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Hearing on *An Emerging China-Russia Axis? Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition*

Panel I. *Ties that Bind: Current Areas of Sino-Russian Cooperation--Strategic Cooperation*

### **Summary: Increasing Sino-Russian alignment against US interests**

The China-Russia relationship continues to deepen and broaden with ever more negative implications for the U.S. The drivers of Sino-Russian cooperation overshadow the brakes on forward movement at the U.S. expense. The momentum is based on (1) common objectives and values, (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 countries seen in decline. The current outlook is bleak, offering no easy fixes for the U.S. Nonetheless, there remain limits on Sino-Russian cooperation. The two governments continue to avoid entering a formal alliance or are reluctant in taking substantial risks in support of one another in areas where their interests do not overlap. Longer-term vulnerabilities include Russia's dissatisfaction with its increasing junior status relative to China, China's much stronger interest than Russia in preserving the existing world order, and opposition to Russian and Chinese regional expansion on the part of important lesser powers in Europe and Asia seeking U.S. support.

### **Increasing Sino-Russian alignment**

The partnership between Moscow and Beijing matured and broadened after the Cold War and significantly strengthened during the past decade. The dispositions of President Vladimir Putin and President Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations. The momentum is based on 1. common objectives and values; 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 powers seen in decline. It no longer is an "axis of convenience" with limited impact on international affairs.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bobo Lo *Axis of Convenience* New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. This section of this testimony assessing recent China-Russian collaboration against the United States is taken from Robert Sutter, "China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and US Policy Options," Seattle WA: National Bureau of Asian Research NBR Special Report #73 September 2018. The judgments and analysis of this report reflected the main findings of a two-year (2016-2018) research and policy engagement project of the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York on the strategic implications of the advancing Russian-Chinese relations. The findings and policy options were based on 50 commissioned papers and formal presentations at workshops and panel discussions in December 2016,

Increasingly, even longstanding observers doubtful of the significance of China-Russia cooperation are altering their positions in the face clear and assertive moves by the two countries to challenge America and shape the international order along lines they favor. Heading the list of such evidence was the September 2018 massive (300,000 troops) Russian military exercise *Vostok*, bigger than any previous Russian exercise since the end of the Cold War, featuring active participation of 3,200 Chinese fighting forces under “joint” Russian-Chinese command. The exercise took place against the backdrop of rising tensions in both countries’ relations with the United States over a wide range of security, economic and diplomatic issues and ever advancing signs of mutual Sino-Russian support against America causing some skeptics of China-Russia cooperation to reluctantly acknowledge the *de facto* alliance.<sup>2</sup>

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, including the Korean peninsula. Russia’s challenges involve military and paramilitary actions in Europe and the Middle East, along with cyber and political warfare undermining

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January 2017, March 2017, July 2017, and May 2018 which involved deliberations by 80 leading US specialists, with 30 leading specialists from Russia, China, Japan, South Korea, and Europe. They also were influenced by briefings with responsible officials at the U.S. National Security Council; the Department of Defense; the Department of State; several briefings for U.S. congressional staff; and presentations and discussions at academic meetings in Seoul, Singapore, and several locations in the United States. The findings and policy options derived from publications of the project include : Richard Ellings and Robert Sutter, (eds.) *Axis of Authoritarians: Implications of China-Russia Cooperation* Seattle WA: National Bureau of Asian Research 2018; Michael S. Chase, Evan S. Medeiros, J. Stapleton Roy, Eugene Rumer, Robert Sutter, and Richard Weitz, “Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines,” NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 66, July 2017; Shoichi Itoh, Ken Jimbo, Michito Tsuruoka, and Michael Yahuda, “Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente: The Future of Major-Power Relations in Northeast Asia,” NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 64, April 2017. In addition, a forthcoming NBR report on China-Russia and Korean affairs will feature articles by Artyon Lukin and Elizabeth Wishnick that guided the assessment of this paper on China-Russia relations and the Korean peninsula.

Other major studies involving China-Russia relations and US interests 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. Simon Saradzhyan and Ali Wyne. *China-Russia Relations: Same Bed, Different Dreams? Why Converging Interests are Unlikely to Lead to a Full-Fledged Alliance* Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs June 2018; Graham Allison and Dmitri Simes “China-Russia: New Best Friends?” *The National Interest* January-February 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Yu Bin, “China-Russia Relations: Crouching Army, Hidden Alliance,” *Comparative Connections* Vol. 20, No. 3 January 2019, p. 113

elections in the United States and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China undermines U.S. and allied resolve through covert and overt manipulation and influence operations employing economic incentives and propaganda. Chinese 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 expense of leading U.S. and other international companies. Coercion and intimidation of neighbors backed by an impressive buildup of Chinese military and civilian security forces expands Beijing regional control and influence.

Russia and China work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in world politics, economy and security. They coordinate their moves and 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. opponents in Iran, Syria and North Korea. 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 two powers have worked more closely together in response to the stronger pressures on China and Russia associated with the Donald Trump administration's National Security and National Defense strategies, and the hardening of US government security, economic and political pressures on both countries that nonetheless has devoted little public attention to how Beijing and Moscow work together against American interests. President Trump remains an uncertainty in these relationships given his avowed unpredictability in foreign affairs; the president avoids using the strong rhetoric of administration policy documents when dealing with Chinese and Russian matters, and his determination to sustain close personal ties with both China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin further complicate US relations with Beijing and Moscow.

### **Closer China-Russia convergence and coordination**

After Russia annexed Crimea in 2014, it faced significant Western sanctions, targeting energy investment and the provision of capital to state-owned enterprises. The sanctions and the wide-ranging disputes with the West over the crisis, led Russia to reevaluate its relationship with China. The rising perception of threat from the West was accompanied in Moscow by a decreasing perception of the threat from China.<sup>3</sup> For Beijing, the Ukraine crisis distracted the Obama government's rebalance policy in Asia, thereby providing China with opportunities to more assertively pursue designs in the region. Notably, the crisis was seen to ease Chinese concerns about US reaction to the next stage of China's expansion in the South China then underway with the start of massive Chinese island building in the disputed Spratly Islands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alexander Gabuev, *Friends with Benefits: Russian-Chinese Relations After the Ukraine Crisis*, Moscow: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Howard French, "China's Dangerous Game," *The Atlantic* November 2014  
<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/11/chinas-dangerous-game/380789/>

Presidents Xi and Putin met on at least twenty separate occasions between 2012 and 2017. These face-to-face meetings included six visits by Xi to Russia and eight visits by Putin to China. The two spent more time together than any other pair of recent world leaders. These interactions culminated in the signing of a joint statement on further deepening the two countries' comprehensive partnership of coordination in July 2017.<sup>5</sup> They witnessed increased military cooperation as well as greater Chinese investment in several major projects, including the Yamal liquefied natural gas project and the Power of Siberia gas pipeline project.<sup>6</sup> Increased China and Russia cooperation also was visible in multilateral venues. The two countries cast four joint vetoes at the UNSC between 2012 and 2017, and analysts highlighted the UN as a major venue of Chinese and Russian political coordination.<sup>7</sup>

2013 marked the start of Xi Jinping's signature Belt and Road Initiative, a massive infrastructure building operation which featured stronger economic, political and other connectivity between China and the Central Asian states in particular. Those states used to be part of the Soviet Union and are viewed by Moscow as part of its bordering sphere of influence. Predictably, Russia's initial reaction to this initiative was that of expected distrust, in view of the risks of expanded Chinese influence undermining Russian prerogatives in its neighborhood. By March of 2015, however, Russia overcame its suspicions, with Presidents Putin and Xi signing a declaration on "cooperation in coordinating the development of [the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union] EEU and the Silk Road Economic Belt." Among the reasons for Russia's eventual acceptance of the BRI was China's implicit affirmation of Russia's status as the dominant power in Central Asia, and Moscow's recognition that it could not make the kinds of investments in Central Asia on the scale that China's plans promised.<sup>8</sup>

In Northeast Asia, China and Russia have worked more closely in recent years in relations with South Korea and North Korea repeatedly seeking to offset US pressures and undermine US influence. They notably adopted a joint position in strong opposition to the US deployment in 2017 of the THAAD anti-ballistic missile system in South Korea and they adopted in 2017 a joint position in favor of step-by-step mutual accommodation leading to North Korean denuclearization favored by Pyongyang and at odds with the much stronger US emphasis on North Korea to denuclearize. Both Russia and China played important roles in easing the strident economic sanctions against North Korea favored by the United States.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "China, Russia to Further Deepen Partnership Amid New International Situation," *China Daily*, July 5, 2017 p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jane Perlez, "China and Russia Reach 30-Year Gas Deal," *New York Times*, May 21, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Alexander Gabuev, "Why Russia and China are strengthening security ties," *Carnegie Moscow Center*, September 24, 2018 <https://carnegie.ru/2018/09/24/why-russia-and-china-are-strengthening-security-ties-pub-77333>

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Scobell, et. al, *At the Dawn of Belt and Road: China in the Developing World*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2018, pp. 259-260.

<sup>9</sup> See among others Artyom Lukin, "A Russian Perspective: Russia's Gambit in the Korean Nuclear Crisis," *The Asan Forum* Vol. 7, No.1 January-February 2019 <http://www.theasanforum.org/a-russian-perspective/> (accessed January 27, 2019)

As in the case of Russian accommodation of Chinese ambitions in Central Asia regarding Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, Russia has willingly accommodated China's recent prominence in dealing with the Korean peninsula. Developments over the past two years have seen China emerge as a critically important player with a major role in all aspects of negotiations involving the crisis caused by North Korea's rapid development and repeated testing of nuclear weapons and related development and testing of ballistic missiles capable of carrying a nuclear warhead as far as the continental United States. By contrast, Russia's role and influence have declined in importance. The failed revival of the six party talks where Russia and Japan played a direct role along with North and South Korea, China and the United States in dealing with the North Korean nuclear weapons crisis, and the current regional dynamic focused on only the four latter powers means that Moscow and Tokyo have been marginalized by recent developments. Such an outcome challenges the Russian government of President Vladimir Putin and its drive to play a prominent role as a leading world power on issues important to Russian interests. Nevertheless, the record shows Russia putting aside such concerns, repeatedly siding with China in playing second fiddle to Beijing in dealing with matters on the Korean peninsula. China, for its part, seems comfortable with close cooperative relations with Russia as it deals with Korean matters. Whatever differences the two may have over Korean issues have been difficult to discern amid their collaboration and cooperation.<sup>10</sup>

Russia also showed accommodation with Chinese interests in the South China Sea. Despite continuing strong Russian political and arms sales relations with Vietnam, which contests Chinese South China Sea claims, Russian forces took part in joint naval exercises in the disputed waters in 2016 targeting the US and its allies and partners. And Moscow strongly backed China in rejecting the 2016 UN Law of the Sea tribunal ruling against China's South China Sea claims that was supported by the United States and Vietnam.<sup>11</sup>

For its part, China reciprocated by accommodating Russian interests even at the risk of other Chinese interests. In particular, China joining Russian forces in exercises in recent years in the Baltic, Mediterranean and Black Seas added support for Russian assertiveness in these areas even though China has strong interests in keeping on good terms with those regional governments unnerved by Moscow's shows of force.<sup>12</sup> And China risked reputational costs when it supported Russia as the Putin government was rebuked in the West during March 2018 for employing a nerve-agent type of chemical weapon in a failed attempt to kill a former Russian spy in England. Against the background of the controversy, the newly appointed Chinese defense minister visiting

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<sup>10</sup> This assessment benefited from Artyom Lukin's judgments on Russia-China-Korean relations in a presentation at an invitation only workshop on China, Russia and the Korean peninsula at the Asan Foundation in Seoul Korea in May 2018 and in his article in a forthcoming NBR Special Report on that subject.

<sup>11</sup> Alexander Korolev, "Russia in the South China Sea," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, February 2018 [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323201523\\_Russia\\_in\\_the\\_South\\_China\\_Sea\\_Balancing\\_and\\_Hedging](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323201523_Russia_in_the_South_China_Sea_Balancing_and_Hedging)

<sup>12</sup> Vasily Kashin, "Why Russian and Chinese Warships Joined Forces in the Baltic Sea this Week," *The Moscow Times* July 28, 2017 <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/07/28/why-russian-and-chinese-warships-met-in-the-baltic-sea-a58525>

Moscow said in early April that he had come “to show Americans the close ties between the armed forces of China and Russia, especially in this situation. We’ve come to support you...”<sup>13</sup>

Meanwhile, security and military strategy documents issued by each side in recent years targeted US unilateral military interventions and economic sanctions as they stressed a special relationship between the two states and outlined areas of expanded cooperation between the forces against such pressures. China’s 2015 Defense White Paper cited Russia first in a listing of military-to-military relations, noting: “China’s armed forces will further their exchanges and cooperation with the Russian military within the framework of the comprehensive strategic partnership of coordination between China and Russia, and foster a comprehensive, diverse and sustainable framework to promote military relations in more fields and at more levels.”<sup>14</sup> Similarly, Russia’s 2015 National Security Strategy highlighted the relationship with China: “The Russian Federation is developing relations of all-embracing partnership and strategic cooperation with the Chinese People’s Republic, regarding them as a key factor of the maintenance of global and regional stability.”<sup>15</sup> After relatively flat arms sales prior to 2014, Russia dramatically increased its arms sales to China after the 2014 sanctions. Russian affairs experts Aleksandr Gabuev and Valiliy Kashin explained “The sale of modern arms to China became part of the strategy to move closer to Beijing in response to the systemic crisis with the West.”<sup>16</sup> Exercise activity also increased considerably during this period, with average number of combined or bilateral exercises now approaching three per year along with a concurrent growth in the size of the individual exercises. Starting with Aerospace Security 2016 in May 2016, Russia and China begun conducting joint missile defense exercises pointing to possible cooperation in the air and missile defense domains.<sup>17</sup> As noted above and reflecting the increasing level of exercise collaboration established during this period, in September 2018, 3200 PLA personnel actively participated for the first time Vostok (“East”) 2018, indicating a new level of trust by the Russian military.

As far as the economic relationship is concerned, according to Alexander Gabuev: “After the Ukraine crisis began, the Russian government immediately started to assess the economic implications. In a series of study sessions [in Moscow]...experts...immediately spotted Russia’s three weakest points: critical dependence on the European energy market, critical dependence on Western capital markets, and critical dependence on

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<sup>13</sup> “Chinese Defense Minister Says China will ‘support’ Russia against America,” *The National Interest* April 4, 2018 <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/the-buzz/chinese-defense-minister-says-china-will-%E2%80%98support%E2%80%99-russia-25216>

<sup>14</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper on China’s Military Strategy, Beijing,” May 2015, Section VI.

<sup>15</sup> National Security Strategy of the Russian Federation, Moscow, December 2015, Section 93.

<sup>16</sup> Aleksandr Gabuev and Vasiliy Kashin. *Vooruzhennaya družba – kak Rossiya i Kitay torguyut oruzhiem* [Friendship in Arms: How Russia and China Trade in Weapons], Moscow Carnegie Center, November 2, 2017. p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> “China and Russia Close Ranks against US Missile-Defense System,” *South China Morning Post*, October 12, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2027171/china-and-russia-close-ranks-against-us-missile-defence> accessed January 27, 2019.

important technologies... They concluded that if the West imposed sanctions, Russia would have no other choice than to be more and more accommodating to China – even if it turned Moscow into the junior partner in the relationship.”<sup>18</sup> In sum, subsequent development have appeared to validate this forecast.

### **Policy Options**

The current outlook is bleak, offering no easy fixes for U.S. policy. Nonetheless, there remain limits on Sino-Russian cooperation. The two governments continue to avoid entering a formal alliance or taking substantial risks in support of one another in areas where their interests do not overlap. Longer-term vulnerabilities include Russia’s dissatisfaction with its increasing junior status relative to China, China’s much stronger interest than Russia in preserving the existing world order, and opposition to Russian and Chinese regional expansion on the part of important lesser powers in Europe and Asia seeking U.S. support.<sup>19</sup>

### ***Policy Recommendations***

- This writer joins many others in recommending a U.S. policy option involving multiyear and wide-ranging domestic and international strengthening—militarily, economically, and diplomatically—to better position the U.S. to deal with the challenges from China and Russia. The United States needs internal strengthening militarily, economically and politically; and it needs to work effectively with allies and partners in the face of a growing axis of authoritarians seen in Beijing and Moscow.
- Though American experts differ on the appropriate amount of strengthening, with some urging sustained U.S. primacy and most others favoring various mixes of strengthening and accommodation requiring compromise of U.S. interests, this writer urges that substantial strengthening is warranted before substantial accommodation.
- In applying the appropriate amount of strengthening and accommodation, some American experts view Russia as the leading danger, warranting U.S. accommodation with China to counter Russia; others seek to work cooperatively with Russia against China, which is seen as a more powerful longer-term threat. In contrast, this writer agrees with those American specialists who view the above maneuvers as less likely to succeed in the face of strongly converging Russian and Chinese interests and identity and a pervasive view in Moscow and Beijing that the US is irresolute and in decline.
- The perception of American weakness joins other circumstances that add to the fluidity of international and domestic circumstances complicating accurate forecasting. Notably, uncertainty prevails as to whether the avowedly

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<sup>18</sup> Alexander Gabuev, “Eurasian Silk Road Union: Toward a Russia-China Consensus?” *The Diplomat*, June 5, 2015.

<sup>19</sup> This section of this testimony assessing recent China-Russian collaboration against the United States is taken from Robert Sutter, “China-Russia Relations: Strategic Implications and US Policy Options,” Seattle WA: National Bureau of Asian Research NBR Special Report #73 September 2018.

unpredictable President Trump will follow his administration's declared national security strategy opposing the adverse and predatory behavior of China and Russia or instead adopt more accommodating approaches in line with his repeated expressions of respect and support for Xi and Putin.

*Play the long game by targeting vulnerabilities in the China-Russia relationship.* The likelihood of quick success through specific moves toward Russia and China appears low. I judge US policymakers should play a long game in seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in Sino-Russian collaboration. As noted above, areas of cooperation that show little susceptibility to being influenced by U.S. policy include arms sales, some aspects of Russian energy exports to China, and some aspects of the U.S.-led international order that Moscow and Beijing seek to change. More promising issues warranting U.S attention and possible exploitation involve the very different standing that Russia and China have with the United States and the asymmetry in their respective worldviews and international ambitions.

For example, because 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 benefits much more from stable relations with the United States and the existing U.S.-led international order. Although its disputes with the United States have been growing in recent years, they have not yet reached a stage of overshadowing Chinese interests in sustaining a good working relationship. Meanwhile, China can be viewed as the greater threat, not only to the United States but also eventually to Russia. Asymmetries in the Sino-Russian relationship make Russia more dependent on China and more distant from re-establishing its great-power status. Against this background, some argue that the United States should seek cooperation with Russia in order to offset the common danger posed by China's rise.

Another promising vulnerability in China-Russia relations involves their respective coercive strategies in pursuit of regional leadership at the expense of neighboring powers. The countries' 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 U.S. alliance structure in Asia, and regional groupings led by ASEAN and other organizations that impinge on Chinese or Russian ambitions. The United States opposes coercive changes to 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 for Asian and European nations affected by Russian and Chinese ambitions. Meanwhile, U.S. contributions to the capabilities and resolve of neighboring states can be justified on their own merits without direct reference to Russia or China. Such steps provide a significant outlet for U.S.-backed strengthening against adverse Chinese and Russian practices that is less directly confrontational than the application of U.S. power against China or Russia.



*Consider Russia and China together as well as separately.* Most recommendations from other authoritative studies of U.S. policy dealing with Russia and China focus on one or the other country but not the two together. The policy recommendations of these studies are useful but I deem it important that they be incorporated with recommendations looking at China and Russia together in order to fully address the implications of their relationship for U.S. interests.

- 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 China-Russia cooperation risks ineffectiveness in the face of the two countries' actions together reinforcing their respective challenges to the United States. It also risks reinforcing the perception that the United States is passive and declining in the face of Sino-Russian advances.
- The different standing that Russia and China have in their 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 United States' overall position. For instance, if President Trump were to make significant compromises with Putin as the United States pursues a trade war of major economic pressure on China, Putin might see these compromises as tactical ploys to increase pressure on China with little lasting benefit for Russian interests.
- Assessing U.S. policy toward both powers facilitates the difficult task of determining with greater accuracy what are the trade-offs for the United States as it seeks an advantage in moving forward with changes in U.S. policy toward one power or the other.

### **Specific Questions and Answers**

1) *What considerations have driven the strengthening of China-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War? What has accelerated China and Russia's alignment in recent years, and how has their relationship evolved under the leadership of Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin?*

Answer. As seen above, the China-Russia relations have become closer and more adverse to US interests because of 1. common objectives and values; 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 powers seen in decline. This writer gives special emphasis to factor # 3 in recent years, seeing Beijing and Moscow working in tandem to challenge US international interests in a wide ranging ways that at least until the advent of the Trump government did not result in effective measures to halt their respective and cooperative advances.

2) *How do Beijing and Moscow seek to challenge or alter the current international order? How does each benefit from the other's cooperation in pursuing these aims?*

Answer. 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, including the Korean peninsula. Russia’s challenges involve military and paramilitary actions in Europe and the Middle East, along with cyber and political warfare undermining elections in the United States and Europe, European unity, and NATO solidarity. China undermines U.S. and allied resolve through covert and overt manipulation and influence operations employing economic incentives and propaganda. Chinese 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 expense of leading U.S. and other international companies. Coercion and intimidation of neighbors backed by an impressive buildup of Chinese military and civilian security forces expands Beijing regional control and influence.

Russia and China work separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in world politics, economy and security. They coordinate their moves and 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. opponents in Iran, Syria and North Korea. The two powers also rely on and 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.

3) *What evidence, if any, exists in terms of coordination between China and Russia in facilitating their respective regional goals (e.g., Russia in its near abroad and China in East Asia)?*

Answer. The discussion above depicts Russia coordinating with and accommodating Chinese interests in Korea, Central Asia and the South China Sea. China for its part avoids challenging Russian leadership in its key areas of concern in Europe, the Middle East and arguably Central Asia. Beijing has also risked China’s longstanding interests in stability in Europe and the Middle East by joining assertive Russian demonstrations of military force along its maritime borders with Europe and the Middle East. It notably stood by Russia when it came under widespread western attack for its egregious violations of international agreements in attempting to assassinate a Russian spy living in England in 2018.

4) *How, if at all, have Beijing and Moscow’s support of rogue or authoritarian regimes (especially Iran, Syria, Venezuela, and North Korea) strengthened their bilateral ties?*

Answer.

Longstanding material and diplomatic (especially in the UNSC) support for these international opponents of the United States have been strengthened with various material

supplies provided despite international sanctions and active international involvement and maneuvers designed to thwart US-led pressures on these opponents.

*5a) How have China and Russia cooperated on the UN Security Council, in UN organizations, and in alternative international bodies and structures (e.g., the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)) in ways counter to the interests of the United States and its allies and partners?*

Answer.

The above discussion shows that increased China and Russia cooperation also has been visible in multilateral venues. The two countries cast four joint vetoes at the UNSC between 2012 and 2017, and analysts highlighted the UN as a major venue of Chinese and Russian political coordination.<sup>20</sup> The SCO and BRICS leadership meetings and other venues feature strong statements against US-fostered military intervention and economic sanctions.

*5b) How have China and Russia coordinated their actions and statements to challenge U.S.-led international norms in cyberspace, space, and other areas of global governance?*

Answer.

China-Russia leadership meetings, deliberations in the United Nations and other venues, and respective authoritative government statements make clear that the two countries are ever more determined to make their world safe for authoritarians led by Beijing and Moscow. Government control of cyberspace and using high technology in pursuit of closer control of populations and domestic order head the list of ways the two powers differ with the United States and its allies and partners. They both seek to counter US military advantages in space, endeavoring to curb American power and thereby facilitate Chinese and Russian expansion at the expense of neighbors and of US interests.

With regard to outer space, the two countries have expanded active cooperation, seeking opportunities to further expand in areas such as technology development and space exploration. China works with Russia to promote norms that would restrict military activities in outer space, even as both countries have been developing and testing anti-satellite weapons. In 2008, Beijing and Moscow proposed the Treaty on Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space and of the Threat or Use of Force Against Outer Space Objects. As they presumably expected, the United States has opposed the proposal, partly because of concerns about verification and because it does not address ground-based weapons like direct ascent anti-satellite missiles. With respect to cyberspace, China and Russia have advocated the formation of a “new cyberspace order” and voiced shared opposition to “actions that infringe upon other countries’ Internet sovereignty.” Internet sovereignty seeks to dictate what rules should be used to govern the management of the Internet and what rights states have to control the content flowing across their country’s networks. The United States believes in open access to information across the Internet, regardless of state boundaries. Meanwhile, as noted above, Russia and China continue

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<sup>20</sup> United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld Library, Veto List, webpage, last updated January 8, 2018

their clandestine cyber attacks against the United States and others seeking respectively to disrupt elections and the overall political order and to gain needed high technology information. Both powers support their partner's denials when they are accused of such illegal behavior.<sup>21</sup>

6) *What are the implications of closer China-Russia political and diplomatic ties for the United States and U.S. allies and partners?*

Answer. In this writer's view, such ties backed by the respective military and economic power of each power, clearly represent the most serious challenge faced by the United States since the end of the Cold War. The Trump administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy accurately depict the very difficult challenges for the United States and its allies and partners.

7) *What are your recommendations for Congressional action related to the topic of your testimony?*

Answer.

Over the past year, Congress has been especially active in the overall hardening of American government policy toward China, arguing in unusually bi-partisan fashion for a whole of government effort to counter the various challenges posed by Xi Jinping's China. This impressive effort has complemented a long standing congressional resolve to counter challenges seen coming from Putin's Russia.

What has been absent from these deliberations is any sort of thorough treatment of how and why China-Russia relations impact American interests and US government policy. As argued above, such deliberation would show the strong need for the United States to strengthen at home and abroad in order to deal effectively with the challenges of these authoritarian powers. This is a daunting task which may explain why the administration rarely discusses this problem. Unfortunately, as shown above, this problem is getting worse. Neglect will not ease it. And above I have attempted to make the case that perceived weakness by the United States and its allies and partners is what Beijing and Moscow discern in the drift in US policy toward the China-Russia relationship.

As seen in congressional leadership in crafting the whole of government response to China's challenges since 2018, tools Congress can use to craft appropriate policy in dealing with China-Russia cooperation adverse to US interests involve oversight hearings and investigations in order to understand the full scope and impact of the problems posed by China-Russia cooperation, speeches to relevant constituencies and letters to the administration urging specific policy changes, and legislation such as that seen in last year's National Defense Authorization Act of 2019 and other binding and non-binding legislation, including appropriations for programs needed to enhance American strengthening.

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<sup>21</sup> Michael Chase et al., "Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic Fault Lines," *National Bureau of Asian Research Special Report 66* (July 2017), p. 7

The China-Russia relationship is not static and the problems and opportunities it poses from the United States can change with changing circumstances. Watchful congressional vigilance seems warranted to create and preserve policy approaches promising positive outcomes for America.