

AXIS OF AUTHORITARIANS

Implications of China-Russia Cooperation

Edited by

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Chapter 6

U.S. Policy Opportunities and Options

Robert Sutter

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter provides an overview of the scope and implications of China-Russia relations, explains why Sino-Russian cooperation against U.S. interests has increased during the past decade, assesses key determinants, and examines U.S. policy options.

MAIN ARGUMENT

The preceding chapters in this volume show how 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. This 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 the U.S. and its allies that are seen as 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 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.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- The chapters of this volume support multiyear and wide-ranging domestic and international strengthening of the U.S. military, economic, and diplomatic position to better situate the U.S. to deal with the challenges from China and Russia.
- The chapters differ on the appropriate amount of strengthening, but all favor various mixes of strengthening and accommodation requiring compromise of U.S. interests.
- Specialists from Russia and China in the NBR China-Russia project, but few others, favor major change in existing U.S. policy to accommodate both Moscow and Beijing.

U.S. Policy Opportunities and Options

Robert Sutter

The judgments and analysis of this volume are the culmination of a two-year research and policy engagement project conducted by the National Bureau of Asian Research (NBR) on the strategic implications of China's and Russia's advancing relations. The purpose of this concluding chapter is to assess what we have learned regarding policy options and opportunities for the United States that flow from the recent and prospective trajectory of Sino-Russian relations. Such an assessment is complicated and challenging for three reasons.

First, as shown in the chapters written by Richard Weitz and Charles Ziegler in particular, reflecting developments in their respective areas of concern—military relations and economic relations—the partnership between China and Russia has become stronger and multifaceted as it has matured and broadened after the Cold War, with serious negative consequences for U.S. interests. The drivers of cooperation overshadow the brakes on forward movement at the United States' 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 powers that are seen as in decline. The dispositions of Presidents Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping support forecasts of closer relations over the next five years and probably beyond. The relationship has gone well beyond the common view a decade ago that

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Sino-Russian ties represented an “axis of convenience” with limited impact on U.S. interests.¹

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 the country’s continental and maritime peripheries. 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 peddling that employs economic incentives and propaganda. Chinese cyberattacks have focused more on massive theft of information and intellectual property to increase China’s economic competitiveness and accelerate its efforts to dominate world markets in key advanced technologies at the expense of leading U.S. and other international companies. At the same time, China’s coercion and intimidation of its neighbors, backed by an impressive buildup of military and civilian security forces, has expanded its regional control and influence.

Russia and China work both separately and together to complicate and curb U.S. power and influence in the international political, economic, and security realms. They coordinate their moves and support one another in their respective challenges to the United States and its allies and partners in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. These joint efforts include diplomatic, security, and economic measures in multilateral forums and bilateral relations involving U.S. opponents in Iran, Syria, and North Korea. The two powers further support one another in the face of U.S. and allied complaints about their coercive expansion and other activities to challenge the regional order and global norms and institutions backed by the United States. Their cooperation today is more than an axis of convenience; today they form an axis of significant strategic cooperation.

American specialists involved with the NBR project differ on the importance of Sino-Russian cooperation opposing and undermining U.S. interests. Some focus on the respective problems posed for the United States by Russian and Chinese policies and practices, deeming their cooperation of significantly less concern. In contrast, Richard Ellings’s chapter for this volume highlights potential major challenges to the United States posed by the complementarity of Chinese and Russian interests in Asia and Europe,

¹ See Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2008).

which in a worst-case scenario could lead to a two-front war. Even short of such a war, there remain major challenges for the United States as it is compelled to divide resources and attention between two theaters, as seen in the concurrent coercive use of military and other state power by Russia in Ukraine and China in the South China Sea.

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

Second, there are significant disagreements among specialists regarding the nature of the problem and what should be done. Russian and Chinese specialists generally argue in favor of U.S. actions to accommodate Russia and China and thereby create a more positive U.S. relationship with these powers. In contrast, the main recommended U.S. policy option for most of the experts from the United States and allied countries involves multiyear and wide-ranging plans to strengthen the United States—militarily, economically, and diplomatically—to better position it domestically and internationally to deal with the China-Russia challenges.

Nonetheless, U.S. specialists differ regarding the importance and negative impact of Sino-Russian cooperation for U.S. interests. In this volume, James Steinberg sees the respective challenges of China and Russia to U.S. interests as very important, but he judges that "in deciding to pursue policies that are inconsistent with U.S. interests, neither China nor Russia is influenced significantly by the support (or the absence of support) from the other." In contrast, Ellings asks whether a "full Sino-Russian alliance" can be prevented and argues that "the details of China-Russia strategic cooperation matter enormously."

For this and other reasons, while supporting U.S. strengthening, participants in the NBR project differ on the appropriate amount of strengthening, with some urging the United States to pursue sustained primacy and most others favoring various mixes of strengthening and accommodation requiring the compromise of U.S. interests. In determining the appropriate amount of strengthening and accommodation to apply, project participants exhibit the following spectrum of views:

- Some project participants view Russia as the leading danger, warranting U.S. accommodation of China to counter Russia.
- Others seek to work cooperatively with Russia against China, seen as a more powerful longer-term threat.
- Others view the above maneuvers as futile in the face of strongly converging Sino-Russian interests and identities.
- As noted above, Russian and Chinese specialists, but few others, favor major changes in existing U.S. policy in order to accommodate both Moscow and Beijing.

In the main, the authors in this volume favor U.S. strengthening but avoid taking sides between China and Russia, apart from Ellings, who urges U.S. policymakers to interact quite firmly but pragmatically with Russia in seeking closer ties in the face of a rising China.

Third, significantly adding to the complexity of the situation in contemporary U.S.-China-Russia relations is the uncertainty as to whether the avowedly unpredictable President Donald Trump will follow his administration's declared national security strategy that opposes adverse and predatory behavior by China and Russia or adopt more accommodating approaches in line with his repeated expressions of respect and support for both countries' leaders.² Thus, as is discussed below, in laying out specific options for U.S. policy toward Russia and China, the NBR project findings and the analysis of this volume differ from other authoritative studies. The reason is that, unlike these other studies, they see the United States not as a constant among variables—notably, an actor assumed as able and willing to employ the recommendations offered by the project. Rather, U.S. policy and behavior are viewed as a major uncertain variable affecting international dynamics, notably including the China-Russia relationship.

Context for Current U.S. Policy: Consensus on Five Policy Judgments

To provide a proper frame of reference for the discussion on U.S. policy options and opportunities below, this section explains five general points of agreement among the NBR project experts from countries other than Russia and China concerning U.S. policy opportunities and choices for dealing with

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, D.C., 2017), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

the adverse strategic implications of China-Russia relations for U.S. interests. Those five general points are supported by the assessments in the chapters of this volume.³

Pursue strengthening and consider alternative policy choices amid international and domestic uncertainty. The broad recommendations in the NBR project for dealing with the negative strategic implications of China-Russia relations for the United States are in line with the recommendations of other authoritative studies in calling for wide-ranging efforts by the United States to strengthen its economic, military, and diplomatic power and influence.⁴ The goal is to create a more favorable balance of power supporting the U.S.-backed international order now challenged by Chinese and Russian actions. Building national power at home and abroad requires greater domestic cohesion and less partisan discord and government gridlock. Strategies employed need to be realistic and effectively implemented. However, in laying out specific options for U.S. policy toward China and Russia, the NBR project differs from other authoritative studies, as noted above, in treating U.S. policy and behavior as an uncertain rather than a constant variable.

Recognize that there are no easy fixes. None of the chapters in this volume offers easy fixes for U.S. difficulties resulting from China-Russia cooperation. There is general agreement among the experts participating in the NBR project that the problems posed by Sino-Russian relations are big and that there are no quick solutions. To fix them will require prolonged whole-of-government approaches that are difficult for U.S. policymakers to carry out amid many high-profile distractions at home and abroad. Such large-scale U.S. government foreign policy approaches often involve extensive publicity used to rally domestic and international support for the new effort against the perceived foreign danger or threat. Unless carefully managed by the U.S. administration, such publicity is seen negatively by some participants in the

³ The very different Chinese and Russian experts' perspectives will be treated in a separate forthcoming NBR publication.

⁴ Major studies include Julianne Smith, "A Transatlantic Strategy for Russia," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 2016; Angela Stent, "Russia, China and the West after Crimea," Transatlantic Academy, 2016; Lisa Sawyer Samp et al., *Recalibrating U.S. Strategy toward Russia: A New Time for Choosing* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2017); Eugene Rumer, Richard Sokolsky, and Andrew Weiss, "Guiding Principles of a Sustainable U.S. Policy toward Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia: Key Judgments from a Joint Task Force," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Policy Outlook, February 2017; Julianne Smith and Adam Twardowski, "The Future of U.S.-Russia Relations," Center for a New American Security, January 2017; Ashley J. Tellis and Robert D. Blackwill, *Revising U.S. Grand Strategy toward China* (New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 2015); Orville Schell and Susan Shirk, "U.S. Policy toward China: Recommendations for a New Administration," *Asia Society*, February 2017; and Bobo Lo, *A Wary Embrace* (Sydney: Penguin, 2017).

NBR project as more likely than not to feed Chinese and Russian perceptions of the United States as a weak opponent—an angst-ridden, declining power seeking in vain to reassert its previous dominance. In sum, it is difficult for the U.S. government to carry out strengthening strategies effectively over time in a low-key and resolved manner reflecting confidence and assurance.

Avoid counterproductive tactical moves. U.S. policymakers choosing between confrontational and accommodating policy choices in relations with China and Russia need to do so with awareness of how such moves affect the longer-term objective of strengthening the United States nationally and internationally and possibly other goals sought by U.S. policymakers. For example, as argued by Steinberg in this volume, accommodation of China or Russia to expand the United States' room for maneuver or other tactical benefits could be counterproductive by weakening domestic resolve and the resolve of U.S. allies and partners. Similarly, specialists from Russia and China are correct in arguing that applying greater U.S. pressure and tougher measures toward either power also could be troublesome. The results might not be in line with domestic interests and those of U.S. international supporters. Meanwhile, Weitz and Ziegler show limited advantage for the United States in maneuvering tactically between China and Russia in those authors' respective areas of concern—military relations and economic relations.

Play the long game by targeting vulnerabilities in the China-Russia relationship. Those authors in the volume proposing options see a low likelihood of quick success through specific moves toward Russia and China. The NBR project participants generally recommend that U.S. policymakers play a long game in seeking to exploit vulnerabilities in Sino-Russian collaboration. As discussed in the chapters in this volume by Weitz, Ziegler, and Steinberg, areas of China-Russia 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 Beijing and Moscow seek to change. More promising issues warranting U.S. attention and possible exploitation involve the very different standing that China and Russia have with the United States and the asymmetry in their respective worldviews and international ambitions.

For example, as illustrated in the chapters in this volume, as well as in the interim reports from the NBR project, 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. As Steinberg and others make clear, although China's 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. Such calculations persuaded some participants in the NBR project to favor the United States working cooperatively with China to seek an advantage against Russia.

However, Ellings in this volume and some other participants in the NBR project see China 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, Beijing and Moscow favor the fragmentation of NATO, the European Union, 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 accordance with international norms. As seen in project deliberations and an interim report featuring experts from Europe, Japan, and South Korea, a strong United States provides a welcome counterweight for Asian and European nations affected by Chinese and Russian ambitions.⁵ Meanwhile, U.S. contributions to the capabilities and resolve of neighboring states can be justified on their own merits without direct reference to China or Russia. As Weitz recommends, such steps provide a significant outlet for U.S.-backed strengthening against adverse Chinese and Russian practices that nonetheless is less directly confrontational than the application of U.S. power against China or Russia.

Consider China and Russia together as well as separately. Most recommendations from other authoritative studies of U.S. policy dealing with China and Russia focus on one or the other country but not the two

⁵ Shoichi Itoh et al., "Japan and the Sino-Russian Entente: The Future of Major-Power Relations in Northeast Asia," NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 64, April 2017.

together. And, as noted above, there is disagreement among NBR project experts on the actual importance of Sino-Russian cooperation against U.S. interests. Nevertheless, overall the NBR project finds the recommendations of other authoritative studies to be useful but contends that they need to 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 China and Russia 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 Trump were to make significant compromises with Putin as the United States pursues a trade war to put 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. Steinberg warns against what he sees as ill-advised efforts by some in the Trump administration to accommodate Russia in seeking an advantage for the United States against China.
- Assessing U.S. policy toward both powers facilitates the difficult task of determining with greater accuracy what the trade-offs are for the United States as it seeks an advantage in moving forward with changes in U.S. policy toward one power or the other. Ellings acknowledges that his interest in pursuing a firm but more pragmatic U.S. approach toward Russia that seeks possible common ground against China is tempered by the possibility of Moscow or Beijing exploiting unwarranted U.S. flexibility and accommodation of Russia.

U.S. Policy Opportunities and Options

The policy options and their opportunities for U.S. interests explained below start with a choice about whether the United States should seek accommodation of China and Russia. This option is not highlighted in this

volume and generally is not favored by the participants in the NBR project, with the exception of specialists from those countries. The discussion then moves to examine three policy choices involving varying degrees of U.S. strengthening in opposition to Chinese and Russian challenges and U.S. accommodation of China and Russia. Those three options are:

- U.S. strengthening to oppose both China and Russia, an approach favored by most authors in this volume
- Applying U.S. strengthening and accommodation in seeking better relations with China for an advantage against Russia
- Applying U.S. strengthening and accommodation in seeking better relations with Russia for an advantage against China, an approach favored by Ellings and in varying degrees others in the project, including this author, who sees China as a much more dangerous challenger to the United States than Russia

Favoring the first of the above three options are the majority of NBR project experts. This includes those few favoring sustained U.S. global primacy; many more, including the authors in this volume, who support pursuing rivalry with Russia and China through a mix of strengthening and accommodation; and those who see U.S. attempts to divide Russia and China and gain an advantage by accommodating one and pressuring the other as futile. Most volume authors avoid explicit views on this judgment of futility, though Steinberg leans in this direction when he considers U.S. efforts to seek an advantage by accommodating Russia or China on core interests.

Accommodation to Meet Russia and China Halfway

Russian and Chinese leaders voice support for this policy choice. This choice also is supported by some U.S. specialists but enjoyed little support during the project deliberations apart from Chinese and Russian participants.⁶ The choice involves U.S. actions reducing both existing sanctions on Russia and military, economic, and political pressures on Russia and China (such as military deployments and surveillance in Asia and Europe, trade and investment restrictions, and criticism of human rights conditions) as means to improve relations and ease tensions.

⁶ Examples of U.S. scholars supporting this option include Lyle J. Goldstein, “Is It Time to Meet China Halfway?” *National Interest*, May 12, 2015; Michael Swaine, “Creating a Stable Asia: An Agenda for a U.S.-China Balance of Power,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2016; and Artyom Lukin and Rensselaer Lee, “U.S. and Russia: A Pacific Reconciliation?” Australian Institute of International Affairs, October 28, 2016.

The benefit of accommodation is that it avoids costly military and other strengthening, eases tensions with Russia and China, is seen as reducing the chance of conflict, allows the United States to conform peacefully to a new international order featuring a rising China and resurgent Russia, and permits the United States to focus more on various domestic problems. Russia and China would be outwardly supportive and presumably find that this policy choice meets their current goals.

One drawback of accommodation is that it would likely be seen in the United States and elsewhere as poorly timed, coming amid growing Sino-Russian challenges to U.S. interests in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, as well as in international economics, politics, and security, and would add to the perception of U.S. weakness and decline that prompts these challenges. Accommodation also risks being viewed domestically as “appeasement,” which is not favored by most Americans and certainly not by Republican leaders in Congress. Finally, it could undermine U.S. alliances and emerging partnerships with key nonaligned powers (e.g., India, Egypt, and Vietnam).

Strengthening to Sustain U.S. Primacy

The majority of experts participating in the NBR project recommend that the United States give top priority to sustaining its position as the world’s leading power, especially military power, which supports a vibrant U.S.-led international order favorable to U.S. interests. As seen in an interim project publication, this policy choice involves facing directly the many challenges posed by China and Russia and mobilizing international partners and domestic resources in a coherent strategy to deter further challenges, deal with existing ones, and exploit Sino-Russian differences—all from a position of greater strategic strength.⁷ A military buildup and international economic activism would accompany improved U.S. domestic governance, economic growth, social cohesion, diplomatic activism, and international attraction—i.e., soft power.

One advantage of this policy choice is its broad domestic political support. It echoes the “preserve peace through strength” theme highlighted in the Trump administration’s National Security Strategy and National

⁷ Michael S. Chase et al., “Russia-China Relations: Assessing Common Ground and Strategic,” NBR, NBR Special Report, no. 66, July 2017.

Defense Strategy⁸ and is widely supported by congressional Republican leaders, the Republican Party platform, and many defense-minded Democrats. The reported parochialism of the rank-and-file Republican Party members known as the “base,” who strongly support President Trump, does not seem to apply to important national security threats. This influential contingent in the party seems to support more rather than fewer resources for defense at home and abroad, according to President Trump and his close associates.⁹ Allies and partners would be reassured by the United States’ demonstrated willingness to bear the costs and risks of this version of U.S. leadership. China and Russia would be put on guard and perhaps would need to recalibrate their challenges to U.S. interests and their perception of U.S. decline, leading to greater moderation on the part of Moscow and Beijing.

However, the costs of this effort are very high, thus tempering wholehearted support for this option. One does not easily move from a 280-ship navy to President Trump’s endorsed 350-ship navy without spending enormous resources. This option will face major budget hurdles involving the Budget Control Act and deficit financing not supported by some leading Republicans. The costs may require political compromises opposed by some in the Republican majority in Congress in order to accommodate Democrats and thereby reach a budget arrangement allowing for substantial and sustained increased outlays for military and other involvement for years to come. Administration and congressional leaders seeking greater burden-sharing by allies and partners may find those states continuing to free ride under the umbrella of resurgent U.S. protection. Meanwhile, the objective of primacy appears unrealistic to those Americans who judge that the United States cannot stop China’s rise, Russian resurgence, or the numerous international challenges caused by Iran, Syria, ISIS, and North Korea. This policy choice also risks driving Russia and China closer together against the United States.

Mixing Strengthening and Accommodation

Most experts in the NBR project, including to varying degrees the authors in this volume, favor the United States adopting a variety of

⁸ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, 4; and U.S. Department of Defense, “Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge,” January 2018, 1, https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf?mod=article_inline.

⁹ Jake Novak, “President Trump’s Military Parade Plan Is a Brilliant Political Move,” CNBC, February 8, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/02/08/trumps-military-parade-plan-is-a-brilliant-move.html>.

initiatives that meet the interests of Russia and China while at the same time endeavoring to engage in domestic and international efforts to strengthen the U.S. position in the world balance of power amid rivalry and competition with these two states. The positive initiatives could involve gestures to advance common ground and ease sanctions and other economic, military, and diplomatic pressures as means to manage tensions and possibly improve relations. For example, the United States could seek greater cooperation with Russia over the conflicts in Syria, issues in the Arctic, and nuclear arms control. Much more extensive is the potential for the United States to expand common ground with China through various political, economic, and security initiatives. Examples include cooperating on North Korea, reducing U.S. surveillance flights near China, and easing U.S. restrictions on Chinese investment in the United States. Meanwhile, both Russia and China have more important interests in Central Asia than does the United States. By supporting each power's peaceful efforts to expand its interests in Central Asia, the United States could show goodwill and ease tension with both powers. The above positive U.S. steps would be carried out as the United States concurrently implements domestic and international strengthening measures to counter challenges posed by the two countries.

The advantage of an approach that includes accommodation is that it could help avoid conflict as the United States strengthens against Russia and China. On the one hand, it would reduce the large costs in emphasis on strengthening without concurrent positive moves toward Russia and China. On the other hand, it would diminish the chance that allies and partners would be upset as accommodation is accompanied by a reassuring strengthening of U.S. commitments to its allies and partners. Moscow and Beijing would likely remain wary of U.S. intentions but receptive to positive initiatives. Moreover, this policy choice could keep Russia and China on the defensive and off balance, perhaps encouraging both countries to exercise caution as they discern U.S. strength, weakness, and resolve. It also could result in more fluidity in Russia's and China's relations with the United States and one another, possibly providing more opportunities for the United States to exploit differences between them.

One drawback of accommodation is that Russia and China could focus on the U.S. strengthening against them and dismiss the positive initiatives, risking greater tension and costs by driving the two countries closer together in working against U.S. interests. Another risk is that Russia and China could become stronger as a result of the United States easing sanctions and investment restrictions. Possibly viewing the accommodations as signs of

weakness, they could use their added strength to double down on negative pressures and challenges to U.S. interests.

An example mixing strengthening and accommodation: Amid strengthening, the Trump administration plays down the promotion of human rights, democracy, and U.S. values. This illustrative policy choice is consistent with the Trump administration's more pragmatic approach to defending American values in international affairs. In particular, the current government has demonstrated to Russia, China, other authoritarian governments, and other states seen as carrying out policies offensive to American views of human rights and democracy promotion that it is much less likely than previous administrations to seek to intervene in the internal affairs of other countries regarding human rights and democracy.

The benefits of such an approach are that it reduces a major incentive for Russia and China to work together or separately against heretofore perceived U.S. efforts at regime change targeting both countries. It also reassures U.S. allies and partners whose policies and practices on human rights and democracy have alienated past U.S. administrations. If accompanied by greater military, economic, and diplomatic strengthening, the new pragmatism on human rights and democracy is less likely to be seen as appeasement.

The drawbacks are that this policy choice still exacts security and economic costs and may prompt unfair burden-sharing among allies and partners. It also sacrifices the political support at home and abroad that comes from the United States promoting its values and could undermine the vision of the world order that has been long defended by the United States.

An example mixing strengthening and accommodation: The United States avoids both the perceived excess of primacy and the sacrifice of core American interests. As explained by Steinberg in this volume, this policy choice favors strengthening, views primacy as unrealistic, and avoids accommodation at the expense of key U.S. interests, including American values. Judging that some accommodation will be essential to the stable management of international relations, the United States should be prepared to take steps, consistent with its core interests, to reduce the danger of unwanted rising tensions with both China and Russia as it shores up U.S. leadership. Examples could include sustaining the long-standing *modus vivendi* with China vis-à-vis Taiwan and implementing restraints on U.S. ballistic missile defenses that might undermine Russian and Chinese nuclear deterrence. In addition, as discussed above, the United States could pursue cooperation with Russia on Syria, arms control, and the Arctic as well as with China on North Korea and development in Central Asia and elsewhere.

The potential benefit of this policy choice is prolonged U.S. strengthening while managing tensions without a major sacrifice of U.S. interests. As the United States becomes stronger, it can use selective accommodation as part of its toolkit to foster less contentious U.S. relations with both Russia and China that are advantageous for broader interests of international leadership.

The risk is that Russia and China may focus on U.S. strengthening and dismiss the United States' nuanced approach toward accommodation. Americans seeking primacy may view deference to Chinese and Russian interests involving Taiwan, missile defense, and other issues as ill-advised concessions weakening U.S. options in the protracted contest with Beijing and Moscow.

Seeking Advantage with Positive and Negative Incentives toward China and Russia¹⁰

Several participants in the NBR project, including those from China and Russia, remain convinced that the closeness of Chinese and Russian interests and identities makes U.S. efforts to seek an advantage by exploiting Sino-Russian differences unlikely to succeed under foreseeable circumstances. Others disagree and favor one of the following options.

Tilt toward China and away from Russia. This policy choice views Russia as the more troublesome of the two powers, and it seeks to isolate the country further by emphasizing the United States' common ground with China while increasing sanctions on Russia. It could involve maintaining strict sanctions and heightening military pressure against Russia while developing more common ground with China on North Korea, easing trade and investment tensions, and showing U.S. support for China's Belt and Road Initiative in Central Asia and other areas near Russia. U.S. energy production could also compete with Russian energy exports to China, and

¹⁰ In addition to the main options in this section, another related option supported by two NBR project participants is keeping Russia and China on the defensive and off balance while exploiting perceived differences. This policy choice involves positive and negative incentives. For example, the United States could (1) join China's Belt and Road Initiative, thereby promoting Chinese expansion in Central Asia and adding friction in China's relations with Russia, (2) propose studying intermediate-range ballistic missile deployments in Asia, despite the restrictions of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty, as a means to work with Russia to get China to limit its ballistic missiles, thereby adding friction in China-Russia ties, and (3) encourage Japan, India, and Vietnam to expand ties with Russia, concurrent with U.S. strengthening of ties with all three Asian powers to challenge Chinese regional expansion. Such positive steps by the United States toward China or Russia could divide the two countries, reducing their cooperation on issues at odds with U.S. interests. At the same time, supporting China in Asia could alienate Japan and other U.S. allies and partners; weakening the INF Treaty could alienate U.S. allies in Europe as well as Japan; and tactical U.S. moves regarding Russia and China may be seen as signs of weakness, prompting greater challenges from China and Russia to U.S. interests.

in the process keep energy prices down, weakening Russia's economy and complicating Sino-Russian energy cooperation.

The benefit of this policy choice is that it is in line with existing U.S. policy toward Russia. It also provides the opportunity for the United States to privately warn China that common interests are in jeopardy as China collaborates with Russia. The perceived forecast is that Russia would feel more vulnerable and seek more cooperative relations with the United States.

The risk is that this policy choice may not work as forecast; China and Russia may be too close to be divided without more accommodation from the United States. Meanwhile, Russia may be prompted to lash out and play the spoiler. Russian actions could involve closer collaboration with Iran in support of conflicts in the Middle East that undermine U.S. interests, more direct military pressures and threats in Europe, and intensified overt and covert efforts to disrupt European democracies and support authoritarian regimes.

Tilt toward Russia and away from China. This policy choice involves the United States wooing Russia by easing sanctions and military pressures with the goal of managing the perceived larger and longer-term strategic danger posed by a rising China. This option would involve an intensification of U.S. trade and investment pressures, a buildup of U.S. and allied forces around China's rim, and vocal opposition to China's expansion of control in disputed regions, self-serving trade and investment in the Belt and Road Initiative, and perceived subversion of nearby countries and leading developed states through covert influence peddling and overt propaganda. The United States would signal an interest in consulting and possibly coordinating with Russia in strengthening their respective relations with key Asian opponents of Chinese dominance, notably India and Vietnam, and defending the common U.S.-Russian interests in sustaining the independence of Japan and the Korean Peninsula in the face of China's growing power.

The advantage of this policy choice is that it would build common ground with Russia, including in mutual areas of concern over possible Chinese dominance. Russia resents its junior-partner status in relations with China and is clear-eyed on how China requires increasing deference from its neighbors as it rises in power and prominence. Beijing, worried about a U.S. tilt toward Russia amid a hardening U.S. position toward China, has a lot at stake in workable ties with the United States. The expectation is that China would moderate policies toward the United States to preclude closer U.S.-Russian ties at odds with Chinese interests (e.g., closer U.S.-Russian relations with Japan, India, and Vietnam and cooperation on arms control and the Arctic).

The risk of this policy choice is that it may not work as forecast. China and Russia may be too close to be divided without more accommodation from the United States.

An example favoring a tilt toward Russia. In chapter one of this volume, Ellings joins NBR project proponents of this policy choice in seeing dire consequences stemming from growing China-Russia coordination and collaboration at the United States' expense, with the potential of a two-front war. Viewing China as the main threat to the United States, proponents of a Russian tilt object to existing U.S. restrictions on interactions with Russia. Moreover, they view Moscow as deeply concerned about Russia's ever-growing subservience to a dominating China and malleable to greater attention involving a mix of U.S. and allied pressures and inducements. Some in this group favor easing U.S. sanctions and other accommodations at the outset of heightened efforts to woo Russia away from China. Ellings and others disagree with such initial compromises. They favor a nuanced coordinated strategy between the United States, other Western countries, and Japan employing existing sanctions and other tough policies along with inducements of mutual benefit that would follow greater U.S. and allied interchange and agreement with Russia. Moscow presumably would be inclined to pursue this path of cooperation with the United States and its allies and partners in order to achieve greater international independence and prominence.

This option would have the benefit of restoring Russia's historically strong linkages with the West and stalling the recent trajectory of Russian dependence on China. A more independent Russia with close ties to the West would serve as a brake on China's ambitions in Eurasia. If done in close coordination with the United States' European and Asian allies, U.S. inducements toward Moscow would avoid the danger of being seen as appeasing Russian aggression.

The risk is that Putin may be unpersuaded by U.S. inducements while continuing strong antipathy toward the West and close relations with China. Russia may view these inducements as signs of weakness, prompting the country to cooperate more closely with China in seeking advances at the expense of the declining Western powers. Russian and Chinese officials could also use the positive U.S. initiatives toward Russia to divide the United States from European powers committed to sanctions against Russian aggression.

An Uncertain Future

The current outlook for U.S. policy in dealing with the negative consequences of Sino-Russian relations remains bleak. There are no easy fixes for the United States. The drivers of cooperation between China and Russia continue to overshadow the brakes on forward movement at the United States' expense. Limits on their cooperation prompt the two governments to 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 in preserving the existing world order, and opposition to Russian and Chinese regional expansion from important lesser powers in Europe and Asia seeking U.S. support.

The Trump administration's National Security Strategy and National Defense Strategy focus on strengthening and other countermeasures against the dangers posed by China and Russia. As explained in Steinberg's chapter and in the discussion in this chapter, those and other strategies arguing for peace through strength can be viewed as seeking to preserve U.S. primacy. This approach, however, is deemed as one-sided and unrealistic by Steinberg and many participants in the NBR project. They argue that some accommodation will be essential to the stable management of international relations. Meanwhile, the impact of the strategies is complicated and arguably diluted by Trump's avowed unpredictability and his repeated controversial initiatives seeking better relations with Putin and Xi amid other signs of policy disagreement within the Trump administration on how to deal with Moscow and Beijing.

China and Russia form an authoritarian axis that is intentionally reshaping the strategic landscape in Asia, Europe, and the Middle East. Their coordinated efforts pose a complex set of interrelated challenges. The question that now confronts the United States and its allies and partners is how to respond to these challenges with an integrated and multilateral strategy spanning the security, economic, and diplomatic spheres. The failure to do so will jeopardize the U.S.-led international order that has sustained over 70 years of peace and prosperity since the end of World War II.

