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CHAPTER 1

China-Russia Relations and Transatlantic Security

Brian G. Carlson

The China-Russia relationship is an increasingly important factor in transatlantic security. Russia and China pose security challenges to the Euro-Atlantic region in distinct and mostly uncoordinated ways, but their partnership allows both countries to pursue spheres of influence close to home. The United States and its allies will therefore face growing security challenges in both the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions. The rise of China will force the United States to devote increased attention and military assets to Asia, underscoring the need for a strengthened European pillar in NATO.

Russian President Vladimir Putin shakes hands with Chinese President Xi Jinping during the BRICS Summit in Brasilia, Brazil, November 13, 2019. *Sputnik / Ramil Sitdikov / Kremlin via REUTERS*

Relations between China and Russia have grown increasingly close in recent years, a trend that will have important implications for transatlantic security. The China-Russia relationship features growing cooperation in both diplomatic and security affairs. The two countries often align their diplomacy, jointly rejecting international criticism of their domestic governance, standing in opposition to conceptions of an international order based on liberal political values, and forging common positions on a variety of international issues, including in the UN Security Council. The strengthening of political and diplomatic relations, in turn, has enabled China and Russia to increase their bilateral defense cooperation. This includes Russian sales of advanced weapons to China and joint military and naval exercises of increasing frequency, intensity, and geographical scope, including joint naval exercises within the past few years in the Mediterranean and Baltic seas.

As China and Russia draw closer together, the impact on transatlantic security stems not primarily from the two countries' direct military cooperation or contemplation of joint military operations in the Euro-Atlantic region, but rather from the broader effects of their rapprochement. The China-Russia "strategic partnership" creates a geopolitical environment that complicates US grand strategy, with important consequences for Europe and the transatlantic partnership. Comity between China and Russia ensures that both countries enjoy a secure strategic rear, freeing each of them from the fear that the other would abandon it and join its adversaries, especially in a crisis.

The reassurance that both countries gain from this understanding affords both of them some additional room for maneuver in their own regions, where they are establishing spheres of influence.[1] They pursue this goal through the tactic of "probing," which entails limited, calculated provocations designed to test the commitment of the United States to its allies and partners.[2] China and Russia frequently disavow any intention to form a political-military alliance. In many cases, parallel rather than coordinated actions by the two countries impinge on Western interests. Coordinated China-Russia efforts in Europe remain limited, but the two countries act individually in ways that pose challenges to regional security.

Both China and Russia are strengthening their military capabilities, applying pressure on the United States and its allies in the Asia-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions, respectively. This places increased strain on the

United States, stretching its resources and complicating the task of fulfilling its security commitments. According to several recent studies, the United States would face severe challenges in winning a war against either country under certain scenarios, including a war against Russia over the Baltics or a war against China over Taiwan. The ultimate risk would be simultaneous or sequential moves by the two countries in their respective regions that could thrust the United States into great-power war on two fronts. China's growing power will force the United States to devote increased attention, resources, and military assets to the Asia-Pacific or broader Indo-Pacific region. Meanwhile, in the absence of a rapprochement between Russia and the West, which appears unlikely in the near term, security challenges in Europe will also remain pressing.

Under these geopolitical circumstances, the United States is likely to face a period of sustained great-power competition. US President Joe Biden's administration appears to favor a dual-track approach of seeking cooperation with both China and Russia on issues of common interest while also attempting to counter threats and resist aggression. In order to pursue this strategy successfully, the United States must rely heavily on its network of alliances, including the transatlantic partnership. Europe could make a valuable contribution to this effort by increasing defense spending and assuming a greater share of the burden for European security within the framework of NATO.

China-Russia Relations and the West

The West has been an important factor in the strengthening of China-Russia relations since the end of the Cold War. The convergence of national identities between China and Russia, based largely on opposition to US power and to conceptions of a liberal international order, which both countries viewed as Western-centric, was an important driver of the relationship.[3] Both China and Russia resented the preponderance of power that the United States enjoyed, criticized US "hegemonism," and actively encouraged the formation of a multipolar world to replace the unipolar order that emerged after the end of the Cold War. They denounced criticism of their human rights records by Western leaders, whom they accused of interfering in their domestic affairs with the goal of promoting political change. As tensions grew in their respective relations with the West, China and Russia drew closer to each other. They viewed their bilateral relationship as a means of gaining increased leverage in disputes with the West.

These trends became especially pronounced in the past decade. At a time when several of China's neighbors were becoming increasingly wary of its growing power and seeking increased support from the United States, Russia defied the expectations of many analysts by drawing ever closer to China, despite the growing power imbalance in China's favor and the potential vulnerability of Russia's eastern regions. Russia set aside long-term concerns about China's rise, calculating that its main challenges for the foreseeable future lay in its troubled relations with the West, especially following the onset of the Ukraine crisis. In particular, President Vladimir Putin viewed the West as a potential threat to his domestic governance. For Russia, China's rise had the possible benefit of diverting US attention to Asia. For China, which embarked on an increasingly assertive course in foreign policy under President Xi Jinping's leadership, Russia's disputes with the West also served as potential distractions for the United States. Both China and Russia recognized that the network of US alliances, including the transatlantic partnership, gave the United States a crucial advantage. They accordingly sought to disrupt these alliances. In Europe, Russia began these efforts at an early stage, but China has become increasingly active on this front in recent years.

Relations with the West are not the only driver of the China-Russia relationship, however. Some aspects, including energy ties, are largely a function of the bilateral relationship itself.[4] More broadly, Russia has important reasons to maintain strong relations with China regardless of the state of its relations with the West. Historical memory of the Sino-Soviet split during the Cold War serves as a reminder for Russia of the price that it could pay for estrangement from China. At that time, the Soviet Union was the stronger of the two countries. Now, with the balance of power in the bilateral relationship tilting rapidly in China's favor, the risks for Russia would be even greater. Given the vulnerability of Russia's underpopulated, underdeveloped regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East, Russia can ill afford a rupture of its relationship with China. For its part, China views Russia as not only a partner in resisting the West, but also as a provider of energy and advanced weapons as well as a friendly neighbor, an important consideration at a time when China faces tensions with several other countries along its periphery.

Despite the increasingly close relationship between China and Russia, their partnership has exerted only a limited direct impact on the West. To date, their cooperative efforts have failed to

yield significant leverage over the West in terms of halting or reversing particular foreign policy decisions by the United States or Europe.[5] The setbacks that the United States and Europe have suffered in recent years are largely the result of domestic political, social, and economic factors in Western societies themselves.[6] China and Russia largely failed to take advantage of transatlantic tensions during Donald Trump's presidency, instead alienating many European countries through their human rights abuses at home and their increasingly assertive behavior abroad, including their efforts to gain influence in European countries.[7]

In Russia's case, the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny in August 2020 exacerbated tensions with the West. After falling ill on a domestic flight in Russia, Navalny was flown to Germany for treatment, where his diagnosis showed poisoning with Novichok, a nerve agent originally developed by the Soviet Union. Following his recovery, Navalny returned to Russia in January to resume his challenge to the government. The Russian authorities immediately imprisoned him, but his supporters held large anti-government protests in several Russian cities. Both the United States and the EU imposed sanctions on Russia in response. The attack on Navalny also prompted calls for Germany to cancel Nord Stream 2, a pipeline that is set to deliver natural gas from Russia to Germany through the Baltic Sea. The German government resisted these calls, however, and by early 2021 the project was nearing completion despite the threat of US sanctions against participating German companies.

As for China, the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic led to a deterioration of relations with the West. In both the United States and Europe, the pandemic caused high death tolls and extensive economic damage. The US-China relationship, which already exhibited signs of an impending superpower rivalry, grew worse amid the pandemic, as US officials and the public blamed China for covering up and failing to contain the outbreak. When the pandemic first reached Europe, China saw an opportunity to increase its influence in several European countries by providing medical supplies and other assistance. Some of the Chinese equipment turned out to be defective, however. This failure, combined with China's heavy-handed efforts to shift blame for the outbreak and to claim credit for its response, turned public opinion in many European countries against China and raised concerns about the consequences of growing dependence on an increasingly powerful authoritarian country. This tendency had

its limits, however, as the European Union concluded negotiations with China on the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (CAI) in December 2020, despite the incoming Biden administration's expressed desire to consult with the EU first.

The pandemic also created challenges for the China-Russia relationship. Russia closed its border with China in the early days of the pandemic, but China later turned the tables by closing the border itself following a sharp rise in cases in Russia, a decision that left many Chinese citizens temporarily stranded on the other side. The two countries handled these and other pandemic-related challenges relatively smoothly, but other issues caused tension in 2020. When the Russian Embassy in China commemorated the 160th anniversary of the founding of Vladivostok, the city in the Russian Far East, Chinese Internet users responded angrily, noting that the city, formerly called Haishenwai, was part of the Qing dynasty's Manchurian territory prior to Russia's imperial conquest of the region. The China-Russia border is settled as a matter of law, but indications that segments of Chinese public opinion reject the status quo could become a concern for Russia over the long term. Russian prosecutors charged a Russian scientist specializing in Arctic research with allegedly passing classified information to China. The standoff between Chinese and Indian forces in the two countries' Himalayan border region, which resulted in a skirmish that killed 20 Indian soldiers and an undeclared number of Chinese troops, created an awkward situation for Russia, which attempts to maintain friendly relations with both countries.[8]

Despite these tensions, the China-Russia relationship appeared to remain strong. In October, Putin responded to a question about the possibility of an alliance with China by saying, "It is possible to imagine anything. … We have not set that goal for ourselves. But, in principle, we are not going to rule it out, either."[9] This appeared to suggest greater openness to the possibility than Putin had expressed previously. Russian leaders also rebuffed India's efforts to encourage Russia's participation in the Indo-Pacific regional concept. In December, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov criticized India's participation in the US-led Indo-Pacific Strategy, accusing the United States and its allies of attempting to draw India into "anti-Chinese games." That same month, for the second time since July 2019, Chinese and Russian strategic bombers conducted a joint air patrol in Northeast Asia, prompting Japan and South Korea to

scramble fighter jets in response. The joint air patrols were part of a pattern of increasingly close China-Russia defense cooperation in recent years.

Cooperation between China and Russia is a growing concern for both the United States and Europe. On both sides of the Atlantic, however, relations with China and Russia are primarily determined by interactions with the two countries individually. China and Russia act in parallel in ways that have an impact on Western societies and on transatlantic security. The United States is increasingly preoccupied with potential security threats from both China and Russia, but geography dictates that Europe has its own distinct perspective. Viewed individually, both Russia and China pose security challenges to Europe, but the nature of these challenges differs significantly. Recent strategy documents by the EU and national governments in Europe tend to distinguish between Russia, which they present as a revisionist power with aggressive aims, and China, which they portray as increasingly influential on the world stage and assertive in Asia, but not a direct military threat to Europe.[10]

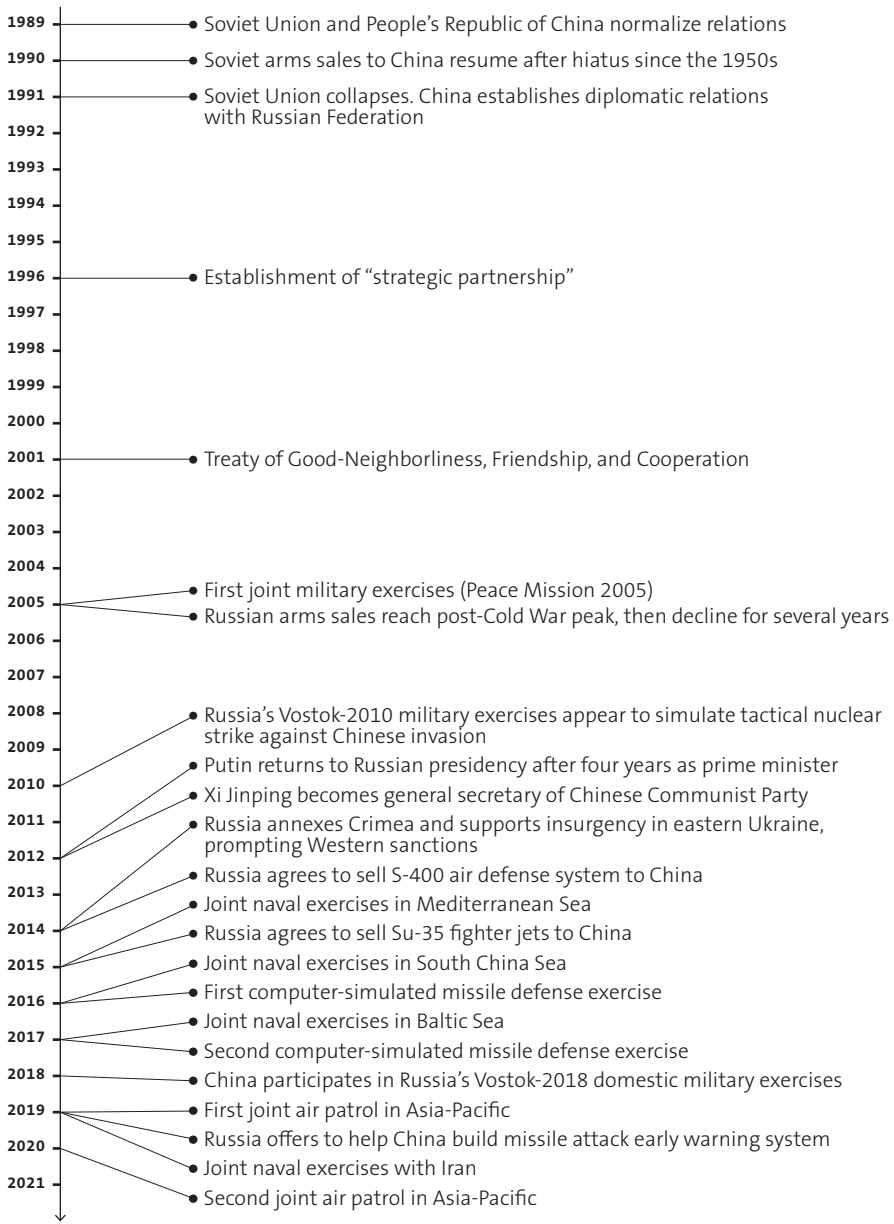
Russia's Challenge to Transatlantic Security

Russia remains the primary security concern for NATO and the broader transatlantic partnership. The security relationship between Russia and the West has been increasingly tense since Russia's annexation of Crimea and the rise of a Russian-supported insurgency in eastern Ukraine. Since then, Western countries have pursued a dual-track approach to Russia, seeking dialogue and a political solution in Ukraine through the Minsk process while at the same time imposing sanctions and seeking to bolster NATO's deterrent, especially along its eastern flank. Russia has pursued military modernization, introduced new weapons systems, and conducted large-scale military exercises in its western regions. The Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, which was negotiated at the conclusion of the Cold War, remains moribund. Russia suspended its participation in the treaty in 2007 and withdrew altogether in March 2015, one year after the annexation of Crimea. Russia also frequently conducts provocations such as bomber and fighter patrols that make incursions into the airspace of NATO member states and other Western countries. In 2020, the United States withdrew from the Open Skies Treaty, alleging Russian violations.[11]

The nuclear dimension of security relations between Russia and the West remains crucial, with growing

China-Russia Relations and Defense Cooperation

Since 1989



implications for China. The United States and Russia agreed to a five-year extension of the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START) in the early days of Biden's presidency, just days before the treaty was set to expire, but many questions remain about the future of arms control. In the view of many analysts, Russia adheres to a "theory of victory" according to which it could use the threat of nuclear escalation or the actual first use of nuclear weapons in order to "de-escalate" a conflict on favorable terms.[12] Russia has taken several steps in the apparent pursuit of this capability. In addition to modernizing all three legs of its nuclear triad, it has developed new intercontinental-range systems such as a hypersonic glide vehicle, a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered cruise missile, and a nuclear-armed, nuclear-powered, undersea autonomous torpedo. Russia has also established superiority in non-strategic, dual-capable systems that can be armed with either nuclear or conventional weapons, including the SSC-8/9M729, a ground-launched cruise missile that violated the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty.[13] The Trump administration refrained from extending New START, insisting that the two sides first reach a political framework agreement calling for a new treaty that would verifiably cover all nuclear warheads, establish updated verification measures, and include China. Russia raised its own demands, insisting that a new treaty should address missile defense and other issues.

Russia also countered US demands that a new treaty include China, arguing that China should make its own sovereign decision on this matter. China has consistently refused to participate in international arms control for as long as its arsenal remains significantly smaller than those of the two nuclear superpowers. Although Russian officials would welcome China's eventual participation, they are reluctant to apply pressure on China for fear that this would merely alienate an important partner while failing to bring it to the negotiating table. They also argue that any arms control negotiations that include China should also include Britain and France.

Russia's position has shifted as its relationship with China has grown closer. Only a few years ago, Russian officials suggested that China should join future arms control agreements and complained that only Russia and the United States were bound by the restrictions of the INF Treaty. Russian defense planners harbor largely unspoken concerns about China's growing conventional military capabilities, including conventionally equipped missiles of intermediate or shorter

range.[14] The ability to defend Russia's eastern regions against a potential Chinese attack depends on nuclear deterrence or, failing this, on the early use of tactical nuclear weapons against an invading Chinese army. Concerns about China appear to have been an initial reason for Russia's violation of the INF Treaty, though the recent improvement in bilateral relations has eased Russia's immediate concerns about a potential security threat from China.

The United States withdrew from the INF Treaty in August 2019 on the grounds that Russia was unwilling to return to full compliance with its provisions, which would have meant accepting that the SSC-8/9M729 was in violation of the treaty. The United States could now choose to deploy missiles of the previously forbidden range in Europe. These would most likely be conventional systems, considering that NATO's member countries would have difficulty agreeing on the deployment of nuclear missiles in Europe. The demise of the INF Treaty could also allow the United States to deploy intermediate-range missiles in Asia, most likely equipped with conventional warheads, as a means of countering the growing military power of China, which was not a signatory to the treaty and possesses a large arsenal of missiles in this category.[15]

Beyond traditional security issues, Russia also poses security concerns for Europe and the transatlantic partners in newer, non-traditional ways. Russia's use of "little green men" during its seizure and annexation of Crimea, as well as its unofficial support for insurgents in eastern Ukraine, raised concerns about possible future instances of such hybrid or gray-zone interventions that fall below the level of open, direct military engagement. Russia has poisoned critics of the Putin regime on the territory of Western countries, as in the fatal polonium attack on Alexander Litvinenko in London in 2006 and the Novichok attack on Sergei Skrypal in Salisbury, England, in 2018, which Skrypal and his daughter survived but which killed a bystander. The poisoning of Navalny occurred on Russian soil, but it generated outrage in the West. The Novichok attacks call into question Russia's compliance with the Chemical Weapons Convention and are also examples of Russian information warfare, as the Russian government denied that the Novichok was of Russian origin and suggested that Western governments might have been the perpetrators. Germany also accused the Russian government of ordering the killing of a former Chechen rebel commander who was shot dead in Berlin in 2019. Russian cyber threats are a growing concern, as shown by

the 2020 SolarWinds attack and other cases. Russia also seeks to sow division in Western societies and to undermine EU and NATO cohesion through interference in domestic politics.

China's Challenge to Transatlantic Security

For Europe, China is not a direct military threat. China has upgraded its military capabilities in recent years, but these efforts are focused on its immediate neighborhood in the Asia-Pacific region. China has also pursued an increasingly assertive foreign policy, but this is a more immediate concern for US allies in Asia than for Europe. Many European countries are wary of becoming embroiled in the US-China rivalry and especially in any potential military conflicts in Asia. Moreover, many Central and Eastern European countries want NATO to remain focused on Russia. China has gained increased prominence in European policy debates, but mostly on issues of trade, investment, technology, and human rights.

Nevertheless, China poses a variety of challenges to European security. As a result, China has risen on the transatlantic agenda. A report by the European Commission in 2019 called China a "systemic rival."[16] In late 2020, a report by the independent NATO Reflection Group called for the alliance to develop a coordinated policy approach toward China.[17] Like Russia, China engages in efforts to undermine Western liberal democracies. It seeks to coopt elites and to influence public opinion in European countries, including Switzerland.[18] These efforts pose a threat to the political sovereignty of individual European countries and the European Union as a whole. Growing economic dependence on China, especially in supply chains that are crucial for defense and intelligence, could create vulnerabilities for Europe. China's inroads in parts of Europe, especially in the Western Balkans, and along its periphery, including in the Arctic and in the Middle East and North Africa region, pose geopolitical challenges to Europe.[19] China's efforts to engage with European countries bilaterally or in sub-regional forums, including the 17+1 format that promotes China's business and investment relations with 17 countries in Central and Eastern Europe, threaten to divide Europe and prevent it from negotiating with China from a position of strength based on European unity and transatlantic cohesion.

China also poses a cybersecurity threat to Europe and the transatlantic partners, particularly through cyber-espionage. China has gained an advantage in crucial high-tech sectors,

including Artificial Intelligence (AI) and fifth-generation wireless technology (5G), with important economic and security ramifications for the West.[20] The Trump administration had some success in persuading European countries to limit or block Chinese telecommunication giant Huawei's involvement in 5G networks, arguing that such steps were necessary in order to protect Western intelligence-sharing against threats from Chinese surveillance and espionage.

These challenges require European countries to strengthen cyber defenses, diversify supply chains, expand intelligence-sharing, and take other measures to strengthen the resilience of their societies.[21] Although the security challenges that China poses to Europe are largely indirect, the growth of China's military capabilities in the Asia-Pacific region will have important secondary effects in Europe. This trend has already caused shifts in US defense policy, with inevitable implications for Europe and transatlantic security.

US Defense Strategy Shifts to Great-Power Competition

The combination of China's rise to global power and the revival of Russia's great-power ambitions led the United States to adjust its foreign and defense policies during Trump's presidency. The most recent *National Security Strategy of the United States,* issued in December 2017, named China and Russia as "revisionist powers" that "challenge American power, influence, and interests, attempting to erode American security and prosperity."[22] The summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, unveiled in January 2018, identified the "central challenge to US prosperity and security as the *reemergence of long-term, strategic competition*" by these revisionist powers.[23]

The new focus on great-power competition led to a change in defense strategy. For much of the post-Cold War era, the United States followed a two-war strategy. This approach sought to ensure that the United States could defeat two "rogue states" simultaneously, for example in the Middle East and on the Korean Peninsula. With the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy, the United States shifted its focus toward securing the ability to defeat one great power in a war at any given time. The strategy does not provide for victory over two great powers simultaneously. Instead, it calls for the United States to maintain the capability, while defeating a single great power in one theater, to deter another great power in a different theater at the same time.[24]

In the period preceding the release of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,

a growing body of evidence suggested that the United States would have difficulty defeating even one great power at a time under certain circumstances. Studies by RAND for the US Department of Defense found that the task of defending Taiwan against a Chinese assault had grown increasingly difficult and that the United States and NATO might lose a war with Russia over the Baltics under present conditions.[25] Following the release of the new defense strategy, the congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission reached similar conclusions, as did other studies.[26] David Ochmanek, a researcher at RAND, described the situation vividly in March 2019, when he said that in many recent war games pitting the United States and its allies against China or Russia, the US-led coalition "gets its ass handed to it."[27]

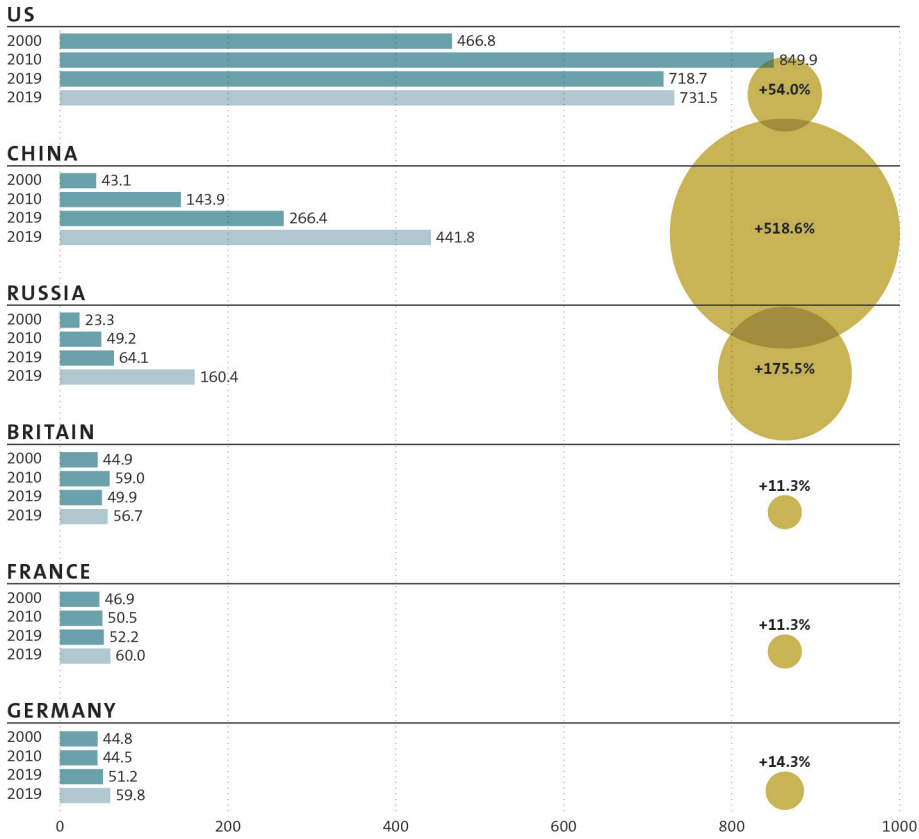
In such assessments, the main challenges for the United States lie in potential regional military contingencies. Although both China and Russia have increased their defense spending significantly during this century, the United States maintains an advantage over both countries in overall military power. US levels of defense spending are still significantly higher than those of either China or Russia, though the gap narrows when spending is measured in terms of purchasing power parity (PPP).[28] In regional contingencies, however, geography and recent improvements in military capabilities could give China or Russia an advantage.

China's improved anti-access/area denial capabilities complicate US objectives in the Asia-Pacific, including the defense of Taiwan, the Senkaku Islands in the East China Sea, or the Spratly Islands in the South China Sea. In a war over Taiwan, for example, China could launch missile attacks at several US targets in the region, including air bases, aircraft carriers, and airplanes. China could also target US command and control by conducting cyberattacks and by attacking satellites and other space-based communications infrastructure. The risk is that China could quickly seize control of Taiwan while inflicting grave losses of personnel and equipment on the United States. Similar concerns apply to Europe, focusing on the possibility that Russian forces could rapidly overrun the Baltics and prove difficult to dislodge.[29] To be sure, such pessimistic assessments remain controversial.[30] However, a broad recognition exists that the task for the United States and its allies in such contingencies has grown more difficult than it would have been only a few years ago.

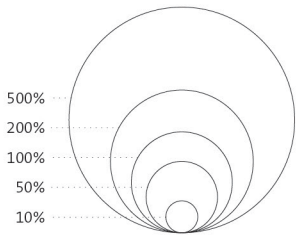
The United States thus faces daunting security challenges in dealing with

Military Spending

In USD (billions)



Military spending at constant 2018 prices and exchange rates
Military spending at purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates
Percentage increase in military spending from 2000–2019 based on figures in constant 2018 prices and exchange rates



Sources: PPP calculations courtesy of Richard Connolly, Royal United Services Institute; IMF World Economic Outlook (October 2020); SIPRI

both China and Russia individually. The challenge would only grow if the two countries were to increase their bilateral defense cooperation significantly. Although China and Russia have refrained from taking the ultimate step of forming an alliance, their defense cooperation has nevertheless grown steadily in recent years, with important consequences for transatlantic security and US grand strategy.

China-Russia Defense Cooperation

Bilateral defense cooperation has been a crucial element of the China-Russia relationship during the post-Cold War era, and further advances have occurred in the past few years. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia has been China's largest foreign arms supplier, making important contributions to China's military modernization. Russian arms sales to China fell sharply in the mid-2000s but rebounded by the early 2010s, culminating in the sales of advanced Russian weapons of a technological level that previously would have been off limits, most notably the S-400 air defense system and Su-35 fighter jets. The two countries have engaged in an impressive series of joint military and naval exercises. In September 2018, a Chinese contingent participated in Russia's large Vostok-2018 domestic exercise in the Russian Far East, the first time that Chinese forces had joined a domestic Russian exercise. In December 2019, China and Russia held joint naval exercises with Iran. The joint air patrols in 2019 and 2020 added a new dimension to bilateral defense cooperation.

China-Russia defense cooperation focuses on the sphere of conventional weapons, but the two countries have also cooperated on issues of broader strategic significance. They have consistently opposed the development of US missile defense systems. In recent years, however, they have also held their own joint missile defense exercises in the form of computer simulations. Russia offered to assist China with the development of a missile attack early warning system. China and Russia have also coordinated their positions on outer space and cyberspace. They have sought to restrict military activities in outer space, even while continuing to develop and test their own anti-satellite weapons, and they have promoted a view of Internet governance that emphasizes national sovereignty.

In the course of defense cooperation with China, however, Russia remains mindful of the need to maintain its capability to deter or defeat a potential Chinese invasion, unlikely as this prospect seems now. As mentioned above, Russia has an interest in ensuring nuclear deterrence in such a

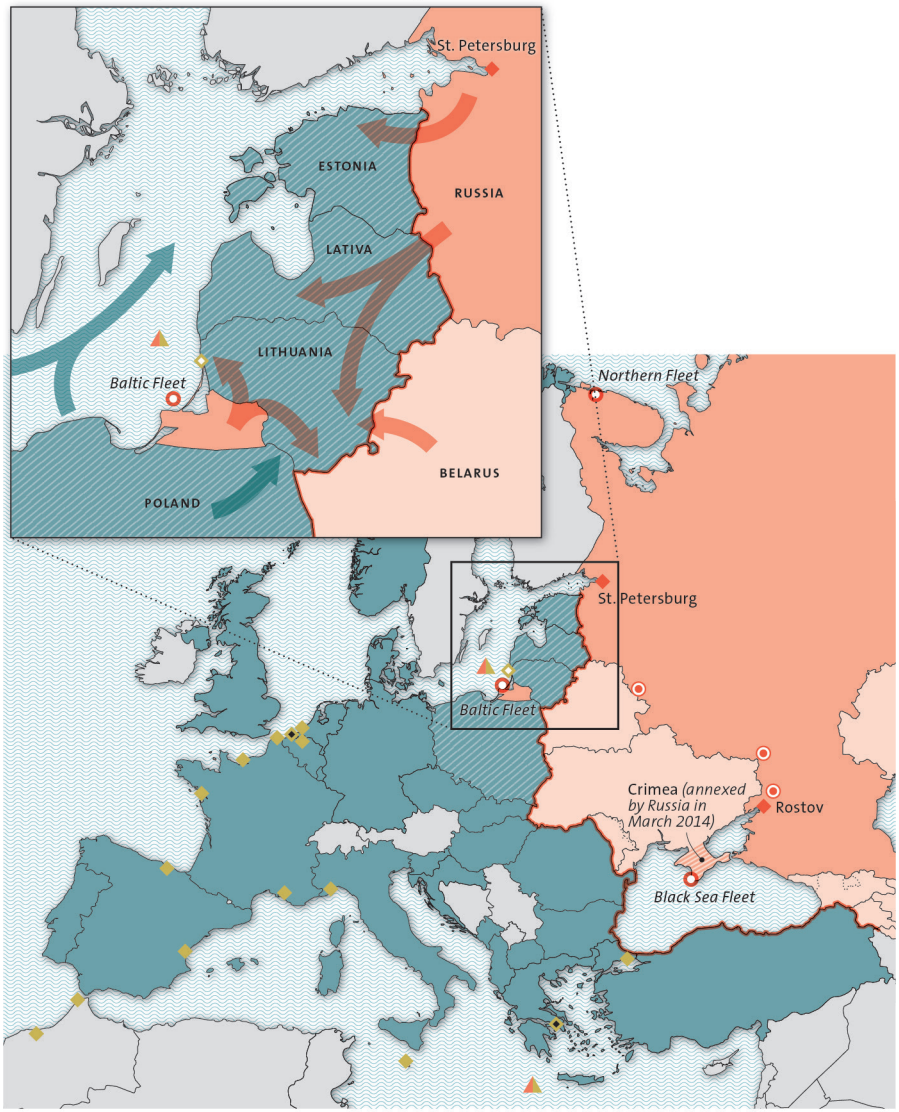
contingency and in securing China's eventual participation in international arms control. Russia's concerns in this area also dictate that its sales of advanced weapons enhance China's air, naval, and air defense capabilities for maritime contingencies against the United States and its allies and partners in the Asia-Pacific region, rather than strengthening China's ground forces.

Despite their increasingly close diplomatic relationship and defense cooperation, China and Russia have declined to form a political-military alliance involving mutual security guarantees. The 2001 Treaty on Good-Neighborliness, Friendship, and Cooperation commits both countries to refrain from joining alliances directed against the other and calls for bilateral consultations in the event that either country faces a threat to its security. However, the treaty includes no obligation for either country to provide security assistance to the other, the crucial feature of any alliance. Both countries prefer to maintain diplomatic flexibility and avoid being drawn into each other's regional disputes.[31]

The Euro-Atlantic region is an unlikely theater for any sort of China-Russia joint military action. However, the two countries' navies have exercised together in the region, largely for purposes of signaling mutual political support. In 2015, China and Russia conducted joint naval exercises in the Mediterranean Sea. During these exercises, Chinese ships also entered the Black Sea, though they stayed away from Crimea. The following year, the two countries held joint naval exercises in the South China Sea just weeks after the Permanent Court of Arbitration in The Hague ruled against China's sweeping claims to sovereignty over the sea. China appeared to use these exercises to signal its defiance of the court ruling, as well as Russia's support for such defiance. China repaid the favor in 2017, when the two countries conducted joint naval exercises in the Baltic Sea. China's participation in these exercises may have been intended not only as a signal of political support to Russia, but also as a response to British and French participation in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea.[32]

The transatlantic partners also face the challenge of potential China-Russia cooperation in hybrid warfare or gray-zone conflicts.[33] China's investments and attempts to build influence in Europe could allow it to assist Russia in the event of military conflict in the region. For example, China could attempt to use its newfound influence in some European countries to dissuade them from supporting NATO in a conflict with Russia. China could also

Russia, China, and European Security



- NATO's eastern border
- NATO member states
- Countries with NATO Enhanced Forward Presence
- Former Soviet republics
- Russian military district headquarters
- Russian fleet headquarters
- Sites where newly formed Russian divisions are stationed

Ports in which China has ...
- ... a controlling stake in a shipping terminal
- ... a minority stake in one or more shipping terminals
- ... an interest in dredging a deep-water port
- Sites of recent Russia-China joint naval exercises
- Possible Russian offensive
- Possible NATO counteroffensive

Sources: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; RAND; Foreign Policy Research Institute; Der Spiegel; MERICS; NPR; Clingendael Report; International Journal of Shipping and Transport Logistics

use its investments in European ports to help Russia by complicating NATO logistics.[34] China's expressed interest in dredging a deep-water port at Klaipeda, Lithuania, could have special significance in this respect, though Lithuania ruled out such a Chinese investment between 2020 and 2023 on national security grounds.[35] In general, however, China is unlikely to provide significant levels of direct security assistance to Russia in a military conflict in Europe.

Nevertheless, China-Russia defense cooperation has important implications for transatlantic security. Russian arms sales to China raise revenues that Russia uses for military research and development, contributing to the recent enhancement of Russia's own military might. Moreover, by diverting US attention and military resources to the Asia-Pacific region, China's growing military capabilities, including the contributions from advanced Russian weapons, complicate US efforts to provide security in Europe and potentially afford Russia some additional room for maneuver in the region.[36] Together, these factors place increasing strain on US grand strategy, with direct implications for Europe.

The Ultimate Fear:
A War on Two Fronts

In a nightmare scenario, the United States would simultaneously face the prospect of war against China in Asia and against Russia in Europe. The 2018 National Defense Strategy's focus on the ability to defeat a single great-power adversary while simultaneously deterring, but not necessarily defeating, another raises the question of how the United States would respond in such a situation.[37] Retired Gen. Ben Hodges, who served as US Army Commander in Europe from 2014 to 2017, starkly expressed this concern, as well as its implications for Europe, during the Warsaw Security Forum in October 2018. "The United States needs a very strong European pillar. I think in 15 years – it's not inevitable – but it is a very strong likelihood that we will be at war with China," he said. "The United States does not have the capacity to do everything it has to do in Europe and in the Pacific to deal with the Chinese threat."[38] In a subsequent interview, Hodges made clear that his message was directed at US allies in Europe. "I was trying to tell them, 'Hey look, we do not have the capacity in the United States to be able to deter Russia, to be the bulwark against possible Russian aggression, and deal with China.'"[39]

In a two-war scenario, the actions of China and Russia could be coordinated or merely opportunistic. If the two countries were to act in coordinated fashion, then this would represent a

de facto alliance. Such an arrangement seems unlikely because it would be susceptible to the familiar pitfalls of entrapment or abandonment. That is, both countries would be wary of being drawn into such a plan on the other's timetable or of receiving insufficient support from the other. Even if one side were merely to act opportunistically, seizing an opportunity arising from aggression by the other, the effect would be to detract from the ability of the United States to wage war effectively against either. This would deliver both sides some of the benefits of an alliance without entailing formal commitments. The mere prospect of such a scenario could give China or Russia increased leverage in a dispute with the United States and its allies. The possibility of a two-front war, even if unlikely, poses severe challenges for US grand strategy, for European strategic thinking, and for the future of the transatlantic partnership.

Implications for Transatlantic Security

The United States and its European allies could address such challenging geopolitical circumstances in various ways. Some analysts call for the United States to attempt a rapprochement with Russia in order to prevent it from becoming excessively close to China.[40] Among those who support such an approach are advocates of a US grand strategy of "offshore balancing." Under this strategy, recognizing that China represents the main challenge to US security and international leadership, the United States would withdraw its onshore military presence from Europe and the Middle East in order to concentrate its forces in the Asia-Pacific region. Europe would then assume responsibility for its own security.[41] A rapprochement with Russia would complement this effort by easing the path for a US withdrawal from European security affairs. In the long run, some analysts argue, the United States could even draw Russia into a balancing coalition against China.[42]

Transatlantic policymakers should look for ways to limit the extent of the China-Russia partnership by emphasizing areas in which the two countries' interests potentially diverge, including nuclear arms control and China's growing influence in Eurasia. In the near term, however, attempts at rapprochement with Russia are unlikely to succeed, and efforts to draw Russia into a balancing coalition against China are even less plausible. Both Russia and China place a high value on their partnership and would be unwilling to sacrifice it.[43] Russia could drift away from China over time, but this would most likely be a naturally occurring process resulting from an eventual Russian calculation

that China's growing power and ambitions had made it a greater threat than the West. China has a strong incentive to avoid such an outcome by continuing to cultivate its relationship with Russia. In the absence of a Western rapprochement with Russia, which might have been possible at the end of the Cold War but would be considerably more difficult now, the United States remains committed to resisting aggression by both China and Russia. This approach could require a form of containment of both countries, a course that would depend heavily on US cooperation with allies.[44]

Trump took a distinctive approach to these issues. With regard to transatlantic relations, his views unsettled many US allies in Europe. His repeated criticism of NATO member states for their low levels of defense spending caused some European countries to question US commitment to the alliance. "The times in which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over," German Chancellor Angela Merkel said following the 2017 NATO and G7 summits, adding: "We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands." In 2020, Trump ordered the withdrawal of 12,000 US soldiers from Germany, some of whom were to be redeployed elsewhere in Europe. Biden reversed this decision early in his presidency.

Trump also entertained the possibility of playing the "Russia card" in relations with China, though his administration's approach was uneven. On the one hand, the administration's national security and defense strategies highlighted the emergence of strategic competition with both China and Russia, and in practice Trump maintained a firm line with Russia while engaging in increasingly open confrontation with China. On the other hand, Trump refrained from criticizing Putin and frequently expressed his desire to improve relations with Russia, partly in an effort to increase US leverage over China. Indeed, he accused past US presidents of pushing Russia into China's arms. Trump made little progress in these efforts, partly because of US domestic opposition, including concerns about Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, and partly because of international factors, including the depth of the chasm between Russia and the West and the growing strength of the China-Russia relationship.

The Biden administration's foreign policy is likely to differ significantly. Biden has vowed to work closely with allies and appears prepared to confront both China and Russia on a range of issues while remaining open to engagement in areas of common interest. As a presidential candidate,

Biden called Russia an "opponent" and China a "serious competitor." During a speech at the State Department shortly after his inauguration, he called China "our most serious competitor" and declared that "American leadership must meet this new moment of advancing authoritarianism, including the growing ambitions of China to rival the United States and the determination of Russia to damage and disrupt our democracy." Biden later said that he anticipated "extreme competition" with China. He has argued that the United States should work with its allies in Europe and around the world in order to negotiate with China from a position of strength on such issues as trade, technology, and human rights, while also seeking cooperation with China on climate change and global public health.[45] Biden has been consistently critical of Russia and appears likely to take a tough line, as in his recent decision to deploy B1 bombers to Norway in order to strengthen the presence of US airpower in the Arctic region. In a signal of US commitment to defend the Baltics, the B1s later conducted joint air patrols with NATO's Baltic Air Policing mission. At the same time, Biden's decision to extend New START showed his willingness to engage pragmatically with Russia.

The Biden administration appears set to pursue a strategy of recommitting to NATO while seeking increased European support for US policy toward China.[46] Biden appealed to European allies for support during his speech to the Munich Security Conference in February 2021. "We must prepare together for long-term strategic competition with China," he declared, adding that the transatlantic partners should also resist Russia's cyberattacks and other "recklessness."

US allies in Europe welcome Biden's emphasis on the transatlantic partnership, but forging a common transatlantic approach to China and Russia is unlikely to be easy. Merkel said during this year's World Economic Forum that she opposed the formation of blocs, and she cautioned during the Munich Security Conference that "our interests will not always converge." This appeared to signal Germany's reluctance to embrace Biden's conception of a struggle pitting Western democracies against authoritarian China and Russia.[47] Merkel, who will leave office this year, was a driving force behind the conclusion of negotiations with China on the investment agreement during Germany's six-month rotation in the EU presidency. This agreement demonstrates that the growing dependence of German manufacturing industries, especially the auto sector, on the Chinese market will complicate efforts to build a

united transatlantic approach toward China. Germany's decision to proceed with Nord Stream 2 also reflects its desire to separate economic and strategic goals, an effort that increasingly places it at odds with the United States.

Recent debates on European strategic autonomy also complicate transatlantic discussions.[48] French President Emmanuel Macron, the most outspoken European leader calling for European strategic autonomy, reiterated his case during the Munich Security Conference. Macron, who has warned of NATO's "brain death," argues that Europe can no longer count on the United States to defend its NATO allies, partly because US focus will inevitably turn to China. In his view, therefore, European countries should build independent military forces in order to provide for their own defense and attain strategic autonomy. Only in this way, Macron argues, can Europe remain in control of its own destiny. In parallel with these efforts, Macron attempted diplomatic outreach to Russia, arguing that Europe would never enjoy security and stability until relations with Russia had improved. Lingering tensions could lead Russia into isolation or a stronger relationship with China, he argued.[49]

Macron's efforts to promote strategic autonomy have made little progress, with Britain and Germany particularly dismissive of the idea. Despite Merkel's earlier statement that European countries would have to take their fate into their own hands, German Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer rejected what she called "illusions" of European strategic autonomy, arguing that Europe will remain dependent on the US security guarantee, especially the nuclear umbrella, for the foreseeable future. European critics of Macron's proposal also noted its high financial cost, continued European dependence on cooperation with US forces in military operations abroad, and the fear that European strategic autonomy could strengthen the arguments of those in the United States calling for disengagement from NATO. Nor have Macron's diplomatic overtures toward Russia made significant gains. They face opposition from Germany and from Central and Eastern European countries that trust only the United States to guarantee their security.

European concerns about US commitment to transatlantic security are understandable. The Biden administration is far more favorably disposed toward NATO than was Trump, but urgent domestic issues, including efforts to promote recovery from the pandemic and to address deep domestic political polarization, threaten

to keep US attention focused inward. Under these circumstances, prudence calls for Europe to strengthen its military capabilities within NATO, as difficult as this may be at a time when its energies and resources are focused on recovery from the pandemic, while leaving open the long-term possibility of attaining strategic autonomy.

The best approach, however, would be for the transatlantic partners to revitalize their cooperation. In view of the increasingly close China-Russia relationship, and in the absence to date of successful efforts to pry Russia away from China, the transatlantic partners will face a situation in which great-power adversaries pose security challenges in both the Euro-Atlantic and Asia-Pacific regions. Under these circumstances, close transatlantic cooperation will be essential. Europe should address the specific challenges that it faces from China by bolstering its resilience and reducing vulnerabilities that could arise from excessive dependence on Chinese supply chains, markets, and investments. Britain and France both have security presences in the Asia-Pacific region, participate regularly in freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea, and could play some role in US efforts to contain China militarily.

For the most part, however, NATO should remain focused on security in the Euro-Atlantic region. The new operational concept that the US Army developed in response to the 2018 National Defense Strategy, known as Multi-Domain Operations, recognizes the difficulty of reinforcing troops in a theater of war against a great-power competitor. Addressing this problem would require either a major increase in US troops stationed in Europe or an increased role for European countries themselves.[50] The first option is unlikely because the rise of China will force the United States to shift focus to a considerable degree toward Asia in the coming years, leaving fewer resources available for European security. This leaves the second option. The United States should remain committed to NATO and the provision of security in Europe, but European countries could make a vital contribution to the transatlantic partnership by increasing defense spending, assuming an increased share of the burden for European security within NATO, and thereby allowing the United States to devote the necessary attention and resources to Asia.

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