



LITTLE IN COMMON

PROSPECTS FOR U.S.-CHINA AND U.S.-RUSSIA SECURITY COOPERATION

In a world now dominated by U.S. strategic competition with Russia and China, what are the prospects that meaningful cooperation may still occur between the United States and these two countries? RAND researchers investigated the potential for such cooperation across a number of national security issues across the world and found that while not entirely absent, the prospects are slim.



A NEW NATIONAL SECURITY FOCUS

As the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) makes clear, the primary national security concern facing the United States now is “strategic competition” with Russia and China, rather than terrorism. Of course, that does not mean that cooperation with Russia and China is not desirable, as long as it comes “from a position of strength and based on our national interests.” But is there any room for meaningful strategic cooperation in this era of competition among great powers?

RAND researchers studied this question and found that

- 1 | There is not much room to work in—that the “trade space” for cooperation is already narrow.
- 2 | The obstacles to cooperation—particularly the absence of trust—are growing.
- 3 | There are relatively few wedge issues that could be used to divide Russia and China.
- 4 | The side benefits of cooperation over competition do not clearly outweigh the costs.

THE BOTTOM LINE Cooperation will be rare and narrowly focused, often limited to making strategic competition “safer.” The Department of the Air Force, the Joint Force, and the United States as a whole should expect that the era of strategic competition is not going anywhere for the foreseeable future.

Under what conditions can great power cooperation occur in an era of increasing great power competition?

How the RAND Team Assessed the Prospects for Cooperation

CHOOSING THE ISSUE SETS FOR POTENTIAL COOPERATION

In choosing issues, the researchers started by deriving a list of U.S. objectives from key American strategic documents, namely the NDS, *National Security Strategy*, findings of the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission, and more-tailored strategic documents, with input from the U.S. Air Force office that sponsored the research. Because China and Russia cannot be expected to share U.S. objectives or aid the United States in accomplishing them, the researchers reframed some of the U.S. objectives into more generalizable issues for which bilateral or trilateral cooperation might be more plausible. For example, although the United States may not be able to cooperate with Russia on preventing Russian aggression in the Baltics, both sides may be able to cooperate to improve security in the Baltic states in other ways. In general, the team’s analytic effort was weighted toward 22 national security issues in geographic areas prioritized in the NDS: the Indo-Pacific (7), Europe and the Middle East (7), and the global commons (8), which consists of overarching issues not specific to any one region.

MEASURING THE PROSPECTS FOR COOPERATION

Cooperation depends first on an *alignment of interests*. National security issues are often complex and multifaceted; only rarely do states' equities perfectly align. Still, given that cooperation is rooted in self-interest, we can expect that the closer the alignment between states' interests, the more likely they will be to cooperate on a given topic. Cooperation also hinges on the *stakes at play* for each country—that is, how much a national security issue matters.

ALIGNMENT

The RAND team's approach to measuring *rhetorical alignment* looks at states' public statements:

YES	NO	MIXED
Competitors' official documents and public statements support interests that largely overlap with U.S. interests.	Competitors' official documents and public statements do not support interests that largely overlap with U.S. interests.	Competitors' interests are not entirely harmonious or adverse to U.S. objectives—which could occur when there is partial overlap in interests, when official statements on a subject are contradictory, or when official statements appear to resemble the U.S. position but it can be easily ascertained that the Chinese or Russian interpretation of their own position diverges from the U.S. understanding.

STAKES

To measure the *stakes* involved, the team used a **high-medium-low** coding scheme:

HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
The issue is vital to the state's survival or mentioned in its defense or foreign policy documents or official statements as a core national security concern.	The issue touches on the state's self-conceived sphere of influence or key allies, partners, or economic relationships but does not directly affect the state's or regime's survival.	The issue is peripheral to the state's interests, capturing minimal attention in leaders' public statements or official policy documents.

COOPERATION

After identifying the list of issues across the geographic areas, researchers analyzed the American, Chinese, and Russian equities on each issue to gauge the possibility for cooperation. To do this, they drew on a range of official strategy documents, public statements, and English-, Chinese-, and Russian-language scholarly and policy analytic work on each issue. The team originally intended to conduct interviews with key government, academic, and policy experts in eight countries across the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East—including China and Russia—about the prospects for cooperation, but because of COVID-19, only the Middle East field research in Israel and Jordan was completed before the global travel shutdown.

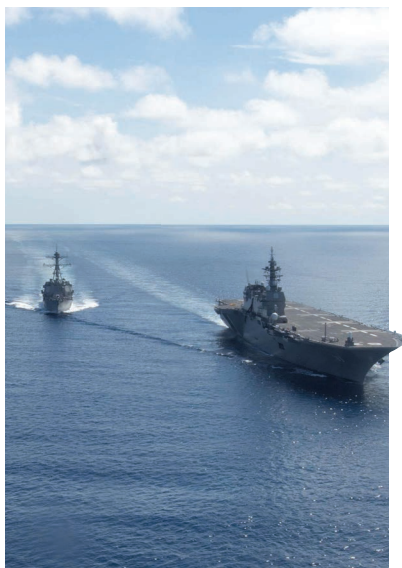
The potential for cooperation is measured on a **high-medium-low** scale, with **not applicable (N/A)** used where one of the countries does not really have a seat at the table but may have stakes in the issue.

HIGH	MEDIUM	LOW
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COOPERATION IN THE Indo-Pacific

The Indo-Pacific is arguably ground zero for great power competition. Geographically, Russia and China are the two largest countries in Asia, and the United States borders the Pacific Ocean and maintains a sizable military presence in the region. All three powers thus have strategic and economic interests at stake in the region's future. **But the opportunities for great power cooperation on national security issues, particularly between the United States and China, are few and far between, as shown in the table.**

INDO-PACIFIC ISSUE SETS	CHINA			RUSSIA		
	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION
Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order	MIXED	HIGH	LOW	MIXED	MEDIUM	LOW
Promoting and preserving regional alliances	NO	HIGH	LOW	MIXED	MEDIUM	LOW
Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam	NO	MEDIUM	LOW	MIXED	LOW	LOW
Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan	NO	HIGH	LOW	MIXED	LOW	LOW
Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea	YES	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	YES	MEDIUM	LOW
Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia	MIXED	LOW	LOW	MIXED	LOW	MEDIUM
India's role and strategic orientation	MIXED	MEDIUM	LOW	NO	MEDIUM	LOW



MAINTAINING A PEACEFUL AND OPEN REGIONAL ORDER. The United States, China, and Russia may share a common interest in a stable, peaceful Indo-Pacific governed by the rule of law, but there is little common ground beyond these vague generalities. Russia and China view the U.S.'s goal of a "free and open Indo-Pacific" as advancing American hegemonic interests, much as the United States views the actions of China and Russia as designed to place their own interests and power in privileged positions. And with China and Russia largely in lockstep on their worldview, there is little apparent room to cooperate with one over the other.

PROMOTING AND PRESERVING REGIONAL ALLIANCES. In the zero-sum world of alliances, there is little room for U.S.-China-Russia cooperation here. For China and Russia, American alliances are at best an obstacle to be overcome, if not a mortal threat. Thus, any American policy to strengthen those alliances is likely to directly conflict with Chinese and Russian interests, leaving little room for any real cooperation, except on the tactical level.



Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson meets with senior Chinese defense officials at the People's Liberation Army (Navy) headquarters in Beijing on January 14, 2019. Richardson was on a three-day visit to Beijing and Nanjing to encourage professional interactions at sea, specifically addressing risk reduction and operational safety measures to prevent unwanted and unnecessary escalation.

EXPANDING STRATEGIC COOPERATION WITH INDONESIA, MALAYSIA, AND VIETNAM. When it comes to Southeast Asia, American and Russian interests are not completely misaligned. The United States would prefer these countries to buy weapons from the United States or its allies, but Russian arm sales to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam still indirectly benefit American interests because those arms are most likely to be directed against Chinese forces. And Russian-owned corporations are cooperating with Vietnamese companies on resource extraction within China's self-proclaimed Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea, suggesting that Russia may be willing to pursue its own economic interests even when they contradict China's preferences. But Russia's willingness to challenge China goes only so far. Russia has not expressed clear support for China's Nine-Dash Line claim, but it has consciously avoided taking Vietnam's side and declined to mediate the dispute when Vietnam asked.

MANAGING CROSS-STRAIT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINA AND TAIWAN. Given China's claims about the fundamental importance of achieving "reunification" with Taiwan, there is not much hope for great power cooperation on the core issue of "resolving" Taiwan's final status. Russo-Taiwanese relations have improved but still pale in comparison to the value Russia places on its relationship with China, and Russia has shown no signs of moving closer to the U.S. position on Taiwan. The only real trade space for cooperation on Taiwan may be in preventing accidental conflict over the issue.

ACHIEVING THE DENUCLEARIZATION OF NORTH KOREA. Many analysts believe that all three powers would prefer a denuclearized North Korea, and both China and Russia have taken some limited steps in pursuit of that objective, such as signing UN Security Council resolutions to impose sanctions on Pyongyang. Still, they have often delayed such measures, negotiated verbiage to water them down substantially, and enforced sanctions unevenly if at all, and often only

under substantial American pressure. Both Beijing and Moscow appear to prefer stability over denuclearization and have urged the United States to make concessions to North Korea, as well as to back off from its demand for complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization. These structural goal divergences are unlikely to be transformed in the near term; therefore, the United States might best focus on more tactical goals, such as cooperating with China to help secure and render safe North Korean nuclear weapons in the event of a North Korean regime collapse.

COUNTERING TERRORISM AND VIOLENT ISLAMIST EXTREMISM IN AFGHANISTAN AND SOUTHEAST ASIA. It is hard to see how the United States can directly cooperate with China or Russia on counterterrorism in Asia in general and on Afghanistan in particular, especially given China's ongoing crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and politicized use of "counterterrorism" for domestic repression. But China and Russia have committed forces to Afghanistan in the past. If the United States were to withdraw from Afghanistan, China and/or Russia might be forced by their own self-interest to take on a greater role in providing stability in the region. China and Russia almost certainly would not continue U.S. democracy and human rights promotion efforts in the country and may even work with Afghan insurgents (as both have been charged with doing).

INDIA'S ROLE AND STRATEGIC ORIENTATION. From the American standpoint, although Russia does not want India to become an American ally or bulwark for democracy, Russia's willingness to sell advanced weaponry to New Delhi offers an opportunity for tacit cooperation to strengthen India against China. Traditionally, the United States has opposed India's purchase of Russian weapons and threatened to impose sanctions, but the United States could drop its opposition to such sales, thereby making India a more formidable military competitor to China, albeit at the cost of undermining Washington's own sanctions regime against Moscow.

COOPERATION IN The Middle East and Europe

Opportunities for cooperation are more promising in the Middle East (the first two rows of the table) because the United States', China's, and Russia's interests are in tension, but not always diametrically opposed. In Europe, the United States and Russia—the two powers with the highest stakes—are diametrically opposed in many of their core objectives. However, the shared interest in avoiding an unintended escalation to conflict between the United States/NATO and Russia produces at least some opportunity to cooperate. China's relatively low stakes in the area, its general opposition to U.S. interests, and its deference to Russia on many issues of European security that divide Russia and the United States/Europe make it highly implausible that China would be inclined to cooperation across virtually any of the issue sets in Europe (thus, prospects are assessed as “N/A” rather than “Low” for most of those issues in the table).

MIDDLE EAST AND EUROPE ISSUE SETS	CHINA			RUSSIA		
	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION
Middle East stability and peace processes	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Countering Iran and its proxies	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Broader Euro-Atlantic security	MIXED	LOW	N/A	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM
Baltic security	MIXED	LOW	N/A	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM
Balkan security and strategic orientation	MIXED	LOW	N/A	MIXED	MEDIUM	LOW
Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation	NO	LOW	LOW	MIXED	MEDIUM	LOW
The future of Ukraine	MIXED	LOW	N/A	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM



MIDDLE EAST STABILITY AND PEACE PROCESSES. This remains an area where cooperation on core security issues with Russia, and to a lesser extent China, is possible. Although China and Russia seek to undermine U.S. influence in the region, all three powers favor stabilization of the region's conflicts. Notably, all three share some interest in advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, stabilizing and rebuilding Syria, and ensuring U.S.-Russia military deconfliction in Syria. All three powers—though to varying degrees—have supported these interests in word and deed. Yet cooperation on these issues is beset by obstacles and is contingent on changed conditions (such as the departure of Assad from power in Syria) and on future U.S. policy choices (such as its approach to the Israeli-Palestinian peace).

COUNTERING IRAN AND ITS PROXIES. Although China and Russia have cooperative relationships with Iran, there is some potential to cooperate with Russia, and to a lesser extent China, on countering malign Iranian activities. First, neither Russia nor China favors a nuclear-armed Iran. Both have cooperated on international efforts to curtail Iran's nuclear program, even though

China opposed the U.S. sanctions regime. Chinese and Russian efforts to keep the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action alive suggest that both remain averse to a nuclear Iran and may be open to renewed cooperation, conditional on the U.S. approach after its withdrawal from the agreement. Second, there is some potential to cooperate on limiting at least some advanced arms and military technology exports to Iran. Both China and Russia have, at times, limited arms sales to Iran and complied with UN sanctions, though China has done so grudgingly. Third, there may be room for tactical cooperation with Russia in countering Iran's proxy network, some of which threatens to undermine Russia's influence in a post-conflict Syria. In the past, Russia has promised to keep Iranian forces from a buffer zone in Syria near the Israeli and Jordanian borders (albeit without much success) and passively acquiesced to Israel's strikes against Iranian affiliates in Syria.

BROADER EURO-ATLANTIC SECURITY. There is no tenable space for cooperation with either Russia or China that would advance U.S. interests with respect to the key pillar of Euro-Atlantic security architecture, the future of NATO. But there is some potential for cooperation to reduce the risk of inadvertent escalation between NATO and Russia, based on existing or alternative instruments of conventional arms control and confidence- and security-building measures.

BALTIC SECURITY. There is no room for cooperation when it comes to the core U.S. objective of preventing Russian aggression and limiting Russia's malign influence in Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Building on the same mutual interest in reducing the chances of unintended conflict between Russia and NATO states, cooperation with Russia may be possible on deconfliction or escalation management measures.

BALKAN SECURITY AND STRATEGIC ORIENTATION. There is scant space for cooperation with either China or Russia to address most sources of instability in the Balkan region or to integrate the Balkan countries more firmly into Western institutions, as neither competitor sufficiently shares the same goals. A somewhat speculative, but noteworthy, area for potential cooperation with Russia might be stabilizing the Kosovo-Serbia conflict. This is contingent on Serbia's willingness to seek U.S. help to normalize relations with Kosovo, in which case Russia might cooperate so as not to lose influence over its close partner, Serbia.

TURKEY'S REGIONAL ROLE AND STRATEGIC ORIENTATION. Because both China and Russia wish to push Turkey further away from NATO and the West, there is no prospect of cooperation to advance the key U.S. interests in Turkey. A relatively narrow trade space might exist for the United States and Russia to cooperate on reducing the risk of unintended escalation in the Black and Mediterranean seas, the European regions where Russia and Turkey are most likely to become involved in dangerous incidents that risk drawing in NATO. Still, Russia's willingness to cooperate in this regard is relatively low.

THE FUTURE OF UKRAINE. Although there is no trade space for cooperation with Russia when it comes to the ultimate vision for Ukraine's future (i.e., pertaining to its prospects for EU or NATO membership), there is some space to cooperatively advance conflict resolution based on the Minsk II agreements. There is also space for cooperation on the more modest goals of limiting hostilities and the worst humanitarian consequences of the conflict in Ukraine's East and constraining the potential for the conflict to escalate or spill over. Although Russia's aggression set off the conflict, which then plunged relations between Russia and the West to a post-Cold War low, the conflict cannot realistically be settled without Russia's participation.



U.S. soldiers with the California Army National Guard and the Oklahoma Army National Guard render salutes during the official opening ceremony for Rapid Trident 17 on September 11, 2017, at the International Peacekeeping Security Center in Yavoriv, Ukraine.

COOPERATION IN THE Global Commons

The global commons issues—those related to the “common domains” of outer space, cyberspace, and the air and maritime domains that are not the sovereign territory of any specific state—could offer more cooperation opportunities than the geography-specific topics. The research team also considered “common goods” abstractly—policy objectives shared across the international community that are not bound to a specific region or location, such as countering violent extremist organizations and transnational criminal networks, promoting global stability, and preventing nuclear proliferation and arms races. Yet even across these issues (see the table), cooperation is challenging and the room for negotiations is relatively narrow, because as much as these issues may be “common,” they are still inextricably linked with core sovereignty and national security concerns.

GLOBAL COMMONS ISSUE SETS	CHINA			RUSSIA		
	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION	ALIGNMENT	STAKES	COOPERATION
Maintaining freedom of access to space	MIXED	HIGH	LOW	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM
Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks	MIXED	LOW	MEDIUM	MIXED	LOW	LOW
Countering violent extremist organizations	MIXED	LOW	LOW	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM
Promoting global stability	YES	LOW	HIGH	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Preserving access to the air and maritime commons	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM	MIXED	MEDIUM	MEDIUM
Preventing nuclear arms races	YES	MEDIUM	LOW	YES	HIGH	MEDIUM
Preventing militarization of the Arctic	YES	LOW	LOW	NO	HIGH	LOW
Maintaining the openness of cyberspace	MIXED	HIGH	MEDIUM	MIXED	HIGH	LOW



MAINTAINING FREEDOM OF ACCESS TO SPACE. The United States, China, and Russia all have strong interests in space on issues that might pose a threat to space exploration, such as space debris. The United States has cooperated with both powers on civilian uses of space and enjoyed long-term cooperation with Russia on such projects as the International Space Station. At the same time, all three countries seek to maintain a robust space capability and unfettered access to the domain for both commercial and military purposes, while denying it to their adversaries. Thus, future cooperation in space may be limited.

DISMANTLING TRANSNATIONAL CRIMINAL ORGANIZATIONS/NETWORKS. Transnational crime inflicts human and economic costs on all nation-states. But China’s cooperation is often transactional, and experts are skeptical about the sincerity of its promises to crack down on Chinese sales of fentanyl abroad. Russia’s willingness to cooperate with the United States has also proven mixed, partly because of Russia’s own ambivalence toward organized



Soldiers provide overwatch during a deployment of Stryker armored vehicles as part of the U.S. Army Alaska-led Arctic Edge 2018 exercise held at Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, March 13, 2018. Arctic Edge 2018 is a biennial, large-scale, joint-training exercise that prepares and tests the U.S. military's ability to operate tactically in extreme cold-weather conditions found in Arctic environments.

crime, the criminalization of its politics, and its preference for methods of cooperation that give it control over the effort.

COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS.

As with the issue of transnational crime, turning interest into cooperation has proven difficult for this issue. U.S. cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism may be somewhat more plausible than with China, but only barely. The United States and Russia differ on who they consider to be terrorists and on methods for counterterrorism. Thus, while the United States and Russia may be able to coordinate and deconflict their counterterrorism efforts on an operational level, more fulsome cooperation is unlikely.

PROMOTING GLOBAL STABILITY. The United States, China, and Russia all support promoting global stability, but disagree about the best means to do this. The United States views China and Russia's support for oppressive regimes as counterproductive, while China and Russia view the United States' democracy and human rights promotion and military intervention as destabilizing and interfering with states' sovereignty. Despite this, China's growing role in peacekeeping could be an area for potential future cooperation. With Russia, the United States could cooperate on promoting global stability, but at a cost. Such cooperation would itself be inhibited by diminished trust between the countries and countervailing strategic priorities.

PRESERVING ACCESS TO THE AIR AND MARITIME COMMONS.

In the abstract, the United States, China, and Russia all want their citizens and goods to travel freely through these shared spaces and the ability to exploit the resources located in the maritime domain. There may be room for cooperation with Russia and China on air and maritime commons issues, particularly on common threats (e.g., Somali counterpiracy) and regions of common interest (e.g., the Horn of Africa). But moving beyond a handful of issues and select locations, each power's strategic and economic interests limit the potential for cooperation.

PREVENTING NUCLEAR ARMS RACES. The United States and Russia, the two largest nuclear powers, have a history of cooperation on nuclear arms control and nuclear safety and an equally long history of mutual distrust. The United States has a growing list of complaints about Russia's violations of existing agreements. Extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) likely will ensure a certain level of global nuclear stability and preserve verifiable constraints on nuclear arsenals. Nuclear safety could be another promising area of cooperation, as both countries share a concern that nuclear material could fall into the hands of malign nonstate actors or third countries with inadequate security protocols. But China has been reluctant to participate in arms control discussions.

PREVENTING MILITARIZATION OF THE ARCTIC.

There is a mismatch between the willingness and the ability of the three countries to cooperate in the Arctic. China has a growing interest in leveraging the Arctic's resources and its trade routes, but China's ability to affect Arctic policy is limited. Russia has a core interest in ensuring that it maintains the economic rights to the Northern Sea Route and that its territory and nuclear capability remain secure and its sovereign territories remain well protected. While there may be some room for cooperation with Russia on environmental protection, scientific exploration, and search and rescue operations in the Arctic, larger issues will likely remain challenging.

MAINTAINING THE OPENNESS OF CYBERSPACE.

This is arguably the site of some of the fiercest competition between the great powers, and the prospects for cooperation are dim and would come at a significant cost. Fundamentally, the three countries disagree over how to govern cyberspace. Russia and China view control over the cyber domain as vital to their survival and a powerful and cost-effective weapon to wield against the United States.

Eight obstacles that hinder cooperation

DISTRUST

A lack of mutual trust between parties with regard to a particular issue

AUDIENCE COSTS

Domestic political costs leaders are likely to incur if they cooperate on a particular issue

DEFINITIONAL

Countries' use of the same terms to discuss issues may mask fundamental differences in what they mean by those terms

THIRD-PARTY OBSTACLES

The presence of third parties whose participation or consent is important to the fate of cooperative ventures but whose interests diverge from the competitors' and/or each other

ISSUE LINKAGE

Issues on which cooperation may be possible become tied to issues on which cooperation is not possible

LACK OF IMMEDIACY

A lack of perceived immediacy or urgency to address an issue that may be approached cooperatively

LEGAL CONSTRAINTS

Legal constraints limit the shape that cooperation may take

CAPABILITY, CAPACITY, OR STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS

Cooperation may be limited because a country does not have resources or organizational structures needed to engage in it

Growing Obstacles to Cooperation

Even if interests overlap on an issue, this does not necessarily mean the countries are likely to choose to cooperate in practice. International cooperation often confronts a series of obstacles, some more immutable than others. The left panel lists eight obstacles that hinder cooperation and that manifest themselves in the 22 policy areas described above.

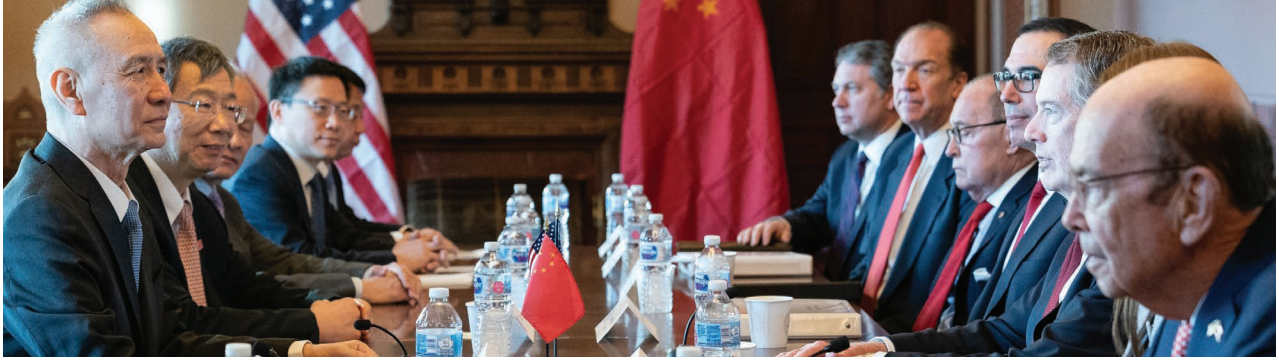
Across all the Indo-Pacific, Europe/Middle East, and global commons issues, multiple, significant obstacles must be overcome. How insuperable are these obstacles? Are they merely speed bumps, or are they roadblocks to cooperation? At one level, we do not and cannot know how formidable an obstacle is until states try to overcome it. Still, logically, certain obstacles should be more easily overcome than others.

The **lack of immediacy** problem is, perhaps, the easiest for a country to fix, if leadership chooses to make a given issue a priority. **Capability, capacity, or structural constraints** and **legal constraints** can be resolved by shifting a country's investment priorities, tweaking organizational structures, and/or changing laws, which can be harder to do in democracies than autocracies but which still lie within the realm of the feasible. **Issue linkage** and **definitional** obstacles can be resolved through negotiation and through narrowing the scope of the issues at hand. **Audience costs** and **third-party obstacles** may be on the more difficult end of the spectrum to resolve, because they require a country's leaders to get buy-in from external constituencies. Still, politicians and diplomats spend careers building support for policies.

Arguably, the most difficult obstacle to overcome is **distrust**. Trust revolves around perceptions of an adversary. What is more, this obstacle is growing—a *trust deficit*. International institutions should be one way to mitigate this lack of trust, but thus far they have not succeeded in doing so. As the United States' trust in Russia and China declines (and vice versa), the distrust obstacle will become increasingly significant, making other obstacles that much harder to overcome and cooperation in the future that much more difficult and less likely.



Then-Vice President Joe Biden greets Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin at the Russian White House, in Moscow, March 10, 2011.



U.S. Trade Representative Ambassador Robert Lighthizer, senior staff, and Cabinet members meet with Chinese Vice Premier Liu He and members of his delegation for the U.S.-China trade talks Wednesday, January 30, 2019.

Few Wedge Issues; Positive and Negative Second-Order Effects

International cooperation is sometimes presented as a good unto itself. This view stems from both a normative judgment that harmonious interactions between states are better than conflictual ones and from a strategic premise that international cooperation is a prerequisite for solving the world's most difficult problems. **But the RAND team's analysis suggests that pursuing cooperation for its own sake is unlikely to substantially advance important U.S. interests.**

For the United States, one of the foremost geopolitical challenges is dealing with two great power adversaries simultaneously. One promising way to approach this would be to use cooperation to drive a wedge into the relationship between them. Cooperation with China or Russia on “wedge” issues might serve to inject tensions into the two competitors' strategic partnership. **But analysis suggests there are relatively few “wedge” issues of this sort.**

Another argument for cooperation rests on the idea that cooperation may spark a virtuous cycle, with cooperation begetting more cooperation. The underlying logic is that trust built from successful cooperation in one area can lead to more harmonious relationships. A gradual build-up of trust from instances of successful cooperation that spill over into other areas may well be one positive second-order effect. **But cooperation on the issues within the trade space is likely to have both positive second-order effects on other issues and U.S. allies and partners, as well as negative ones; this would inevitably entail trade-offs.**

Also, evidence suggests that these positive second-order effects can be elusive, at least in the near term. The few clear-cut successful cases of cooperation on national security matters and the mixed cases of cooperation on issues such as the Middle East peace, counterpiracy, or counterterrorism may have reduced great power friction in select areas, but they have not yet produced the spillover effect that some may have hoped to see.

In the final instance, cooperation, even where theoretically possible, has both benefits and costs—direct and second-order ones. Great power cooperation could affect the U.S.'s relations with other countries for better or for worse, as the United States' actions might be viewed as either reducing regional tensions or as abandoning them to a hostile power. U.S. decision-makers should carefully consider where and whether to attempt cooperation with one or the other competitor.

Pursuing cooperation for its own sake is unlikely to substantially advance important U.S. interests.



Concluding Thoughts and Key Recommendations

The overarching finding from the RAND team’s analysis is that the prospects for cooperation on national security issues between the United States, China, and Russia are narrow and may be narrowing. To respond to this gloomy forecast, the United States should cooperate in the few places where it can with China and Russia—and prepare for long-term strategic competition. While a “grand bargain” that can reset the proverbial great power playing board has a certain allure, no such bargains are in sight. Another commonly debated idea for cooperation is to try to leverage Russia to counter China, but few potential wedge issues exist to do so. Finally, cooperation is sometimes treated as an unqualified good, but cooperation always involves transactional costs; while some fights are worth fighting, others are not.

Given these concerns, the RAND team identified recommendations, summarized below, on how the United States can best pursue cooperation, organized by whether they pertain to the U.S. government, the Department of Defense and the Joint Force, or the U.S. Air Force and U.S. Space Force. A full discussion of the list is provided in the report.

U.S. GOVERNMENT

- View cooperation as a strategic choice, rather than as an objective unto itself.
- Embrace self-interested cooperation.
- Concentrate efforts on the global commons and the Middle East.
- Use international organizations to ease cooperation, but accept their limitations.
- Divide the 22 issue areas into more narrowly focused topics
- Prepare for long-term competition.

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE AND THE JOINT FORCE

- Focus on deconfliction and de-escalation.
- Coordinate with allies on “safe competition.”
- Concentrate on North Korea contingency planning, counterpiracy, and counterterrorism.
- Weigh the utility of Russian arms sales to Indo-Pacific partners.

U.S. AIR FORCE AND U.S. SPACE FORCE

- Expand air deconfliction mechanisms.
- Increase communications on space debris management.

This brief describes research conducted in RAND Project AIR FORCE and documented in *Vanishing Trade Space: Assessing the Prospects for U.S. Security Cooperation with China and Russia in an Era of Competition—A Project Overview*, by Raphael S. Cohen, Elina Treyger, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Scott W. Harold, Michelle Gris , Marta Kepe, Soo Kim, Ashley L. Rhoades, Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, RR-A597-1, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A597-1). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RBA597-1. This brief also draws from three other reports in the series: *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Competition in the Indo-Pacific*, by Scott W. Harold, Soo Kim, and Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, RR-A597-2, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A597-2); *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Competition in Europe and the Middle East*, by Elina Treyger, Ashley L. Rhoades, Nathan Vest, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Raphael S. Cohen, and Asha Clark, RR-A597-3, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A597-3); and *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Competition in the Global Commons*, by Raphael S. Cohen, Marta Kepe, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Michelle Gris , Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest, RR-A597-4, 2023 (available at www.rand.org/t/RR-A597-4). This research was completed in September 2020, before the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine and before the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan in August 2021. It has not been subsequently revised.

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