

Contemporary Russian-Chinese Relations: Strategic Implications and American Foreign Policy Choices¹

Purpose and Scope

This paper examines the context, status and likely trajectory of Russian-Chinese relations, finding that the two powers acting separately and cooperating together pose substantial negative implications for American interests. Based on the author's work as the principal investigator in a two year project sponsored by the National Bureau of Asian Research, the paper favors a longer term strategy of strengthening the American position vis-à-vis Russia and China and broadly based efforts to improve the international balance of power in line with US interests. However, prevailing uncertainties in the United States mean that this US policy course is far from certain. Observers need to consider a wide variety of options that may be followed by the US government in the years ahead, each having notable pro and cons.

Context

American government and non-government specialists along with many international colleagues have had long experience in assessing the twists and turns of the relationship between Moscow and Beijing and what they mean for U.S. interests.² Highlights of

¹ Paper presented at the 59th conference of the American Association for Chinese Studies, University of South Carolina, Columbia South Carolina, Oct 21, 2017 by Robert Sutter, George Washington University.

² The authoritative literature in this field is enormous. Salient examples are Dittmer, Lowell. *Sino-Soviet Normalization and its International Implications, 1945-1990*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1992; Garver, John W. *Chinese-Soviet Relations, 1937-1945: the Diplomacy of Chinese Nationalism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988; Reardon-Anderson, James. *Yenan and the Great Powers: the Origins of Chinese Communist Foreign Policy, 1944-1946*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1980; Westad, Odd Arne. *Brothers in Arms: the Rise and Fall of the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1945-1963*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998; _____. *Cold War and Revolution: Soviet-American Rivalry and the Origins of the Chinese Civil War, 1944-1946*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993; Chang, Gordon. *Friends and Enemies: the United States, China, and the Soviet Union, 1948-1972*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990; Goncharov, Sergei N, John Lewis, and Xue Li Tai. *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao and the Korean War*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993; Griffith, William E. *Cold War and Coexistence: Russia, China, and the United States*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1971; Hinton, Harold. *Bear at the Gate: Chinese Policymaking under Soviet Pressure*. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1971; _____. *China's Turbulent Quest*. New York: Macmillan, 1972; Mayer, David Allan. *Cracking the Monolith: US Policy Against the Sino-Soviet Alliance, 1949-1955*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986; Zagoria, Donald. *The Sino-Soviet Conflict, 1956-1961*. New York: Atheneum, 1964; Barnett, A. Doak. *China and the Major Powers in East Asia*. Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1977; Gottlieb, Thomas. *Chinese Foreign Policy Factionalism and the Origins of the Strategic Triangle*. Santa Monica, Cal.: RAND, 1977; Kirby, William, Robert Ross, and Gong Li, eds. *Normalization of U.S.-China Relations*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2005; Kissinger, Henry. *White House Years*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1979; Vogel, Ezra. *Deng Xiaoping and the Transformation of China*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011; Mandelbaum, Michael. *The Strategic Quadrangle*. New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1995; Ross, Robert S., and Jiang Changbin, eds. *Reexamining the Cold War*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001; Luthi, Lorenz, *The Sino-Soviet Split* Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2008; Bobo Lo *Axis of Convenience* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008; Jeanne Wilson, *Strategic Partners: Russian-Chinese Relations in the Post-Soviet*

attention in the 1950s included the implications of the Sino-Soviet alliance for the American war effort in Korea, the extent of Soviet support for China during the Taiwan Strait crises of 1954-1955 and 1958, the extent of Sino-Soviet backing the Vietnamese Communists defeating the French in Indochina, Soviet support for Chinese economic and particularly military modernization including nuclear weapons, and the signs of friction emerging in the alliance relationship.

In the 1960s, the Sino-Soviet split came into public view and grew in intensity; it was accompanied by major U.S. involvement in combat operations in Indochina facing Vietnamese and neighboring communist forces backed by China and by the USSR, increasingly in competition with China. The U.S. military commitment and broader government involvement in Southeast Asia became the top preoccupation of American foreign policy during the Lyndon Johnson administration (1963-1969). Related was U.S. concern with China's nuclear weapons program which had received significant Soviet support in the 1950s and which came to be viewed by Moscow as a major threat once Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated in the 1960s. The Richard Nixon administration (1969-1974) carried out secret efforts to open official relations with China amidst acute tensions in Sino-Soviet relations prompting American analysts to warn of possible Sino-Soviet war and its implications.³

The successful opening of U.S.-China relations by Richard Nixon and Mao Zedong set the stage for a new framework for analyzing the trilateral U.S.-China-Soviet relationship which remained a focus of U.S. government and non-government assessments until the end of the Cold War. Sometimes characterized as the "Great Power Triangle," the trilateral relationship became a focal point of U.S. specialists and policy makers who gave careful attention to America's relationships with Moscow and Beijing and the implications for U.S. interests of their relations with one another.⁴ In general, the U.S. was seen in an advantageous position particularly as Moscow and Beijing remained seriously opposed to one another for various reasons. American specialists and policy makers remained alert in particular to the implications of China's sometimes siding with the United States against the USSR and sometimes seeking thaw in relations with Moscow.

The American imperative to monitor changing Russian-Chinese relations seemed to decline for a time with the end of the Cold War and demise of the Soviet threat. The end of the Soviet threat terminated what had been the main common ground of strategic collaboration between the U.S. and Chinese governments. This important development

Era Armonk, N.Y: M.E. Sharpe, 2004; Robert Ross, ed. *China, the United States, and the Soviet Union: Tripolarity and Policy Making in the Cold War* Armonk NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1993.

³ U.S. National Intelligence Estimate *The USSR and China* Number 11/13-69, August 12, 1969 https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0000261304.pdf

⁴ Luella Christopher, *United States-Soviet Union-China: The Great Power Triangle* (Summary of hearings conducted by the Subcommittee on Future Foreign Policy Research and Development of the Committee on International Relations, October-December 1975, March-June 1976) (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 95th Congress, 1st session. Committee print, 1997).

coincided with the Tiananmen crackdown in China which shocked Americans and led to an abrupt reversal in U.S. policy from positive engagement to hostile opposition of the Chinese government and its practices. America now seemed ascendant, Russia was in decline and China was preoccupied; against that background the danger of Russian-Chinese collaboration at odds with U.S. interests got less attention.

As China's economy experienced very rapid growth beginning in 1992, Beijing was successful in ending most western sanctions caused by the Tiananmen crackdown and in expanding diplomatic and other relations throughout Asia and the world. China resorted to nine months of off-and-on live-fire military exercises in the Taiwan Strait in 1995-1996 in response to the Bill Clinton government (1993-2001) granting a visa for the Taiwan president to visit the United States. Clinton administration leaders were alarmed; they became much more attentive to Chinese concerns, seeking to reassure and positively engage China. In this context, the extent of Russian arms sales and military collaboration with China was viewed with concern by U.S. government and other analysts. Often intense U.S. disagreements with Russia and China over the war in Kosovo, U.S. plans for national and theater ballistic missile defenses, NATO expansion, and U.S. military presence and policy in the Middle East saw leaders in Moscow and Beijing align together against the United States. In response, U.S. government analysts were repeatedly tasked with assessing the possible significant implications of such cooperation. These were accompanied by various non-government assessments.⁵

These studies--including U.S. government estimates--some now declassified-- of post Cold War Russia-China relations and their strategic implications often show a variety of significant military, political, and economic cooperative developments but they also depict elements of competition and reservations by one side or the other. In the late 1990s, when Russia and China were both weaker and seemed reluctant to challenge the United States despite anti-hegemony rhetoric and diplomatic activism to the contrary, such Russia-China cooperation appeared to not have major strategic implications for U.S. interests.

In recent years, China is much stronger and Russia is somewhat stronger and much more assertive; Russian leaders and to a lesser degree Chinese leaders have demonstrated much more willingness to challenge U.S. interests in their respective primary areas of interest. Those areas include notably Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in the Asia-Pacific. Meanwhile, the Barack Obama administration (2009-2017) tried to withdraw from major wars in Southwest Asia and the Middle East and placed a higher priority than the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) on avoiding military involvements or onerous economic and other international commitments seen as not in America's longer term interests.

⁵ U.S. National Intelligence Estimate *Russian-Chinese Relations: Prospects and Implications UPDATE* NIE 2000-10C September 2000 https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/DOC_0005526244.pdf

As a result, the United States recently has faced more direct challenges from Russia and China in a period of perceived American international retrenchment.⁶ And, the concern in the United States over the implications of the developing Russian-Chinese collaboration--even with its various limitations--is now deemed much greater than it was at the turn of the century.

Contemporary Russian-Chinese Relations: Status and Trajectory

The paper now provides the main findings, and subsequently discusses US policy options, derived from a two-year (2016-2018) research and policy engagement project of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) supported by a generous grant of the Carnegie Corporation of New York on the subject of the strategic implications of the advancing Russian-Chinese relations. The findings and policy options are based on 25 commissioned papers and formal presentations at workshops in December 2016, January 2017 and July 2017, which involved deliberations by 100 leading specialists in the United States, Russia, China, Japan, South Korea and Europe. Publications of the project thus far include *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*⁷ and *Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente*.⁸

Main Findings

Overview

The partnership between Moscow and Beijing has matured and broadened after the Cold War, with serious negative consequences for American interests. The relationship has significantly strengthened during the past decade. The dispositions of President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations over the next five years, and probably beyond. The momentum is based on 1. common objectives; 2. perceived Russian and Chinese vulnerabilities in the face of U.S. and Western pressures; and 3. perceived opportunities for the two powers to expand their influence at the expense of U.S. and allied leaders seen as cautious, distracted and in decline. The relationship has gone well beyond the common view a decade ago that Russian-Chinese ties represented an “axis of convenience” with limited impact on U.S. interests.⁹

Today, Russia and China pose increasingly serious challenges to the U.S.-supported order in their respective priority spheres of concern—Russia in Europe and the Middle East, and China in Asia along China’s continental and maritime peripheries. Russia’s challenges involve cyber and political warfare undermining elections in the United States and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China’s cyber attacks have focused more on massive theft of information and intellectual property to accelerate China’s economic competitiveness to dominate world markets in key advanced technology at the

⁶ U.S. National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* Report NIC 2017-001 (Washington DC, January 2017) p. x, 31, 33

⁷ <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=349>

⁸ <http://www.nbr.org/publications/issue.aspx?id=344>

⁹ Bobo Lo *Axis of Convenience* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008

expense of leading U.S. and other international companies. Russia and China work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in world politics, economy and security. They support one another in their respective challenges to the United States, allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East and Asia. These joint efforts also involve diplomatic, security and economic measures in multilateral forums and bilateral relations involving U.S. adversaries in North Korea, Iran and Syria. The two powers also support one another in the face of U.S. and allied complaints about Russian and Chinese coercive expansion and other steps challenging regional order and global norms and institutions backed by the United States.

The U.S. ability to deal with these rising challenges is commonly seen as in decline. The U.S. position in the triangular relationship among the United States, Russia and China has deteriorated, to the satisfaction of leaders in Moscow and Beijing opportunistically seeking to advance their power and influence. Russia's tension with the West and ever deepening dependence on China and active U.S. constructive engagement with China have given Beijing the advantageous "hinge" position in the triangular relationship that the United States used to occupy.

From one perspective among American foreign policy experts, the developing Russia-China rapprochement represents a failure of the U.S. foreign policy strategy going back to the Nixon administration—that the U.S. would seek to have better relations with Russia and China than they had with one another. Given the end of the Soviet Union and the threat it posed to both the United States and China, it's not surprising in recent decades for Sino-Russian relations to improve markedly. But the degree of recent Sino-Russian collaboration clearly disadvantages America and has reached sufficient importance that some urge the United States to seek as a matter of strategic importance to drive a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. The failure to do so would leave in place an authoritarian axis increasingly capable of challenging the liberal order central to the American position in the world.

A contrasting view from other knowledgeable America specialists is that the ever more extensive development of overlapping Russian-Chinese interests served by their mutual cooperation since the end of the Cold War makes any American effort to manipulate one against the other very difficult. Unlike the Sino-Soviet animus of the Cold War, the two powers have come to depend on each other for economic, military and diplomatic support in the face of challenges they face brought on in particular by U.S. and Western policies at odds with their domestic and international ambitions. The prevailing pattern is of ever closer Russian-Chinese cooperation in their respective oppositions to a U.S.-led international order seen as disadvantaging them through often poorly managed policies creating chaotic and other adverse consequences for Russian and Chinese interests.

Recent Russian and Chinese policy calculations show the importance of improved relations with the United States is low for President Vladimir Putin and the Russian leadership; their world view focuses on dealing with the American threat with coercive means short of war including military deployments, cyber attacks, and security assistance to American adversaries. President Xi Jinping's government continues to balance strong

opposition to U.S. international leadership and perceived U.S. encirclement in Asia with managing differences with the United States in order to avoid confrontation and conflict. China has a much greater stake in the U.S.-led international order than does Russia. But Beijing strikes the balance in ways that seriously undermine America. Notable in this regard are coercive advances to control disputed territory along its rim in ways that undermine the American position as regional security guarantor and an ever expanding military budget that supports increasingly sophisticated weapons systems seeking to turn the military balance of power in Asia against the United States.

There remain significant limits to Russian-Chinese cooperation at odds with the United States. Up to this point, it has been hard to find instances when Russia took substantial risks in support of China's serious challenges to the United States that did not involve overlapping Russian interests, and vice versa. At the same time, as the Russian-Chinese relationship has become closer, American and other specialists carefully peruse the behavior of both sides for signs of such closer collaboration with negative implications for the United States.

The drivers of Russian-Chinese cooperation detailed below overshadow the brakes on forward movement at America's expense. The influence of U.S. policy on key areas of Russia-China cooperation, notably sales of advanced weapons, energy related trade and investment and cooperation in the United Nations and elsewhere against various Western initiatives, is low. U.S. and allied leaders preoccupied with troubles at home and abroad create a balance of international power favoring further advances and challenges by a rising China and resurgent Russia adverse to the U.S.-backed international order.

The negative recent trends remain heavily dependent on circumstances subject to change. The Russian-Chinese relationship is not an alliance with formal obligations to come to one another's assistance. In various important ways, it is a transactional relationship, focused on overlapping interests and with few broadly binding commitments. Such limited engagement reflects the two powers' negative Cold War history and conflicting contemporary interests. In particular, asymmetries in the relationship make Russia, with national wealth only one tenth the size of China's increasingly modern economy, ever more dependent on China and consequently more distant from the widely supported goal of reestablishing Moscow's great power status. And despite its perceived decline documented below, the United States remains a superpower with the means if not necessarily the will far beyond Russia and China to take steps to change prevailing trends.

Through effective economic and military strengthening and adroit statecraft, the United States could lead efforts to counter the challenges of Russia-China cooperation against it and this author and many others in the Russia-China project favor such a course of action. The United States would gain substantially from the establishment of mutually beneficial Russia-China-U.S. relations eschewing the challenges and frictions seen recently. U.S. policy choices considered below often involve a broad range of possible efforts to change the international balance of power to America's advantage. Some involve imposing greater costs on Russia and China for their challenges and some involve more cooperative U.S. relations with each among steps that could change the circumstances

underlining the current adverse trends. Lesser powers with important roles to play in the triangular U.S.-Russia-China relationship include Japan which is in the lead among regional powers seeking to improve its relations with Russia; India and Vietnam, Asian powers with close ties with Russia, wary of Chinese dominance, and actively building closer ties with the United States; and a variety of European and Asian states allied to or partnering with America while seeking advantageous relations with China and Russia.

However, uncertainty over the U.S. government's commitment and resolve head the list of causes of recent international volatility considered in determining viable recommendations for U.S. policy in the Russia-China-U.S. triangular relationship. Given prevailing uncertainties, presented below in addition to policy options in support of greater US strengthening and adroit diplomacy are other options that could be followed by American leaders. The salient pros and cons of all options considered are briefly discussed.

Why has Russian-Chinese cooperation against the U.S. strengthened recently?

Putin's Pivot

The recent advance in Russian-Chinese cooperation against the United States involves Moscow's recent world view. There is some debate among foreign specialists about the origins and durability of Putin's recent harder line toward the West and tilt toward China. A perceived vulnerability of the Russian regime in the face of internal instability seen fostered by the West prompted the Putin regime to shift policy to insure self-preservation. Putin's further turn away from the West and toward China showed in 2012 in the aftermath of the large-scale demonstrations in Moscow to protest the results of the December 2011 parliamentary election widely seen as unfair and compromised; and it followed Putin's decision to reclaim the presidency from his interim successor Dmitry Medvedev. Western support for the protests and criticism of Putin's handling of the situation reportedly convinced the Russian leader that the West was committed to regime change in Russia, that Medvedev's attempted reforms and rapprochement with the West were ill-advised, and that a change in the country's direction, both foreign and domestic, was necessary.

This decision and the ensuing pivot in Russian foreign policy away from the West and toward China intensified in the wake of the Ukraine crisis amid the threat of possible further Western encroachment in Russia's periphery. The pivot made clear that the function of Russian foreign policy is heavily domestic—to maintain the stability of the regime. The goal of Russian foreign policy is to provide for the security and the well being of the country's elite, rather than the well-being, security, and international standing of the country itself and its people.¹⁰

¹⁰ In a commissioned paper for the NBR project, American expert Eugene Rumer persuasively explained that foreign policy is the exclusive property of a narrow elite that does not see itself accountable to the population for its choices, and the population does not hold it accountable for them. Independent institutions that could subject the elite's foreign policy to scrutiny—free press, an independent legislature, a community of independent academics and think tanks, independent business associations, other civil

A rapprochement with the West and participation in its institutions would improve Russia's security, economy and popular well being, but it would require the Russian elite to take steps that would diminish its hold on the country's domestic politics and its economy. In short, it would mean regime change in Russia.

By contrast, no such threat is seen in Russia's closer relationship with China. It does not call for its political system to become more open; it does not call for a more transparent and orderly investment regime; it does not require taking on the entrenched bureaucracy, de-monopolizing of the economy and opening it to more competition, or removal of other barriers to trade and investment that participation in Western-led institutions would require of Russia. Beijing appears content to accept Russia as it is. Moreover, from the perspective of Russia's ruling elite keen to protect its interests, the rationale for partnering with China is reinforced by the complementary nature of the two countries' economies. Militarily, Russia increasingly recognizes it cannot compete with China and chooses to embrace its neighbor. And the two powers are like-minded on many major international issues. Of course, as noted below, the two powers differ in their opposition to the United States and the U.S.-backed international order, with Russia much more willing to take risky measures to disrupt the existing order and confront the United States, whereas China wants to preserve much of the current order that benefits China and Beijing avoids potentially costly initiatives that risk significant backlash from the United States in particular.

China's response

The modern history of the Chinese relationship with Russia shows cycles of cooperation and cycles of contention. The upswing in relations since the end of the Cold War has shown durability and continues to advance. The preference of the Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin governments support further strengthening over the next five years and probably longer. China has strong incentives to further enhance its relationship with Russia, covering economic, military, and diplomatic cooperation. These incentives remain robust. The prevailing trend shows Moscow ever more dependent on and accommodating of China and its concerns, with Beijing carefully avoiding direct challenge to Russian great power pretensions as it works together with Moscow on a broad range of common interests at odds with U.S. supported interests, institutions and norms. For Beijing, Russia is a pliant and influential partner providing strategic, political and economic support for China and its interests in Asia while preoccupying the United States with challenges in Europe and the Middle East. Meanwhile, at least until the end of the Barack Obama government, the risks for China in cooperating more closely with

society actors, etc.—do not exist in Russia. With the elite fully in control of all major media outlets, its foreign policy choices are presented to the general public so as to maximize the public's support for it and for the regime. Such circumstances reinforce developments showing Russian foreign policy is an instrument of domestic stability and regime preservation. The analysis in this section is based heavily on this paper and the discussion of its findings at a January 26, 2017 workshop held by NBR, which is to be published along with other conference papers in the NBR special report *Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines*.

Russia remained low with U.S. and allied governments reluctant to cause serious deterioration in ties with Beijing.

Key determinants of Russian-Chinese cooperation

The drivers of forward movement in Russian-Chinese relations allow for stronger cooperation adverse to U.S. interests despite significant brakes involving Russian-Chinese differences and disagreements.

The drivers¹¹

- *Counterbalancing U.S. global influence and revising the international order.* Russian and Chinese interests converge most prominently on the desire to serve as a counterweight to perceived U.S. preponderant influence and to constrain U.S. power. China sees Russia as a useful counterweight to U.S. power and Russia values Sino-Russian cooperation for the same reason. One element they agree on is that the United States handled poorly international economic leadership leading to the financial crisis and massive recession begun in 2008. The results were very damaging for Russia in particular, prompting common Russian-Chinese efforts to seek alternatives to U.S.-led economics.
- *Countering perceived U.S. promotion of Democracy.* The governments in Moscow and Beijing feel vulnerable and sometimes threatened in the face of U.S. promotion of human rights and democracy, motivating closer cooperation in response.
- *Opposing U.S. military advances in areas important to Russia and China.* Targets here include opposition to U.S. missile defense systems and military reconnaissance along the Russian and Chinese borders, notably the recent proposed deployment of the THAAD missile system in South Korea; and opposition to U.S. long-range strike capabilities, such as conventional prompt global strike (CPGS).
- *Opposing U.S. policies on space and cyberspace security.* China and Russia work together to influence rules and norms for outer space and cyberspace to their advantage, avoiding constraints and restrictions sought by the United States.
- *Strongly engrained common world view.* Moscow and Beijing share a negative view of American and allied intentions which reinforces Russia-China cooperation against perceived outside threats. The rapport between Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping rests in part on this common outlook and adds to incentives for closer collaboration.
- *Sales and development of advanced weapons, military technology and other defense cooperation.* Sino-Russian national security collaboration includes arms sales, defense dialogues, and joint exercises. China and Russia have expanded contacts between their national security establishments, and have institutionalized their defense and regional security dialogues, military exchanges, and strategic

¹¹ The factors listed here include motives driving Russian-Chinese leaders to cooperate against U.S. interests as well as determinants focused on other mutual interests less directly linked to the United States such as sales of Russian oil, gas and arguably military equipment to China.

consultations. Their shared objectives include promoting arms sales and influencing third parties, seeking to change the balance of power to the disadvantage the United States.

- *Trade and investment links.* Western sanctions after the Russian takeover of Crimea mean that China has loomed much larger in Russian calculations as an increasingly large purchaser of Russian oil and gas and a supplier of capital. China views Russia as a source of secure energy supplies and routes. Given Western economic sanctions, Russia views China as a medium-term replacement for needed capital and technology

The brakes

- *Economic asymmetry and longer term military and political implications.* Many Russian-Chinese complaints about energy development, trade and investment reinforce a stark trend of Russia increasingly playing the role of a dependent junior partner in its relationship with China. Asymmetries in Chinese-Russian economic strength and Russia's dependence on China have reached the point that Moscow has accommodated China's economic dominance and greater overall influence in key areas along Russia periphery in Mongolia and Central Asia. The heavily asymmetrical economic relationship undergirds strategic forecasts of ever greater Chinese military capacity and international influence jeopardizing Russia's key interests along its rim. Russia falling ever further behind its Chinese partner notably runs counter to continued strong Russian drive for status as an international great power.
- *Asymmetrical "tools" of power.* Underlining the above asymmetry of power is Russia's somewhat limited tool kit for exerting international influence which features nuclear weapons; military power and covert operations and intelligence in nearby areas juxtaposed with large economic and demographic weaknesses and the absence of soft power. China features the full range of international security, economic and diplomatic tools, which are growing rapidly; Beijing generally uses these tools cautiously except in near-by areas concerning key sovereignty and security issues. China seeks to continue to benefit greatly from various aspects of the existing world order and to avoid the risks and possible costs of serious disruptions apart from matters of security and sovereignty.
- *Limits on arms sales and defense cooperation.* Russia has less to offer China than it once did as a source of advanced military hardware, because of advances in China's defense industries. Russia also maintains restrictions on sales of some advanced weapons systems, presumably because they would pose a direct threat to Russian security.
- *History, distrust and divergence regarding the Russia-China-U.S. triangle.* Both Moscow and Beijing are familiar with the history of duplicity and distrust that characterized their past often confrontational relationship and their respective dealing with the United States against one another. Recent cooperation has put those concerns in the background but they are not forgotten.
- *Divergence on relations with the United States.* The active debate in the United States over a possible effort by the Donald Trump administration to reach an

- understanding with the Putin government raises the question in the minds of Chinese leaders about whether or not President Putin might be inclined to shift policy closer to the United States in ways that would negatively impact Chinese interests. Meanwhile, China has a bigger stake and stronger interest than Russia in managing tensions in relations with the United States. Although China supports Russia in its periodic dramatic uses of force to advance its interests at U.S. expense and Beijing conducts its own incremental probes and advances at American expense, Beijing also seeks a stable working relationship with Washington. Beijing does not want to be seen as an adversarial revisionist power and formally eschews alliance with Russia. Meanwhile, major Chinese banks have gone along with Western sanctions on Russia, with Beijing resorting to other means to provide Russia with economic support.
- *Divergence on relations with Japan.* Japan's strong efforts since the start of the government of Prime Minister Abe in 2012 to improve relations with Russia have yet to achieve a major breakthrough but they continue to raise the possibility that Moscow may be persuaded to improve relations with Tokyo that could work against Beijing's hard line against Japan.
 - *Divergence on Central Asia.* Both sides have failed to coordinate well their economic strategies to the region. China has much more to offer and has gained political influence through its trade and investment activities. China plans to do much more in Central Asia with its various new "Silk Road" programs and related initiatives, which holds the prospect of orienting these economies more toward China than Russia. Russia's relative discomfort with this is an open question but China is dedicated to continuing this effort, for both security and economic reasons. This situation has produced today a rough division of labor with China as the primary provider of economic goods and Russia as the security provider. A looming question, and potential source of tension, is whether China's growing economic role will inevitably lead to an increased security role – and how Russia responds.
 - *Divergence over Europe and the Middle East.* China's ever growing interest in economic penetration of Europe and the Middle East requires stability challenged by Russian assertiveness—a source of possible growing Russia-China friction going forward.
 - *India, Vietnam, North Korea, Syria, South China Sea, Taiwan.* Russia has close relations with India and Vietnam, including large scale provision of advanced military equipment that secures these states against China's rise. China has long resisted Russian efforts to raise India's international profile in such Asian multilateral bodies as the Chinese-Russian-led Shanghai Cooperation Organization. North Korea, Taiwan and the South China Sea are more important for China than Russia. Russia does have an important stake in North Korea and its involvement may or may not complicate China's policy. Russian demonstrations of support for China regarding the South China Sea and Taiwan through rhetoric and military exercises mirror the Chinese posturing in support of Russian actions in Syria and the Baltic Sea. Such posturing underlines continued ambivalence to support each other with binding commitments.

US Policy Options

The NBR project's discussion of U.S. policy options for dealing with the largely adverse strategic implications of Russia-China relations for U.S. interests resulted in five general judgments prefacing recommendations for alternative policy choices for the United States. As noted above and below, the project and this writer tend to favor policy choices leading to American strengthening at home and abroad in a multi-year effort to create a more favorable balance of power for US interests in the face of challenges posed by Russia and China. However, given the fluidity of international and domestic circumstance, the project and this paper offer a fuller range of policy choices, noting relevant pros and cons for U.S. policy makers with an interest in those policy choices.

Judgments

1. U.S. strengthening and alternative policy choices amid international and U.S. uncertainty. The majority of recommendations in the NBR project for dealing with the negative strategic implications of Russia-China relations for the United States are in line with those in other authoritative studies.¹² They call for broad-ranging American strengthening of economic, military and diplomatic power and influence. Such strengthening is to create a more favorable balance of power supporting the U.S.-backed international order now challenged by Russian and Chinese actions. Building national power at home and abroad will require greater domestic cohesion and less partisan discord and government gridlock. Strategies employed need to be realistic and effectively implemented.

Alternative policy choices for U.S. policy considered by the NBR project are presented below to assist American policy makers to discern what they deem as the proper mix of U.S. actions in dealing with the challenges posed by Russia and China amid changing international circumstances and American domestic division and uncertainty. Unlike the other authoritative studies, the NBR project and this paper see the United States not as a constant among variables—notably, an actor assumed as able and willing to employ the recommendations offered by the project. Rather, American policy and behavior is viewed as a major uncertain variable impacting international dynamics, notably including the Russia-China relationship.

¹² Major studies include Julianne Smith, *A Transatlantic Strategy for Russia* Washington DC, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016; Angela Stent, *Russia, China and the West After Crimea*, Washington DC: The TransAtlantic Academy, 2016; Kathleen Hicks and Lisa Sawyer Samp, *Recalibrating US Strategy toward Russia* Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) March 2017; Eugene Rumer, Henry Sokolsky and Andrew Weiss, *Guiding Principles of a Sustainable U.S. Policy Toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia: Key Judgments from a Joint Task Force*, Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2017; Julianne Smith and Adam Twardowski, *The Future of US-Russian Relations* Washington DC: Center for New American Security, January 2017; Robert Blackwill and Ashley Tellis, *Council Special Report: Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China* Washington DC: Council on Foreign Relations, April 2015; Orville Schell and Susan Shirk, *Chairs, US Policy toward China: Recommendations for a new administration* New York: Asia Society, 2017; Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace: A Lowy Institute Paper* Sidney Australia: Penguin Special Studies, 2017.

2. No easy fixes. There is general agreement in the NBR project that the problems posed by Russia-China relations are big and that there are no easy fixes for these problems. Longer term policy choices noted below require prolonged whole-of-government approaches that will be difficult for American policy makers to carry out amid many high profile distractions at home and abroad. For example, such large scale U.S. government foreign policy approaches often involve extensive publicity used to rally support at home and abroad for the new effort against the perceived foreign danger or threat. Unless carefully managed by the U.S. administration, such publicity is seen negatively in the NBR project as more likely than not to feed Russian and Chinese perceptions of the United States as a weak opponent--an angst-ridden declining power seeking vainly to reassert previous dominance. In sum, it will be difficult for the U.S. government to determine clear goals and strategies and carry them out effectively over time in a low key and resolved manner reflecting confidence and assurance.

3. Avoid counterproductive tactical moves. As U.S. policymakers assess and pursue American interests in considering possible changes in U.S. policies toward Moscow and Beijing, they need to do so with awareness of how such moves impact the above objective of America's national and international strengthening, or other goals sought by American policy makers. Notably, there are many areas where Russia and China cooperate together that seem unlikely to be changed by U.S. policy and practice. And accommodation of Russia or China for the sake of expanding U.S. room for maneuver or other tactical benefits could be counterproductive, notably in weakening domestic U.S. resolve and U.S. ties with allies and partners needed to support the broader U.S. strategic international goal. Similarly, applying greater pressure and tougher measures toward either power also could be troublesome if not in line with U.S. domestic interests and those of U.S. international supporters.

4. Play the "long game"; target Russia-China vulnerabilities. The likelihood of quick success through specific U.S. moves toward Russia and China appears low. The NBR project has recommended that American policy play a "long game" in seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in the Russian-Chinese collaboration at odds with U.S. interests. As noted above, many areas of Russia-China cooperation show little impact by U.S. policy; these include Russian-Chinese cooperation on arms sales, some aspects of Russian energy supply to China, and some aspects of the U.S.-led international order that Moscow and Beijing seek to change. More promising Russian-Chinese differences warranting U.S. attention and possible exploitation involve the very different standing Russia and China have with the United States and the asymmetry in their respective world views and international ambitions.

Russia is an avowed opponent of the United States on various key issues bilaterally and in regard to the U.S. - led international order; U.S.-Russian relations have declined to the lowest point since the Cold War. Whatever positive cooperative elements in the relationship remain are fully overshadowed by differences and disputes. In contrast, China has many more positive and cooperative interactions with U.S. policymakers; it benefits greatly from the existing U.S.-led international order and wants to sustain those benefits. The disputes it has with the United States are serious, important and have been

growing in recent years, but they have not yet reached a stage of overshadowing Chinese interests in sustaining a good working relationship with Washington. Meanwhile, asymmetries in the Russia-China relationship make Russia more dependent on China and more distant from reestablishing Moscow's great power status.

Another promising vulnerability in Russia-China relations involves their respective coercive strategies toward regional leadership at the expense of neighboring lesser powers. The Russian and Chinese goals are at odds with the core interests of most of their neighbors. Taken together, Moscow and Beijing favor fragmentation of NATO, the EU, the US alliance structure in Asia and regional groupings led by ASEAN and others that impinge on Chinese or Russian ambitions. The United States opposes coercive changes in the status quo and supports existing boundaries, stronger regional collective security, and the sovereignty and aspirations of all states in accord with international norms; a strong United States provides a welcome counterweight to Russian and Chinese ambitions. U.S. contributing to capabilities and resolve of these states surrounding China and Russia can be justified on their own merits without direct reference to Russia or China. The U.S. steps provide an impactful outlet for U.S. backed strengthening against adverse Chinese and Russian practices that is less directly confrontational with either power.

5. Consider Russia-China together as well as separately. Most recommendations from other authoritative studies for U.S. policy dealing with Russia and China focus on either Russia or China but not the two together. Those recommendations are useful but they need to be incorporated with recommendations looking at China and Russia together in order to be sure their implications on the Russia-China relationship involving U.S. interests are fully considered.

- One cannot discern appropriate U.S. policy toward Russia and China without careful consideration of the main differences between the two that can be used by U.S. policy.
- U.S. policy that does not deal with Russia and China cooperation risks ineffectiveness in the face of the Russian-Chinese actions together reinforcing their respective challenges to the United States and reinforcing a U.S. image of passivity and decline in the face of Russia-China advances.
- The differing standing Russia and China have in relations with the United States means that U.S. policy needs to be tailored to both at the same time in ways that avoid worsening the overall American position.
- Assessing U.S. policy toward both powers assists in the difficult task of determining with greater accuracy what are the trade-offs for the United States as it seeks advantage in moving forward with changes in U.S. policy toward one power or the other.

Alternative Policy Choices

This section describes alternative U.S. policy choices in dealing with challenges posed by Russia and China, showing the main pros and cons of each policy choice for salient American interests and concerns. The NBR project recognizes that American policy making toward Russia and China remains subject to change. It judges that presenting the

main U.S. options in this framework will assist U.S. policymakers in discerning what they deem as the proper path forward for U.S. policy amid prevailing international and U.S. domestic uncertainty.

The policy choices considered below start with two policy choices seeking U.S. accommodation of Russia and China. These policy choices were considered by the NBR project. The first listed below was generally not favored by the NBR project. The discussion then moves to examine policy choices stressing various degrees of American strengthening in opposition to Russian and Chinese challenges. While most of the policy choices considered by the NBR project involved multi-year American efforts at accommodation or American strengthening in seeking longer term U.S. international and domestic interests, considered in the final sub-section below are policy choices focusing on alternative near term moves, taken under existing circumstances without significant change in American strengthening or accommodation.

Accommodation—meet Russia and China “half-way”

Russian and Chinese leaders voice support for this general policy choice. This choice also is favored by some prominent U.S. specialists on Russia and on China. The choice involves U.S. actions reducing existing sanctions on Russia and military, economic and political pressures on Russia and China (e.g. US military deployments and surveillance in Asia and Europe; US trade and investment restrictions; US criticism of human rights conditions) as means to improve relations and ease tensions.

- **Pros:** avoids costly U.S. military and other strengthening; eases tensions with Russia and China; seen as reducing chance of conflict; allows U.S to conform peacefully to a new international order featuring a rising China and resurgent Russia; allows U.S. to focus more on various U.S. domestic problems; Russia and China outwardly supportive—would presumably find this policy choice meets their current goals
- **Cons:** seen as poorly timed—comes amid growing Russian-Chinese challenges to U.S. interests in Europe, Middle East, Asia, international economics, politics and security; would add to perception of U.S. weakness and decline which prompts Russian and Chinese challenges. Risks being viewed in U.S. domestic politics as “appeasement” not favored by Americans and certainly not Republican leaders in Congress. Could undermine U.S. alliances and emerging partnerships with key nonaligned powers (e.g. India, Egypt, Vietnam)

Accommodation as part of strengthening

This policy choice urges the United States to include a variety of initiatives meeting the interests of Russia and China as the U.S. endeavors at the same time to engage in domestic and international efforts to strengthen the U.S. position in the world balance of power. The positive initiatives would involve gestures to advance common ground and ease sanctions and other economic, military and diplomatic pressures on Russia and

China as means to manage tensions and possibly improve relations. For example, the United States could seek greater cooperation with Russia over the conflicts in Syria, managing issues in the Arctic and nuclear arms control. Much more extensive U.S. common ground with China could be expanded with various political, economic or security initiatives. Examples include reducing U.S. surveillance flights near China and easing U.S. restrictions on Chinese investment in the United States. The positive U.S. steps would be carried out as the United States concurrently implements domestic and international strengthening to counter challenges posed by Russia and China, explained in policy choices below.

- **Pros:** Helps to avoid conflict as the U.S. strengthens against Russia and China. Seen on the one hand to diminish the large costs in emphasis on U.S. strengthening without concurrent positive U.S. moves toward Russia and China; and on the other hand to diminish the chance that allies and partners would be upset as U.S. accommodation of Russia and China is accompanied by reassuring U.S. strengthening of commitments to allies and partners. Russia and China are foreseen to remain wary but receptive to U.S. positive initiatives. And this U.S. policy choice could keep Russia and China on the defensive and off balance perhaps resulting in Russian and Chinese caution as they discern American strength, weakness and resolve. This U.S. policy choice also could result in more fluidity in Russian and Chinese relations with the United States and one another, possibly providing more opportunity for U.S. to exploit differences between Russia and China in dealing with the U.S.
- **Cons:** Russia and China could focus on the U.S. strengthening against them and dismiss the U.S. positives, risking greater tensions and costs for the United States. This result could drive Russia and China closer together in working against US interests.

Strengthening # 1—sustaining US “primacy”

This policy choice gives top priority to strong U.S. efforts to sustain America’s position as the world leading power, especially military power, as it supports a vibrant U.S. led international order favorable to American interests. This policy choice involves facing directly the many challenges posed by Russia and China, mobilizing international partners and domestic resources in a coherent strategy allowing America to deter further challenges, to deal with existing ones, and to exploit Russian-Chinese differences--all from a position of greater U.S. strategic strength. A military buildup and international economic activism would accompany improved U.S. domestic governance, economic growth, social cohesion, diplomatic activism and international attraction—i.e. “soft power.”

Pros: This policy choice is widely supported by congressional Republican leaders and the Republican Party platform. Allies and partners would be reassured by demonstrated U.S. willingness to bear the costs and risks of this version of American leadership. Russia and China would be put on guard and perhaps would need to recalibrate their challenges

to U.S. interests and their perception of U.S. decline, leading to greater moderation on the part of Moscow and Beijing.

Cons: The costs of this effort are very large. They will face major budget hurdles involving the Budget Control Act and deficit financing not supported by some leading Republicans. The costs may require political compromise opposed by some in the Republican majority in Congress in order to accommodate Democrats and thereby reach a budget arrangement allowing for substantial outlays for military and other involvement. Administration and congressional leaders seeking greater burden sharing by allies and partners may find those states continuing to free ride under the umbrella of U.S. resurgent protection. Meanwhile, the objective of primacy appears unrealistic to those Americans who judge the U.S. can't stop China's rise, Russian resurgence or the numerous international challenges caused by Iran, North Korea, and ISIS. This policy choice also risks driving Russia and China closer together against the United States.

Strengthening #2—less than primacy—adjust to a more multipolar world—protect key US interests

This policy choice also would focus on U.S. strengthening at home and abroad in facing challenges posed by Russia and China and others. Seeking to improve the American position in the international balance of power would involve increased U.S. budget outlays for military strengthening, and economic and diplomatic activism, but considerably less than sought in *strengthening # 1*, above. It could involve some accommodating of Russia and China, along with overall moderate U.S. strengthening.

Pros: This policy choice would provide more U.S. support for allies and partners, NATO, EU, stable international boundaries, U.S.-backed values and norms. This policy option's upgrade in U.S. military strength may or may not need change in Budget Control Act and/or require Republican accommodation of Democrats in the budget process. It would accommodate Russian and Chinese interests in some areas partly as means to avoid confrontation while continuing US strengthening.

Cons: This policy choice would involve more costs for US albeit less than *strengthening #1*. It may diminish pressure on allies and partners for more burdensharing. Any needed accommodation with Democrats on budget issues may be unwelcome by some Republicans. Despite some accommodation of Russia and China, Moscow and Beijing may still bond closer together in the face of U.S. strengthening.

Strengthening #3—military, economic, diplomatic but avoid values-democracy promotion

This policy choice is seen in line with the Trump administration's more pragmatic approach to advocacy of American values in international affairs. In particular, the current U.S. government has demonstrated to Russia, China, other authoritarian governments and other states seen as carrying out policies offensive to American views of human rights and Democracy promotion that the U.S. administration is much less

likely than previous recent U.S. administrations to seek to intervene in their internal affairs regarding human rights and Democracy.

Pros: Reduces a major incentive for Russia and China to work together and/or separately against heretofore perceived U.S. efforts at regime change targeting Russia and China. Reassures American allies and partners whose policies and practices on human rights and Democracy have alienated past U.S. administrations. If accompanied by greater military, economic and diplomatic strengthening, the new pragmatism on human rights and Democracy is less likely to be seen as appeasement.

Cons: This policy choice still requires the costs and may prompt the unfair burden sharing seen in *strengthening # 1* and *strengthening #2*. It sacrifices the political support at home and abroad that comes from the United States promoting its values abroad. It could undermine the vision of the world order long sought by the United States seen in American values and norms, including human rights and Democracy.

Policy choices under existing circumstances

Current circumstances relevant to US policy toward China and Russia include the following. The Trump administration has proposed some increase in military spending, in line with the Budget Control Act. It has gone along with strong congressional support for tougher sanctions against Russia. It has reduced earlier pressure on allies regarding burden sharing and has provided greater assurance on U.S. support for allies and partners in NATO and Asian security arrangements. There has been some lessening in pressure on allies and partners regarding trade imbalances. Diplomatic activism among allies and partners remains hampered by slow appointments, international distractions and domestic complications.

Meanwhile, the Trump administrations strong reaction to North Korea's surprising nuclear weapons developments and the threats they pose to the United States is seen to underline the volatility of contemporary American foreign policy amid uncertain international and domestic circumstances. The current North Korean crisis preoccupies American policy makers dealing with China and thereby influences US policy consideration on China and Russia relations in as yet unclear ways. Threats posed by cyber warfare and terrorism are among other topics seen in deliberations of the NBR project as able to divert attention away from other otherwise influence U.S. policy choices dealing with the negative implications of Russia-China cooperation for the United States.

Policy choices under existing circumstances include:

1. Tilt toward China and away from Russia. This policy choice views Russia as the more troublesome of the two powers. Seek to isolate Russia further by emphasizing U.S. common ground with China while sanctioning Russia more. Use U.S. energy production to keep energy prices down, weakening Russia's economy and complicating Russian-Chinese energy cooperation.

Pros: This policy choice is in line with existing and proposed US sanctions against Russia. It also builds US common ground with China—the U.S. can privately warn China that U.S.-China common ground is in jeopardy as China collaborates with Russia. The perceived forecast is Russia will feel more vulnerable and seek more cooperative relations with US.

Cons: This policy choice may not work as forecast; China and Russia may be too close to be divided without more accommodation from U.S.; Russia may be prompted to lash out—play the spoiler.

2. Tilt toward Russia and away from China—Woo Russia in a policy choice focused on the perceived larger and longer term strategic danger posed by rising China.

Pros: This policy choice builds common ground with Russia including in areas of mutual US-Russian concerns over possible Chinese dominance. China, worried about a U.S. tilt to Russia amid a U.S. hardening toward China, has a lot at stake in workable ties with US; perceived forecast—China will moderate with US to preclude closer US-Russian ties at odds with China’s interests (e.g. closer US-Russian relations at odds with Chinese interests regarding Japan, India, Vietnam, arms control, and the Arctic)

Cons: This policy choice may not work as forecast; China and Russia may be too close to be divided without more accommodation from U.S.

3. Keep Russia and China on defensive, off-balance; exploit perceived differences. This policy choice involves positive and negative incentives. E.g., a) U.S. joins China’s One Belt, One Road—promotes Chinese expansion in Central Asia, adding friction in China’s relations with Russia; b) U.S. proposes study US intermediate ballistic missile deployments in Asia despite restrictions of INF treaty—use this steps as means to work with Russia to get China to limits missiles—weapons in line with US-Russian accords—overall result could add to friction in China-Russian ties; c) encourage Japan, India, Vietnam ties with Russia, concurrent with U.S. strengthening of ties with all three Asian powers at odds with Chinese regional expansion.

Pros: Such U.S. positive steps to China or to Russia are seen to divide the Russia-China relationship, reducing Russian-Chinese cooperation at odds with US interests

Cons: Supporting China in Asia could alienate Japan, other U.S. allies and partners; weakening INF treaty could alienate U.S. allies in Europe, Japan; tactical U.S. moves regarding Russia and China may be seen as signs of weakness—prompting greater China-Russia challenges to U.S. interests.

4. Seek to meet Russia and China “half-way.” [Same pros and cons noted above].

Next Steps

In the second half of 2017, it remains very unclear what course or courses of action listed above will be considered favorably by the Donald Trump administration. Part of the problem is the remarkable slowness of the administration in appointing officials at levels of authority in the Department of Defense and the Department of State responsible for the making of new policies. Another is the preoccupation of the President and senior administration leaders with such higher priority foreign issues as North Korea's nuclear weapons threat, the war against the Islamic state in the Middle East, and the decision to expand the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan. And the president's domestic agenda also is stalled and it usually gets priority over foreign policy concerns. A third set of distractions comes from the ongoing special US government investigation and various congressional investigations of the Donald Trump election campaign over possible wrongdoing in dealings with Russian officials.

While other authoritative studies have reflected the preference of this writer and many involved in the NBR Russia-China project for a firmer US approach to Russia and China with a base of stronger US military, economic and diplomatic power and influence, the leanings of the often conflicted policy makers in the Trump administration remain opaque. With greater clarity on what exactly the US is prepared to do will come a better grasp of the impact of the policy actions on the course of Russian-Chinese relations and their implications for American interests.