THE POST-POST-COLD WAR ERA

Among its other effects, Vladimir Putin’s second war of aggression against Ukraine is accelerating the division of the world into opposing geopolitical, economic, and ideological blocs. Russia’s unprovoked brutality and disastrous military incompetence have further deepened its isolation from advanced industrial democracies, strengthening the bonds among them while driving Moscow into an ever-deepening dependence on Beijing. The shock of invasion has resulted in an expansion of NATO’s ranks, bolstering its northern flank and galvanizing unprecedented transatlantic security cooperation. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping’s refusal to condemn the actions of his “best and bosom friend,” and the fact that the war began only days after he and Putin proclaimed their “no limits” partnership, has heightened suspicions about Beijing’s intentions in European capitals, fueling demands in some quarters for a thorough reexamination of every aspect of policy toward China.¹ The terrible spectacle of an enormously destructive war in the heart of Europe has also raised the perceived probability of a similar conflict in the Indo-Pacific, highlighting the need for closer strategic cooperation among the United States and its democratic allies in both regions.

At the same time as they intensify divisions between East and West, recent events have raised questions about future patterns of alignment between the North and the Global South. The United States and its allies have cast their support for Ukraine as upholding the
norm of sovereignty and opposing the law of the jungle by defending the weak against the depredations of the strong. Yet many governments in the developing world clearly do not view the conflict in the same light and, in any event, have been reluctant to join the West in denouncing Russian aggression. This has led some observers to predict the emergence of a new nonaligned movement, while others warn that Moscow and Beijing have stolen a march on the advanced democracies, outflanking them by winning support across the non-Western world.

In its recently released National Security Strategy, the Biden administration declared that “the post-Cold War Era is definitively over.” While its precise features remain to be determined, this new “post-post-Cold War” epoch already bears a striking resemblance to the early years of the superpower rivalry that followed the end of World War II. Now, as then, a pair of continental authoritarian giants are facing off against a coalition made up largely of democracies arrayed around the periphery of Eurasia and backed from across the oceans by the United States. And, as was true in the second half of the twentieth century, the two blocs have begun to compete for followers, access, and influence in the developing world.

AN “AXIS OF AUTHORITARIANS”

Despite three decades of steadily tightening ties, skeptics continue to question the depth and durability of the connections between Moscow and Beijing. Since the start of Russia’s renewed war in Ukraine, some have suggested that the Sino-Russian partnership might be approaching a “turning point,” with Xi looking to distance himself from Putin’s misadventures and perhaps even open to the possibility of “recalibrating” relations with Russia. As has happened repeatedly in the past, however, such predictions are likely to be disproven by events. Indeed, as David Shullman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor have argued, it now seems clear that, instead of driving them apart, the war in Ukraine will end up drawing Russia and China even closer together.

The notion that the links between the two Eurasian giants comprise a fragile “axis of convenience,” and that theirs is nothing more than “a classic great power relationship driven by common interests rather than shared values,” is misleading on several counts. Throughout history, most geopolitical partnerships have in fact been built largely if not entirely on shared interests; what matters is how strong and enduring this commonality proves to be. In the case of Russia and China, the alignment of material interests has only grown stronger with the passage of time.

Since early in the post-Cold War period, both Moscow and Beijing have believed that they face a common geopolitical foe: an arrogant and overbearing American hegemon which, together with its regional allies, is determined to block their revisionist territorial ambitions and deny them a sphere of influence commensurate with their power. Over the course of the past decade, as they have sought more openly to push back against what they regard as U.S.-led containment, Xi and Putin have helped to create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Even before the latest crisis, China’s increasingly forceful attempts to assert its maritime claims, and Russia’s aggression against Georgia and then Ukraine, were beginning to galvanize precisely the sort of collective opposition that both Moscow and Beijing have long said they fear. Recent events will only serve to accelerate this cycle, stiffening democratic resistance, thereby further heightening the authoritarians’ perceptions of threat and tightening ties between them.

In addition to shared strategic concerns, Russia and China have also been drawn together by the needs of their respective economies. China’s rapid development has given it an enormous appetite for minerals, cereals, and energy resources, all of which Russia has supplied in increasing quantities since the end of the Cold War. Especially since its first invasion of Ukraine, in 2014, the imposition and strengthening of sanctions has caused Russia to turn increasingly to China as an alternative to Western markets, capital, and technology.

Although the interests they share are strong, it would be a mistake to understate the commonality of values and outlook that also binds the authoritarian powers together. During the Cold War, the People’s Republic and the Soviet Union ostensibly shared a commitment to Marxism-Leninism, but they soon fell out over how to interpret and apply that supposedly scientific and infallible doctrine. Russia and China may not be united today by a common ideology, but neither are
they divided by one; instead, they share an intense animosity to the ideals and governing principles being propounded by liberal democracies. What Beijing refers to as the West’s “so-called universal values”–including an insistence on the sanctity of the individual, the defense of personal freedoms, the right to self-government, and the rule of law–are inimical to the precepts on which both the Russian and Chinese regimes are founded.

To counter this threat to their legitimacy, both Moscow and Beijing have crafted alternative ideational programs that contain varying blends of authoritarianism, statism, and nationalism as well as appeals to history, “traditional values,” and cultural conservatism. These programs are not identical, but they are clearly compatible and, in any event, are far more similar to one another than either is to liberalism. Like Hitler and Mussolini, Xi and Putin represent different species of the same anti-democratic, illiberal genus. The fact that the United States is now casting its opposition to them in ideological terms, as part of a global struggle between democracy and authoritarianism, will only confirm what they already believed to be true.

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For most of the post-Cold War era, the authoritarian great powers have been following very different trajectories, with China gaining rapidly in wealth and power and Russia experiencing a sustained and painful decline. To the surprise of many observers, this reversal of fortunes has not given rise to ever-growing friction over tangible issues or even to much open resentment in Russia about its comparative loss of status. For the most part, Moscow and Beijing have found ways to work together rather than at cross purposes, dividing the labor where their activities overlap or simply staying out of one another’s way. Chinese policymakers have generally taken care to avoid behaving in a humiliating or high-handed fashion, while their Russian counterparts have had little choice but to accept their own diminished position. Moscow’s increasing isolation after the imposition of harsh sanctions in 2014, and the devastating additional blow that has now been inflicted to its power and prestige, will hasten its relative decline, further narrowing its freedom of maneuver, diminishing its leverage, and compelling it to follow Beijing’s lead even more closely than before.

One further source of skepticism about Sino-Russian cohesion is the belief that, because of their divergent paths, the two authoritarian powers must have very different time horizons and strategic objectives. In this view, Russia is a weak and fading “disruptive power” whose only option for preserving its position is to undermine others by promoting instability. On the other hand, confidence in its own rise supposedly allows China to take a more relaxed and incremental approach, advancing patiently toward global leadership while remaining within the confines of the existing international system.

Hal Brands and Michael Beckley have recently argued to the contrary that, as growth slows and external resistance mounts, Beijing’s assessments of its own prospects will become more pessimistic and its behavior more belligerent. If this happens, the democracies could find themselves confronted by two highly aggressive authoritarian enemies at once, each willing to take major risks to achieve its aims and perhaps coordinating their actions at opposite ends of the Eurasian landmass. At least for the moment, however, there is no indication that Xi Jinping has lost faith in the ultimate triumph of the nation and the system that he leads, or that he is anywhere close to contemplating a desperate gamble to stave off terminal decline. In fact, Beijing may now believe that Russian belligerence can help it to execute its comparatively cautious strategy for gaining regional preponderance by deflecting some of the resources and attention of the United States and its allies away from Asia to Europe. This is what occurred in 2014, when the first Ukraine war helped to derail the Obama administration’s proposed “pivot” to Asia. Depending
on how events play out, something similar could happen again today.

Assuming that it does not suffer political collapse and regime change, an authoritarian Russia will emerge from the current conflict even weaker, more alone, and more deeply dependent on China than it was when the war began. Alexander Gabuev has even gone so far as to claim that Moscow is being transformed into “China’s new vassal.” In certain respects, the shifts will be in matters of degree rather than in kind. Cut off from other markets, Russia will have to sell yet more natural resources at still lower prices to China, often accepting renminbi in payment and using them to buy more Chinese consumer products, machine tools, semiconductors, and other manufactured goods of the sort that can no longer be obtained from Europe. Moscow’s isolation will also compel it to become an even more avid and dependable supporter of Beijing’s positions in international institutions and to accept a further expansion in China’s presence and influence in Central Asia relative to its own.

As a result of the war, Russia may also have to accede to demands that will have implications for the balance of military power in the Indo-Pacific, including agreeing to sell or transfer even its most advanced weapons systems to China, and perhaps cutting back arms sales to two of China’s nonaligned regional enemies, India and Vietnam. Although any understandings would likely be tacit rather than explicit, Beijing may also make clear that, in return for its continuing support, it expects Moscow to take diversionary action in Europe should it ever decide to move against Taiwan.

Thanks to his bungled war of aggression, Putin has no choice but to cling as tightly as possible to his partner and patron. Xi surely has greater freedom of maneuver, but given his dark assessment of Western intentions, his options with respect to Russia are also quite limited. As Shullman and Kendall-Taylor explain, Xi cannot permit Putin to be isolated, defeated, and humiliated by a U.S.-led coalition to the point where the Russian leader might actually be overthrown. In addition to setting a very dangerous precedent, such an outcome would effectively remove Moscow as a useful counterweight to the menacing collective power of the United States and its allies. Should they succeed in neutralizing Russia, the democracies would then be free to turn their full attention to encircling and containing China. Xi’s oft-expressed desire to reduce the efficacy of Western economic pressure, and his evident conviction that the risks of confrontation and war are rising, makes it even more important to secure China’s rear areas. Expanded overland flows of oil, gas, and grain can help it to hedge against the possibility of a U.S. naval blockade. Seen in this light, more cheap and reliably accessible Russian resources are not merely a bargain but a crucial lifeline. Russia’s dismal prospects may mean that, in the long run, China will find itself “shackled to a corpse.” Even in the relatively near term, a shattered and defeated nation that still rejects the West and seeks Beijing’s protection could become a major liability. For the time being, however, Russia remains an indispensable partner. Beijing has expressed mild disapproval at Putin’s egregious conduct, and it has taken care thus far to avoid crossing lines that might trigger secondary sanctions from the United States and European Union. But Xi has also continued to provide diplomatic cover and economic support to help keep Russia (and Putin) afloat. A decision to go further, openly supplying Moscow with weapons and other military systems, would mark a major departure that could trigger an escalating cycle of sanctions and counter-sanctions between China and the West. Because of the likely costs and risks, Xi will probably take such a step only if he fears that Russia is on the verge of outright defeat.

From Xi’s perspective, the ideal outcome would be a return to some version of the status quo ante: a frozen conflict in which fundamental issues remain unresolved and the combatants are still at swords’ point, only now with greatly heightened animosity, tension, and the lingering threat of direct conflict between Russia and the West. Such a situation would give Russia the chance to begin to rebuild its strength, drawing it deeper into China’s embrace while at the same time continuing to distract the United States from the Indo-Pacific. If it can present itself plausibly as a peacemaker and honest broker, Beijing may even be able to regain some of its lost leverage in European capitals, perhaps enabling it to get back to the business of driving wedges between Washington and its Atlantic allies.
A COALITION OF DEMOCRACIES
As was true during much of the Cold War, the world’s major democracies can be thought of as comprising a triangle. The United States stands at the apex, embedded in a multilateral alliance system with Europe and linked by a network of bilateral commitments to its various partners in Asia. While they are not joined together by a trans-regional mutual defense pact, European and Asian democracies nevertheless engage in various forms of intelligence sharing, joint technology development, and strategic dialogue. Thanks in part to recent events, the three vertices of this triangle have all grown stronger and more cohesive. Albeit to varying degrees, so too have the ties between each of them. Beyond the purely military realm, Europe, Asia, and the United States have also begun to move closer in their economic policies toward Russia and China and in their emphasis on the shared values that unite them and separate them from their authoritarian rivals. Whether these trends will prove enduring, resulting in a fully reconstituted, global “free world” coalition, remains to be seen.

THE UNITED STATES AND ASIA
Well before the current crisis, China’s increasing strength and its growing belligerence had begun to produce a stepped-up counterbalancing response on the part of its wealthiest and most capable neighbors. Albeit belatedly, Japan, Australia, South Korea, Taiwan, and India have all undertaken major increases in defense spending in the past half-decade. Concerns over China’s growing capabilities and opaque intentions have also led to intensified consultation and cooperation, both bilaterally with the United States and in various multilateral groupings, outside the context of formal alliance commitments. First launched in 2007 and revitalized in 2017, the Quad has become a regular mechanism for promoting closer and more regular strategic coordination among Japan, Australia, the United States, and India. Starting in 2021, the United States and the United Kingdom announced their intention to cooperate to help Australia build a nuclear-powered submarine as well as to work together to develop artificial intelligence, quantum computing, hypersonic weapons, and autonomous undersea vehicles. After years of recrimination and tension, Japan and South Korea have also taken steps to normalize their relations with one another and, together with the United States, to resume regular trilateral strategic dialogue and expand military cooperation.

Despite the fact that they involve different actors and are taking place half a world away, events in Ukraine have given an additional impetus to all these efforts. Whether or not there has truly been an increase in the probability of war, the shocking reality of a major conflagration in the heart of Europe has increased the perceived likelihood of similar events occurring in the Indo-Pacific. Putin’s unexpected, self-destructive, and arguably irrational decision to use force to absorb another polity has highlighted the danger that autocracies led by unchecked dictators may be prone to disastrous mistakes. China’s refusal to join the democracies in denouncing Russian aggression has also fueled more specific concerns about its own intentions and ambitions. Perceptions and possible parallels aside, in the past year Beijing has further intensified its ongoing campaign of pressure against Taipei, including an August 2022 military exercise of unprecedented scope in the water and airspace around the island. At the same time, the demonstrated effectiveness of precision munitions, information operations, and flexible small-unit tactics has bolstered the belief that, if the right preparations have been made in advance, even less numerous and seemingly weaker forces can hold off attacks by a heavily armed opponent. The conflict in Ukraine has thus led both to a heightened sense of threat and to renewed hope that, with sufficient effort, a war in the Indo-Pacific can be deterred and, if necessary, won.

While the need is now clear and widely acknowledged, the ability of the United States to lead its Asian allies in a major, sustained peacetime military buildup could still face significant fiscal constraints. Before the war broke out, some strategists were arguing that the United States should shift the great bulk of its military resources to Asia, leaving its prosperous European allies to finally take on full responsibility for their own defense. This now appears implausible. Barring a regime change in Moscow or the total collapse of Russian power, the U.S. Department of Defense will likely have to allocate more resources to the European theater than it had intended only a few years ago. Over the long term, this will require either a reduction in spending planned for Asia or a
permanent increase in the overall size of the defense budget. With outlays still running well below Cold War levels as a share of GDP, the latter option is economically feasible, but it could prove politically difficult in the face of mounting congressional pressure for major cuts in federal spending.

THE UNITED STATES AND EUROPE

Compared to Asia, where security concerns were already growing, the war in Ukraine has had an especially dramatic impact on key countries in Europe and on the prospects for transatlantic defense cooperation. After decades of legal neutrality, Russian bellicosity and heightened concerns for their own security have forced both Sweden and Finland to come down from the fence and seek formal affiliation with other European democracies. The two Nordic nations have significant military and defense industrial capabilities, making them especially strong and capable allies. Their geographical location near key waterways and chokepoints and adjacent to Russian territory would strengthen NATO’s ability to defend itself and, if necessary, to conduct powerful counter-offensives against an invader from the east.

In order to wage an effective proxy war against Russia, the United States and its European allies have been compelled to engage in unprecedented levels of consultation and policy coordination. While the United States is far and away the biggest contributor, other NATO members, including Germany, the United Kingdom, Poland, and Canada have also agreed to transfer significant quantities of arms and ammunition to Ukraine, including artillery, anti-tank missiles, and air defense weapons. Beyond the current conflict, recent events have breathed new life into transatlantic planning mechanisms, resulting in what one NATO publication describes as “the biggest overhaul of Allied defence and deterrence since the Cold War.”

The shock of war has also induced many European countries to commit to major long-term increases in defense spending, potentially alleviating a perennial source of friction with the United States. According to one set of estimates, whereas NATO spending was on track to grow by 14 percent between 2021 and 2026, it is now likely to increase between 53 percent and 65 percent during the same period. One of the major contributors to this buildup will be Germany, which has long failed to meet the official NATO target of devoting 2 percent of its GDP to defense despite having Europe’s largest economy. In the immediate aftermath of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, German chancellor Olaf Scholz declared that the world had arrived at an historic turning point, or Zeitewende. To meet the needs of this new age, Scholz pledged that Germany would finally fulfill its obligations, starting with an increase in defense spending of €100 billion, or roughly $106 billion at current exchange rates.

Since the end of the Cold War, some European governments have flirted with the idea of achieving true “strategic autonomy,” building up the European Union’s defenses and its capacity for independent action while reducing dependence on NATO and the United States. This idea seems now to have been abandoned or at least deferred into the indefinite future. In the face of imminent danger from Russia and perhaps, in the longer term, a growing threat from China, there is growing recognition that Europe cannot simply fend for itself but must continue to cleave closely to its American ally. In the words of a recent joint EU-NATO statement, the war in Ukraine demonstrates “more than ever” the “importance of the transatlantic bond.” Enhanced European capabilities are desirable, but their purpose must be to strengthen NATO, which, the EU-NATO statement emphasizes, “remains the foundation of collective defence for its allies and essential for Euro Atlantic security.”

Along with all of these signs of growing vigor and cohesion, there are some indications of possible contradictory developments. One year after declaring its intention to make an historic turn, the Scholz government has acknowledged that it will take several more years to reach the goal of spending 2 percent of GDP on defense. If Berlin lags behind, other European governments could revert to a similarly lax attitude about contributing more to the common defense. Proclamations of unity notwithstanding, the war has revealed significant differences in outlook among Europe’s democracies and, in particular, a division between several of the older, more established nations of the West and the newer members of the liberal order to
the east. Bonn and Paris want to see Putin’s aggression fail, but they also hope that Russia can somehow be reengaged economically and that adroit diplomacy can bring it back into what Chancellor Scholz has described as the “peace order” that supposedly existed in the past. By contrast, former members of the old Soviet empire harbor deep and enduring suspicions about Moscow’s intentions and are determined to see it decisively defeated and isolated from the rest of the continent, at least for as long as Putin remains in power. The United States is clearly closer to “new Europe” in this regard, setting the stage for possible future disagreements with Germany and France. Thus, while they appear sturdy at the moment, transatlantic ties may yet be tested by the mounting costs of a protracted conflict or by renewed fears of nuclear escalation.

Finally, despite its recent role in leading opposition to Russian aggression and pressing for closer transatlantic cooperation, there is uncertainty about the permanence of the United States’ commitment to Europe. Some Republicans have sought to revive an “Asia First” strategy along the lines that the party favored in the early years of the Cold War. Alongside a desire to limit defense spending and a belief that China poses the greatest threat to U.S. security, there is an underlying suspicion and resentment of Europe in the minds of some Republicans. Especially in the party’s right wing, there is a belief that many Europeans are “woke,” environment-obsessed, anti-religious, left-leaning free riders whose values and interests have come to diverge significantly from those of the United States.

During the Trump era, some Republicans showed a surprising affinity for an authoritarian, illiberal Russian regime that was the obverse of their contempt for “soft” Western liberal democracies. This sentiment may fade as more familiar attitudes on the right reassert themselves. For now, there is a clear division between those who favor cutting aid to Ukraine and pulling back from Europe and those who support the dominant Cold War-era Republican position of backing fellow democracies against authoritarian aggression.

**EUROPE AND ASIA**

As was true during the Cold War, the links between Europe and Asia remain the least developed leg of the democratic strategic triangle. This comes as no surprise. Even the most capable countries in both regions have limited capacity to project military power in sizable increments to the other side of the globe. Recent events have also driven home the fact that the greatest threat in each theater derives from the closer of the two authoritarian powers. Nevertheless, despite these enduring realities, there is a growing sense that the democracies of the Eurasian rimlands face a common danger emanating from the core of the heartland and that they must work together in order to meet it.

Some of the signs of this broadening of strategic horizons are significant despite being largely symbolic. In 2022, the NATO summit in Madrid was attended for the first time by observers from the United States’ most important Asian allies: Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia. With their visitors looking on, NATO members approved a new strategic concept that identified China explicitly as a “systemic challenge” and called for closer political consultation with like-minded Asian nations and “expanded cooperation” on a range of issues, including cyber threats and maritime security.

With the exception of India and Indonesia, the major democratic powers in Asia have joined in imposing punishing economic sanctions on Russia. Meanwhile, for their part, European officials have expressed growing concern about the threat China presents to freedom of navigation throughout the Indo-Pacific and, more specifically, to the security of Taiwan. Although there is not yet a formal policy regarding the possible imposition of European sanctions in response to Chinese aggression, some commentators have expressed the view that such a step would be appropriate and, indeed, inevitable. According to the newly appointed EU ambassador to Beijing: “In the event of a military invasion [of Taiwan] we have made it very clear that the EU, with the U.S. and its allies, will impose similar or even greater measures than those we have now taken against Russia.”

Somewhat more concretely, a number of European and Asian states have recently entered into strategic cooperation agreements with varying configurations and covering everything from consultation and information exchanges to joint exercises and future technology development. Over the course of the past year, South Korea and the United Kingdom, Japan and France, Japan
and Italy, and Japan and Germany have all pledged to
tighten bilateral defense ties, while Japan, Italy, and the
United Kingdom have agreed to work together to develop
a next-generation fighter aircraft.  

The Asian democracies have proven that they are willing
to provide diplomatic and economic support to their
European partners, at least in circumstances where
none of them has been directly attacked and where the
costs and risks of imposing sanctions and embargos are
relatively low. What remains less certain is the extent of
Europe’s commitment to Asia under similar conditions.
China obviously has far greater economic clout than
Russia and could threaten to impose more severe
punishment on any outsiders who dared to intercede in a
confrontation between Beijing and Taiwan, for example.
In such circumstances, Beijing would also seek to muddy
the waters, blaming Taipei (and perhaps Washington) for
initiating the crisis and trying to persuade key European
countries to stand aloof from what Neville Chamberlain
once memorably described as a distant quarrel “between
people of whom we know nothing.”

THE UNITED STATES, ASIA, AND EUROPE

Outside the realm of military cooperation, the
democracies of Europe, Asia, and North America have
begun to converge in their views of the values gap
that separates them from Russia and China and, albeit
tentatively, in their economic policies for dealing with
those powers.

The United States’ allies have often been critical in
the past of what they regard as its overly ideological,
moralistic approach to foreign policy and its supposed
proclivity for dividing the world simplistically into
“good guys” and “bad guys.” In recent years, however,
policymakers in both Europe and Asia have also begun to
attribute the aggressive behavior of the authoritarian great
powers to the repressive nature of their domestic regimes.
Without necessarily calling them out by name, Asian
leaders (including South Korea’s newly elected president)
now frequently echo American rhetoric, warning that
Russia and China together pose a threat to the universal
values that unite democracies.  

Japan’s minister for trade
and industry has likewise cautioned that “authoritarian
countries have amassed tremendous power, both
economically and militarily” and are using it to threaten
“a world order based on fundamental values of freedom,
democracy, human rights, and the rule of law.” A recent
statement on EU-NATO cooperation identifies the two
main culprits before stating bluntly that “authoritarian
actors challenge our interests, values and democratic
principles using multiple means—political, economic,
technological and military.” In sum, democratic leaders
now agree that they face rivals whose animosity and
aggression are rooted in illiberal ideologies.

The war in Ukraine has driven home the dangers of
economic dependence on potentially hostile regimes.
After decades of debate, a new consensus has emerged
among Europe’s democracies in favor of diversifying
energy supplies away from Russia and drastically
reducing imports of its oil and natural gas. The current
crisis has also helped fuel doubts about the wisdom
of relying on China for a wide range of manufactured
goods, chemicals, and natural resources. This issue
began to get greater attention during the Covid-19
pandemic, which highlighted the dependence of
advanced democracies on Chinese manufacturers of
personal protective equipment as well as the chemical
precursors used in many medications.

Worsening relations and the growing danger of future
trade disruptions have helped broaden the list of
concerns to include everything from semiconductors
to the rare-earth minerals used in magnets, batteries,
and video displays. In response, the United States and
some of its major trading partners have begun to boost
subsidies for domestic producers of critical items and
contemplate the potential virtues of “friend-shoring”—
using tariffs to discourage imports of certain goods from
China while encouraging them from countries that are
friendly, close by, and preferably both. The process of
building out networks of trusted suppliers is still in its
early stages.

Even as they reduce their dependence on critical
imports from the authoritarian powers, the United
States and some of its allies have begun to constrict
those countries’ access to cutting-edge technologies
that could boost their economies and empower their
militaries. With Russia already largely isolated, China
is the primary focus of these efforts. Over the last five
years, the United States, Japan, and the European
Union have all imposed new regulations which, to
varying degrees, enhance the ability of government agencies to review and potentially block the purchase of domestic firms by foreign companies.

The United States has taken the lead in imposing new export controls designed to prevent the sale of select, cutting-edge technologies, or the transfer of relevant knowledge, to China. In the recent case of high-end semiconductor manufacturing equipment, Washington has also exerted considerable diplomatic pressure to obtain compliance from allies with capabilities comparable to its own. Beyond individual cases, U.S. officials are working with European and Asian allies to craft common approaches to preserving remaining advantages over their authoritarian rivals.

How far the United States and its allies will ultimately be willing to go in insulating themselves from China, and the extent to which they can harmonize their trade and technology policies toward it, remains to be determined, despite the European Union formally identifying China as a “systemic rival.” Germany, France, and the European Union as a whole have been reluctant to upend relations with a country that they still regard as an indispensable future trading partner. Some Europeans are also wary of what they regard as a self-interested, nationalistic turn in U.S. economic policy, and they fear that, if they follow too closely in Washington’s footsteps, they could be drawn into an avoidable conflict with China. To forestall, or at least to slow such coordination, Beijing has targeted a new “charm offensive” on Europe, which it sees as the weakest link in a tightening democratic chain.

THE STRUGGLE FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Even as it solidifies opposing liberal and authoritarian blocs in the Northern Hemisphere, the war in Ukraine has ushered in a new era of intensifying competition between them for influence in the Global South. As in other domains, the United States and China will drive this aspect of the democratic-authoritarian rivalry, with the advanced democracies of Europe and Asia, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, playing supporting roles.

Throughout the Cold War, Russia was actively engaged in the developing world, where it worked to spread communism and outflank the West by backing left-wing governments, cultivating allies, and acquiring military outposts. All of this eventually came to naught with the final demise of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia’s new leaders had no interest in promoting an ideology in which they themselves no longer believed, and they lacked the means to provide economic assistance to countries whose impoverishment in some cases only marginally exceeded their own. Arms sales became the primary tool for exerting influence, especially in dealing with countries whose militaries continued to rely on Russian-made equipment.

As relations with the West have worsened over the last two decades, Moscow has intensified and diversified its engagement, including through the provision of mercenaries to train local forces and enhance regime security. Starting in 2015, Russia once again became directly involved in the Middle East, sending forces to help prop up the Syrian government. Following Beijing’s lead, Moscow also began to use propaganda and disinformation to attack Western arrogance and interventionism and associate itself more closely with the outlook and interests of the world’s poorest countries.

Given Moscow’s heavy reliance on arms sales and security assistance, the war in Ukraine will likely constrict its ability to exert influence in the developing world. The drawdown of its own stockpiles, the strains on its defense industrial base, and the poor performance of some of its weapon systems will make it more difficult for Russia to hold its place as an arms supplier. Massive casualties could also mean that fewer men will be available to serve as mercenaries and trainers or be involved in overseas military adventures. Russia will remain a major arms seller, but its incompetence, its failures on the battlefield, and its sheer brutality will diminish its reputation for martial skill and its desirability as a role model for aspiring regional powers.

As is true for Russia, China’s interest in the Global South has fluctuated with the passage of time. Throughout the 1950s and into the early 1970s, Mao regarded what he labeled the “third world” as central to his dreams of leading a global revolution and his hopes of pushing back against Western, and later Soviet, “imperialism.” With Mao’s death and the start of “reform and opening up” under Deng Xiaoping, Beijing lost interest in promoting the spread of communism and focused instead on building strong trading ties with advanced
industrial nations. In the 1990s and early 2000s, as their economy boomed, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) planners began once again to pay more attention to the developing world, this time viewing it primarily in economic terms as a source of raw materials, another market for inexpensive manufactured products, and a potential destination for China’s growing supply of investment capital.

In the past decade, Chinese strategists have come to take a much broader view of the potential importance of the Global South. Indeed, to an extent that has not been fully appreciated, they now see it as central to their plans for pushing back against U.S. and Western hegemony and catapulting their own country into a position of global leadership. This assessment reflects a mix of economic, diplomatic, ideological, and military considerations. As most of the advanced industrial democracies experience population decline and slower economic growth, and as China’s relations with them worsen, Beijing will need to find new outlets for the products of its vast manufacturing base. The countries of the Global South are still far too poor to take the place of the less populous but far richer nations of the Global North. Nevertheless, with their expanding populations and rising incomes, Africa and South Asia could someday become important new sources of demand for China’s exports and drivers of its continuing economic vitality. This is evidently part of what Xi Jinping has in mind when he declares that China must move toward a “dual circulation” growth model, one that relies less on exports to the advanced industrial nations and more on domestic demand and the markets of the developing world.

Preferred access to fast-expanding pools of demand for products such as cell phones and IT network switching equipment can also help Chinese companies achieve economies of scale, enabling them to undercut their Western competitors and putting them in position to dominate global markets and set industrial standards that will lock in their advantages. A dwindling working-age population is already causing wages to rise and eroding China’s long-standing advantages as a low-cost manufacturing hub. One way of dealing with this could be for Chinese companies to build new productive capacity in poorer, populous countries. As they look to the next stage in their own development, CCP planners evidently hope that the nations of the Global South will play the same role for them as China once did for the advanced industrial West.

Economics aside, Beijing clearly sees the developing world as a source of backing in its diplomatic disputes and escalating “discursive struggle” with the West. For example, when faced with recent criticism for mistreating its Uyghur Muslim minority, the CCP regime quickly obtained countervailing statements of support from a collection of developing nations. Beijing has also taken advantage of the fact that, for the most part, the United Nations operates on the principle of one nation, one vote. In recent years, it has used financial inducements to line up backing from poorer countries for its preferred candidates for jobs in various international agencies and its own distinctive interpretation of concepts such as human rights and internet freedom.

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Whereas they once focused almost exclusively on their immediate neighborhood and, in particular, on the waters off their eastern seaboard, China’s planners now see virtually the entire Global South as a domain of strategic rivalry with the West and as a potential theater for future military operations. Xi Jinping’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is clearly motivated in part by the desire to build more secure transport links between China and its suppliers of energy, food, and raw materials. Shipments by road and rail along the BRI’s overland axes cannot compete on price with maritime bulk transport, but in the event of a major conflict, they could help minimize the effects of a naval blockade and permit sufficient imports to keep China’s war economy running. New ports, canals, and pipelines in South and Southeast Asia could enable China’s maritime fleet to bypass key chokepoints, reducing its vulnerability to interdiction.
Having abandoned its previous objections to overseas bases, Beijing now appears intent on building a network of facilities that could extend from the Horn of Africa south and east around the rim of the Indian Ocean, west and north along the Atlantic coast of Africa, and perhaps across the Atlantic into the Western Hemisphere. Attacks launched from some of these locations could close vital waterways such as the Suez or Panama Canals at the outset of a future war, slowing the movement of U.S. forces from its east coast to the Indo-Pacific theater.

Beijing has thus far been careful not to trigger Washington’s historically rooted reflexes by venturing too far into what the Americans still regard as their own backyard. Despite this lingering caution, China could take the further step of raising the profile of its involvement in the Western Hemisphere as the Sino-American rivalry intensifies, perhaps gaining access to ports and airfields within range of the California coastline, the Caribbean, and the Panama Canal. By pressing in closer to its most powerful rival, Beijing may hope to flip the field, forcing the United States to pull back from the Indo-Pacific and compelling it to focus more on defending its own “near abroad” rather than on trying to contain China. Harkening back to one of Mao’s favorite stratagems, Xi and his underlings may hope that they too can “surround the city from the countryside,” using positions of strength in the less-developed world to escape encirclement and launch a campaign of counter-encirclement against their richer and still more capable opponents.

For the past 75 years, the intensity of the United States’ engagement with most parts of the developing world has fluctuated depending on the perceived presence of an urgent geopolitical or ideological threat. For the first three decades of the Cold War, the United States devoted increasing resources to stemming communist subversion in Latin America and across the newly liberated former colonies in Africa and Southeast Asia. U.S. interest and involvement peaked during the Vietnam War, dwindled with the collapse of the Soviet Union, then grew again after 9/11 and the onset of the so-called global war on terror.

The United States is now in the early days of a new cycle of strategically motivated engagement in the Global South. Despite a strong desire among both Republicans and Democrats to pull back from quagmires and “forever wars,” U.S. policymakers find themselves forced to wrestle with the question of how best to counter growing Chinese and, to a lesser extent, Russian presence and influence in parts of the developing world. The urgency and complexity of this task have been highlighted by the reluctance of many poorer countries to join the advanced industrial democracies in denouncing Russia’s aggression, or criticizing Beijing’s tacit support for it.

Some observers have interpreted these developments as heralding the emergence of a new nonaligned movement, along the lines that many advocated during the Cold War. There is, however, very little reason to think that a cohesive, powerful southern bloc is any more plausible today than it was 50 years ago. The nations of the Global South do not share a common ideology, and they have a wide variety of domestic institutions and enjoy disparate levels of political freedom and economic development. Some lean toward democratic Western powers, others toward authoritarian Eastern ones. And while many poorer countries may hope to play one side against the other in order to extract benefits for themselves from both, they show no signs of pursuing a coherent, collective strategy designed to benefit them all.

For much of the past two decades China was able to steal a march on its rivals, taking advantage of their preoccupation with other problems to enhance its presence and extend its influence across wide swaths of the developing world. Starting with the announcement of the BRI in 2013, U.S. and allied observers began to pay more attention to China’s economic, diplomatic, and military activities in the developing world, but they were slow to develop a clear view of how these disparate pieces fit together or what their larger purpose might be. While differences remain, there is increasing recognition among advanced democracies that Beijing’s actions are neither benign nor purely commercial in intent and that they must be countered and offset. Separately and together, the United States and its allies have initiated programs to provide transparent, low-cost alternatives to Chinese funding to developing countries seeking to upgrade their transportation, communication, and power-generating infrastructure. Beyond these specific sectors, the U.S. government is in the process of revamping its entire approach to development.
assistance so that it can compete more effectively against China. At the United Nations, Washington has also taken a particular interest in countering CCP influence operations in key developing countries and across entire regions, especially Africa. Meanwhile, the Department of Defense and the U.S. intelligence community are watching closely for signs that Beijing is trying to acquire more overseas bases and considering ways to block and, if necessary, respond to such developments.

Even as the United States and its allies are beginning to focus more of their attention on China’s activities in the developing world, recent events have elevated its importance to Beijing. The downward spiral in relations with the United States and the wider West seems, if anything, to be sharpening Beijing’s southward focus, encouraging it to launch new and as yet ill-defined global security and development initiatives. The prospect of stricter limitations on China’s access to the markets of advanced industrial democracies has added urgency to the search for alternative outlets for exports and investment. The increasingly open “systemic rivalry” with the West has encouraged Beijing to become more vocal and explicit in proclaiming that it has a superior alternative to liberal democracy. And the growing plausibility of a future military conflict seems certain to accelerate China’s efforts to acquire overseas bases and access agreements. All of this, in turn, will heighten the anxieties and spur the counter-reactions of democracies. The contest for influence in the Global South has now been fully joined.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The assessment offered here has three broad implications for U.S. strategy.

First, at least for the moment, there is virtually no chance of driving a wedge between Moscow and Beijing. The United States and its allies would be better advised to take the opposite tack, highlighting Beijing’s complicity in Moscow’s barbarism, emphasizing the commonalities in worldview and interests that bind the two authoritarian powers, and making clear the threat that they pose to the liberal democracies and to any smaller and weaker states, regardless of regime type, that happen to run afoul of them. The democracies must also continue to monitor closely the evolving channels through which Beijing may seek to provide aid and comfort to Moscow. And they must be prepared to impose substantial, escalating costs if China begins to do more than it is already doing to keep Russia afloat.

Second, with respect to its major allies in Europe and Asia, the object of U.S. strategy must be to draw these countries together as closely as possible so that they begin to resemble a true, global “free world” alliance. In addition to intelligence sharing, joint military planning, and close diplomatic coordination, the democracies should engage in advanced consultation and serious, detailed preparation for the imposition of harsh collective sanctions on potential aggressors. The threat of sanctions is insufficient in itself to deter a determined predatory state. Still, had Vladimir Putin known in advance the full extent of the economic punishment that would be inflicted on his country, there is at least a chance that he could have been dissuaded from invading Ukraine. As Xi Jinping contemplates the possibility of moving against Taiwan, he should have little doubt about the sweeping trade, travel, and financial restrictions democracies will impose in response, even at substantial cost to themselves.

In the longer run, the United States and its key partners in Europe and Asia should work together to create a more integrated economic subsystem similar in some respects to the one they constructed during the Cold War. The core of such a bloc would be comprised of
a group of like-minded advanced industrial countries willing to lower barriers to flows of goods, capital, information, and people among themselves while imposing some restrictions on their economic interaction with the authoritarian powers, and especially with China. These countries should seek to maintain their existing advantages by slowing or blocking the transfer of cutting-edge technologies while expanding scientific, technical, and industrial collaboration among themselves. The members of this grouping should also limit the danger of espionage or sabotage by collectively prohibiting the use of Chinese-made equipment in critical infrastructure. The advanced democracies must also take steps to reduce their vulnerability to threatened or actual disruptions in supplies of critical materials and manufactured goods by increasing domestic productive capacity and building out networks comprised of trusted, like-minded countries.

The ultimate objective of these measures would not be total decoupling but rather partial disengagement—a greater degree of separation and insulation from authoritarian powers that continue to take advantage of democracies’ openness but whose interests and values are inimical to their own. The United States and some of the other advanced industrial nations have already begun to take steps in this direction in recent years. To date, however, their activities have been only loosely coordinated, leaving many loopholes and potential work-arounds.

Finally, the democracies need to develop a coherent, collective approach to dealing with the Global South, including (but not limited to) a strategy for countering Russian and Chinese influence there. Having sometimes paid insufficient attention in the past, there is a danger that Washington, in particular, will now be prone to overreact. If it responds reflexively, especially to Beijing’s increasingly widespread and diverse activities, it could wind up wasting resources in places that are actually of little interest or value to it. It is also possible that some of what China is now doing in the developing world will turn out in the long run to be wasteful and perhaps even counterproductive.

Beijing appears to be betting that it can succeed where the West has often failed, stimulating growth and guiding political development in ways that will serve its own economic and strategic ends. Yet the obstacles that have held developing countries back in the past, including corruption, weak institutions, crippling debt, and political instability, seem certain to persist in many places. Indeed, all of these problems are likely to be made even worse by extensive Chinese intrusion into local societies and economies.

In part for these reasons, Beijing’s activities have begun to stir resentment in portions of Africa, Central and South Asia, and the South Pacific. In countries that have achieved at least a degree of political liberalization, advanced democracies can help to fuel the forces of resistance and slow the spread of China’s corrosive influence by supporting civil society groups that favor a free press, fair elections, an independent judiciary, and scrupulous oversight of government contracting. More generally, and in spite of their own past track records, the democracies need to make the case that it is China, rather than themselves, that has taken on the role of a neo-imperialist power. Notwithstanding its ceaseless rhetoric about “win-win cooperation” and building a “community of common destiny,” it is Beijing that seeks to penetrate and gain leverage over smaller and weaker countries, establishing relationships of dependence and exploiting them for its own benefit. The democracies can offset some of China’s appeal by providing more capital for sound investments that benefit entire societies rather than select elites and by opening their own educational systems and markets more widely to people and goods from the Global South.

The United States and its partners need to set priorities and, to the extent possible, divide the labor among themselves. Even as the United States takes a global perspective, others will focus their energies on countries and regions where they have special experience, access, and influence, such as Britain and France in parts of Africa, for example, or Japan and South Korea in Central Asia. As for priorities, rather than attempting to promote the further spread of democracy, Western powers should concentrate on helping to bolster democratic practices and institutions where these have already begun to take root. Beyond this, the United States and its allies need to focus on countering Chinese influence in countries that contain large reserves of critical resources and that sit adjacent to major maritime chokepoints. Regardless
of regime type, states such as India, the Philippines, or Vietnam, which for their own reasons are willing to contribute to balancing Beijing’s power, are also worthy of at least some forms of support.

In addition to meeting potential threats, the democracies should be alert to opportunities to make China pay a price for its ambitions. Exposing the corruption and brutality of some of those Beijing is backing could help to damage its reputation and curtail its influence in the developing world and beyond. Supporting forces that seek to resist China and its local clients could draw Beijing into costly internal conflicts that are difficult to win. CCP strategists seem to believe that they can have the benefits of deep engagement in the developing world while avoiding quagmires and overextension. Like the United States and the Soviet Union, Beijing may soon find that its reach has exceeded its grasp.

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ENDNOTES


5 Kendall-Taylor and Shulman, “Best and Bosom Friends.”

6 Lo, Turning Point?, 3.


9 For the argument that China’s declining economic prospects could cause it to become more aggressive, see Hal Brands and Michael Beckley, Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022).


11 Kendall-Taylor and Shulman, “Best and Bosom Friends.”

12 This scathing assessment of the Austro-Hungarian empire’s utility as an ally during World War I is usually attributed to the German general Erich von Ludendorff. See John S. Van Oudenaren, “China and Russia: Shackled to a Corpse?,” Jamestown Foundation, China Brief 22, no. 5, March 11, 2022, https://jamestown.org/program/china-and-russia-shackled-to-a-corpse/.


23 Ibid.


29 David Hutt, “Should Europe Discuss Sanctioning China Now?,” Internationale Politik Quarterly, October 10, 2022, https://ip-


“Joint Declaration on EU-NATO Cooperation,” NATO.


