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FACING THE AUTHORITARIAN CHALLENGE

The Sino-Russian alignment and what to do about it

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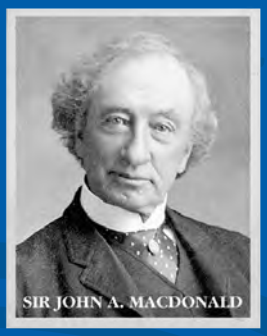
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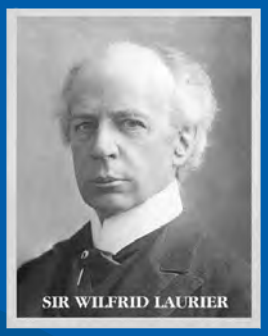
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Executive Summary

Democracies around the world face an important new challenge with an authoritarian axis being formed around Russia and China. Driven by a neo-authoritarian ideology, obsessed with regime security, and convinced that the West is in terminal decline, the despotic regimes of Putin and Xi are increasingly aligning their policies from defence to international institutions to cyber-governance.

Given their hostility to universal human rights and democracy, their "Animal Farm" understanding of sovereignty (some are more sovereign than others, only major powers are truly sovereign), their desire to make the world safe for autocracy, and their increasingly revanchist policies, the Sino-Russian alignment poses a serious challenge to the rules-based international order and its defenders. As we emerge into a post-pandemic world, Canada and its allies and partners need to have a clear-eyed view of the challenge posed by this authoritarian axis.

The paper offers a brief overview of the fundamental drivers of Sino-Russian alignment, namely neo-authoritarian ideology, regime survival, and a belief in shifting global power. Both China and Russia believe they need to speed up this shift in global power away from the West and restructure the international order to their liking. Engaging in subversion against the West is a crucial component of this strategy and a natural driver for their alignment.

The Sino-Russian alignment is further explored across three domains: defence, democracy and human rights, and cyber-governance. To be fair, there are existing and potential differences between two countries on a number of fronts – from the growing power asymmetry that clearly favours China to their rivalry when it comes to both influence in Central Asia and arms sales. Yet none of these disagreements and concerns are strong enough in the short to medium-term to override the primary drivers of this axis.

Yet that raises the question of what to do in the face of this challenge. To answer this question, this paper discusses four potential strategies to deal with it. As it shows, ignoring the Sino-Russian alignment and waiting for it to

dissolve is shortsighted at best. Hoping to be able to drive a wedge between Russia and China is a fool's errand that misunderstands the deep structural factors that drive their alignment.

Instead, this paper suggests that the best way to deal with this authoritarian axis is a multilayered, multilateral strategy, one that combines selective mitigation of the effects of Sino-Russian alignment, specifically by the United States, complemented by a dual-containment strategy of Russia and China by the West and other democratic partners – involving not only the US, the EU and Canada but also other like-minded partners in relevant regions such as Japan, South Korea, India, Taiwan, and Ukraine. That will help capitalize on the individual strengths of each democratic partner and amplify each other's capabilities across domains and geographies.

"The despotic regimes of Putin and Xi are increasingly acting in concert with each other from defence to cyber security.

The despotic regimes of Putin and Xi are increasingly acting in concert with each other from defence to cyber security, from subverting international norms to undermining democratic societies. The future of the rules-based international order, liberal democracy, and individual rights and freedoms depends on how well we confront this task. It's time that democracies join together to fight back against this authoritarian axis.

Sommaire

Les démocraties tout autour du monde doivent faire face au nouveau défi de taille que soulève la formation de l'axe autoritaire sino-russe. Motivés par une idéologie néo-autoritaire, obsédés par la sécurité du régime et convaincus que l'Occident est en déclin terminal, les régimes despotiques de Poutine et de Xi harmonisent de plus en plus leurs politiques, de la défense jusqu'à la cybergouvernance, en passant par les institutions internationales.

L'alignement sino-russe présente un sérieux problème pour l'ordre international fondé sur des règles et pour ses défenseurs en raison de l'hostilité à l'endroit de la démocratie et des droits universels de la personne, de la conception « animaliste » de la souveraineté (certaines nations sont plus souveraines que d'autres et seules les grandes puissances sont vraiment souveraines), du souci de sécuriser l'autocratie à l'échelle mondiale et des politiques de plus en plus revanchistes qui en émanent. Le Canada et ses alliés et partenaires devront aborder de façon lucide les défis posés par cet axe autoritaire dans un monde post-pandémique.

Ce document offre un aperçu des moteurs fondamentaux de l'alignement sino-russe, à savoir l'idéologie néo-autoritaire, le maintien du régime et la conviction que le pouvoir mondial se déplace. La Chine et la Russie estiment toutes deux qu'elles doivent accélérer ce rééquilibrage des forces loin de l'Occident et restructurer l'ordre international comme elles l'entendent. Les actions de subversion contre l'Occident constituent une composante cruciale de cette stratégie et un moteur naturel de l'alignement sino-russe.

L'alignement sino-russe est examiné en profondeur dans trois domaines : la défense, la démocratie et les droits de la personne, et la cybergouvernance. Soyons justes, des différences existent déjà ou se profilent entre les deux pays à un certain nombre d'égards – de l'asymétrie croissante du pouvoir qui favorise nettement la Chine jusqu'à la rivalité opposant les deux pays au sujet de l'influence en Asie centrale et des ventes d'armes. Toutefois, aucun désaccord n'est suffisamment sérieux à court ou moyen terme pour contrecarrer les principaux moteurs de l'alignement sino-russe.

Pourtant, cette problématique soulève la question de savoir ce qu'il faut faire face à ce défi. Pour y répondre, ce document analyse quatre stratégies possibles. Comme on l'illustre, ignorer l'alignement sino-russe et attendre sa dissolution relève, au mieux, d'une approche à courte vue. Et, espérer pouvoir creuser un fossé entre la Russie et la Chine est une idée saugrenue, qui fait fi des facteurs structurels profonds à l'origine de cet alignement.

Ce document propose plutôt une meilleure façon de combattre cet axe autoritaire : une approche multilatérale à plusieurs niveaux combinant l'atténuation sélective par les États-Unis des effets de l'alignement sino-russe et le « double endiguement » de la Russie et de la Chine par l'Occident et d'autres partenaires démocratiques – comprenant non seulement les États-Unis, l'UE et le Canada, mais également d'autres participants aux vues similaires provenant de régions comme le Japon, la Corée du Sud, l'Inde, Taïwan et l'Ukraine. Cette stratégie contribuerait à tirer parti des atouts particuliers de chaque partenaire démocratique et à amplifier leurs capacités respectives à travers les domaines et les géographies.

> *« Les régimes despotiques de Poutine et de Xi posent de plus en plus souvent des actions concertées, de la défense jusqu'à la cybersécurité.*

Les régimes despotiques de Poutine et de Xi posent de plus en plus souvent des actions concertées, de la défense jusqu'à la cybersécurité, en passant par la subversion des normes internationales et la fragilisation des sociétés démocratiques. L'avenir de l'ordre international fondé sur des règles, de la démocratie libérale et des droits et libertés des individus dépend de notre capacité à agir. Il est temps que les démocraties joignent leurs efforts pour combattre cet axe autoritaire.

Introduction[1]

The democratic world is facing an authoritarian axis. The despotic regimes of Putin and Xi are increasingly acting in concert with each other from defence to cyber security, from subverting international norms to undermining democratic societies. This Sino-Russian alignment is more often driven by deeper incentives around regime survival, common threat perceptions, and global power shifts rather than deliberate coordination, although the latter is becoming more common each day. As we emerge into a post-pandemic world, it is imperative that Canada and its allies and partners have a clear-eyed view of the challenge posed by this authoritarian axis. This paper aims to provide an overview of that challenge and offer a multilayered, multilateral strategy to deal with it.

The next section provides a brief overview of the fundamental drivers of the Sino-Russian alignment, namely neo-authoritarian ideology, regime survival, and a belief in shifting global power. The third section looks at the specific components of the Sino-Russian alignment, focusing on three domains: defence, democracy and human rights, and cyber-governance. The penultimate section asks the question of what to do in the face of this challenge and discusses four potential strategies to deal with it. I argue for a combination of selective mitigation of the effects of this authoritarian axis, specifically by the United States, complemented by a multilayered, multilateral dual-containment strategy of Russia and China by the West and other democratic partners. The last section concludes by presenting a very brief summary of the main points.

Identifying the drivers[2]

What drives the Sino-Russian challenge against the West? Although Russia and China have their own specific reasons to challenge and undermine the rules-based international order, three common drivers underlie the challenge posed by these authoritarian regimes. Both regimes are neo-authoritarian in their ideology, perceive the global order as an existential threat to their domestic regime survival, and are convinced that the shifts in global balance of power favour them and not the West.

The ruling ideology of both Putin and Xi can be best described as a form of neo-authoritarianism (Friedberg 2017; Wright 2017; Belton 2020). In the beginning, Putin's regime was more personalized in nature and Xi's rule was based on the CCP's institutional power. However, starting with the CCP's 19th Congress in 2017 and continuing with the abolishment of term limits in March 2018 and the enshrining of Xi Jinping Thought in the country's constitution, Chinese neo-authoritarianism is getting closer to the Russian model, with Xi at the centre of everything.

The essence of this ideology is the belief in the necessity of a strong leader to promote economic growth, protect the regime, and advance the national interest abroad. Here the personal fortunes of the leader are assumed to be one and the same with the national interest and thus any threat to Putin's or Xi's rule is perceived to be an existential threat to Russia or China. Such regimes cannot tolerate dissent, at home or abroad. They are characterized by suppression of free speech, tight control of traditional and social media, repression against political and religious dissident groups, and especially in the case of PRC, a vast surveillance infrastructure that reaches every aspect of political and social life. This shared neo-authoritarian ideology enables Putin and Xi to frame their common opposition to the rules-based international order as existential and surmount the lingering suspicions between two countries dating back to the Cold War.

Russia and China share a common interest in undermining the international order as they perceive it as an existential threat to the ruling regimes in both countries. This imperative of regime survival is crucial to understand the Sino-Russian alignment at the international level. More than anything else, it is this perceived common threat to the survival of neo-authoritarian regimes in these countries that makes the strategic partnership between Russia and China an enduring one, despite tensions in other areas (Wright 2017; Ferrari and Ambrosetti 2019). The CCP explicitly identifies values and norms such as liberal democracy, freedom of press, freedom of expression, and human rights as threats to its rule in its own internal documents (Greer 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Rolland 2020a, 2020b; Tobin 2020). The existence of a thriving democracy right across the strait in Taiwan makes the undermining

of the international order led by liberal democracies even more urgent in the eyes of the CCP.

Putin's notion of "sovereign democracy" (Lipman 2006) intentionally positions itself against liberal democracy. The Kremlin's propaganda about a decadent West in decay and decline, in part due to the expansion of civil rights to previously marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ communities (Foxall 2019), is meant to warn the Russian people of the dangers of liberal values. The emergence of free and democratic societies that are prospering in the post-Soviet space, the place Kremlin labels "near abroad," is a constant threat to Putin and his regime, much like the dynamic between the CCP and Taiwan, since they are proof that an authoritarian kleptocracy is not the only way for former communist countries.

> *Neo-authoritarian regimes cannot afford alternative, democratic narratives to challenge their own legitimizing narratives at home.*

It is important to note that this threat of regime survival, which both the Kremlin and CCP perceive, is asymmetrical. In other words, the liberal democracies do not perceive the existence of authoritarian regimes *per se* as a threat to their survival. It is the actions of those regimes at the international level and their attempts to subvert international order as well as the domestic politics of democracies that is the threat. The same is not true for authoritarian regimes. The very existence of functioning, prosperous liberal democracies, regardless of whether they engage in promoting their values elsewhere, is the threat for authoritarian regimes. Those neo-authoritarian regimes cannot afford alternative, democratic narratives to challenge their own legitimizing narratives at home.

It is crucial to emphasize this point. The consequence of this asymmetry is that the fundamental interests of democratic nations are irreconcilable with those of authoritarian regimes. Unless the democratic countries repudiate what makes them who they are, they will remain a threat to authoritarian regimes. The notion of a "grand bargain" with China and Russia, where they will stop trying to undermine and subvert democratic nations in return for "non-interference" and recognition of "spheres of influence," is an illusion.

It is an undeniable fact that China's military and economic power is on the rise and this process has only sped up in the last decade. As China becomes more powerful, it is also becoming more aggressive in its dealing with other countries – from maritime bullying in the South and East China Seas to its territorial aggrandizement along the Sino-Indian border to its economic blackmail and hostage-taking against Canada, Australia and others.[3] Under the presidency of Xi, and especially since 2017, a more emboldened CCP believes that the time has come for China to stop following Deng's dictum of hiding its capabilities and biding its time, and instead use its strength to shape a new international order with the People's Republic of China at the centre (Greer 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Rolland 2020a, 2020b; Tobin 2020). Xi's grand project, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), is a centrepiece of this new emerging international order (Rolland 2020b). Underlying all this is the belief in Beijing that a power transition is happening and the West is facing inevitable decline.

Russia in contrast is not a rising power but a recovering power. Furthermore, this recovery was and will be limited. Putin recognizes that he only has a limited window of opportunity where Russia can still punch above its weight and thus shape the emerging international order. For different reasons – for Xi impatience and for Putin necessity – both China and Russia believe that they need to speed up this shift in global power away from the West and restructure the international order to their liking. Engaging in subversion against the West is a crucial component of this strategy and a natural driver of the Sino-Russian alignment.

Understanding the Sino-Russian alignment

Do Russia and China form an intentional "axis of authoritarianism" and coordinate their challenge to the rules-based international order? Or do their actions happen to be aligned due to the drivers discussed above? The answer is both. China and Russia increasingly coordinate their policies, especially when it comes to actions in international organizations and military cooperation. That being said, a significant portion of the authoritarian challenge is still in the form of alignment of policies without deliberate coordination because both, independently, would like to see an international order that is less free, less open, and less democratic. More fundamentally, it matters little whether it is deliberate coordination or "spontaneous" alignment as the end result is the same.

The debate about a Sino-Russia axis is not new (Kashin et. al 2019; Chase et. al. 2017; Sutter 2018; Alexeeva and Lasserre 2018; Yeung and Bjelakovic 2010; Flikke 2016; Koralev and Portyakov 2019). Their ideological and nor-

mative convergence (Ekman et. al 2020; Tobin 2020), increasing cooperation on defence issues (Watts et. al. 2016; Chase et. al. 2017; Sutter 2018; Korolev 2018, 2019; Kofman 2020), deepening economic cooperation (Kaczmarski 2017a, 2017b; Hopewell 2017; Peyrouse 2017; Rolland 2020b), and exploration of closer relations in areas such as the Arctic (Sorensen and Klimenko 2017), energy (Locatelli et. al 2017; Freeman 2018; Atli 2018; Pop 2010), regional issues (Lewis 2018; Chobarov 2019; Yussupzhanovic 2019; Saalman 2017; Wishnick 2018; Christoffersen 2018; Kaczmarski 2017a, 2017b), and global governance (Ambrosio 2017; Rolland 2019, 2020a, 2020b; Bin 2019; Ekman et. al. 2020) have been noted repeatedly.

There are three areas in which this alignment manifests itself most clearly: defence, subverting international norms (particularly on democracy and human rights), and cyber-governance. The depth and breadth of recent Sino-Russian cooperation and alignment in these areas have been covered extensively in a series of reports.[4] Therefore, I will provide a brief overview of them before moving on what to do in the face of this new authoritarian challenge.

> *"China and Russia believe that they need to speed up this shift in global power away from the West.*

Defence cooperation between Russia and China has been growing for some years, particularly after Russia's illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Kofman 2020: Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021). Arms sales, cooperation in military technology development, and joint military exercises are all parts of this increasingly close relationship between Russia and China. It is not a formal military alliance and it is unlikely to evolve into one. Both countries prioritize different theatres of operation (Europe is the primary theatre for Russia, while China's main concern is the Pacific), and being great powers themselves, neither requires security guarantees from the other (Kofman 2020). Nevertheless, this strategic partnership between Russia and China is not only buttressed by the overall drivers of this relationship, as discussed above, and common threat perception vis-a-vis the United States but also by the fact that they can provide to each other what the other lacks. As Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021, 7) summarize:

> the PLA benefits from the advanced weapons systems it receives from Russia, as well as the operational experience it gains by exercising

> with Russia's combat-tested forces. Conversely, Russia benefits from Chinese capital, including investments needed to finance major Russian projects, and Beijing's purchase of energy products and military equipment that U.S. sanctions prevent Russia from selling elsewhere. In some areas, such as shipbuilding and unmanned aerial vehicles, China has strengths where Russia has weaknesses or is behind. Russia has also turned to China in the wake of Western sanctions to access technology like electronic components that it previously obtained from the West. Moreover, both countries likely view cross-collaboration on a number of fronts – such as guided missile technology, unmanned systems, and training data for artificial intelligence (AI) – as opportunities to fill gaps and accelerate progress.

Although there are limits to this cooperation, including an aversion in both parties towards sharing too much military technology and a preference for autarky in the defence sector, its pace is likely to increase in the future.[5]

Russia and China also increased the number of joint military exercises since 2012 including air, land, and naval components. For instance, naval components such as Joint Sea exercises took place in the Mediterranean, South China Sea, the Black Sea, and the Baltics (Kashin 2018). China participated in "Russia's annual strategic command-staff exercises, starting with Vostok-2018 and Tsentr-2019 – both significant developments from the Russian standpoint" (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021, 6). These exercises primarily – but not only – serve as a geopolitical signal to the United States and others of their close alignment and their willingness to act together if the need arises.

The Russia-China axis is most prominent, however, when it comes to subverting international norms and institutions, especially on human rights and democracy. As discussed above, both Putin and the CCP regime under Xi perceive promotion of democracy and universal human rights as a direct threat to their rule. Therefore, they work actively and in tandem to undermine and subvert the normative foundations of the liberal international order, and paralyze and eventually redesign international institutions such as the UN to create a global order that is safe for autocracy.

China and Russia are engaged in a crusade against universal human rights in the various agencies of the UN, "emphasizing state-led development, national sovereignty, and nonintervention as norms above protection of human rights" (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021, 11). They go about undermining the UN system of human rights protection in a very deliberate fashion, eliminating or defunding hundreds of human rights-related positions across the UN, including "those focused on monitoring, investigating, and reporting on the abuse of women and children and other rights violations in the Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, Sudan, Mali, Haiti, and elsewhere" (ibid., 11). Both countries use their veto power in the UN Security Council to block

any criticism of their human rights records including the genocide perpetuated by the CCP regime against Uyghurs in Xinjiang (East Turkestan).

According to Ekman et al. (2020), both countries account for the vast majority of vetoes in the UN Security Council and neither supported any resolution opposed by the other. China also uses its economic power to pressure members of the Human Rights Council to follow China's lead on issues related to human rights or democratic norms. China aims to alter the way the UN interprets human rights, and it "wants to place 'harmony' and right to development over individual rights and political freedoms" (Ekman et. al. 2020, 3).

Both countries' support for dictatorships in Syria, Iran, Venezuela, Belarus, and Cuba are well known. Particularly Russia, but also increasingly China, also provide support for various illiberal regimes in Eastern Europe, the Balkans, Middle East, and Africa, seeing attempts by the United States and the EU to promote democracy, good governance, transparency, and human rights as attempts to undermine regimes that are friendly to them. Russia and China see each other and other authoritarian and illiberal regimes as valuable partners in their ideological confrontation with liberal democracies.

> *"Russia and China see each other and other authoritarian and illiberal regimes as valuable partners.*

Russian disinformation campaigns aiming to subvert and weaken democratic societies has been reported and studied extensively, and therefore are well-known. Until recently, Chinese attempts to subvert democracy and engage in disinformation campaigns were limited in scope (mostly targeting Taiwan). However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, China has adopted a more aggressive strategy aimed at shaping the narrative through its so-called "wolf warrior diplomacy" (Weitz 2020; Wescott and Jiang 2020; Miller 2020). In this case, China is learning from Russia and both countries increasingly align their messaging and influence operations, even in the absence of formal coordination (Ekman et. al 2020; Kendall-Taylor et. al. 2020).

Unlike the potential limits in defence cooperation, "the common strategic approach to these issues indicates virtually unlimited potential for close collaboration to refashion an international order less democratic and more suited to Russia and China's interests, forming the foundation for a more robust relationship going forward" (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021, 12).

Lastly, Russia and China are increasingly acting in concert when it comes to cyber-governance and information security. Their cooperation in this field has been steadily increasing in the last decade, both in bilateral forums as well as multilaterally such as in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and International Telecommunications Union (Ekman et. al. 2020). They share best practices of digital authoritarianism with each other and try to shape norms and regulations regarding cyber security and the functioning of the Internet (Segal 2020). As Ekman et. al. (2020, 6) point out, their normative framework "prizes sovereignty in the information space (and governments' capacity to control it) over the free flow of information." Both Russia and China independently pursue "cyber sovereignty" – China's Great Firewall and Russia's RuNet – and seek to control content and information flow. After all, both see "free and open internet…and the spread of digital tools as posing a threat to their national sovereignty and their hold on power" (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021, 16).

"Russia and China are increasingly acting in concert when it comes to cyber-governance and information security.

Not everything is well in the Sino-Russian relations however. There are existing and potential differences between two countries on a number of fronts. First, growing power asymmetry between Russia and China in favour of the latter is and will remain a concern for the Kremlin. Putin is very well aware that the tables had been turned since the Cold War and a legacy of mistrust lingers below the surface. Second, despite increasing cooperation on defence issues, intellectual property theft and reverse engineering by China remains a concern for Russia, particularly as it relates to advanced weapons systems. China is increasingly becoming a rival to Russia in arms sales as it improves its defence industries. Third, despite increasing cultural, educational, and military-to-military contact, cultural affinity between the two countries remains non-existent or very limited. Russian elite perceives Russia as a Eurasian power, with the emphasis being on Europe.

Fourth, as BRI develops, China will become an even more important competitor both economically and politically in the regions that are historically important for Russia, such as Central Asia and the Arctic. It is already fuelling a "quiet rivalry" in Central Asia and such rivalry is likely to intensify as

Russia sees its traditional sphere of influence shrink in the region (Yau 2020; Freeman 2018). Russia and China have different priorities when it comes to the Arctic (Sorensen and Klimenko 2017). For Russia, the Arctic is a matter of both economic development and asserting sovereignty. For China, on the other hand, the region is slowly increasing its importance due to its future economic potential. Thus, while Russia is very protective of its sovereignty in the Arctic and is weary of outside actors being involved in Arctic governance, China's primary fear is to be locked out from the region, creating potential for conflict of interest between the two countries (Sorensen and Klimenko 2017). Lastly, Russia is a leading seller of advanced weapon systems to both India and Vietnam, the two countries that are increasingly wary of aggressive military posturing by China. Those capabilities are an increasing concern for Beijing (Sutter 2017).

However, none of these disagreements and concerns are strong enough in the short to medium-term to override the primary drivers of Sino-Russian alignment. They are either concerns for the long-term, such as related to the Arctic that could be dealt with when the time comes, or secondary interests to one of the parties that is not worth sacrificing Sino-Russian alignment, such as Russian weapon sales to India and Vietnam. Therefore, we have to assume that Russia and China will continue to align their policies and strategies in the next decade.

What is to be done?

There are four potential strategies that liberal democracies and their like-minded partners around the world could pursue in the face of a rising Sino-Russian authoritarian axis.

The first is to do nothing. This line of reasoning argues that whatever the current cooperation and degree of alignment, it is bound to be short-lived, a product of convenience rather than a basis for an enduring relationship between Russia and China. Therefore, the argument goes, the liberal democracies more broadly and the West in particular do not need to worry too much about a potential Sino-Russian axis. Indeed, the biggest danger would be an over-reaction that would push those two countries together.

The second line of thinking calls for peeling off one of the two, generally Russia, to disrupt this authoritarian axis. The so-called wedge strategy envisions improved relations with and concessions to Russia in order to convince the Kremlin that it will be better off siding with the West against China or at least stay neutral in the long-term.

The third strategy aims to mitigate the effects of Sino-Russian alignment in select domains rather than confronting it in toto and advocate a differentiated approach to Russia and China – one that includes cooperation with each of them in different domains and geographies to exacerbate the tensions between them. Here the aim is more modest than the wedge strategy. Instead of hoping to peel off one member of this axis, it focuses on degrading their ability to coordinate by creating incentives for cooperation with the West, even if that does not lead to a "break-up" between Russia and China.

The last strategy is a comprehensive and active dual-containment of Russia and China (Mandelbaum 2019) that unequivocally identifies them as adversaries of liberal democracies, at least under their present regimes, and pushes back against authoritarian subversion of the international order while vigorously defending the interests and values of the West and its like-minded partners around the world.

> *Russia and China will continue to align their policies and strategies in the next decade.*

The first two strategies, namely doing nothing and convincing Russia to flip, can be dismissed with a brief discussion. Both fundamentally misunderstand the nature of the authoritarian challenge and the primary drivers of Sino-Russian alignment. The first strategy overlooks both the historical lessons Moscow and Beijing learned from the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950s and the long history of cooperation between Russia and China almost immediately after the Cold War. This may not be a formal military alliance, and it does not need to be, but that does make it less enduring. It is not a fluke and it is not a so-called "marriage of convenience." It is an alignment based on a common threat perception vis-a-vis the United States and a common ideological opposition to the liberal world order and its normative underpinnings. The imperatives of regime survival and the belief that the West is in secular decline convinces both Putin and Xi that their best bet is to work together in the short to medium-term. They can sort out their differences in the long-term after the West is defeated and the international order is redesigned to the benefit of both Russia and China.

Furthermore, the idea that the West could pursue a successful wedge strategy against Sino-Russian axis is well-intentioned but fundamentally misguided. For such a strategy to work, it would need to satisfy three conditions. First, the pay-off for Russia needs to be sufficiently large for it to "flip" or at least

stay neutral. It cannot be just symbolic gestures of dialogue or offers of cooperation that are not relevant for core Russian interests. That would essentially mean, at minimum, recognizing Russian claims of a sphere of influence in its "near abroad," ceasing the support for democracy and human rights in Russia and its neighborhood, and accepting Putin's kleptocracy as a legitimate partner for the West.

Second, concessions to Russia should be politically, strategically, and normatively acceptable to the West. The enormous cost of such concessions for European and transatlantic security and cohesion and the damage they would inflict on the normative foundations of the liberal world order are obvious. They are simply not acceptable on both sides of the Atlantic. Lastly, Putin needs to believe that this is a genuine "grand bargain" that accepts Russia as a great power and an equal player in world affairs. Even with such enormous concessions, it is not clear whether and why Vladimir Putin should change his belief that the West is out to get him. He would perceive this as a ploy to drive a wedge between Russia and China and then pick off Russia alone afterwards. A wedge attempt would be transparent to all the parties involved, thus reducing its likelihood of success. In short, the cost of wooing Russia far exceeds the uncertain – and easily reversible – benefits of peeling off Russia from China.

This leaves us with the last two strategies, namely selective mitigation and dual-containment. I argue that both of these strategies are best thought of as complementary rather than competing strategies.

Selective mitigation, advocated by Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021) as the preferred strategy for the United States, involve three central claims. First, the US needs to prioritize where and how to push back against Sino-Russian coordination since strategy is all about making choices. Second, the US needs to monitor and plan for deepening Sino-Russian cooperation as attempts to drive a wedge between them are not very likely to succeed. Lastly, despite the low likelihood of success, the US should still look for potential rifts and imbalances in Russia-China relations and when possible try to alter Russia's calculus. Kendall-Taylor and Shullman (2021) explicitly point out that their suggestion of trying to change the Kremlin's calculus is not the wedge strategy described above, as they make clear here:

> Critically, a U.S. approach designed to change Russia's calculus is not the same as the so-called "reverse Nixon" strategy of cozying up to Russia and choosing to ignore Moscow's direct assaults on U.S. interests and democracy to pull it away from Beijing. The costs to the United States of such an approach would outweigh the benefits of mitigating the effects of their alignment. Such a strategy would compromise the long-standing U.S. commitment to supporting countries' right to pursue their self-defined interests and signal to onlooking

> countries that the costs associated with efforts to undermine democracy are short-lived. Moreover, there is no guarantee that efforts to lure Russia away from China would be successful. This is because Putin views the United States and not Beijing as the central threat to his hold on power. (Kendall-Taylor and Shullman 2021, 26)

Crucially, selective mitigation is a US-centric strategy and is meant to provide an edge for the United States in its competition with China in the next decades. Thus, its focus is on how to maximize US assets and leverage against China. However, the Sino-Russian alignment poses a threat not only to the United States but to democracies around the world, including Canada and the European Union. What is needed is a coordinated and aligned strategy by the West and other democratic partners. A broad, coordinated, and multilayered dual-containment strategy by the West writ-large against the Sino-Russian axis will complement a selective mitigation strategy pursued by the United States. In other words, while the United States focuses its power in areas that will have the most bang for its buck, the EU, Canada, and their like-minded partners could fill in the gaps. The authoritarian axis needs to be met with a democratic axis on all domains – from global norms to defence to emerging technologies – and in all geographies – from the Arctic to the Indo-Pacific to the Middle East and Africa.

What could such a dual containment strategy against the Sino-Russian alignment look like? The specifics of such a strategy would depend on the domain, issues, interests, and the capabilities of the partners involved. It also does not mean treating China and Russia as a monolithic bloc. Such a strategy would require understanding them as authoritarian powers with different capabilities and specific interests yet aligned due to common drivers that are unlikely to change in the near future. It also does not mean pursuing regime change in Russia or China, a charge that is more of a strawman rather than an option that was ever seriously entertained by the West. Dual-containment does not mean escalating tensions or engaging in military confrontation, unless instigated by Russia or China. What it means is much closer in spirit to Kennan's (1947) original formulation of containment as "a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant" policy that is multilayered and multilateral – involving not only the US, the EU and Canada but also other like-minded partners in relevant regions such as Japan, South Korea, India, Taiwan, and Ukraine.

The following is a non-exhaustive list that could provide guidance in developing a multi-layered, multilateral strategy:

- The CCP-led China and Putin's regime in Russia are adversaries of the West and its democratic partners around the world. They are increasingly aligned in international politics and the Sino-Russian axis is unlikely to unravel in the near future. A clear-eyed assessment and recognition of this state of affairs should be the first step.

- A semi-formal institutional structure in the form of a community or alliance of democracies (Devlen and Miller 2020) modelled after the G7 but expanded to include other major democracies such as South Korea and India is needed to ensure policy coordination across different domains and geographies.

- The West should push back against Sino-Russian subversion of international institutions (Weintzek 2020) and should coordinate its efforts with other democratic partners around the world.

- The normative foundations of the liberal world order such as democracy, rule of law, and human rights should be reaffirmed and defended without apology.

- The West should strengthen democratic partners that are at the frontier of this great power competition such as those in the Indo-Pacific and Eastern Europe.

- The West should continue to provide support for the defenders of human rights and democracy in Russia and China.

- Existing multilateral institutions such as NATO as well as intelligence alliances such as Five Eyes should play a central role in developing a comprehensive plan to counter Sino-Russian alignment and complement the selective mitigation strategy of the United States.

- The democratic world should aim to reduce its economic and resource dependence on Russia and China. A complete decoupling is unlikely at least in the medium-term, however, reorienting strategic supply chains away from China, protecting communication infrastructure and intellectual property in emerging technologies against espionage, diversifying energy resources away from Russia, and reducing the dependence of developing economies on Chinese investment are all goals that could realistically be pursued in the next decade.

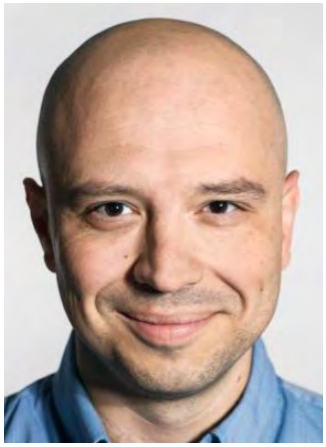
- The West should be wary of attempts in linking cooperation on global issues, such as climate change and pandemics, to acquiesce to Russian and Chinese demands on other areas. These global problems require global cooperation and it is in the interest of both Russia and China to work with the West as much as it is the case for the West.

Conclusion

A new authoritarian axis is fast taking shape in international politics. Driven by a neo-authoritarian ideology, obsessed with regime security, and convinced that the West is in terminal decline, Russia and China increasingly align their policies from defence to international institutions to cyber-governance. Their hostility to universal human rights and democracy, their "Animal Farm" understanding of sovereignty (some are more sovereign than others, only major powers are truly sovereign), their desire to make the world safe for autocracy, and their increasingly revanchist policies pose a serious challenge to the rules-based international order and its defenders.

Ignoring the Sino-Russian alignment and waiting for it to dissolve is shortsighted at best. Hoping to be able to drive a wedge between Russia and China is a fool's errand that misunderstands the deep structural factors that drive their alignment. What is needed is the dual-containment of Russia and China by an alliance of democracies led by the United States, devising a multilayered, multilateral, coordinated strategy capitalizing on their individual strengths and amplifying each other's capabilities across domains and geographies. The future of rules-based international order, liberal democracy, and individual rights and freedoms depends on how well we confront this task.

About the author



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Endnotes

1 I'd like to thank Lucas Donovan for his research assistance.

2 This section is based on Devlen 2020.

3 On hostage taking by CCP, see Bagshaw 2020 and Connoly 2020 for recent examples where Canadian and Australian citizens are detained by CCP.

4 See *inter alia* Kendal-Taylor et. al 2020, Kendal-Taylor and Shullman 2021, Kofman 2020, Segal 2020, Bendett and Kania 2020, Edmonds 2020, Ekman et. al. 2020, Coats 2019.

5 See Kaufman 2020 for a detailed discussion of Sino-Russian cooperation in military technology and arms sales as well as the limits to such cooperation.

6 See Rid 2020 and Kolga 2019 for overviews of this vast literature. Disinfo Watch (https://disinfowatch.org/) and Stop Fake (https://www.stopfake.org/en/main/) provide extensive examples of Russian and Chinese disinformation campaigns.

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