finally, China has an economic interest in rebuilding Ukraine after the war, which would be predicated on Russia not maintaining control of the country once military operations conclude.¹⁶⁸

B. THE HARDLINE APPROACH: A CONTEST BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND AUTOCRACY

Presidents and policymakers often have a very limited set of policy options available to them that are often constrained by geopolitical realities and major events—and the policy options available to the United States to mitigate against Sino-Russian cooperation is no different. In this sense, the recent Russian invasion of Ukraine and the declaration of a no-limits Sino-Russian partnership, seem to have cleared out some of the ambiguity regarding the U.S. policy options, leaving the “hardline” autocracy-democracy approach as the only feasible response for the United States. This gives even greater credibility to hypothesis three, that Russia and China are balancing against the internal threat and focusing on regime stability. As discussed earlier in this chapter, Putin has burned bridges with the West with the invasion of Ukraine and China risks harming its economic ties to the West by maintaining an ambiguous posture toward Russia's war effort. Therefore, any further alignment in the shadow of continued Russian aggression in Ukraine—and the penalties it brings to the broader Russian and Chinese national interests—would signal that the Sino-Russian cooperation may be primarily motivated regime preservation.

At the time of writing, the U.S. approach under the Biden Administration has already committed to a hardline stance rooted in the belief that competition between the

¹⁶⁷ Mohammedbagher Forough, “What Will Russia's Invasion of Ukraine Mean for China's Belt and Road?” *The Diplomat*, March 3, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/03/what-will-russias-invasion-of-ukraine-mean-for-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

¹⁶⁸ John Feng, “China Praises Ukraine Resistance, Pledges Economic Support,” *Newsweek*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.newsweek.com/china-praises-ukraine-resistance-pledges-economic-support-1688608>.

United States, Russia, and China is a contest between autocracy and democracy.¹⁶⁹ At the March 2022 State of the Union Address, President Biden repeated the narrative, referencing the “battle between democracy and autocracy,”¹⁷⁰ which underscores the emerging policy of support for democracy internationally within the context of Great Power Competition. This may be in part seen as a reaction to the declaration of President Putin and Chairman Xi in February 2022 that there are “no limits” to the strategic partnership between Russia and China. Although the latter did not explicitly state that autocracy promotion is their goal, it was clear that curbing the spread and influence of democracy was their key common goal.¹⁷¹

Since 2014, analysts have written about the American response to Russian aggression in Ukraine as an indicator for how it would respond to Chinese aggression toward Taiwan. Although there are a number of significant differences between Ukraine and Taiwan and where they fit into American national security interests, China will certainly take note of the West’s response to Russia and that fact must be taken into consideration when developing policy. Russia is now subject to an unprecedented level of diplomatic and economic sanctions from the United States, EU, and several Western-aligned states in the Indo-Pacific.¹⁷² In the current era of globalization and China’s major role in the global economy, it may be difficult to gain a consensus among Western countries to enact similar sanctions against China, but the threat of them is likely enough to deter China from moving against Taiwan in the short-term. China’s continued economic growth is reliant on trade with foreign countries and particularly on the export of goods from China

¹⁶⁹ Sam Roggeveen, “Democracy vs. Autocracy: Biden’s Inflection Point,” *The Lowy Institute*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/democracy-vs-autocracy-biden-inflection-point>.

¹⁷⁰ Joseph R. Biden, “State of the Union Address,” March 3, 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2022/03/01/remarks-of-president-joe-biden-state-of-the-union-address-as-delivered/>.

¹⁷¹ Andrew Osborne and Mark Trevelyan, “Russia and China Hail ‘No-Limits’ Partnership to Stand Up to U.S.,” Reuters, February 4, 2022.

¹⁷² Minami Funakoshi, Hugh Lawson, and Kannaki Deka, “Tracking Sanctions Against Russia,” Reuters, March 21, 2022, <https://graphics.reuters.com/UKRAINE-CRISIS/SANCTIONS/byvrjenzmve/>.

to markets in the United States, EU, and Asia.¹⁷³ Beijing is closely observing the unfolding war in Ukraine with an eye toward Taiwan and would be keen to avoid some of the same mistakes Russia committed in its campaign, as well as the Western reactions.¹⁷⁴ Subtle messaging that China could share the same fate of international isolation that Russia finds itself in if they openly support Russia or make a similar move against Taiwan could prove a meaningful deterrent. Therefore, the hardline stance against Russia to include materiel support for Ukraine in addition to sanctions would a clear message to China that the United States is willing risk confrontation to protect their national interests abroad, especially when it comes to supporting a threatened democracy.

Similarly, the potential for diplomatic and economic sanctions against China for supporting Russia would inhibit China's economic growth, likely resulting in domestic instability. Sanctions and boycotts of China would pose both an internal and external security threat for the CCP regime, meaning it is unlikely that CCP leadership would see a move against Taiwan as feasible in the short-term since.¹⁷⁵ Given the high stakes involved after the invasion of Ukraine, and the potential precedents it set, a hardline stance, underscored by the narrative of democracy against authoritarianism, coupled with the unity that U.S. allies demonstrated in confronting Russia, may yield the best results in mitigating against the effects of a deeper Sino-Russian cooperation. Also, this firm stance might best deter China from moving against Taiwan while the West is distracted with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

¹⁷³ "China Imports, Exports, and Trade," *Observatory of Economic Complexity*, March 21, 2022, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/chn>.

¹⁷⁴ Bonnie Lin, "Ukraine and Taiwan: Parallels and Early Lessons Learned," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/ukraine-and-taiwan-parallels-and-early-lessons-learned>.

¹⁷⁵ Richard J. Harknett & Jeffrey A. VanDenBerg (1997) Alignment theory and Interrelated Threats: Jordan and the Persian Gulf Crisis, *Security Studies* 6, Iss 3, 114. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09636419708429316>.

C. THE MIDDLE GROUND OPTION: CONTAINMENT AND SELECTIVE COOPERATION

While there is little room for selective cooperation with Russia following their invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, an opportunity still exists with China, since it shares a much greater stake in the current world order than does Russia, and there are still common interests between the United States and China.¹⁷⁶ Cooperation should occur where possible, but never if it compromises the hardline approach, or Western values essential to maintaining a global leadership role. An emphasis on these common interests can actually prove to be a lever which the United States can use to convince China to distance itself from Russia as it risks from being diplomatically and economically cut off from the West as a result of invading Ukraine. This is a clear wedging strategy, but instead of attempting to sway Russia away from China—as most of the existing literature proposes—the goal would be to convince China to distance itself from Russia. Furthermore, by demonstrating the ability to cooperate despite a competitive relationship, the United States and China can reduce the tensions between them and have a greater chance at avoiding costly escalations.

D. THE ROLE OF AMERICAN ALLIES

Convincing European allies that a hardline stance against China is in their best interests is a difficult task, even as most have realized the serious threat that Russia poses to European security. As Stephen M. Walt correctly observed, “Europe is very far from China, and Beijing poses no threat to the territorial integrity of any European states or to other basic elements of their national security.”¹⁷⁷ While there is a negligible threat of a Chinese armada assailing Europe from the Mediterranean or North Sea, the threat of economic coercion and manipulation by China is very real, and the cooperation with the United States in containing this danger needs to be promoted as a prudent choice for its European allies. Additionally, the United States needs to maintain an awareness of the national interests that European and Asian allies have in maintaining trade links with China

¹⁷⁶ Iain Alistair Johnston, “China in a World of Orders.” 10.

¹⁷⁷ Stephen M. Walt, “Will Europe Ever Really Confront China?” *Foreign Policy*, October 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/10/15/will-europe-ever-really-confront-china/>.

in order to maintain its alliances abroad without attempting to push allies into compromising their own priorities. In addition to economic coercion and industrial espionage threat posed by China, American allies could be rallied around common values and the commitment to preserving democracy globally. The EU's 2019 Strategic Outlook cited economic coercion and increasing Chinese assertiveness in Europe as main reasons for labeling China a, "systemic rival,"¹⁷⁸ meaning the EU has a degree of incentive to join the United States in competition with China, though much less is at stake for the EU and the potential for the EU committing to armed conflict with China is very remote.

Up until the recent show of unity over Russia's invasion of Ukraine, American allies in Europe took a backseat to competition with Russia, preferring to rely on the American guarantee of security while benefitting from Russian energy imports. Similarly, America's European allies have been reluctant to firmly take the side of the United States to avoid alienating China, which is the EU's largest trading partner.¹⁷⁹ This reluctance exists despite the strong negative opinions most European publics hold against China due to human rights abuses and unfair trade practices. Still, the direct military threat China poses to Europe is both minimal and distant, meaning Europe has little incentive to join the United States in balancing against China.¹⁸⁰ Aside from the notable exception of the UK, which banned Chinese telecommunications company, Huawei, from its 5G infrastructure, Europe has hedged its bets in an attempt to maintain good relations with both the United States and China, while remaining independent of both. This hedging is understandable in the current era of globalization wherein trade with China underscores the economic interests of not only the United States, but every single one of its allies. The common threat posed by Russia is now in full view, and this Allies in Europe and Asia need not be forced to choose between values-based alignment with the United States and economic interests with China. Instead, the United States should refocus on the liberal democratic values shared by its allies, emphasize common security interests, and allow allied states to pursue

¹⁷⁸ Janka Oertel, "U.S.-China Confrontation and Repercussions for the EU."

¹⁷⁹ "China Overtakes U.S. and EU's Biggest Trading Partner," BBC News, February 17, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56093378>.

¹⁸⁰ Stephen M. Walt, "Will Europe Ever Really Confront China?"

some of their own core interests, even if they do not fully or always align with the United States

V. CONCLUSION

Do Russia and China Benefit from Revising the liberal international order? To answer this question, a sufficient understanding of revisionism is in order. Revisionism is a frequently misunderstood term and often taken in a binary context where a state either supports the status quo or seeks a full revision and replacement with a different type of order. This perspective is overly simplistic to analyze Sino-Russian alignment and lacks the framework to support an understanding of Chinese or Russian ambitions. To be clear, both countries are revisionist to a degree, but they are also stakeholders in the U.S.-dominated LIO. China's ambitions appear to be achieving regional hegemony in Asia and greater exceptionalism within the status quo from which it has benefitted enormously over the past few decades. Russia seeks a change to the security order in Europe and a restoration of its former sphere of influence. Underscoring both of these ambitions is the boost in popular support each regime enjoys by pursuing these national objectives. These conclusions strongly support hypothesis three, which posits that Russia and China are primarily balancing against internal threats to regime stability and using exaggerated external threats to drum up support for the regime. They also overlap with hypothesis one, which theorizes that the two are driven to cooperation based on mutual disdain for American hegemony, which is both a key constraint on Russian and Chinese aggressive behavior abroad, as well as the key promoter of the internal threat of democratic diffusion.

The U.S.-dominated LIO shaped the 21st century, but democratic backsliding around the globe and rising authoritarianism suggests that there is no guarantee that it will shape the 21st century in the same manner. President Biden declared that the contest of the 21st century will be between democracy and authoritarianism;¹⁸¹ however, a continued decline of U.S. power and the democratic values it promotes does not mean an authoritarian world order will replace the current one. In fact, Bobo Lo argues that the world is becoming more disordered, as American leadership is diminished and no alternative model or state seems willing or able to fill that role—including the key U.S. adversaries like Russia or

¹⁸¹ Stephen Lee Myers, "An Alliance of Autocracies: China Wants to Lead a New World Order," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2021.

China.¹⁸² Authoritarianism in both Russia and China is a tool of regime stability rather than an exportable ideology. The American emphasis on the values of democratic governance stands apart from China and Russia's pragmatic, ideologically agnostic positions internationally. While both Russian and Chinese revisionism is driven by grievances against the current LIO established by the United States after World War II, neither of these U.S. adversaries has the capacity or the will to attempt to replace the LIO with a world order of their own creation.

Instead, recent Sino-Russian cooperation is more an indication of each country balancing against American hegemony in what they consider to be their own regions of influence in Eurasia and the Pacific, which to a large degree, overlaps with their primary goal of balancing against the internal threat to the Putin and Xi regimes. According to Kyle Haynes:

Beijing and Moscow have few common interests beyond a shared aversion to the constraints imposed by American hegemony and while both China and Russia chafe under American preponderance, the revised orders that each would seek to impose in their respective home regions are likely to be more harmful to the other's interests than the current U.S.-led order.¹⁸³

The current relationship is more about obtaining "breathing room" for Russia and China individually than any attempt to replace the status quo internationally. Rather than replace the LIO, Russia and China share the common interest of undermining democracy itself because democratic revolutions are threatening to regime stability in both states.

Undermining democracy and Western values abroad seeks to weaken the potential coalitions that may form against Russia and China (although the exact opposite outcome has happened in Europe after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022), and dissuade Russian and Chinese citizens from seeking alternative forms of governance in their countries at the expense of the ruling regimes. This aligns with hypotheses one and three of this thesis, where Russia and China balance against both the most powerful external threat—the United States—whose hard power in Europe and Asia constrains that of Russia

¹⁸² Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, Brookings Institute Press, Washington, DC, 2015. Xxvii.

¹⁸³ Kyle Haynes, "Balancing or Backscratching: Sino-Russian Logrolling During U.S. Decline," 919.

and China. Furthermore, the soft power of the United States and Western allies—the spread of liberal democratic ideals—which is most threatening to the Putin and Xi regimes.

China has benefitted greatly from the current LIO, though they have eschewed certain international rules and norms that inconvenience them. In this regard, China seeks a status within the current order on par with or greater than that of the United States, whose relative power is declining. China has been described as an “illiberal state seeking leadership in a liberal world order.”¹⁸⁴ This increase in international influence is a hallmark of Xi Jinping’s presidency, where his stated goals are a return to great power status and China’s ability to shape the international “rules of the playground” to benefit China at the expense of other powers.¹⁸⁵ However, this narrative of national rejuvenation cannot be divorced from the internal objectives of the Chinese regime, as it plays well domestically, where an increasingly nationalist Chinese public strongly supports their country’s growing international ambitions. Essentially, China’s growing assertiveness around the world increases the status of the CCP and Xi Jinping, who are primarily concerned with maintaining domestic legitimacy and control.

By contrast, Russia initially suffered from the victory of the LIO over the Soviet Union. As result of the imperial collapse after the dissolution of the USSR, and the subsequent economic and domestic political turmoil, Russia—and Russian citizens—had lost both in terms of power, status and welfare. These sentiments have driven much of the Russian opposition to the LIO. Furthermore, Russia’s reliance on hydrocarbon exports mean that the access to foreign markets provided by the LIO is of vital importance to their prosperity, but along with that access comes susceptibility to international sanctions over domestic or foreign policy actions.

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia’s aspiration toward a multipolar world order that would counterbalance American influence has defined Moscow’s geopolitical intentions.¹⁸⁶ Such aspirations have led to the creation of the Eurasian Economic Union

¹⁸⁴ Elizabeth Economy, “China’s New Revolution,” 61.

¹⁸⁵ Elizabeth Economy, “China’s New Revolution,” 65.

¹⁸⁶ Bobo Lo, *Russia and the New World Disorder*, 42.

(EAEU) and BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), which are intended to serve as trading blocs and cooperative organizations to offset Western-dominated organizations such as the EU. In this context, Russia's multipolar world view is less about Russia replacing the United States as a hegemonic power, but rather Russia leading "the rest," which rise—in concert with the decline of the United States—diminishes the latter's ability to project soft power globally and impose the aspects of the LIO that are undesirable from the Russian standpoint.

Still, despite its efforts to create alternative economic unions and trade blocs that it leads or belong to, Russia lacks the capacity to displace the United States. This is because of its slow economic growth, rapid population decline, and dependence on the export of hydrocarbons to sustain itself, which leaves it vulnerable to sanctions and the transition to non-hydrocarbon energy sources.¹⁸⁷ The most prominent option left to Russia to displace the United States is not to outpace the United States, but rather to wage a sort of an "guerilla war" to undermine the global influence of the United States and democratic governance as a whole. Perhaps the starkest example of this is the Kremlin's interreference in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, where U.S. Intelligence assessed that the main goal was, "undermining public faith in the U.S. democratic process, denigrate Secretary Clinton, and harm her electability and potential presidency."¹⁸⁸ Russian motives for pursuing alignment with China can be seen from this perspective—as a method to overcome its relative weakness and get additional leverage to undermine the United States and the LIO it seeks to promote.

As the dominant power in the unipolar, post-Cold War world, the United States has written the rules, but the United States enjoys a large degree of exceptionalism outside of the constraints of those rules other states are expected to follow.¹⁸⁹ As China continues to

¹⁸⁷ James Dobbins, Howard Shatz, and Ali Wyne. 8.

¹⁸⁸ Office of the Director of National Intelligence, Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent U.S. Elections, Washington, DC., January 6, 2017. https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/ICA_2017_01.pdf.

¹⁸⁹ Stephen M. Walt, "China Wants a 'Rules-Based International Order,' Too." Harvard Kennedy School of Government, Belfer Center for Science and international Affairs, Last modified March 31, 2021. <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/china-wants-rules-based-international-order-too>.

grow in power, it also seeks a greater degree of exceptionalism as a stakeholder in the status quo.¹⁹⁰ Many analysts and policymakers interpret this ambition toward exceptionalism as outright revisionism, believing that China seeks to displace the United States and create a world order of its own.¹⁹¹ That concern is shared by the current U.S. president and previous one, demonstrating a rare degree of continuity as they both consider China a revisionist power. The Biden administration goes a step further in framing the competition ideologically between democracy and autocracy.¹⁹² Both administrations portray China as a full-blown revisionist threat: the Trump administration as a threat to the rules-based order primarily through trade practices, and the Biden administration as an ideological threat to liberal internationalism.

Both administrations were correct in their assessments, but the threat posed by China's pushback against the status quo is overstated because China may be attempting to gain leverage against the United States, but as mentioned earlier, they lack an exportable model of governance. Furthermore, the status quo benefits China enormously, and thus China would not benefit from its complete revision. In fact, President Xi acknowledges the importance of a stable international system: "We cannot realize the Chinese dream without a peaceful international environment, a stable international order and the understanding, support, and help from the rest of the world."¹⁹³ Also, while China continues to demonstrate a willingness to reject some international laws and norms when convenient, it finds it beneficial to follow many of them when beneficial in what has been termed as

¹⁹⁰ Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracies,"

¹⁹¹ Jessica Chen Weiss, "A World Safe for Autocracies."

¹⁹² Elizabeth Economy, "China's New Revolution,"; Matthew Burrows and Robert Manning, "The Problem with Biden's Democracy Agenda."

¹⁹³ Xi Jinping Xi Jinping, "Full Text from President Xi Jinping's Speech," New York City, National Committee on United States-China Relations, September 2015.

https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2015xivisit/2015-09/24/content_21964069.htm.

Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Timothy R. Heath, and Michael Mazarr, "China and the International Order," 13.

“selective revisionism.”¹⁹⁴ This shows that China cannot simply be labeled a revisionist power without the nuanced understanding of the significant limits to its revisionism.

Ultimately, Russia and China share common interests in limiting the United States’s hard and soft power in Europe and Asia. Sino-Russian cooperation directed against the United States promotes regime legitimacy for both Putin and Xi. In other words, Russia and China are “omnibalancing” against the overlapping external threat of American hegemony, and the principal internal threat of domestic challenges by pro-democracy movements.

¹⁹⁴ Astrid Stuth Cevallos, Timothy R. Heath, and Michael Mazarr, “China and the International Order,” 38.

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