



RESEARCH REPORT

# VANISHING

ASSESSING THE PROSPECTS FOR GREAT POWER COOPERATION

# TRADE

IN AN ERA OF COMPETITION

# SPACE

A PROJECT OVERVIEW

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# About This Report

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) starts with the assertion that “Interstate strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.” The NDS acknowledges, however, the need for cooperation with competitors, albeit “from a position of strength and based on our national interests.” This report, the first of a four-part series, presents the overarching findings of a study that looked at great power cooperation on national security matters in an era of strategic competition. The other volumes in this series are

- *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific*, RR-A597-2, by Scott W. Harold, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, and Soo Kim
- *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East*, RR-A597-3, by Elina Treyger, Ashley L. Rhoades, Nathan Vest, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Raphael S. Cohen, and Asha Clark
- *Assessing the Prospects for Great Power Cooperation in the Global Commons*, RR-A597-4, by Raphael S. Cohen, Marta Kepe, Nathan Beauchamp-Mustafaga, Asha Clark, Kit Conn, Michelle Grisé, Roby Valiaveedu, and Nathan Vest.

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# Summary<sup>1</sup>

## Issue

To what extent can the United States still cooperate with China and Russia in certain areas in this era of strategic competition? On which issues? What are the obstacles, the potential benefits, and the risks associated with such cooperation?

## Approach

This study sought to understand where the United States, China, and Russia have common interests, what the obstacles to cooperation are, and where the United States might be able to deepen its cooperation with one or both powers in pursuit of shared, mutual interests. To do so, the study team drew on primary and secondary source materials in four languages and more than 40 interviews with government officials, military officers, academics, and think tank analysts.

## Conclusions

Overall, the study yielded four major findings:

- The trade space is narrow, and the obstacles to cooperation are significant and growing.
- There are no grand strategic bargains in sight.
- There are only a handful of potential wedge issues between Russia and China.
- The second-order benefits do not always clearly outweigh the costs of cooperating.

## Recommendations

The U.S. government should

- view cooperation as a strategic choice, rather than as an objective unto itself
- embrace self-interested cooperation
- concentrate its efforts on global commons and the Middle East
- utilize international organizations to ease cooperation, but accept their limitations

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

- divide issue areas into more narrowly focused topics
- prepare for long-term competition.

The Joint Force should

- focus on deconfliction and deescalation
- coordinate with allies on “safe competition”
- concentrate on contingency planning around North Korea, and on counterpiracy and counterterrorism
- weigh the utility of Russian arms sales to Indo-Pacific partners.

The Department of the Air Force should

- expand air deconfliction mechanisms
- increase communications on space debris management.

Across a range of issues, the research team found relatively few areas for cooperation and more with Russia than with China. Most of these areas, however, consisted of deconfliction and marriages of convenience rather than genuine cooperation (Table S.1).

TABLE S.1

**The Narrow Trade Space for Cooperation**

| Issue Area     |                                                                                       | Prospects for Security Cooperation with the United States |        |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------|
|                |                                                                                       | China                                                     | Russia |
| Indo-Pacific   | Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                        | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Promoting and preserving regional alliances                                           | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam                 | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan                            | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea                                         | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | India's regional role and strategic orientation                                       | Low                                                       | Low    |
| Middle East    | Middle east stability and peace processes                                             | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Countering Iran and its proxies                                                       | Medium                                                    | Medium |
| Europe         | Broader Euro-Atlantic security                                                        | N/A                                                       | Medium |
|                | Baltic security                                                                       | N/A                                                       | Medium |
|                | Balkan security and strategic orientation                                             | N/A                                                       | Low    |
|                | Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation                                      | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | The future of Ukraine                                                                 | N/A                                                       | Medium |
| Global Commons | Maintaining freedom of access to space                                                | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks                             | Medium                                                    | Low    |
|                | Countering violent extremist organizations                                            | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Promoting global stability                                                            | High                                                      | Medium |
|                | Preserving access to the air and maritime commons                                     | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Preventing nuclear arms races                                                         | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Preventing militarization of the Arctic                                               | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Maintaining the openness of cyberspace                                                | Medium                                                    | Low    |



# Cooperation in an Era of Strategic Competition<sup>1</sup>

On New Year's Eve, 2019, China informed the World Health Organization (WHO) that 44 of its citizens had fallen ill in the city of Wuhan in central China's Hubei Province.<sup>2</sup> Over the next two weeks, health officials identified the culprit as a novel coronavirus named SARS-CoV2 and the disease it causes, COVID-19.<sup>3</sup> Over the subsequent months, the virus spread rapidly, first across China, then to Italy, Iran, South Korea, and ultimately across the globe. On March 11, 2020, just under two and a half months since the first report and with by that point 118,000 cases and 4,291 deaths in 114 countries, the WHO formally declared the COVID-19 outbreak to be a global pandemic.<sup>4</sup>

Before long, the response to COVID-19 became mired in geopolitics. Senator Tom Cotton (R-AR) suggested that the virus might have originated from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, China's military infectious disease laboratory, as part of a biological warfare program, though he later acknowledged that a naturally occurring disease was the more likely explanation.<sup>5</sup> A few weeks later, China escalated the accusations. Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Zhao Lijian tweeted that it "might be [the] US army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan."<sup>6</sup> Russia and Iran later piled on China's claims, as the United States tried to debunk them, and the rhetoric around the global pandemic descended into mutual recriminations.<sup>7</sup> The geopo-

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization, *Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) Situation Report—1*, January 21, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> World Health Organization, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, "WHO Director-General's Opening Remarks at the Media Briefing on COVID-19," March 11, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tara Subramaniam, "Fact-Checking Tom Cotton's Claims About the Coronavirus," CNN, February 18, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Bradford Betz, "Chinese Foreign Ministry Suggests US Army to Blame for Coronavirus Pandemic," Fox News, March 13, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Guy Taylor, "Russia and China Flood Web with Coronavirus Outbreak Lies Blaming U.S.; State Dept. Fights Back," *Washington Times*, March 15, 2020. Also see Yun Sun, "China's 'Wolf Warrior' Diplomacy in

litical tensions went beyond just words. During the early days, China refused offers from the WHO and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help with the outbreak.<sup>8</sup> And so, even in the face of a deadly global pandemic that threatened to wreak havoc on the global economy without regard to international borders, great power competition remained very much alive and well.

The 2018 *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) starts with the assertion that “Interstate strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>9</sup> The strategy’s central thesis is that the United States is now locked in battle for global influence with China and Russia, and that the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) and the Joint Force must now compete with both powers. While the document was produced by the Trump administration, this central idea—that the United States’ primary security focus should be great power competition—has bipartisan appeal.<sup>10</sup> Interstate competition, however, is a multidimensional game. As a superpower with global interests, the United States can ill afford the luxury of competing with any one rival everywhere all the time, nor often does it want to. Even with China and Russia, the Joint Force has a narrow set of missions—such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief—where cooperation more closely approximates, as China dubiously labels it, “win-win.”<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the United States often must cooperate to some degree with China and/or Russia to address a range of regional security problems, particularly in countries where their influence outstrips that of the United States’, such as North Korea, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela. On a deeper level, simultaneous competition with both China and Russia may constitute an unsustainable proposition. Because resources—from fifth-generation aircraft and advanced munitions to time on senior leaders’ calendars—are finite, competition with either China or Russia functionally comes at the expense of competition with the other. Unsurprisingly, both the 2017 *National Security Strategy* (NSS) and the 2018 NDS acknowledge the need for cooperation with competitors, but “from a position of strength and based on our national interests.”<sup>12</sup>

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the COVID-19 Crisis,” ASAN Forum, May 15, 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Donald G. McNeil Jr. and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, “C.D.C. and W.H.O. Offers to Help China Have Been Ignored for Weeks,” *New York Times*, February 7, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military’s Competitive Edge*, Washington, D.C., 2018, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> The bipartisan, congressionally mandated National Defense Strategy Commission, for example, found, “The Commission thus supports the view that major-power competition should be at the center of the Department’s strategy as well as its budget” (Eric Edelman and Gary Roughead, *Providing for the Common Defense: The Assessment and Recommendations of the National Defense Strategy Commission*, Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace, 2018, p. 44).

<sup>11</sup> Cui Tiankai, ambassador of the People’s Republic of China, “China-U.S. Relations: World Is Our Stage of Win-Win Cooperation,” speech at Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah, October 6, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> DoD, 2018, p. 5; The White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, p. 26.

This study explored great power cooperation on national security issues in an era of strategic competition. We sought to understand where the United States, China, and Russia have common interests, what the obstacles to cooperation are, and where the United States might be able to deepen its cooperation with one or both powers in pursuit of shared, mutual interests. This report is the first in a four-part series; the three subordinate volumes explore the cooperation trade space in the Indo-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East, and the global commons. This volume presents the study's overarching findings.

In this chapter, we define the key terms in the project; propose several hypotheses about when we might expect great power cooperation; describe how we went about measuring great power competition; detail how we chose the specific aspects of the United States-China-Russia relationship we ultimately decided to focus on; and finally, provide an overview of structure of this report and our central findings.

## Defining Strategic Competition and Cooperation

Before delving into when and where the United States can cooperate with China and Russia in an era of strategic competition, we first need to define what both terms mean. Defining *competition* is a particularly vexing task. As RAND analysts Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas noted in their study of the subject, “Surprisingly . . . for a term used so routinely in international relations, there is no clear, consensus understanding of what *competition* means. The distinctions among related but very different global dynamics—such as competition, conflict, rivalry, and contestation—are not well defined.”<sup>13</sup>

International relations scholars offer explanations for the roots of great competition. Structural realists, for example, argue that competition results from the anarchic, self-help nature of the international system and the need for states to pursue their own security interests.<sup>14</sup> Others argue that primarily economic factors drive great power competition.<sup>15</sup> Still

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<sup>13</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Jonathan Blake, Abigail Casey, Tim McDonald, Stephanie Pezard, and Michael Spirtas, *Understanding the Emerging Era of International Competition: Theoretical and Historical Perspectives*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2726-AF, 2018a, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> See Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1979; John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, New York: W.W. Norton, 2001. This argument echoes in the policy world, as well. For example, a Congressional Research Service report links the United States' current competition with China and Russia with its longstanding interest in preventing the emergence of regional hegemons in Eurasia. See Congressional Research Service, *Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C., R43838, December 19, 2019, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see Edward Wong, “U.S. Versus China: A New Era of Great Power Competition, but Without Boundaries,” *New York Times*, June 26, 2019; Michael J. Mazarr, Timothy R. Heath, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *China and the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2423-OSD, 2018, p. 14.

other analysts suggest that less tangible factors drive great power competition. The late Princeton political scientist Robert Gilpin talked about the importance of “prestige” in the international pecking order—determined not by a state’s economic and military power, but rather by the reputation a state gains from its peers.<sup>16</sup> While these theories may explain *why* the United States, China, and Russia are competing with one another today, they do not explain *what* great power competition is nor *how* it manifests itself in practice.

Competition, similarly, is not particularly well defined in American strategy, despite it being the cornerstone of these documents. The 2017 NSS, for example, uses the term *competition* 25 times but defines the term only by what it is not (war and peace) and what it does not imply (namely, not hostility or the prelude to conflict).<sup>17</sup> The 2018 summary of the NDS, likewise, uses the term some 14 times, including stating that “long-term strategic competitions with China and Russia are the principal priorities for the Department,” but also avoids a clear definition.<sup>18</sup> And the bipartisan 2018 National Defense Strategy Commission found that “the NDS rightly stresses competition with China and Russia,” the commission faulted the strategy for failing to articulate “clear approaches” to what exactly peacetime competition entails.<sup>19</sup>

Mazarr et al. suggest a three-part definition. First, they argue, “there must be some degree of perceived or measurable contention involved.”<sup>20</sup> Competition may not necessarily mean outright hostility, but there must be some measurable level of antagonism. Second, they assert that, in a competition, “each party (or one of the two parties) aims to enhance its power and influence, typically relative to one another.”<sup>21</sup> In this sense, competition tends to be for relative gains. Finally, they suggest that competitions tend to arise from “either (1) scarcity in the object of the competition or (2) significance to getting more of that object than someone else.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, if the object was unlimited or not of special significance, there would

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<sup>16</sup> Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 31–34. Some cast modern great power competition as quest for prestige. For this applied to Russia, in particular, see Andrew Radin and Clint Reach, *Russian Views of the International Order*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1826-OSD, 2017, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> The *National Security Strategy* begins “Competition does not always mean hostility, nor does it inevitably lead to conflict, although none should doubt our commitment to defend our interests” (White House, 2017, p. 3). The strategy notes, “China, Russia, and other state and nonstate actors recognize that the United States often views the world in binary terms, with states being either ‘at peace’ or ‘at war,’ when it is actually an arena of continuous competition” (White House, 2017, p. 28).

<sup>18</sup> DoD, 2018, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Edelman and Roughhead, 2018, p. vii.

<sup>20</sup> Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018a, p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018a, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018a, p. 4.

be no reason to compete over it.<sup>23</sup> Cooperation then occupies some sort of middle ground between harmonious relationship on the one hand and conflict on the other.

Unlike *competition*, *cooperation* is somewhat better defined in American strategy. The 2017 NSS gives a rather succinct, if simple, definition of *cooperation*: “Cooperation means sharing responsibilities and burdens.”<sup>24</sup> At places, the strategy seems to equate cooperation with naivete. For example, it summarizes, “Since the 1990s, the United States displayed a great degree of strategic complacency. . . . We believed that liberal-democratic enlargement and inclusion would fundamentally alter the nature of international relations and that competition would give way to peaceful cooperation.”<sup>25</sup> Still, the NSS recognizes the need to pursue cooperation in some form, although mostly as a nonmilitary task. It notes, “Diplomacy sustains dialogue and fosters areas of cooperation with competitors.”<sup>26</sup>

There are less demanding definitions of cooperation than the burden-sharing that features in the NSS. Mazarr et al. define *cooperation* as “seeking th[e] same goals through mutual coordination of activities for common benefit.”<sup>27</sup> This sets a somewhat lower bar for cooperation: It may not necessarily be proactive burden-sharing, but a coordination or deconfliction of actions in the pursuit of similar ends. Particularly in an increasingly competitive world, this is perhaps a more realistic standard for Sino-Russo-American interactions.

Both the definitions of *cooperation*, however, share two important aspects. First, both definitions assume that states are not cooperating with their peers out of a sense of magnanimity but rather because they see such activities as benefiting themselves. Cooperation, therefore, can be a selfish, if unsavory, act. A second important commonality between the two definitions is that neither requires cooperation to be an all-or-nothing affair. Both definitions leave open the possibility that states can cooperate—either through burden-sharing or at least deconfliction—in certain areas while still competing with one another elsewhere. Even within an issue area, the depth of cooperation can vary from relatively superficial displays of rhetorical support on one end of the spectrum to more genuine and more costly acts of burden-sharing on other.

## When Can Strategic Competitors Cooperate?

There is an interesting irony in American strategy: Formal strategies often tend to be pessimistic about the prospects of cooperation, but American policymakers themselves often tend to start out bullish about cooperation. At least judging from their public rhetoric, senior

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<sup>23</sup> Even prestige—to the extent it reflects a pecking order in the international system—is a finite good.

<sup>24</sup> White House, 2017, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> White House, 2017, p. 27.

<sup>26</sup> White House, 2017, p. 33.

<sup>27</sup> Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018a, p. 5.

leaders routinely overestimate the chances for great power cooperation in the international politics.

President George W. Bush, arguably, fell victim to this delusion. He famously proclaimed in 2001 that he “‘looked [Vladimir Putin] in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul.’”<sup>28</sup>

Despite all their differences, President Barack Obama seemingly harbored similar views as his predecessor. He famously launched a “reset” of U.S.-Russia relations as one of his early foreign policy initiatives. When his 2012 election opponent Mitt Romney suggested that Russia was the United States’ “number one geopolitical foe,” Obama quipped that, “The 1980s are now calling to ask for their foreign policy back. Because the Cold War has been over for 20 years.”<sup>29</sup> Even after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2014, then-Secretary of State John Kerry responded, “You just don’t behave in the 21st century in 19th century fashion by invading another country on completely trumped up pretext.”<sup>30</sup>

President Donald Trump similarly believed that the United States could cooperate with its long rivals in a host of areas. He promised “by far, the greatest and biggest deal ever made for our Great Patriot Farmers in the history of our Country” with China.<sup>31</sup> Trump suggested that there is “tremendous potential for a good/great relationship with Russia.”<sup>32</sup> And he stated, “I think [Kim Jong-un] wants to get it [denuclearization] done. I really feel that very strongly.”<sup>33</sup>

In the end, reality frustrated all three presidents’ desires for increased great power cooperation. Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 dashed first Bush’s and then Obama’s hopes for a more harmonious relationship with Putin’s Russia. And Trump’s initiatives did not lead to a final trade deal with China, a substantively better relationship with Russia, or a denuclearized North Korea.

There are many potential reasons why U.S. leaders might overestimate their ability to cooperate—political necessity, a misplaced belief that China and Russia share the United States’ interests, a sign of some deeper fallacy in American strategic culture that assumes the world politics naturally tend to cooperation rather than conflict, or simple hubris. Proving which of these factors is the primary reason for this strategic misstep ultimately would require a more detailed analysis than we have space for here. And in all fairness, there are probably as many examples of American presidents exaggerating their prospects to achieve

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<sup>28</sup> Jane Perlez, “Cordial Rivals: How Bush and Putin Became Friends,” *New York Times*, June 18, 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Jillian Rayfield, “Obama: The ‘80s Called, They Want Their Foreign Policy Back,” *Salon*, October 23, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Reid J. Epstein, “Kerry: Russia Behaving Like It’s the 19th Century,” *Politico*, March 2, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Megan Henney, “Trump Says Chinese Demand After ‘Greatest Deal Ever Made’ May Overwhelm US Farmers,” *Fox Business*, October 12, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Tal Axelrod, “Trump Goes on Tear, Sharing Tweets About Putin, North Korea’s Kim and Far-Right YouTube Star,” *The Hill*, May 4, 2019.

<sup>33</sup> Greg Myre, Elise Hu, and Bill Chappell, “An Upbeat Trump Praises Kim’s Commitment to Denuclearize After Singapore Summit,” *NPR*, June 11, 2018.

their objectives through coercion or confrontation as there are through cooperation. Nonetheless, the fact remains that history has shown time and time again that successful cooperation, particularly about core security matters, is hard to achieve.

In contrast to U.S. leaders, many international relations scholars often tend to be more cynical about the prospects of international cooperation. As Thucydides famously concludes the Melian Dialogue, “the strong do what they have the power to do and the weak accept what they have to accept.”<sup>34</sup> More recently, the entire school of structural realism suggests that, at its core, the international system is premised on self-help, where the lack of a central authority means that states must fend for themselves and where one state’s security inherently comes at the expense of its rivals.<sup>35</sup> Even when states’ interests are best served by cooperation, the problem of credible commitment—the inability to trust each other—makes cooperation rare.<sup>36</sup>

And yet, even international relations realists believe that cooperation—even on security matters—is possible.<sup>37</sup> Not every game is zero-sum, and even rivals might have more to gain from cooperation than alternative pursuits of their interests, which helps account for important examples such as alliances and trade agreements.<sup>38</sup> And even realists accept that solutions to the credible commitment problem are possible under certain conditions.<sup>39</sup> Robert Jervis summarizes some of these:

[C]ooperation is more likely or can be made so if large transactions can be divided up into a series of smaller ones, if transparency can be increased, if both the gains from cheating and the costs of being cheated on are relatively low, if mutual cooperation is or can be made much more advantageous than mutual defection, and if each side employs strategies of reciprocity and believes that the interactions will continue over a long period of time.<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, empirically, cooperation between great power rivals has certainly occurred at times. For example, the United States and the Soviet Union cooperated extensively on nuclear nonproliferation, including through “sharing of sensitive intelligence information, negotiating novel arms control and disarmament measures, formulating new approaches for regu-

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<sup>34</sup> Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Rex Warner, New York: Penguin Books, 1972, p. 402.

<sup>35</sup> Admittedly, other schools of international relations theory—most notably neoliberal institutionalism and constructivism—are even more bullish on the prospects of international cooperation, premised on the existence of international institutions. For a brief overview of modern international relations theory, see Jack Snyder, “One World, Rival Theories,” *Foreign Policy*, October 26, 2009.

<sup>36</sup> For an overview of cooperation in realist and neoliberal thought, see Robert Jervis, “Realism, Neoliberalism, and Cooperation: Understanding the Debate,” *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1999.

<sup>37</sup> See Snyder, 2009.

<sup>38</sup> For example, see Waltz, 1979; Stephen Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1987.

<sup>39</sup> Jervis, 1999.

<sup>40</sup> Jervis, 1999, p. 52.

lating nuclear exports, and meeting regularly to review all issues of nonproliferation concern to either party”—cooperation that did not cease “even during some of the most frigid moments of the Cold War.”<sup>41</sup> The period of *glasnost* in the 1980s witnessed a relative warming in relations between the United States and the Soviet Union, during which they worked together on several issues, such as trying to slow, if not stop, the North Korea nuclearization. After 9-11, similarly, Russian cooperated with the United States on counterterrorism. More recently, there was limited coordination between the United States and Russia on actions in Syria; cooperation, albeit perhaps grudgingly, between the United States and China over North Korean denuclearization; and coordination with both powers—and others—on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to address the Iranian denuclearization. Ultimately, the real question is: Under what conditions can great power cooperation occur even during great power competition?

Of course, one can imagine a host of prerequisite factors for there to be any sort of meaningful interaction—cooperation or competition—whatsoever. First, as noted in the Mazarr et al. definition, the two states must have a relevant issue to compete over or cooperate on and need to possess the wherewithal to compete or cooperate.<sup>42</sup> Beyond this, international cooperation is contingent on at least two key factors. First, cooperation depends on an *alignment of interests*. States’ interests on any given issue often are complex and multifaceted; only rarely do states’ equities perfectly align. Still, given that cooperation is often self-interested, we can expect that, *ceteris paribus*, the closer states’ equities align, the more likely they will cooperate on a given topic.

Perhaps less obviously, cooperation also hinges on the *stakes at play* for each country. Some issues, such as core security concerns, might go to the heart of a state’s—or a regime’s—survival and offer very little room for negotiation. Others—such as many economic or prestige issues—may prove more fungible and offer more potential bargaining space.<sup>43</sup> Still other issues—be they security, economic, or prestige—may be peripheral to a state’s core interests. In the latter case, a state might be willing to cooperate with a rival on one issue if it believes that, by doing so, it can gain its rival’s cooperation on another issue in a form of linkage politics. Presumably, a state would only be willing to make this “trade” if the issue it is making concessions over matters less to its national interest than the issue on which it is gaining.

Put another way, we can begin to make rough predictions about the relative likelihood of cooperation on a given issue based on these two factors. Table 1.1 depicts the chances of

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<sup>41</sup> William Potter and Sarah Bidgood, “The Good Old Days of the Cold War: U.S.-Soviet Cooperation on Nonproliferation,” *War on the Rocks*, August 7, 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Mazarr, Blake, et al., 2018a, p. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Importantly, there are a certain economic (e.g., access to energy) and prestige (e.g., control over sacred spaces, such as Jerusalem) that may also be indivisible and high stakes for a regime’s, if not the state’s, survival. See Ron E. Hassner, “‘To Halve and to Hold’: Conflicts over Sacred Space and the Problem of Indivisibility,” *Security Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 2003.

**TABLE 1.1**  
**Predicting Cooperation**

|                       | Low Stakes    | Medium Stakes      | High Stakes    |
|-----------------------|---------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Interests Aligned     | Low potential | Moderate potential | High potential |
| Interests Not Aligned | No potential  | Moderate potential | No potential   |

cooperation based on simplified coding: *alignment of interests* (yes or no) and *level of stakes involved* (high, medium, or low).

If both powers have relatively low stakes in the outcome of a given issue and their interests are not aligned, there is relatively low potential for cooperation. Neither power cares to spend much in time and resources bargaining over a given issue, and, since the powers diverge in their preferred outcomes, cooperation is unlikely. If, by contrast, neither state has much of a stake in the outcome but there is some degree of mutual interest, then there may be comparatively more likelihood for cooperation.

As the stakes rise for both states, the likelihood of cooperation may diverge to either extreme. If both are highly vested in the outcome of a given issue and share a common policy view, the chances for cooperation increase dramatically, since both sides are motivated to find solution and more or less agree on the desired outcome. By contrast, if both sides view the stakes as high but disagree on what that preferred outcome should be, then the chances of successful cooperation decline dramatically, as both sides view the issue as zero-sum.

## Measuring Cooperation in an Era of Great Power Competition

To test the theory laid out in the previous section, we need to develop ways to measure the variables in Table 1.1. More specifically, we need to measure *stakes*, *alignment*, and, most importantly, *potential for cooperation*. Unfortunately, none of these three concepts lend themselves to easy quantitative metrics that can be applied across the full range of foreign policy issues that great power relations encompass. As such, for this project, we adopt a simplified coding system for each variable.

To measure the *stakes* involved, or how important the issue is to a country, we use a high-medium-low model. We code an issue as “high” if the issue is vital to the state or the regime’s survival or mentioned in the country’s defense or foreign policy white papers or senior leader speeches as a core national security concern. By contrast, an issue is rated as a “medium” if it 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 and/or regime’s survival. Finally, “low” issues are those that are peripheral to the state’s interests; generally, these receive only minimal attention in leaders’ public statements and/or official policy documents.

Our measurement of *alignment* is also based on states’ public statements—both in their white papers and in senior leader statements—but uses a four-part, yes-no-mixed-irrelevant coding structure. We code alignment as “yes” if Chinese or Russian official documents and

public statements support objectives/interests that are the same or nearly the same as U.S. objectives and “no,” if they are not. We used “mixed” (an intermediate coding) if one of three conditions apply: if Chinese and Russian statements on a subject are contradictory; if the messages coming out different parts of the government say different things (e.g., the Ministry of Defense takes a substantially harder line than the Ministry of Foreign Affairs); or if statements may seem well-aligned at first blush, but there is reason to believe that how China or Russia interpret their own public statements varies substantially from how the United States does (e.g., all three great powers may be for combating terrorism, but how they define *terrorism* may be very different). Finally, we use “irrelevant” if China or Russia has been largely silent on a given issue.

Perhaps the ultimate measure of the *potential for cooperation* is whether countries have demonstrated any willingness to commit resources to fulfill their commitments on an issue. After all, talk is cheap in geopolitics, and the true measure of a country’s willingness to cooperate is what kind of sacrifices it is willing to make to attain its stated goals. We code potential for cooperation as “high” if there are concrete signs that the state will incur costs—both in terms of physical resources as well as the more amorphous notion of “political capital” (such that a leader actually stakes their reputation on achieving a certain outcome)—to achieve a shared goal. Conversely, we code potential for cooperation as “low” if there is no such sign. “Medium” is reserved for cases where China or Russia have given unclear or contradictory signals about their commitment on an issue, have made a commitment and then retracted it, or have engaged in half-hearted cooperation (for example by having passively allowed the United States to achieve a given policy outcome but avoided actively aiding U.S. efforts). Finally, an “irrelevant” coding is reserved for cases where China or Russia does not have much say in the matter one way or the other, and so could not meaningfully cooperate even if it chose to do so.

Finally, we should highlight one key factor we are *not* measuring in our assessment of cooperation: the motivations of states. The United States, China, and Russia each accuse each other of cooperating only out of self-interest, while casting themselves in a more benevolent light. For example, as former Russian army officer turned think-tank scholar Dmitri Trenin has written, “The United States can be relied upon . . . to reach out to Russia out of its own self-interest.”<sup>44</sup> Rather than sifting through the mutual recriminations and trying to decipher motivations, we instead assess cooperation by the more concrete evidence of actions—what states do rather than why they do it.

Admittedly, the measurements for all three variables remain rather broad and do not capture the full nuances unique to each issue area. Still, as we shall see in the next section, the range of topics covered in this series necessitates a certain amount of coarseness in the measurements.

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<sup>44</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “What Does Russia Want from the United States?” Carnegie Moscow Center, April 15, 2020.

## Topic Selection

In this study, we examined only a subset of great power relations. Specifically, we looked at core American national security objectives, examined where the United States can cooperate versus where it will need to compete with China and Russia, and analyzed the practical obstacles to doing either successfully. In this report, we present our findings and recommend potential policy options.

The specific list of U.S. objectives here are drawn from key American strategic documents—the NSS, NDS, the findings of the bipartisan National Defense Strategy Commission, and more-tailored strategic documents—with input from the sponsor of this research, the Headquarters Air Force A-5 Strategy office. In general, analytic effort was weighted toward geographic areas prioritized in the NDS—the Indo-Pacific, Europe, and the Middle East, in that order—with another volume looking at overarching topics that are not specific to any one region.<sup>45</sup>

Since China and Russia cannot be expected to share the United States' objectives or aid the United States in accomplishing its objectives, we turned some of the U.S. objectives to more generalizable issue areas. This broadening, in turn, allows us to look more comprehensively at cooperation, where strategic cooperation might not be plausible, but lesser, more operational cooperation might be. For example, although the United States might not be able to cooperate with Russia on preventing Russian aggression with the Baltics, both sides might be able to cooperate over reducing tensions and accidental conflict in this area. Ultimately, this produced the list of topics in Table 1.2.

Before describing how we analyzed each of these objectives, it is important to caveat with what this study is not: a comprehensive study of great power competition and cooperation, or even a comprehensive study of competition and cooperation with Russia and China. We did not look at the full range of American relationships with allied great powers (e.g., the United Kingdom, France, and Japan) or non-aligned great powers (e.g., India and Brazil), nor the full list of adversaries (i.e., North Korea and Iran). We also did not examine the full range of American objectives vis-à-vis China and Russia, but rather only those of importance to DoD and specifically to the Department of the Air Force (DAF). Consequently, we mostly focus more on American security concerns, rather than on American economic strength, prestige, or other objectives outlined in the earlier section.

While narrowing the scope was necessary to maximize the resources devoted to matters of most interest to the sponsor of this research, it also means that this study represents only a partial test of the theory outlined in the previous section. We cannot test the prerequisites for competition because both China and Russia are capable competitors with wide-ranging interests.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, although issues vary in their importance to the United States, China,

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<sup>45</sup> DoD, 2018, p. 6; Edelman and Roughhead, 2018, pp. 34–35.

<sup>46</sup> For an analysis of China and Russia's interests, see Mazarr, Heath, and Cevallos, 2018; Radin and Reach, 2017.

**TABLE 1.2**

**List of Issues (organized by volume and not in order priority)**

| Indo-Pacific                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          | Europe and the Middle East                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Global Commons                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order</li> <li>• Promoting and preserving regional alliances</li> <li>• Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam</li> <li>• Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia</li> <li>• Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan</li> <li>• Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea</li> <li>• India's regional role and strategic orientation</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broader Euro-Atlantic security</li> <li>• Baltic security</li> <li>• Balkan security and strategic orientation</li> <li>• Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation</li> <li>• The future of Ukraine</li> <li>• Middle East stability and peace processes</li> <li>• Countering Iran and its proxies</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining freedom of access to space</li> <li>• Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks</li> <li>• Countering violent extremist organizations</li> <li>• Promoting global stability</li> <li>• Preserving access to the air and maritime commons</li> <li>• Preventing nuclear arms races</li> <li>• Preventing militarization of the Arctic</li> <li>• Maintaining the openness of cyberspace</li> </ul> |

and Russia, we have selected issues for their centrality to American national security, so study does not include any truly “low stakes for both” issues (as depicted in Table 1.1). Hopefully, what this study sacrifices in terms of theoretical comprehensiveness, the resulting series of reports gains in practicality—providing a useful guide for policymakers about the best areas for competition and cooperation.

After identifying the list of the topics, we analyzed the American, Chinese, and Russian equities on each issue. To do this, we drew on a range of official strategy documents, public statements, and English-, Chinese-, and Russian-language scholarly and policy analytic work on each issue. We also originally intended to conduct interviews with key government, academic, and policy experts in eight countries across Europe, the Middle East, and the Indo-Pacific—including China and Russia—about the prospects for cooperation. Unfortunately, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, only the Middle East field research—in Israel and Jordan—was completed before the global travel shutdown. Still, the research team completed some 40 interviews with a mixture of government, military, academic, and think-tank analysts from the United States, Israel, and Jordan.

The lack of field research poses two limitations. First, the lack of firsthand interviews in China and Russia hinders our ability to fully assess where both regimes might bargain with the United States over sensitive issues and what they themselves perceive as the primary obstacles to cooperation (see Chapters Two and Three). Instead, we were forced to rely mostly on official statements and on other scholarship.

Second, and to a lesser extent, the lack of interviews limits our understanding of allies' and partners' views of cooperation (discussed in greater detail in Chapter Four). Almost by definition, cooperation requires compromise. These compromises can work either for or against allies' and partners' interests. In some cases, allies and partners stand to lose the most from great power conflict and will benefit from more-harmonious relationships. In other cases, compromises mean sacrificing some of allies' and partners' interests on behalf of U.S. policy goals. Ideally, fieldwork interviews with allies and partners would have captured these views. Unlike China or Russia, most U.S. allies and partners are open societies with more transparent policymaking, so we were more easily able to compensate for this deficit. Still, the lack of field interviews does limit some of the texture of the analysis.

## Overview of the Report and the Core Argument

The remainder of this report proceeds in four chapters. In Chapter Two, we look at the 22 topic areas listed in Table 1.1 to map the “trade space” and understand where the United States', China's, and Russia's interests align and where there might be some room for the three powers to cooperate. In Chapter Three, we look at the obstacles to cooperation. Even if the United States, China, and Russia might theoretically agree about an issue in the abstract, this does not mean they will cooperate in practice, for a host of reasons, and so in Chapter Three we examine the obstacles to cooperation in each theater. Next, in Chapter Four, we look at the second-order effects of cooperation: whether the United States could cooperate with China to pressure Russia or vice versa and how cooperation in one area might affect American partners and allies, as well as other American interests.

Ultimately, we present a rather gloomy finding. The NDS proclaims, “As we expand the competitive space, we continue to offer competitors and adversaries an outstretched hand, open to opportunities for cooperation but from a position of strength and based on our national interests.”<sup>47</sup> If we accept this premise that the United States, China, and Russia will each act from a position of strength and only in pursuit of their own self-interest, then the prospects for cooperation appear dim. Our finding is that the trade space for cooperation is already narrow; that the obstacles to cooperation—particularly the absence of trust—are growing; that there are comparatively few wedge issues to play the two powers off of one another; and that the side benefits of cooperation over competition do not clearly outweigh the costs of doing so. In other words, any cooperation between the powers will be rare and need to be narrowly focused, and the DAF, the Joint Force, and the United States as whole should expect that the current era of strategic competition will continue for the foreseeable future.

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<sup>47</sup> DoD, 2018, p. 5.



## The Narrow Trade Space for Cooperation

Analyzing where the United States could cooperate with China or Russia starts with understanding equities on a range of topics. Cooperation, after all, is not altruism; even when states cooperate with one another, they remain guided by their own self-interest and view cooperation on a given topic as beneficial for themselves. In this chapter, we analyze the Russian and Chinese equities involved on a range of U.S. priorities to identify where there may be overlapping interests to lay the bedrock for future cooperation. Unfortunately, however, those areas are few and far between.

### Trade Space in the Indo-Pacific

Today, 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 military presence on the Asian continent. All three powers, consequently, have a considerable strategic and economic interest in the future of the region. If China and the United States are locked in a competition for global influence, then the battle arguably starts in the Indo-Pacific. Unsurprisingly, given this context, there are few opportunities for great power cooperation on national security issues in this region, particularly between the United States and China (see Table 2.1).

### Maintaining a Peaceful and Open Regional Order

At least in theory, all three powers are committed to maintaining a peaceful regional order in Asia, but what that means in practice is very different for each. The overarching U.S. policy framework in the Indo-Pacific, as described by the Trump administration since the president's speech in Da Nang, Vietnam, in November 2017, has been to promote a "free and open Indo-Pacific (FOIP)."<sup>1</sup> The goal is to ensure a region where "sovereign and independent nations, with diverse cultures and many different dreams, can all prosper side-by-side, and

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<sup>1</sup> Donald J. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at APEC CEO Summit, Da Nang, Vietnam," U.S. Department of State, November 2017.

**TABLE 2.1**  
**Interest in Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**

| Issue Area                                                                            | China     |        |           | Russia    |        |           |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------|-----------|
|                                                                                       | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate |
| Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                        | Mixed     | High   | Low       | Mixed     | Medium | Low       |
| Promoting and preserving regional alliances                                           | No        | High   | Low       | No        | 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       | No        | 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 regional role and strategic orientation                                       | Mixed     | Medium | Low       | No        | Medium | Low       |

thrive in freedom and in peace.”<sup>2</sup> In practice, this has translated into three basic goals: safeguarding freedom of the seas, which requires preserving access to the region and the ability to transit through its international air and maritime spaces; deterring conflict and coercion; and promoting adherence to international law and standards.

Rhetorically, Beijing agrees with Washington about the importance of freedom of navigation, regional peace and stability, sovereign self-determination, and adhering to international law in the Indo-Pacific. Senior Chinese government officials repeatedly emphasize that “China always maintains that countries enjoy freedom of navigation and overflight,” including in disputed places, such as the South China Sea.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, at the Track 1 U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue in November 2018, “The two sides committed to support peace and stability in the South China Sea, the peaceful resolution of disputes, and freedom

<sup>2</sup> Trump, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> People’s Republic of China Consulate in Gothenberg, “Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press,” March 9, 2016; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Wang Yi on the South China Sea Issue at the ASEAN Regional Forum,” August 6, 2015.

of navigation and overflight and other lawful uses of the sea in accordance with international law.”<sup>4</sup>

Beneath these superficialities, however, Beijing believes that the FOIP concept is a direct threat to Chinese power and influence in the region. As an aspiring regional hegemon and already the dominant economic actor in Asia, China has huge economic and strategic stakes in transforming the regional order in the Indo-Pacific in directions more favorable to its interests. China does not view avowed American objectives in the region as either genuine or benign. As one senior Chinese diplomat stated bluntly, “The US Freedom of Navigation Programme should not be confused with freedom of navigation that is universally recognized under international law. The former is an excuse to throw America’s weight about wherever it wants.”<sup>5</sup>

As a result, China has attempted to thwart the FOIP strategy. China routinely challenges countries’ rights to freedom of navigation through the South China Sea, and China claimed that it had “expelled” at least five U.S. warships in the first half of 2020.<sup>6</sup> China has also used its economic leverage against American allies, most notably by cutting off rare earth exports to Japan after it detained a Chinese fishing trawler captain in 2010, banning banana imports from the Philippines because of the two countries’ dispute over South China Sea sovereignty in 2012, punishing South Korea for allowing the United States to deploy the Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) ballistic missile defense system that was intended to defend against missiles from the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) in 2016–2017, and cutting off imports of various agricultural products from Australia after Canberra called for an investigation into the origins of COVID-19 in 2020.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, Russia is similarly opposed to FOIP, but, with much of its strategic attention focused more on Europe and, to a lesser extent, Central Asia and the Middle East, Russia has less at stake in the Indo-Pacific than China does. Russia’s 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept* underscores the strategic importance of the “Asia-Pacific Region” to Russia’s foreign policy and details Russia’s engagement with the region, often through constructs designed to counter American influence, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian

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<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, “U.S.-China Diplomatic and Security Dialogue,” November 9, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Liu Xiaoming, “China Will Not Tolerate US Military Muscle-Flexing Off Our Shores,” *The Guardian*, June 27, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Liu Xuanzun, “PLA Expels US Warship Illegally Trespassing into S. China Sea,” *Global Times*, May 28, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Tillett, “Barley Backfire: Tariffs to Cost China \$3.6b, Birmingham Reveals,” *Australian Financial Review*, June 17, 2020; “The China-Philippine Banana War,” *Asia Sentinel*, June 6, 2012; Keith Bradsher, “Amid Tensions, China Block Vital Exports to Japan,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2010. For a broader analysis of Chinese economic coercion, see Peter Harrell, Elizabeth Rosenberg, and Edoardo Saravalle, *China’s Use of Coercive Economic Measures*, Washington, D.C.: Center for a New American Security, June 11, 2018.

Economic Union.<sup>8</sup> Like China, Russia views the FOIP concept as rooted in U.S. hegemonic interests and designed to contain or exclude China and, by extension, Russia.<sup>9</sup> As Moscow's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted, "Why do you need to call Asia-Pacific as Indo-Pacific? The answer is evident—to exclude China."<sup>10</sup>

In the abstract then, 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 United States' FOIP as advancing American hegemonic interests, much as the United States views China and Russia's own actions in a similar light. Moreover, with China and Russia largely in lockstep on their worldviews, there is little apparent room to cooperate with one over the other. Still, the three powers could at least try to cooperate on reducing the threat of accidental conflict through further engagement in Track 1.5/Track 2 dialogues and via risk reduction and crisis communication mechanisms.

## Promoting and Preserving Regional Alliances

There is similarly little room for great power cooperation on the issue of the U.S. alliance network in the Indo-Pacific. As DoD's 2019 *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report* notes, U.S. allies and partners constitute "a force multiplier for peace and interoperability, representing a durable, asymmetric, and unparalleled advantage that no competitor or rival can match."<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, China and Russia take a dim view of U.S. alliances in general and in the Indo-Pacific in particular.

For the most part, China views American alliances as a threat. In the 1970s and early 1980s, China accepted U.S. alliances in the region as a way to deter Soviet aggression, and China has, at times, valued the U.S.-Japan alliance's role in restraining Tokyo's perceived ambition.<sup>12</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, however, China has expressed a belief that America's alliances in the Indo-Pacific have outlived their purpose and should be disbanded. From a security perspective, "Beijing interprets what Washington and its allies consider to be defen-

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<sup>8</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, *Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, approved by President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin on November 30, 2016b.

<sup>9</sup> Ekaterina Koldunova, "Russia's Ambivalence About an Indo-Pacific Strategy," *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, No. 476, May 6, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> Ashok Sharma, "Russia Says US Indo-Pacific Strategy Is to Contain China," *The Diplomat*, January 15, 2020; Sergey Lavrov, foreign minister of Russia, "Lavrov, Sergey, foreign minister of Russia, 'Sergey Lavrov, Foreign Minister of Russia, at Raisina Dialogue 2020,'" speech at Raisina Dialogue 2020, video, January 15, 2020," speech at Raisina Dialogue 2020, video, January 15, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> DoD, *Indo-Pacific Strategy Report: Preparedness, Partnerships, and Promoting a Networked Region*, Washington, D.C., June 1, 2019, p. 16.

<sup>12</sup> See the declassified accounts of Nixon's discussions with Mao and Zhou during his 1972 trip to China. William Burr, "Nixon's Trip to China," National Security Archive, December 11, 2003; Adam Liff, "China and the U.S. Alliance System," *China Quarterly*, Vol. 223, 2018, pp. 144–145.

sive measures as offensive provocations threatening China's own security."<sup>13</sup> From Beijing's perspective, American alliances block Chinese regional ambitions, increase the chances of a regional conflict spiraling into a great power war, and endanger vital Chinese economic supply lines, such as the Malacca Strait.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, in the place of the U.S. alliance network, China has proposed a "new Asian security concept" based on the four principles of "common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security" that would place China at the center of a new security architecture designed to tackle both economic and nontraditional security concerns, as well as more interstate issues.<sup>15</sup>

Russia also views the Indo-Pacific alliances of the United States in a negative light, for a host of reasons. Moscow views some American military alliances in the Indo-Pacific—such as the U.S.-Japan alliance—as partly aimed at the containment of Russia and as a threat to Russian security interests, particularly over the disputed Kuril Islands.<sup>16</sup> Russia also notes that the United States has leveraged its Indo-Pacific alliances—such as with Australia—to build support for the United States' sanctions regime targeting Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.<sup>17</sup> In other cases, Russia sees American treaty alliances as an obstacle to its economic interests, although perhaps not an insurmountable one. For example, in October 2017, Russia and the Philippines signed a defense cooperation agreement to designate areas for military technical cooperation, including research, training, and the procurement of Russian defense articles.<sup>18</sup> Under the "9-Bridge Strategy," Russia and South Korea aim to enhance their cooperation in key infrastructural sectors, including railways, shipbuilding, agriculture, marine products, and gas.<sup>19</sup> Particularly in the latter case, however, South Korea's reliance on American security guarantees may limit how far Russia-South Korea ties can develop.

Ultimately, in the zero-sum world of alliances, there is little room for Sino-Russo-American cooperation. For China and Russia, American alliances in the Indo-Pacific are at

<sup>13</sup> Liff, 2018, p. 139; Adam P. Liff and G. John Ikenberry, "Racing Toward Tragedy? China's Rise, Military Competition in the Asia Pacific, and the Security Dilemma," *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 2, Fall 2014.

<sup>14</sup> DoD, 2019, p. 12. For Chinese concerns over its SLOC vulnerability, see Ian Storey, "China's 'Malacca Dilemma,'" *China Brief*, Vol. 6, No. 8, April 12, 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Xi Jinping, "New Asian Security Concept For New Progress in Security Cooperation," speech at the Fourth Summit of the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia, May 21, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, "Acting Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Remarks and Answers to Media Questions at a News Conference on Russia's Diplomatic Performance in 2019 Moscow, January 17, 2020," January 17, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Korolev, "Australia's Approach to Cooperation with Russia," *Russia in Global Affairs*, December 17, 2019; Elizabeth Buchanan, "What a New Russian Ambassador Might Mean for Relations with Australia," *The Interpreter*, Lowy Institute, May 27, 2019; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, "Russian Sanctions Regime," undated.

<sup>18</sup> Anna Patricia L. Saberon, "Philippine Defense Cooperation with Russia: A Wake-Up Call for the United States?" *Asia-Pacific Bulletin*, No. 444, October 24, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Liudmila Zakharova, "Economic Relations Between Russia and South Korea in the New Northern Policy," Korea Economic Institute of America, KEI Academic Paper Series, December 10, 2019.

best an obstacle to be overcome, and at worst a mortal threat. Consequently, any American policy dedicated to strengthening those alliances is likely to be in direct conflict with Chinese and Russian interests, leaving little room for any real cooperation except on the tactical level—for example, how to ensure that alliances do not draw the United States, China, and Russia into an unintentional conflict by bringing Japan, South Korea, and/or the Philippines into the various military-military risk reduction/crisis communication agreements with the People's Liberation Army (PLA).

## Expanding Strategic Cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam

In addition to deepening security cooperation with existing U.S. allies and partners, the United States has also made a conscious effort to develop its security relationships with previously neutral countries (e.g., Indonesia and Malaysia) and even former adversaries (Vietnam), mostly to check Chinese hegemonic ambitions in Asia. Unsurprisingly, there is little room for cooperation with China on this venture, but there might be some room for tacit, if indirect, cooperation with Russia.

Rhetorically, China supports Indo-Pacific nations developing improved security and political relationships, including with the United States. Alluding to the U.S. relationships in the region, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) General-Secretary Xi Jinping stated in 2014, “We welcome all parties to play a positive and constructive role in promoting Asia’s security and cooperation and work together to achieve win-win outcomes for all.”<sup>20</sup> In March 2018, when a U.S. aircraft carrier visited Vietnam for the first time since the end of the Vietnam War, the Chinese Foreign Ministry said, “We have no problem with relevant countries developing normal relations and conducting normal cooperation.”<sup>21</sup>

In practice, however, China opposes new U.S. relationships in the Indo-Pacific and has tried to thwart them. Although Beijing believes the U.S.-Vietnam relationship will not progress too far, Beijing still is concerned by Hanoi’s decision to deepen defense relations with Washington.<sup>22</sup> China also sought to undercut the United States’ pursuit of improved relations with Myanmar. According to China expert Yun Sun of the Stimson Center, “China has perceived new American interest in engaging Myanmar as a threat to their established role in the country, and has tended to view the dynamic in zero-sum, competitive terms.”<sup>23</sup> Arguably, a similar zero-sum logic complicates meaningful cooperation with Sino-American cooperation with any American outreach to the other countries of the region.

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<sup>20</sup> Xi, 2014.

<sup>21</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Regular Press Conference on March 6, 2018,” March 6, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Greg Torode and Mai Nguyen, “Vietnam Seeks to Pacify China as Landmark U.S. Carrier Visit Signals Warming Ties,” Reuters, March 3, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Yun Sun, *Myanmar in US-China Relations*, Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, June 2014.

By contrast, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam are of relatively low importance to Russian foreign policy interests, though all three countries are viewed as key destinations for Russian arms sales.<sup>24</sup> Moscow's 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept* only briefly mentions an interest in expanding Russia's multidimensional cooperation with Indonesia and Malaysia and strengthening its comprehensive partnership with Vietnam.<sup>25</sup> Still, Russia has improved its military ties with all three countries in recent years. Russia-Malaysia military cooperation began in 1994, with Moscow furnishing fighter jets, assault weapons, helicopters, and other air defenses to help upgrade and strengthen Malaysian armed forces, and Malaysia has an outstanding requirement for another 18 fighter jets, which may include the purchase of additional Su-30s from Moscow.<sup>26</sup> If anything, Russia has been even more active with Indonesia and Vietnam. In 2018, Russia upgraded its relationship with Indonesia to a strategic partnership and signed a military cooperation roadmap with Vietnam to deepen their security relations.<sup>27</sup> Russia's economic interests are least partially driving the budding security relationship: Vietnam ranks as the third-largest destination for Russian weapon sales, surpassed only by India and China.<sup>28</sup>

Ultimately, American and Russian interests are not completely misaligned when it comes to these three strategically important Southeast Asian nations. While the United States would prefer for these countries to buy weapons from the United States or one of its allies, Russian arms sales to Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam could still indirectly benefit American interests, since these weapons, if fired in anger, are most likely to be directed against Chinese forces. Moreover, Russian-owned corporations are cooperating with Vietnamese companies on resource extraction within China's Nine-Dash Line in the South China Sea, suggesting that Moscow might be willing to pursue its own economic interests at a modest price on its relations with China.<sup>29</sup> Russia's willingness to challenge China, however, goes only so far. Russia has not expressed clear support for China's Nine-Dash Line claim, but it has also consciously avoided taking Vietnam's side, and even declined to mediate the dispute when Vietnam asked.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Richard Connolly and Cecilie Sendstad, *Russia's Role as an Arms Exporter: The Strategic and Economic Importance of Arms Exports for Russia*, London: Chatham House, March 2017.

<sup>25</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>26</sup> Richard A. Bitzinger, "Russian Arms Transfers and Asian Military Modernisation," *RSIS Policy Report*, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), 2015.

<sup>27</sup> "Moscow, Jakarta Embark on Strategic Partnership in Their Relations, Lavrov Says," TASS, March 13, 2018; "Russia, Vietnam Ink Military Cooperation Roadmap Until 2020," TASS, April 4, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Connolly and Sendstad, 2017; Daniel Brown, "The Top 10 Countries That Bought Russia's Most Powerful Weapons in 2017," *Business Insider*, October 6, 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Bennett Murray, "Vietnam's Strange Ally in Its Fight with China," *Foreign Policy*, August 1, 2019b.

<sup>30</sup> Nicholas Trickett, "Working with Vietnam, Russia's Rosneft Draws China's Ire," *The Diplomat*, March 19, 2018; Murray, 2019b; Bennett Murray, *Russia's Awkward Dance with Vietnam*, Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2019a.

## Managing Cross-Strait Differences Between China and Taiwan

For the past seven decades, Taiwan has been a central point of contention in U.S.-China relations. Since the cessation of formal diplomatic recognition and the termination of the Mutual Defense Treaty upon the establishment of ties with the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1979, the United States has not maintained a formal security commitment to Taiwan. Still, as the American Institute in Taiwan, the entity charged with executing and managing America's unofficial relations with Taiwan, notes, maintaining "strong, unofficial relations with Taiwan is a major U.S. goal, in line with the U.S. desire to further peace and stability in Asia. . . . The United States believes that cross-Strait differences should be resolved peacefully."<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, the prospects of great power cooperation on this issue are slim.

Beijing's public statements treat Taiwan as a near-existential interest, one inextricably linked to China's very identity and the CCP's legitimacy, regional security, nationalism, and great power status. In his 2017 speech, President Xi stated, "Resolving the Taiwan question to realize China's complete reunification is the shared aspiration of all Chinese people, and is in the fundamental interests of the Chinese nation," adding that "Achieving China's full reunification is essential to realizing national rejuvenation."<sup>32</sup> China has explicitly refused to rule out the possibility of using force to achieve this goal. In a January 2019 speech on Taiwan, Xi said, "We do not renounce the use of force and reserve the option of taking all necessary measures. This is to guard against external interference and a tiny number of separatists and their separatist activities for 'Taiwan independence.'"<sup>33</sup> More recently, on May 29, 2020, General Li Zuocheng, Chief of Staff of the PLA, reiterated China's willingness to "take all necessary steps to resolutely smash any separatist plots or actions" by Taiwan.<sup>34</sup>

By contrast, Russia does not view ensuring a peaceful resolution to China-Taiwan issues as particularly important to its interests. In the 2001 Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, Moscow affirmed its One China Policy, acknowledged the PRC as the sole legal government representing the whole of China, and opposed any form of Taiwanese independence from China.<sup>35</sup> Russia has stuck by that position ever since and has criticized Taiwan's efforts to seek

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<sup>31</sup> American Institute in Taiwan, "U.S.-Taiwan Relations," accessed June 19, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Xi Jinping, "Secure a Decisive Victory in Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects and Strive for the Great Success of Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era," speech at 19th Party Congress, October 18, 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Xi Jinping, "Working Together to Realize Rejuvenation of the Chinese Nation and Advance China's Peaceful Reunification," speech at the Meeting Marking the 40th Anniversary of the Issuance of the Message to Compatriots in Taiwan, January 2, 2019.

<sup>34</sup> Minnie Chan, "Chinese General Says Beijing Will 'Resolutely Smash' Any Separatist Moves by Taiwan," *South China Morning Post*, May 30, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> Treaty of Good Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation, July 24, 2001.

expanded diplomatic recognition and opportunities for participation in international society as “dangerous political games” that are categorically unacceptable to Moscow.<sup>36</sup>

In sum, there is not much hope for great power cooperation on Taiwan’s security. Given the existential nature of Taiwan for China, there is little hope of cooperation on the core issue of Taiwan’s final status. The prospects of U.S.-Russia cooperation on Taiwan are only marginally brighter. Although Russo-Taiwanese bilateral trade enjoyed a double digit increase between 2016 and 2017 and the two introduced direct flights in May 2019, Russia-Taiwan relations still pale in comparison to the value Russia places on its relationship with the mainland, and Russia has shown no signs of moving closer to the United States’ position on Taiwan.<sup>37</sup> In other words, the only real trade space for cooperation on Taiwan might be in preventing accidental conflict over the issue.

## Achieving the Denuclearization of North Korea

At first blush, the United States, China, and Russia share a similar goal of preventing North Korea from acquiring a nuclear arsenal and associated delivery systems. Pursuit of complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization therefore should be an area where cooperation among the three parties should be easy. Unfortunately, this expectation has been repeatedly dashed.

China’s interests in DPRK denuclearization are secondary to its preference for stability on the Korean Peninsula. China’s North Korea policy is often described as “no war, no instability and no nuclear weapons” (不战, 不乱, 无核), reflecting China’s main interests in order of priority.<sup>38</sup> North Korea’s location on China’s border and the Korean Peninsula’s historical status as a geopolitical stepping stone for adversaries invading China mean that Beijing views DPRK security and stability as critical to its own security.<sup>39</sup> By contrast, North Korea’s nuclear program specifically is a concern to China. Beijing is very worried that the United States will conduct a preemptive strike on DPRK nuclear facilities, or otherwise start a war on the Korean Peninsula that spills across the border into China.<sup>40</sup> While analysts have some-

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, “Briefing by Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Maria Zakharova, Sochi, May 19, 2016,” May 19, 2016a; “China Values Russia’s Support on Taiwan—Foreign Ministry,” TASS, May 20, 2016.

<sup>37</sup> Duncan DeAeth, “Relations Between Taiwan and Russia Are Steadily Improving: VOA,” *Taiwan News*, June 5, 2019; Ministry of Economic Affairs Bureau of Foreign Trade, Taiwan, “Taiwan-Russia Economic Relations,” revised December 5, 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Li Xiaodong, ed., 朝鲜半岛危机管理研究 [A Study of Crisis Management on the Korean Peninsula], Beijing: Military Science Publishing House, 2010, p. 4; Bonnie Glaser and Brittany Billingsley, “Reordering Chinese Priorities on the Korean Peninsula,” Center for Strategic International Studies, 2012, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, *China’s Search for Security*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.

<sup>40</sup> Qiao Zhongwei, Wang Jiasheng, and Zou Hao, eds., 边境危机应急控制 [Border Crises Emergency Response and Control], Beijing: Academy of Military Science, 2013.

times believed Beijing might be shifting its prioritization to favor denuclearization over “no war, no instability,” as of late 2020, Chinese actions suggest that denuclearization is still a secondary goal.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this rhetorical alignment, China’s preferred approach to denuclearization differs from that of the United States and emphasizes political dialogue free from pressure or sanctions and with reassurances to Pyongyang that many American observers would categorize as rewards for bad behavior. China was a signatory of the Six-Party Talks joint statement in 2005 that called for DPRK denuclearization, and it consistently reiterates this point.<sup>42</sup> China’s compliance with sanctions designed to pressure DPRK denuclearization, however, has been uneven at best. For example, in 2013, the Bank of China cut ties with North Korea’s main foreign banking arm.<sup>43</sup> Chinese experts admitted at the time, however, that these actions had more to do with a fear of U.S. retaliatory sanctions than Beijing’s actual desire to pressure North Korea toward denuclearization.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, despite these moves, the Kim regime still engages in substantial foreign trade and banking activities through China to this day.<sup>45</sup> While China may not like the DPRK’s nuclear weapon program, it fears that truly comprehensive sanctions might destabilize North Korea and jeopardize its other objectives on the Korean Peninsula.

Like China, Russia also views the North Korean nuclear issue as an important, although not existential, issue and is—at least rhetorically—committed to regional cooperation to prevent nuclearization.<sup>46</sup> Russia’s 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept* prioritizes easing tensions between the two Koreas and achieving a non-nuclear status for the Korean Peninsula through the Six-Party Talks framework.<sup>47</sup> That said, Russia subscribes to a more generic goal of removing nuclear weapons from the totality of the Korean Peninsula—not the complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization of North Korea, which is the goal of the United States.<sup>48</sup> And like China, Russia has an inconsistent record on enforcing sanctions against the DPRK. Rus-

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<sup>41</sup> Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, “China’s North Korea Policy: Backtracking from Sunnylands?” 38North, July 2, 2013; Stephanie Kleine-Ahlbrandt, “Testimony Before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on China’s Relations with North Korea,” June 5, 2014.

<sup>42</sup> “Joint Statement of the Fourth Round of the Six-Party Talks,” September 19, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Heng Xie and Megha Rajagopalan, “Bank of China Closes Account of Key North Korean Bank,” Reuters, May 7, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Heng and Rajagopalan, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Niharika Mandhana and Aruna Viswanatha, “North Korea Built an Alternative Financial System Using a Shadowy Network of Traders,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 28, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Elena Ponomareva and Georgij Rudov, “Russia–North Korea: State of Affairs and Trends,” *Journal of Asian Public Policy*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 2016.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>48</sup> Alexander Gabuev, “Bad Cop, Mediator, or Spoiler: Russia’s Role on the Korean Peninsula,” Carnegie Moscow Center, April 24, 2019.

sian companies allegedly reexported North Korean coal and hired DPRK forced labor, and Russian financial institutions served as conduits for Pyongyang's illicit financial activities.<sup>49</sup>

In short, neither China nor Russia view North Korean denuclearization in the same terms that the United States does, and both powers have circumvented North Korean sanctions in the past. Consequently, some analysts doubt whether the DPRK will ever fully give up its nuclear weapons.<sup>50</sup> Still, most analysts believe that all three powers genuinely would prefer a denuclearized North Korea, and both China and Russia have taken at least some limited steps in pursuit of that objective. Both China and Russia, after all, have signed off on UN Security Council resolutions on the DPRK, even if they have negotiated their verbiage, and China and Russia have enforced sanctions, albeit unevenly and often under American pressure. Consequently, there is some room for cooperation in this area. Moreover, if the United States backs off its demand for complete, verifiable, and irreversible denuclearization and settles for something less—such as containing DPRK proliferation or managing the consequences of a nuclear DPRK, then there may still be more room for trade space on a host of topics, such as cooperating with China to help secure and render safe North Korean nuclear weapons in the event of a regime collapse.

## Countering Terrorism and Violent Islamist Extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia

For the past two decades, counterterrorism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia has topped the American national security agenda. As part of the Global War on Terrorism, the United States has fought an almost two-decades-long war in Afghanistan; carried out a raid inside Pakistan that killed the leader of al-Qaeda, Osama bin Laden; conducted smaller-scale counterterrorism operations in the Philippines; and supported local governments' battles against a panoply of Sunni Islamist groups throughout the region. At least in theory, countering Sunni Islamist terrorism should be in the common interest of both China and Russia in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia. In practice, however, even cooperation on this issue has proven difficult.

Rhetorically, and to lesser extent substantively, China shares the United States' and other regional countries' desire to counter Sunni Islamist terrorism. In his 2017 speech to the 19th Party Congress, Xi said, "We must rigorously protect against and take resolute measures to combat all acts of infiltration, subversion, and sabotage, as well as violent and terrorist activities, ethnic separatist activities, and religious extremist activities."<sup>51</sup> Washington

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<sup>49</sup> "Russia Resumes Coal Supplies via North Korea: Ifax Citing Official," Reuters, September 5, 2018; United Nations Security Council, *2019 Midterm Report of the Panel of Experts Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2464 (2019)*, S/2019/691, August 30, 2019; Christy Lee, "Experts: Russia Skirts Sanctions on N. Korean Workers to Defy US-Led Pressure," Voice of America, February 1, 2020; Scott A. Snyder, "Where Does the Russia–North Korea Relationship Stand?" Council on Foreign Relations, April 29, 2019.

<sup>50</sup> For example, Robert E. Kelly, "North Korea Will Never Give Up Its Nuclear Weapons," *Channel News Asia*, July 30, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Xi, 2017.

and Beijing have talked about how to achieve this mutual goal, particularly in Afghanistan, over the years. In 2017, Trump and Xi “discussed the Middle East, Afghanistan, and other issues, and agreed to deepen cooperation on counterterrorism,” and Trump said the two leaders agreed that “terrorists are a threat to all of humanity, and we will stop radical Islamic terrorism.”<sup>52</sup> One of China’s first foreign deployments was sending the People’s Armed Police to Tajikistan to help control Afghanistan’s Wakhan Corridor.<sup>53</sup> China also committed \$70 million to the Afghan National Army.<sup>54</sup> China also expressed interest in future counterterrorism operations. Its 2019 defense white paper calls on the PLA to “fulfill [its] international responsibilities and obligations, and provide more public security goods,” in part by countering the growing threat of terrorism.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time, cooperation with China on counterterrorism in the Indo-Pacific has its limits. China remains mostly interested in combating terrorism that directly threatens its own domestic stability. China has also used counterterrorism as justification to crack down on domestic opponents of the regime and particularly its Uyghur minority.<sup>56</sup> China has also supported repressive crackdowns in other countries, including Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte’s counterterrorist and counter-drug campaigns.<sup>57</sup> Beyond that, China also views American military counterterrorism operations in the region, particularly in Afghanistan, as threatening. According to one China expert, “Beijing instinctively sees American troops in China’s ‘backyard’ as a serious strategic threat.”<sup>58</sup>

Russia, similarly, wants to combat Islamist terrorism in the Indo-Pacific. Russia’s 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept* calls for creating a broad international counterterrorist coalition without any political considerations or “double standards.”<sup>59</sup> And while Russia’s most notable operations have been in Syria and Libya, Russia made modest efforts in Asia as well, although arguably as much for chipping away at support from American allies and partners as from a genuine desire to fight terrorism. In 2017, Russia and the Philippines signed a memorandum of understanding on security cooperation, wherein Moscow offered Manila access to its

<sup>52</sup> Donald J. Trump and Xi Jinping, “Remarks by President Trump and President Xi of China in Joint Press Statement,” U.S. White House, November 9, 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Gerry Shih, “In Central Asia’s Forbidding Highlands, a Quiet Newcomer: Chinese Troops,” *Washington Post*, February 18, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> Jessica Donati and Ehsanullah Amiri, “China Offers Afghanistan Army Expanded Military Aid,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 9, 2016.

<sup>55</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s National Defense in the New Era,” July 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Lisa Schlein, “US Warns China’s Detention of Uighurs to Counter Terrorism Will Backfire,” *Voice of America*, March 14, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Sarah Zheng, “China Arms Philippine Police for Counterterrorism Mission,” *South China Morning Post*, October 5, 2017.

<sup>58</sup> Yun Sun, “China’s Strategic Assessment of Afghanistan,” *War on the Rocks*, April 8, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

intelligence database to help the latter fight transnational crime and terrorism.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, in 2019, Russia and Thailand signed a military cooperation agreement to enhance counterterrorism cooperation, intelligence exchange, and military personnel training.<sup>61</sup>

Moscow's recent contributions to the global fight against terrorism, however, seem geared more toward dividing the West's solidarity and undermining U.S. interests.<sup>62</sup> This is perhaps best seen in Russia's Afghanistan policy. Russia does not want Afghanistan to become a haven for Sunni Islamist terrorism, but it does not want American or NATO presence there either. During the early phases of Operation Enduring Freedom, Russia helped the United States gain access to Central Asia to allow for the United States' invasion.<sup>63</sup> More recently, Russia—along with China and Pakistan—joined the United States in trying to negotiate a long-term peace on Afghanistan, albeit with mixed success.<sup>64</sup> Russia, however, also views NATO involvement in Afghanistan as a direct threat to its southern flank and is suspected of waging a covert war to coerce the United States and its allies to leave the country. Russia is suspected of providing the Taliban with weapons and military equipment to directly target U.S. and NATO service members.<sup>65</sup> U.S. intelligence agencies also claim that a Russian military intelligence unit offered Taliban-linked militants bounties to kill coalition forces in Afghanistan, including American troops.<sup>66</sup>

Given this context, it is hard to see how the United States can directly cooperate with China or Russia on counterterrorism in Asia in general and in Afghanistan in particular. It might be that the only plausible path to cooperation here would be for the United States to withdraw from Afghanistan, thereby assuaging China and Russia's fears of permanent American bases on the border. Perhaps then China and/or Russia would be willing to take more responsibility for counterterrorism and stability in the region, more out their own self-interest than anything else.<sup>67</sup> Even this, though, is by no means guaranteed.

<sup>60</sup> "Russia to Share Intelligence with Philippines, Train Duterte Guards," Reuters, February 16, 2017; Department of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of the Philippines, "Key PH-Russia Security Agreement Enters into Force," January 16, 2018.

<sup>61</sup> "Russia, Thailand Sign Military Cooperation Agreement," TASS, September 14, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Mariya Y. Omelicheva, "Russia's Counterproductive Counter-Terrorism: An Overview and Assessment of Trends in Russia's Counterterrorism Policy and Moscow's Efforts to Promote It Internationally," testimony before the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, June 12, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> See Rajan Menon, "The New Great Game in Central Asia," *Survival*, Vol. 45, No. 2, Summer 2003.

<sup>64</sup> U.S. Department of State, Office of the Spokesperson, "U.S., Russia, China and Pakistan Joint Statement on Peace in Afghanistan," October 28, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Carpenter, "Testimony for the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (Helsinki Commission)," June 12, 2019; Colin P. Clarke, "Russia Is Not a Viable Counterterrorism Partner for the United States," *Russia Matters*, February 8, 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Schwartz, "Russia Secretly Offered Afghan Militants Bounties to Kill U.S. Troops, Intelligence Says," *New York Times*, June 26, 2020.

<sup>67</sup> For example of this argument, see Vikram Singh and Jacob Stokes, "Can US, China and Russia Cooperate on Afghan Peace?" *The Hill*, August 31, 2019.

## India's Regional Role and Strategic Orientation

Strengthening the U.S.-India relationship is an increasingly important pillar of the United States' Indo-Pacific Strategy. As the U.S. Department of State has noted, "India plays a vital role in the U.S. vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific."<sup>68</sup> For the United States, India—given its size, population, location, and democratic form of government—is a natural partner and counterweight to China. Moreover, India and China have several points of friction. India hosts the Dalai Lama's Tibetan government-in-exile in Dharamsala, thereby undercutting Beijing's claim to legitimacy and total control over Tibet.<sup>69</sup> Since the short 1962 war that China won over India, the two sides have faced off repeatedly in border skirmishes, most notably with a two-month standoff near Doklam in 2017 and a clash in July 2020 near the Galwan Valley.<sup>70</sup> Outside of the border dispute, Beijing has deployed submarines into the Indian Ocean, which New Delhi considers provocative.<sup>71</sup>

Obviously, China is actively opposed to India becoming the anti-China bulwark for democracy. As Foreign Minister Wang Yi said in 2018, "China and India must do everything to empathize with and support each other and to avoid mutual suspicion and attrition. . . . Let us replace suspicion with trust, manage differences through dialogue, and build a future through cooperation."<sup>72</sup> Despite its attempts to downplay tensions in their bilateral relationship, China opposes India's relationship with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue—the strategic relationship between Australia, Japan, India, and the United States that is sometimes described as a nascent counterbalancing coalition against China.<sup>73</sup> China also has considerable economic interests in its relationship with India. Economically, India is China's 11th-biggest trading partner, with bilateral trade in 2018 at \$95.7 billion, with a \$58 billion trade surplus for Beijing.<sup>74</sup> China, on the other hand, has been India's biggest trading partner since

<sup>68</sup> U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Political Military Affairs, "Fact Sheet: U.S. Security Cooperation with India," July 20, 2020.

<sup>69</sup> Krishna N. Das and Sunil Kataria, "Dalai Lama Contemplates Chinese Gambit After His Death," Reuters, March 18, 2019; Krithika Varagur, "The Coming Fight for the Dalai Lama's Soul," *Foreign Policy*, January 22, 2019; Eric Baculinao and Jason Cumming, "China Spends Big in Tibet to Avert a Crisis When the Dalai Lama Dies," *NBC News*, August 30, 2018; Sudha Ramachandran, "Rivalries and Relics: Examining China's Buddhist Public Diplomacy," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 5, March 5, 2019.

<sup>70</sup> Joel Wuthnow, Satu Limaye, and Nilanthi Samaranyake, "Doklam, One Year Later: China's Long Game in the Himalayas," *War on the Rocks*, June 7, 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win*, Washington, D.C., January 2019b.

<sup>72</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Minister Wang Yi Meets the Press," March 9, 2018b.

<sup>73</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2018b.

<sup>74</sup> Authors' calculation using 2018 trade data (excludes Hong Kong) from World Integrated Trade Solution, website, World Bank, undated-b.

2008, accounting for roughly 15 percent of total trade.<sup>75</sup> Consequently, there is little room for American-Sino cooperation over India's strategic direction.

Russia, by contrast, is in a somewhat more nuanced situation. As the 2016 Russian *Foreign Policy Concept* notes, Moscow has long had a strategic interest in India, dating back to the Cold War.<sup>76</sup> In September 2019, Russian President Vladimir Putin and India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi signed a joint statement focused on expanding bilateral trade as the foundation for further expanding the range of Moscow–New Delhi ties.<sup>77</sup> Although Russo-Indian trade is relatively small, Russia is a key weapon supplier to India.<sup>78</sup> More than 25 percent of Russia's exports of military equipment and technology every year are delivered to India, and India has consistently been the top destination of Russian arms exports for years.<sup>79</sup> Between 2007 to 2017, India's defense imports from Russia totaled \$24 billion out of a total of \$34 billion.<sup>80</sup> Russia has also transferred some of its more sensitive and capable military equipment to India. Since 2012, Moscow has leased a nuclear-powered B-class attack submarine (SSN) to India.<sup>81</sup> A second submarine of the same type will be delivered to the Indian Navy by 2025.<sup>82</sup> In October 2018, the two countries concluded a deal for India to purchase four regiments of Russia's advanced S-400 surface-to-air missiles.<sup>83</sup> In 2019, India awarded a \$1.2 billion contract to a Russian defense equipment manufacturer and arms export company for the technology transfer for local production of 464 Russian T-90S tanks.<sup>84</sup>

From the American standpoint, although Russia does not want India to become an American ally or bulwark for democracy, Russia's willingness to sell India advanced weaponry offers an opportunity for tacit cooperation to strengthen India against China, albeit at a price.

<sup>75</sup> Embassy of India in Beijing, China, "India-China Trade and Economic Relations," undated.

<sup>76</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>77</sup> Ministry of External Affairs, India, "India-Russia Joint Statement During Visit of Prime Minister to Vladivostok," September 5, 2019.

<sup>78</sup> Megan Maxwell, "Don't Blame Russia for the Problems in the U.S.-India Relationship," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 16, 2019; Aleksei Zakharov, "Exploring New Drivers in India-Russia Cooperation," Observer Research Foundation, ORF Occasional Paper #124, October 2017.

<sup>79</sup> Pieter D. Wezeman, Aude Fleurant, Alexandra Kuimova, Nan Tian, and Siemon T. Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2018," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, SIPRI Fact Sheet, March 2019.

<sup>80</sup> Alexey Kupriyanov, Amit Bhandari, Chaitanya Giri, and Kunal Kulkarni, "Russia-India Cooperation Against the Backdrop of Sanctions: Adverse Effects and New Opportunities," Russian International Affairs Council, November 15, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> "India Signs Pact with Russia on Chakra-3 Attack Submarine," *Economic Times*, March 8, 2019.

<sup>82</sup> "India Signs Pact with Russia on Chakra-3 Attack Submarine," 2019.

<sup>83</sup> Franz-Stefan Gady, "India, Russia Sign \$5.5 Billion S-400 Deal During Modi-Putin Summit," *The Diplomat*, October 5, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Vivek Raghuvanshi, "India Pays Russia \$1.2 Billion in Technology Transfer Fees for T-90S Tanks," *Defense News*, November 26, 2019.

India wants these weapons to guard against its archrival Pakistan, but also against China. In fact, during the June 2020 border crisis with China, India's Defense Minister visited Russia and sought Moscow's assurances that its delivery of spare parts for India's T-90S tanks, *Kilo*-class submarines, and fighter aircraft—all of Russian origin—would not be delayed.<sup>85</sup> Consequently, the United States faces a dilemma. Traditionally, the United States has opposed India's purchase Russian weapons and threatened retaliation under the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) legislation.<sup>86</sup> The United States, however, could cooperate with Russia by dropping its opposition to the sale and in the process make India a more formidable military competitor to China, but at a cost of undermining the United States' own sanctions regime against Russia.

## Trade Space in Europe and the Middle East

Despite Russia's ups and downs in the post-Cold War period, the country remains the dominant competitor to the United States on security matters in Europe and the Middle East. In Europe, challenges to cooperation with Russia are particularly daunting: More often than not, U.S. interests in Europe are framed as directly opposing Russian "subversion and aggression," and Russian objectives imply direct opposition to the United States and NATO.<sup>87</sup> Moreover, given the high importance both sides attach to Europe, compromise on the core objectives themselves should not be expected in the foreseeable future. By contrast, while China has placed increasing economic and political importance on Europe in recent years, it has played a far less prominent role on European security matters. China's relatively low stakes in Europe make it highly implausible that China would be inclined to cooperation. Consequently, the room for great power cooperation on substantive U.S. objectives in Europe remains limited: While there is room for negotiation, the sides are far apart on a host of issues and do not show much inclination to turn discussion into action. There is, however, space for cooperation on managing the dangers of continuing competition—notably, the risks of unintended escalation stemming from the very security issue sets that divide the United States and Russia.

The Middle East presents a somewhat different story because the key objectives of the United States and its competitors are in tension, though not diametrically opposed. Russia's military presence in places such as Syria, and its military aid to multiple countries, including Iran, give it a key voice in shaping the region's future. And while China has mostly stayed out of the Middle Eastern security affairs, it has considerable economic ambitions for the region and relies on its oil; moreover, Beijing has sold weapons to various Middle East countries over

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<sup>85</sup> Rajeswari Pillai Rajagopalan, "The Sino-Indian Clash: Russia in the Middle," *The Diplomat*, June 25, 2020.

<sup>86</sup> Gady, 2018.

<sup>87</sup> The White House, 2017, p. 48.

the years, and some of first foreign deployments have been to this region. Moreover, unlike Europe for Russia or the Indo-Pacific for China, neither U.S. rival views the Middle East as vital to its national security. Consequently, the prospects for cooperation in the Middle East seem more promising (see Table 2.2), though they still face serious headwinds.

**TABLE 2.2****Interest in Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East**

| Issue Area                                       | China     |        |           | Russia    |        |           |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------|-----------|
|                                                  | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate |
| 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

Middle East stability remains one of the comparatively bright spots for cooperation. Although China and Russia are opposed to the United States' democracy-promotion efforts in the region, all three powers would prefer to see the region stable in order to leverage its vast energy resources, prevent the spread of Islamist terrorism, and allow for more predictable foreign policy. And all three powers—to varying degrees—have committed to this objective both in word and in deed. Yet, even here, cooperation still faces its challenges.

Of the three, China probably has the lowest stake in Middle Eastern stability, and China's equities primarily revolve around its dependency on the region's energy resources. Although Russia in recent years has become the PRC's top supplier of hydrocarbon imports, five of China's top ten oil suppliers (Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Oman, Iran, and Kuwait) are in the Middle East, which collectively accounts for over 40 percent of China's oil imports.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, "China's reliance on Middle Eastern oil is only likely to increase in the future," because "the International Energy Agency predicts that China will double its Middle East imports by 2035."<sup>89</sup>

<sup>88</sup> DoD, 2019, p. 12.

<sup>89</sup> ChinaPower, "How Is China's Energy Footprint Changing?" undated.

Despite these equities, China has remained a relatively minor player in many of the region's conflicts. According to its 2016 white paper, China supports "seeking political resolution to hotspot issues, and promoting peace and stability in the Middle East."<sup>90</sup> In July 2017, President Xi proposed a limited four-point approach promoting a political settlement of the Israeli-Palestine issue, broadly calling for a resolution via development and cooperation between the Palestinians and Israel.<sup>91</sup> Additionally, Xi proposed a China-Israel-Palestine tri-lateral dialogue mechanism shortly afterward.<sup>92</sup> China has also appointed special envoys for major hotspots, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue in 2002 and Syria in 2016.<sup>93</sup> Additionally, China pledged to support Syrian reconstruction.<sup>94</sup>

Beyond these diplomatic overtures, China's commitment of resources toward Middle East stability has remained modest, with few concrete results. Most significantly, China has contributed troops to the United Nations Interim Force In Lebanon (UNIFIL) since 2006, with 419 noncombat troops primarily deployed in southern Lebanon in mid-2020.<sup>95</sup> Financially, China has committed roughly a paltry \$50 million toward Syrian humanitarian causes, including a 2017 pledge by Xi for \$30 million for refugees.<sup>96</sup> China reportedly pledged \$2 billion toward an industrial park in Syria in 2017, but it is unclear how much has actually been invested so far.<sup>97</sup> China's economic investments in the region have mostly been focused on profit-seeking rather than more benevolent actions. Xi pledged \$20 billion in loans to the Middle East in 2018, but China only gave \$15 million in actual aid for Palestine and \$91 million split between Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, and Jordan.<sup>98</sup> In sum, China remains involved in the Middle East but has made mostly symbolic efforts to support its long-term stability.

Russia has deeper ties to the region. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was one of the region's major powerbrokers, a mantle Russia is arguably trying to reclaim today. Strategi-

<sup>90</sup> "China's Arab Policy Paper," Xinhua, January 2016.

<sup>91</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Mahmoud Abbas of Palestine: The Two Heads of State Stress to Promote the Comprehensive Development of China-Palestine Friendly Cooperative Cause," July 18, 2017b.

<sup>92</sup> Yannis Stivachtis, *Conflict and Diplomacy in the Middle East: External Actors and Regional Rivalries*, Bristol, UK: E-International Relations Publishing, 2018, p. 82.

<sup>93</sup> Zheng Guihong, "China's First Special Envoy to Middle East," China.org, November 8, 2002; Ben Blanchard, "China Appoints First Special Envoy for Syria Crisis," Reuters, March 29, 2016.

<sup>94</sup> "Xi Expounds China's Position on Syrian Conflict, Venezuelan Crisis, Iran's Nuclear Issue," Xinhua, June 5, 2019.

<sup>95</sup> United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL), "UNIFIL Troop-Contributing Countries," accessed June 10, 2020; "Chinese Peacekeepers in UNIFIL Complete 17th Rotation in Lebanon," Xinhua, May 28, 2019.

<sup>96</sup> John Calabrese, "China and Syria: In War and Reconstruction," Middle East Institute, July 9, 2019.

<sup>97</sup> Liu Zhen, "US Withdrawal from Syria Leaves China's Plans for Investment Up in the Air, Analysts Say," *South China Morning Post*, December 29, 2018.

<sup>98</sup> Christian Shepherd, "China's Xi Pledges \$20 Billion in Loans to Revive Middle East," Reuters, July 9, 2018.

cally, Russia maintains a naval base in Tartus (its only naval base in the Mediterranean) and has access to operate out of an air base at Khmeimim, both in Syria. Russia also has serious concerns about extremism and terrorism and is concerned about the spillover of religious extremism generated from Middle Eastern conflicts into Russia itself.<sup>99</sup> Moscow, like Beijing, is also deeply preoccupied about instability rooted in “external interference”—that is, the alleged Western instigation of events such as the Arab Spring, as well as Western military interventions, such as in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—which it feels set a dangerous precedent for other places at large.<sup>100</sup>

Russia has played an active role in the region in recent years, most notably through its intervention to support the Assad regime in Syria, its decision to send mercenaries to Libya, and its sales of weapons to multiple countries in the region. Russia also has a vested interest in international efforts to help reconstruct Syria, estimated to cost upward of \$400 billion.<sup>101</sup> Russia has positioned itself as an independent peace broker for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and announced that it will “strive to achieve a comprehensive, fair and lasting resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in all its aspects consistent with international law.”<sup>102</sup> And Russia has tried to make good on this pledge. In July 2019, the U.S., Russian, and Israeli national security advisers held trilateral meetings in Jerusalem to discuss, *inter alia*, Israel’s security and mutual concerns over Iran’s expanding presence in Syria.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, in May 2020, Moscow’s Special Envoy to the Middle East conducted a phone conference with the U.S. Special Representative for International Negotiations to discuss prospects for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian issue.<sup>104</sup>

Ultimately, there might be some room for U.S. cooperation with China and/or Russia on key issues vital to Middle Eastern stability: the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; diplomatic resolution of the Syrian civil war, and pending that, deconfliction of operations with Russia; and Syrian reconstruction. Potential to cooperate on these issues is not without important caveats. Although all three share the objective of ending the Syrian war, the United States cannot negotiate with Russia until the latter ceases to insist on retaining Bashar al-Assad in power, or until circumstances resolve that issue. Neither China nor Russia have shown any interest in paying for reconstruction of places such as Syria unless they profit from the venture. Both countries take a similarly transactional approach to the military burden of stabi-

<sup>99</sup> See Samuel Charap, Elina Treyger, Edward Geist, *Understanding Russia’s Intervention in Syria*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3180-AF, 2019, pp. 4–5.

<sup>100</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b; President of Russia, “Meeting of the Valdai International Discussion Club,” October 24, 2014b; Charap, Treyger, and Geist, 2019.

<sup>101</sup> Joseph Daher, “The Paradox of Syria’s Reconstruction,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 4, 2019.

<sup>102</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>103</sup> Aleksandr Aksenok, “Jerusalem Format: Searching for a Solution to the Crisis in the Middle East,” Russian International Affairs Council, September 3, 2019.

<sup>104</sup> Maxim A. Suchkov, “Russia’s Playbook on the Trump Peace Plan,” Middle East Institute, May 22, 2020.

lizing the region: China has, for the most part, not viewed these operations as strategically beneficial and has shied away from participating in them, and Russia has only sent forces to protect its strategic interests.

## Countering Iran and Its Proxies

Cooperation on countering Iran, by contrast, is complicated by the fact that China and Russia see Iran, if not as a friend, then at least not as an enemy.<sup>105</sup> As China's seventh-largest source of imported oil (with likely more being smuggled around U.S. sanctions), Beijing has sunk at least \$27 billion into Iran, with significant commitments to the energy sector, including a \$16 billion investment in North Pars natural gas field.<sup>106</sup> Tehran is a key node on China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and in 2016 Xi pledged to increase bilateral trade to \$600 billion by 2026, although given that bilateral trade amounted to only \$23 billion in 2019, China has a long way to go to achieving this objective.<sup>107</sup> Iran also serves a strategic purpose for China. According to a 2016 RAND report, "Iran can help counter US power in the Middle East as China chips at US influence in East Asia."<sup>108</sup> In July 2020, reports emerged of a secret agreement for Iran to provide China with discounted oil for 25 years in exchange for substantial Chinese investment across a range of Iranian industries and strengthened military cooperation.<sup>109</sup>

As a result, China has taken a tepid approach to countering Iran and its proxies. Although China opposed the Iranian nuclear program and backed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, it also opposed the U.S.-led sanctions regime and watered down UN resolutions against Iran's nuclear program.<sup>110</sup> Still, both the Bush and Obama administrations succeeded

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<sup>105</sup> Scott W. Harold, "Opportunistic Cooperation Under Constraints: Non-Proliferation, Energy Trade, and the Evolution of Chinese Policy Towards Iran," *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, Vol. 8, No. 1, Spring 2015.

<sup>106</sup> American Enterprise Institute, "China Global Investment Tracker," accessed June 1, 2020; Dalga Khatinoglu, "Iranian Oil Shipments to China Rebranded in Malaysia to Circumvent Sanctions," *Radio Farda*, June 15, 2020.

<sup>107</sup> Golnar Motevalli, "China, Iran Agree to Expand Trade to \$600 Billion in a Decade," Bloomberg, January 23, 2016; Emma Scott, "Defying Expectations: China's Iran Trade and Investments," Middle East Institute, April 6, 2016; "Iran-China Trade Dropped by One-Third in 2019," *Radio Farda*, January 24, 2020.

<sup>108</sup> Andrew Scobell and Alireza Nader, *China in the Middle East: The Wary Dragon*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1229-A, 2016, p. 52.

<sup>109</sup> Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, "Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership," *New York Times*, July 11, 2020.

<sup>110</sup> "UN Votes for New Sanctions on Iran over Nuclear Issue," BBC, June 9, 2010; Emma Scott, "A Nuclear Deal with Chinese Characteristics: China's Role in the P5+1 Talks with Iran," *China Brief*, Vol. 15, No. 14, July 17, 2015.

in curtailing Chinese arms sales to Iran in compliance with these UN sanctions.<sup>111</sup> China has shown little interest in countering Iranian proxies and has dismissed American concerns about Iranian presence in the Syrian civil war.<sup>112</sup> During the brief U.S.-Iran crisis in early 2020, Beijing criticized Washington's "military adventurism" but did not denounce Iran's attack on the U.S. base in Iraq, merely calling for "restraint on both sides."<sup>113</sup>

Russia, too, views Iran as a strategic asset in its competition with the United States, but also as a potential challenge. Russia coordinated its actions in Syria with Iran and relied on Iran to provide ground forces in the operation.<sup>114</sup> Trade between Russia and Iran amounts to only a fraction of the trade between China and Iran, but it still totals approximately \$2 billion annually.<sup>115</sup> Moreover, Iran wants to buy some \$8 billion worth of Russian arms and, according to Center of Analysis of Strategies and Technologies defense expert Ruslan Pukhov, Russia views Iran as one of the "world's last big untapped weapons markets."<sup>116</sup> At the same time, Moscow and Tehran have clashed over numerous issues, such as the division of the Caspian Sea. Even with respect to the Middle East, Russia, like China, needs to balance its relationship with Iran with its relationship with Iran's adversaries, such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain. Even in Syria, the presence of Iranian forces prevents Russia from becoming the sole great power guarantor of the Assad regime.

Consequently, there might be room for tactical cooperation with Russia on Iran. Russia has allowed Israel to strike Iranian positions in Syria without retaliating, in part because weakening the Iranians' grasp over Syria strengthens Russia's hand.<sup>117</sup> Although Russia views Iran as a lucrative arms market, Russia suspended, for a time, selling the S-300 air defense

<sup>111</sup> Dennis Wilder, "The U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue: Continuity and Change in Obama's China Policy," Brookings Institution, May 15, 2009; Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 57.

<sup>112</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on April 10, 2017," April 10, 2017a.

<sup>113</sup> Wendy Wu, "As US and Iran Step Back from the Brink, China Faces Energy Security Risk," *South China Morning Post*, January 9, 2020.

<sup>114</sup> "Starting in early 2015, a series of meetings in Moscow and Tehran laid the groundwork for intervention, including Soleimani's alleged meeting with Putin and Shoigu in July" (in Nicole Grajewski, *Friends or Frenemies? How Russia and Iran Compete and Cooperate*, Philadelphia: Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 12, 2020, citing Olga Kuznetsova, Ivan Safronov, and Elena Chernenko, "General-Maiora Suleimani Uglyadeli v Rossii [Major General Soleimani Was Spotted in Russia]," *Kommersant*, August 14, 2015; Olga Kuznetsova, "Iranskii General Poteryalsya Mezhdru Tegeranom i Moskvoi [Iranian General Lost Between Tehran and Moscow]," *Kommersant*, August 14, 2015).

<sup>115</sup> Reese Erlich, "Trump Is Driving Iran into Russia's Arms," *Foreign Policy*, May 29, 2019.

<sup>116</sup> Grajewski, 2020, citing Ivan Safronov and Elena Chernenko, "Iran Pritsenivaetsya k Rossiiskomu Voenpromu [Iran Is Checking Out the Russian Defence Industry]," *Kommersant*, February 15, 2016; Henry Meyer, "Russia Rejects Extending Iran Arms Embargo, Defying U.S.," Bloomberg, December 27, 2019.

<sup>117</sup> Eugene Rumer, *Russia in the Middle East: Jack of All Trades, Master of None*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2019, p. 15.

system to Iran and so far has declined to sell Iran the more-advanced S-400 systems.<sup>118</sup> From Russia's standpoint, the move serves a variety of selfish motives: It keeps Russia on good terms with Israel, it avoids potential strategic embarrassment if top-line Russian equipment fails to stop an Israeli or American strike on Iran, and, most broadly, it keeps Iran dependent on Russian backing.<sup>119</sup> Consequently, cooperation with Russia and Iran may be possible, but only insofar as it pays dividends for Russia.

## Broader Euro-Atlantic Security

At the core of many of the European security issues is a broader debate about the Euro-Atlantic security architecture and, specifically, the future of NATO. And here, we begin to see a dynamic play out that is repeated throughout most of the European security topics explored in this study. While China and Russia are similarly mostly at odds with the United States, China has less of a stake in these issues and little, if any, voice in the outcomes. Russia, by contrast, cares a great deal about these issues, and although it remains at loggerheads with the United States on the macro level, it has proven willing to bargain over the outcome, potentially creating room for cooperation on a smaller scale.

China has little direct interest in the future of NATO, so long as it does not perceive the alliance as targeting Beijing. Although Xi characterizes all alliances as vestiges of “outdated,” “Cold War” era, and “zero-sum” thinking, Beijing's most recent comment on NATO in June 2020 was to welcome NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg's statement that China is not a rival and state that “China is ready to enhance dialogue with NATO on the basis of equality and mutual respect.”<sup>120</sup> NATO, after all, does not directly influence China's ability to trade with Europe, nor does it directly drive European political decisionmaking regarding China's rise. Indeed, China arguably benefited from some of the Euro-Atlantic security measures, such as arms control agreements, when they limited the United States' capabilities in the Pacific. Still, to the extent that the United States could leverage NATO against China, the alliance remains a risk to China, albeit not the most pressing one.

By contrast, Russia views the continued existence of NATO as a serious and arguably growing threat, especially as the alliance has expanded ever closer to Russia's borders. As Putin stated in 2007, NATO “represents a serious provocation that reduces the level of mutual trust”—giving Russia “the right to ask: against whom is this expansion intended?”<sup>121</sup> Russia viewed NATO's offers of Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to Georgia and Ukraine in 2008

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<sup>118</sup> Grajewski, 2020, p. 6; Rumer, 2019, p. 16.

<sup>119</sup> Interview with an Israeli think tank researcher, Tel Aviv, February 16, 2020; interview with an Israeli academic, Tel Aviv, February 17, 2020.

<sup>120</sup> Xi, 2014; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on June 10, 2020,” June 10, 2020.

<sup>121</sup> See “Putin's Prepared Remarks at 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy,” *Washington Post*, February 12, 2007.

as a “strategic challenge with serious strategic consequences.”<sup>122</sup> The prospect of Ukrainian and Georgian accession would expand NATO’s presence on Russia’s doorstep, further pulling both countries out of Russia’s sphere of influence. Indeed, Georgia in 2009 and Ukraine in 2018 exited Russia’s Commonwealth of Independent States, since, as Georgia stated explicitly, a country “cannot be part of two military structures simultaneously.”<sup>123</sup> Even farther afield, Russia views NATO expansion as threatening: Russia sponsored a coup in a failed effort to prevent tiny Montenegro from joining the alliance.<sup>124</sup>

Fundamentally, the United States and Russia have opposing approaches to European security: The United States views NATO as the cornerstone to European peace; Russia views NATO as a hinderance to peace and as an outdated construct that should not exist. Still, cooperation may be possible on a smaller scale—in terms of managing risks of intentional escalation and easing tensions between Russia and NATO—since both sides want to avoid an all-out conflict. In general, this could take two forms. First, the United States and Russia could resume and potentially expand forums for military deconfliction, including in the Russia-NATO Council, which has been suspended since Russia’s intervention into Ukraine in 2014. Second, the United States, NATO, and Russia could pursue conventional arms control regimes, limiting the size and types of forces in particularly sensitive areas or at least giving advance notification to the other about their position. As will be discussed in the next chapter, both such proposals would have to overcome major obstacles—including deep-seated mistrust—in order to become policy.

## Baltic Security

As with broader Euro-Atlantic security, there is only narrow room for cooperation with either China or Russia when it comes to the core U.S. objective of preventing Russian aggression in the Baltic countries—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—as well as limiting Russia’s influence activities. The Baltics are of limited importance to China and have long been considered by Beijing to be part of Russia’s de facto sphere of influence on its periphery.<sup>125</sup> Rhetorically, China has supported the Baltics’ integration into the European Union and NATO, but the

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<sup>122</sup> Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia*, London: International Institute of Strategic Studies, Adelphi Series, Vol. 56, 2016.

<sup>123</sup> “Georgia Opts Out of Ex-Soviet Military Cooperation Body,” *Pravda.Ru*, March 2, 2006; Nicholas Waller, “Poroshenko Officially Ends Ukraine’s Membership in CIS,” *New Europe*, May 28, 2018.

<sup>124</sup> Andrew E. Kramer and Joseph Orovic, “Two Suspected Russian Agents Among 14 Convicted in Montenegro Coup Plot,” *New York Times*, May 9, 2019.

<sup>125</sup> As one scholar recounted, “In the late 1980s, when the Balts awakened to the possibility of regaining sovereignty, the PRC’s sympathy was firmly on the Soviet side. Fearful that the Baltic struggle for independence might spur on similar movements among ethnic minorities in China, the Chinese leadership backed Gorbachev’s efforts to reestablish central rule. The Baltic republics’ independence . . . came as a surprise and an inconvenience” (Czesław Tubilewicz, *Taiwan and Post-Communist Europe: Shopping for Allies*, New York: Routledge, 2007, p. 88).

region attracts little attention in Chinese strategic documents for good reason: With a relatively small population located far away from China's borders, the region is of relatively little strategic or economic significance to China.<sup>126</sup> In 2018, Lithuania was China's 103rd-largest trading partner (just below the Marshall Islands), at \$2.1 billion, Latvia was number 117 (just above Zimbabwe), at \$1.4 billion, and Estonia was number 120 (just above Syria), at \$1.3 billion in 2018.<sup>127</sup> Given this lack of interest, China is simply not a player in Baltic security matters.<sup>128</sup>

By contrast, the Baltic region matters a great deal to Russia. Russia largely acquiesced to their accession to NATO in 2002 to 2004, but these countries still share a border with Russia and host considerable ethnic Russian and Russian-speaking populations.<sup>129</sup> Russia relies on Lithuania for access to its exclave of Kaliningrad and to supply that isolated region with power, although steps are being taken to make Kaliningrad energy self-sufficient.<sup>130</sup> Russian business actors also have interests in Latvia and Estonia, including corrupt ones (e.g., using the banking systems there for money laundering).<sup>131</sup> Simply ceding the Baltic countries to NATO's sphere of influence, consequently, is a nonstarter for Russia.

Instead, U.S.-Russia cooperation over Baltic security, if it is possible, would have to take a more operational form, such as steps aimed at reducing the chances of a conflict over the region. At a minimum, the United States could encourage NATO to "re-establish military-to-military crisis communications channels with the Russian General Staff at the working level" to ideally deescalate potential crises in the Baltics.<sup>132</sup> Others have proposed more ambitious forms of cooperation. For example, both Russia and researchers associated with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe have proposed various schemes for reviv-

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<sup>126</sup> For the last visit of a Chinese leader, in 2002, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Latvia, "Visit of President Jiang Zemin of the People's Republic of China to Latvia," March 24, 2004. For one summary of China's economic footprint in the Baltics, see Erik Brattberg, "Chinese Investments in the Baltic Sea Region," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2019.

<sup>127</sup> WITS data.

<sup>128</sup> China, however, does have an soft power and intelligence/IT presence in the Baltics. See "The Rough Face of China's Soft Power in the Baltics," *Re:Baltica*, September 5, 2019; "Baltics Caught Between Superpowers in China's 5G battle," *Re:Baltica*, September 10, 2019; "China's Belt and Road Grip Reaches the Baltics," *Re:Baltica*, September 16, 2019; Holger Ronemaa, "Huawei's Backdoor in Estonia: Ex-Ministers Hired for Last Minute Lobby Efforts," February 16, 2020.

<sup>129</sup> Bryan Frederick, Matthew Povlock, Stephen Watts, Miranda Priebe, and Edward Geist, *Assessing Russian Reactions to U.S. and NATO Posture Enhancements*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1879-AF, 2017, pp. 29–30; Radin and Reach, 2017, p. 11.

<sup>130</sup> Jo Harper, "Kaliningrad Gets Moscow Energy Boost as Baltic States Pull Plug," *DW*, March 22, 2019.

<sup>131</sup> On business ties with Latvia, see Heather A. Conley, James Mina, Ruslan Stefanov, and Martin Vladimirov, *The Kremlin Playbook: Understanding Russian Influence in Central and Eastern Europe*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016.

<sup>132</sup> Ulrich Kühn, *Preventing Escalation in the Baltics: A NATO Playbook*, Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2018.

ing the conventional arms control treaties, limiting NATO's military presence in the Baltic countries and broader region in exchange for equivalent reductions in the Western Military District of Russia, and Belarus, and reinvigorating the NATO-Russia Founding Act.<sup>133</sup>

As of late 2020, these limited forms of cooperation have not come to fruition, and, given the fraught history of U.S.-Russia arms control agreements, there is an open question whether some of the more ambitious proposals could ever materialize. Still, during the COVID-19 crisis, Russia decided to suspend all exercises in its Western military district and along NATO borders, partly in response to NATO cancelling a large-scale exercise and partly due its own pandemic-related concerns.<sup>134</sup>

## Balkan Security and Strategic Orientation

The Balkans is primarily a theater of competition for influence among the United States and Russia, rather than China. Therefore, escalation management (again the trade space for U.S.-Russia cooperation) in the Balkans hinges on preventing persistent political conflicts from escalating into armed conflicts between NATO and Russia in the region.

Overall, China has low stakes in the Balkans and mixed rhetorical alignment with the United States. China's direct economic stake in the Balkans is small. China's bilateral trade with all Balkans countries totaled \$13 billion in 2018, representing less than 0.5 percent of China's global trade.<sup>135</sup> Politically, China sees amassing support in the Balkans as a way legitimize its authoritarian model of government, shape European policies, and create support for Chinese policies in international forums.<sup>136</sup> For example, as the *Financial Times* notes, "Beijing supports Belgrade's refusal to recognize Kosovo, which declared independence in 2008, while Serbia backs China's stance on Taiwan and territories in the South China Sea."<sup>137</sup> Still, at least on paper, China continues to support the integration of the Balkans with the rest

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<sup>133</sup> Wolfgang Zellner (coordinator); Philip Remler, Wolfgang Richter, Andrei Zagorski (drafting group); Evgeny P. Buzhinsky, Vladislav L. Chernov, Ali Serdar Erdurmaz, Marc Finaud, Cornelius Friesendorf, P. Terrence Hopmann, Lukasz Kulesa, Igors Rajevs, Benjamin Schaller, Hans-Joachim Schmidt, Niklas Schörnig, Oleg Shakirov, and Simon Weiß, *Reducing the Risks of Conventional Deterrence in Europe: Arms Control in the NATO-Russia Contact Zones*, Vienna, Austria: OSCE Network, 2019; Johan Engvall, Gudrun Persson (ed.), Robert Dalsjö, Carolina Vendil Pallin, and Mike Winnerstig, *Conventional Arms Control: A Way Forward or Wishful Thinking?* Stockholm: FOI, 2018, p. 37.

<sup>134</sup> Jake Rudnitsky, "Russia Halts War Games on NATO Borders to Fight Coronavirus," Bloomberg, March 23, 2020.

<sup>135</sup> WITS data.

<sup>136</sup> For more, see Visar Xhambazi, "China Buying Balkans Influence, Competing with West," *Balkan Insight*, January 28, 2020.

<sup>137</sup> Valerie Hopkins, "Pandemic and EU Neglect Tighten Serbia Bonds with China," *Financial Times*, June 16, 2020.

of Europe.<sup>138</sup> And when compared with other Chinese foreign policy priorities in globally, amassing influence in the Balkans ranks on the relatively low end of the spectrum.

By contrast, Russia has comparatively higher stakes in the fate of Balkan countries, although the region does not have the same strategic or economic significance to Russia that some other parts of the post-Soviet space, such as Ukraine and Belarus, do. Russia shares cultural affinities, religious commonality, and resentment toward NATO with the Balkan countries, particularly Serbia.<sup>139</sup> Russia also regards Serbia as a “strategic partner” and has given it observer status within Russia’s Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), along with the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina.<sup>140</sup> Finally, Russia also has economic interests in the Balkans, particularly as a transportation hub for supplying oil and gas to Europe.<sup>141</sup> Despite this, some observers argue that Russia mostly views the region as “a bargaining chip in [its] strategic competition with Western powers,” which might open the door to potential for cooperation at least on a quid pro quo basis.<sup>142</sup>

Toward the top of Moscow’s agenda in the Balkans is resolving the long-term status of Kosovo (where NATO still maintains a peacekeeping presence) and Montenegro (the site of increased Russian gray zone activity and 2016 coups d’état).<sup>143</sup> Despite its ties to Serbia, Russia has been willing to bargain over Kosovo, at times calling for “an agreement in which Serbia recognizes Kosovo in exchange for four municipalities in the north, the Community Serb Municipalities in the south and the extraterritoriality of the Serbian Orthodox Church

<sup>138</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “China’s Policy Paper on the European Union,” December 18, 2018b.

<sup>139</sup> See President of Russia, “Interv’yu serbskim izdaniyam «Politika» i «Vecherniye novosti» [Interview to the Serbian Publications “Politics” and “Vechernie Novosti”],” January 16, 2019; on support for Russia, see Dimitar Bechev, “Making Inroads: Competing Powers in the Balkans,” in Giorgio Fruscione, ed., *The Balkans: Old, New Instabilities: A European Region Looking for its Place in the World*, Milano, Italy: Istituto per Gli Studi di Politica Internazionale (ISPI), 2020.

<sup>140</sup> Bechev, 2020: “Since concluding a defence cooperation agreement with Serbia in 2013, Russian and Serbian soldiers have been training together on a regular basis in both Serbia and Russia. Serbia has procured weapons systems, including MiG-29 fighter jets, T-72 tanks and armoured reconnaissance vehicles from Russia and Belarus. Serbia furthermore holds observer status in the Russian-backed Collective Security Treaty Organization” (Dimitar Bechev, *Russia’s Strategic Interests and Tools of Influence in the Western Balkans*, NATO Strategic Communications Centre of Excellence, September 2019).

<sup>141</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>142</sup> Bechev, 2019. See also prominent Russia expert Mark Galeotti: “Russian leaders see the Balkans as critical piece in a new, broader ‘Great Game,’” in which Russia, Europe, and the United States “will seek to gain advantage and apply leverage in the region in the pursuit of wider goals that have little to do with Balkan politics” (Mark Galeotti, *Do the Western Balkans Face a Coming Russian Storm?* London: European Council on Foreign Relations, ECFR/250, April 2018, p. 16).

<sup>143</sup> Russia has also been active in trying to scuttle North Macedonia accession into NATO. See “Russia Fumes at North Macedonia’s NATO Accession,” Euractiv.com, April 1, 2020.

monasteries.”<sup>144</sup> Russia, however, has been lukewarm on American peace initiatives, although Russia has stated that it “will support all steps and initiatives that will really help Belgrade and Pristina reach a mutually acceptable solution based on the UN Security Council Resolution 1244.”<sup>145</sup> Russia has also been willing to negotiate about the future of Montenegro. In June 2019, Washington and Moscow reportedly discussed a mutual noninterference proposal put forth by Russia.<sup>146</sup> Whether the United States and Russia could actually find sufficient common ground and whether China—which would likely oppose granting Kosovo’s formal *de jure* independence and international recognition to avoid setting a precedent for Taiwan—would accept such a compromise, however, remains to be seen.

## Turkey’s Regional Role and Strategic Orientation

Turkey sits at the geographical and strategic crossroads of Europe and the Middle East. Despite being a NATO member, Turkey shares an interest with Russia and China in limiting U.S. and Western influence.<sup>147</sup> Consequently, Turkey has occasionally cooperated with Russia more closely than with its Western allies, and the authoritarian policies of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan increasingly align more with Russia and China rather than those of the Western democracies.

Although Turkey still ranks low in terms of the PRC’s overall foreign policy, China has more at stake with the future of Turkey than it does with the Balkans or the Baltics. Turkey plays a minor role to China’s domestic affairs as the home to 45,000 Uyghurs, a Turkic people from in the Xinjiang region of China, whom China is especially determined to pacify as part of its broader goal of erasing Uyghur identity.<sup>148</sup> Because of Turkey’s cultural importance to the Uyghur people, Beijing seeks to secure Turkey’s support (or deference) on this issue—to avoid a repeat of Erdoğan’s criticism of China’s heavy-handed crackdown in Xinjiang in 2009.<sup>149</sup> Turkey also was China’s 35th-largest trading partner in 2018, with a total trade volume of roughly \$22 billion, with a \$14 billion surplus.<sup>150</sup> Finally, Turkey presents China with a budding strategic opportunity to develop military ties with a NATO and American

<sup>144</sup> “Serbia and Kosovo Should Follow Good Examples of Solving Disputes in the Region,” *European Western Balkans*, November 16, 2019.

<sup>145</sup> Mustafa Talha Öztürk, “Russia Supports ‘Acceptable’ Solution on Kosovo,” Anadolu News Agency, June 18, 2020.

<sup>146</sup> Samuel Charap and Ivan Timofeev, “Can Washington and Moscow Agree to Limit Political Interference?” *War on the Rocks*, June 13, 2019.

<sup>147</sup> Fiona Hill and Ömer Taşpınar, “Turkey and Russia: Axis of the Excluded?” Brookings Institution, March 1, 2006.

<sup>148</sup> For one example, see Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey,” July 2, 2019b.

<sup>149</sup> “Turkish Leader Calls Xinjiang Killings ‘Genocide,’” Reuters, July 10, 2009.

<sup>150</sup> WITS data.

ally. The two sides have occasionally flirted with increased bilateral military cooperation, notably a 2010 joint exercise that was Beijing's first with a NATO member and a 2013 plan for China to sell Turkey its HQ-9 SAM system.<sup>151</sup>

As with the other European issues, Russia has more at stake in Turkey than China does. Turkey's control over the Turkish Straits means that Russia requires Turkey's cooperation if it wants to keep NATO forces out of the Black Sea while enabling its own Black Sea Fleet access to the Mediterranean.<sup>152</sup> Russia also sold weaponry to Turkey in 2019, including its advanced S400 air defense system. Not only did the deal provide \$2 billion in resources to Russia's struggling economy, but the deal also helped drive a wedge between Turkey and the rest of NATO and stop Turkey from acquiring F-35 fighter aircraft.<sup>153</sup> At the same time, Russia and Turkey have clashed—in some cases violently—over the direction of the Middle East, backing opposing sides in the wars in Syria and Libya.<sup>154</sup>

Ultimately, Turkey's strategic direction is not a particularly fruitful space for strategic cooperation. The United States has not engaged China much on this issue, nor does China seem particularly interested in wooing Turkey away from Russia. Conversely, whether Turkey moves closer to Russia or remains in the strategic orbit of the United States and NATO is mostly a zero-sum issue and contingent at least as much on Turkish domestic politics as it is on the policies of the United States and/or Russia.

Still, given that Turkey and Russia are actively backing opposite sides of both the Syrian and Libyan civil wars, and that any prospective Russo-Turkish war would risk involving the other NATO members, there may be some value in U.S.-Russia efforts to deescalate any potential crisis and avoid unintentional clashes or accidental conflict. Like in other geographic regions, there may be room for a conventional arms control regime in the Black Sea region to check the growth of advanced short-range missiles—which could be particularly destabilizing because of their short warning times—in order to prevent accidental conflict.<sup>155</sup> Another possibility would be updating the Vienna Document to institute mechanisms for notification and observation of snap exercises, which have been historically used to intimi-

<sup>151</sup> Jim Wolf, "China Mounts Air Exercise with Turkey, U.S. Says," Reuters, October 8, 2010; Ethan Meick, *China's Potential Air Defense System Sale to Turkey and Implications for the United States*, Washington, D.C.: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, December 2013.

<sup>152</sup> Stephen J. Flanagan, F. Stephen Larrabee, Anika Binnendijk, Katherine Costello, Shira Efron, James Hoobler, Magdalena Kirchner, Jeffrey Martini, Alireza Nader, and Peter A. Wilson, *Turkey's Nationalist Course: Implications for the U.S.-Turkish Strategic Partnership and the U.S. Army*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2589-A, 2020, p. 130.

<sup>153</sup> Tim Lister, "Turkey Bought Russian S-400 Missiles Designed to Down NATO Planes. For the US, That's a Problem," CNN, July 13, 2019.

<sup>154</sup> Selcan Hacaoglu, "Erdogan, Putin Build Trade Ties as Proxies Face Off in Libya," Bloomberg, January 7, 2020; Michelle Nichols, "Up to 1,200 Deployed in Libya by Russian Military Group: U.N. Report," Reuters, May 6, 2020.

<sup>155</sup> Neil J. Melvin, *Rebuilding Collective Security in the Black Sea Region*, Solona, Sweden: Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, December 2018.

date Turkey.<sup>156</sup> Finally, the United States could propose a series of deconfliction measures for potential flashpoints, such as creating hotlines for Libya and the Black Sea, similar to those that already exist for Syria.

## The Future of Ukraine

The United States, China, and Russia's equities are sharply disproportional in Ukraine. For China, Ukraine is of marginal importance. Economically, Ukraine is China's 54th-largest trading partner and the 15th in Europe, according to 2018 data, making Ukraine a relatively minor player in China's European strategy.<sup>157</sup> In the past, China bought weaponry from Ukraine, including its first aircraft carrier from Ukraine in 1998, and attempted to purchase Motor Sich, the world's largest producer of aerospace engines, before the deal was blocked by the Ukrainian government under pressure from the United States.<sup>158</sup> Still, the Ukrainian arms industry is not of significant enough concern to China to risk crossing Russia. Despite China's declared principles of prioritizing sovereignty, territorial integrity, and noninterference in foreign affairs, China has remained mostly on the sidelines of the Ukraine conflict. It has supported the various ceasefires and cast itself as providing "a number of positive and constructive suggestions," but it did not participate in the conflict-resolution process.<sup>159</sup>

By contrast, Ukraine's importance to Russia cannot be overstated. Russia has historically considered Ukraine to be part of Russia. Russians and Ukrainians, according to Putin, are "one people" or "one nation," although many Ukrainians would disagree.<sup>160</sup> Ukraine is also strategically important to Russia. Russia's Black Sea Fleet is based in Crimea, and Russia wants greater control over the waterways around Crimea and the Donbas—i.e., the Sea of Azov and the Kerch Strait, which connects the Azov and Black Seas. By contrast, Russia views any encroachment by the European Union, or worse still, NATO, into Ukraine as a dire strategic threat. Russia annexed Crimea and launched a war in the Donbas because it saw the uprising against former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich as a Western-backed coup that, if successful, would lead to a pro-Western government, threaten the ethnic Russian population in Crimea, and displace the Russia Black Sea Fleet from Crimea.

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<sup>156</sup> Melvin, 2018.

<sup>157</sup> World Integrated Trade Solution, "China Exports, Imports and Trade Balance by Country 2018," World Bank, undated-a.

<sup>158</sup> Minnie Chan, "Mission Impossible: How One Man Bought China Its First Aircraft Carrier," *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2015; Brett Forrest, "U.S. Aims to Block Chinese Acquisition of Ukrainian Aerospace Company," *Wall Street Journal*, August 23, 2019; "Ukraine Court Rejects Chinese Appeal in Aerospace Deal Opposed by United States," Reuters, April 17, 2020.

<sup>159</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Wang Yi: China Supports Ceasefire Agreement in Line with Ukrainian People's Fundamental Interests," September 6, 2014.

<sup>160</sup> "Putin: Russians, Ukrainians Are 'One People,'" Associated Press, July 20, 2019.

At the macro level, the United States and Russia are unlikely to find much in common over whether Ukraine should be allowed to join NATO, and neither have a vote on whether Ukraine joins the European Union. If Ukraine cannot be overtly pro-Russia, then Moscow prefers the country to be divided, weak, and, most importantly, excluded from Western institutions.<sup>161</sup> And as it has already shown, Russia is willing to act to achieve these goals, and it continues to undermine the Kyiv government and exacerbate divisions within Ukrainian society.<sup>162</sup>

Still, both the United States and Russia want a peaceful resolution of the conflict in Ukraine along the lines of the Minsk II agreement. Per Moscow's 2016 *Foreign Policy Concept*, "Russia undertakes to make every effort to promote political and diplomatic settlement of the internal conflict in Ukraine in cooperation with all the interested States and international agencies."<sup>163</sup> Putin and other Russian officials have repeatedly stated Moscow's commitment to the Minsk II agreements, which have also been endorsed by the UN Security Council (Resolution 2202).<sup>164</sup> The problem lies with the interpretation of that agreement. The United States and Ukraine argue that there needs to be a ceasefire and Russian withdrawal of forces before a political settlement (i.e., elections and a decentralization of power to the regions via a special status), whereas Russia argues that a political settlement must precede a withdrawal and a ceasefire.<sup>165</sup> Still, Russia has consistently been willing to engage with the United States over Ukraine and willing to make tactical gestures of goodwill, including withdrawing its armed forces and weapons from three frontline "disengagement areas" in the run up to the 2019 so-called Normandy Four talks.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Western and Russian experts alike make such an assessment. For a view by a traditionally oriented Russian analyst, see Vladimir Chernega, "Kakoy budet vneshnyaya politika Rossii v 2030 godu [What Will Be Russia's Foreign Policy in 2030]," *Russia in Global Affairs*, January 12, 2019. For an American analysis, see Steven Pifer, "How to End the War in Ukraine," *Foreign Affairs*, November 21, 2019.

<sup>162</sup> See Elina Treyger, Joe Cheravitch, and Raphael S. Cohen, *Russian Disinformation on Social Media*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-4373/2-AF, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>164</sup> President Putin had said that there are "no alternatives" to the Minsk agreements; see Mykhailo Minaikov, "Results of the Normandy Format Talks for Ukraine: Hope, with Reservations," Wilson Center, December 11, 2019.

<sup>165</sup> This appears to reverse the order stipulated in the Minsk agreement see Congressional Research Service, *Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy*, Washington, D.C., R45008, April 29, 2020a, p. 24. For further discussion, see Duncan Allan, *The Minsk Conundrum: Western Policy and Russia's War in Eastern Ukraine*, London: Chatham House, May 2020, p. 12.

<sup>166</sup> Congressional Research Service, 2020a, p. 20.

## Trade Space in the Global Commons

Considering the broad scope of the global commons and specifically their overarching character, which is not always tied to a specific region, global commons could offer more cooperation opportunities. Global commons issues include those related to the management of the “common domains,” such as outer space, cyberspace, and the air and maritime domains, that are not the sovereign territory of any specific state.<sup>167</sup> We extend the definition of the *global commons* here to also look at “common goods” in the abstract sense—policy objectives shared widely across the international community that are not bounded 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. And yet, even across this wide range of issues, cooperation proves challenging and the room for negotiations proves relatively narrow because, as much as these issues may be “common,” they are still inextricably linked with core sovereignty and national security concerns (see Table 2.3).

**TABLE 2.3**  
**Interest in Cooperation in the Global Commons**

| Issue Area                                                | China     |        |           | Russia    |        |           |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------|--------|-----------|
|                                                           | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate | Alignment | Stakes | Cooperate |
| 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     | Low    | Medium    |
| Preserving access to 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       |

<sup>167</sup> The White House, 2017, p. 41.

## Maintaining Freedom of Access to Space

The United States, China, and Russia prioritize maintaining access to space. For all three countries, the ability to access and use the space domain represents an important source of national pride, but also of concrete capabilities, including civil and military communications, weather forecasting, navigation, and mapping, that ensure other services on the ground.<sup>168</sup> Although it is open to interpretation, space ranks as a somewhat higher priority for Russia than China: Not only does Russia have a longer history of spacefaring dating back to Sputnik, but Russia also views achieving supremacy in space as critical for winning future conflicts and as part of maintaining its global leadership.<sup>169</sup>

Like the United States, both China and Russia support peaceful exploration and use of space, although both have expanded their military uses of space as well. For example, while simultaneously pushing ahead with an array of kinetic and nonkinetic counterspace capabilities, China has stated that it will pursue “peaceful development” of space, oppose the weaponization of space, and “protect . . . the space environment to ensure a peaceful and clean outer space and guarantee that [China’s] space activities benefit the whole of mankind.”<sup>170</sup> By contrast, Russia has been somewhat more direct about its aims. A Russian space strategy approved on December 28, 2012, described its goal as “ensur[ing] guaranteed access and the necessary presence of Russia in space.”<sup>171</sup>

Whether China and Russia are open to cooperating with the United States, the track record proves somewhat more mixed. The U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration and the China National Space Administration held a series of meetings on civil uses of space between 2015 and 2017, and the Obama administration held one meeting of the U.S.-China Space Security Talks on space debris in 2016.<sup>172</sup> Concerns over technology transfer, however, have limited the scale and scope of cooperation, and, so far, China has yet to dedicate resources to back up the negotiations.<sup>173</sup> By comparison, the actions of the United

<sup>168</sup> Cassandra Steer, *Why Outer Space Matters for National and International Security*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Center for Ethics and the Rule of Law, University of Pennsylvania, January 2020.

<sup>169</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Challenges to Security in Space*, Washington, D.C., January 2019a.

<sup>170</sup> State Council Information Office of the People’s Republic of China, “White Paper on China’s Space Activities in 2016,” December 27, 2016.

<sup>171</sup> Government of Russia, “Russia’s Space Activities, 2013–2022,” State Program, December 28, 2012. See also D. R. Biryukova and N. Gahrymanova, “Kosmicheskaya Politika Kaka Odin Iz Mehanizmov Obezpecheniya Strategicheskikh Interesov Rossii [Space Policy as One of the Mechanisms for Ensuring the Strategic Interests of Russia],” *Zhurnal Postsovetskiye issledovaniya [Postsoviet Research]*, Vol. 1, No. 7, 2018, p. 682.

<sup>172</sup> Andrew Jones, “U.S., China Set for Spring Civil Space Dialogue on Exploration, Science,” *Space News*, January 20, 2020; Mike Gruss, “U.S., China Will Meet This Year to Talk Space Debris,” *Space News*, September 22, 2016; Frank Rose, “America in Space: Future Visions, Current Issues,” testimony before the House Committee on Science, Space and Technology Committee, March 13, 2019.

<sup>173</sup> U.S. House of Representatives, Select Committee on U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns with the People’s Republic of China, *U.S. National Security and Military/Commercial Concerns*

States and Russia have been more robust. The two countries have cooperated on civilian space, sharing “training, communications, operations, and launch capabilities in support of the [International Space Station].”<sup>174</sup> And despite ongoing tensions with Russia on a host of issues, after the end of the shuttle program in 2011 and before the SpaceX flight in May 2020, U.S. astronauts relied on Russia for transportation to the International Space Station.<sup>175</sup>

Ultimately, the United States, China, and Russia share interests in space on a range of issues, from managing space debris to civil space exploration. Still, because command of space is a core and potentially existential security concern, cooperation can only go so far. All three countries want to maintain unfettered access to the domain for military purposes while denying it to their adversaries. As such, certain areas of spacefaring are not open for negotiation. For example, although China and Russia have jointly pushed international treaties against the militarization of outer space, such as the Draft Treaty on the Prevention of the Placement of Weapons in Outer Space (PPWT), they have focused on U.S. on-orbit capabilities and not their own ground-based anti-satellite weapons.<sup>176</sup> And China and Russia might not be entirely genuine about limiting space-based weapons either. For all its support of PPWT, in July 2020, Russia tested its own on-orbit anti-satellite capability.<sup>177</sup> Consequently, the room for great power cooperation in space remains significantly constrained.

## Dismantling Transnational Criminal Organizations/Networks

Crime may not be an existential threat to the United States, China or Russia, but it inflicts a massive human and economic cost on all nation-states. In 2017, Global Financial Integrity assessed that the annual revenue from transnational crime was between \$1.6 and \$2.2 trillion, with counterfeiting and drug trafficking being by far the most lucrative crimes.<sup>178</sup> Driven by demand for Chinese traditional medicine remedies, China is the number one destination in the world for illegal ivory and many other animal goods, and drug networks proliferate throughout China, with the largest believed by the UN to earn between \$8 billion and \$17 bil-

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*with the People’s Republic of China*, Vol. 1, January 3, 1999; Jeff Foust, “NASA Opens Door to Additional Cooperation with China,” *Space News*, October 1, 2018.

<sup>174</sup> Todd Harrison, Kaitlyn Johnson, and Thomas G. Roberts, “Space Threat Assessment 2019,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, April 2019, pp. 12–13.

<sup>175</sup> Maria Kiselyova and Andrew Osborn, “Russia Applauds SpaceX Launch but Calls Trump’s Reaction ‘Hysteria,’” *Reuters*, May 31, 2020.

<sup>176</sup> Victoria Samson and Brian Weeden, “US Should Start Space Security Talks with Russia, China,” *Breaking Defense*, May 12, 2020.

<sup>177</sup> U.S. Space Command, Public Affairs Office, “Russia Conducts Space-Based Anti-Satellite Weapons Test,” July 23, 2020.

<sup>178</sup> Revenue from transnational crimes includes revenue from drug, small arms and light weapons, human, and organ trafficking; trafficking in cultural property; counterfeiting; illegal wildlife trade; illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing; illegal logging and mining; and crude oil theft (Global Financial Integrity, “Transnational Crime and the Developing World,” March 2017).

lion a year.<sup>179</sup> According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2018, 58 organized crime groups were operating in Russia, and, according Russia's Duma, they were responsible for more than 15,000 felonies that year alone.<sup>180</sup>

And yet, while all three countries theoretically share an interest in combating transnational crime, cooperation in practice has been harder to achieve. China has been more willing to bargain with the United States over countering transnational crime than Russia has. Building on past dialogue and cooperation on the issue, the two sides agreed to establish the U.S.-China Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue as one of four main official Track 1 dialogues under the Trump administration.<sup>181</sup> However, the limits of dialogue are evident in the fact that it was only held once, in October 2017, because of the deteriorating relationship, particularly over cybersecurity issues.<sup>182</sup> Still, in 2018, President Xi agreed with President Trump to crack down on Chinese sales of Fentanyl abroad, though enforcement so far has been mixed and Western experts are skeptical of China's commitment.<sup>183</sup> Still, these initial agreements may pave the way for comparatively more cooperation with China on counter-narcotics trafficking in the future.

By contrast, Russia's willingness to cooperate with the United States has proven mixed, partly because of Russia's own ambivalence toward organized crime. While Russia views drug smuggling and other illegal trafficking as a threat to its own population and to regional stability, Russia remains suspicious of the United States and Western counternarcotics and security support for regions near its borders, including Central Asian states.<sup>184</sup> Russian intelligence agencies also reportedly use organized crime to conduct cyber attacks and promote

<sup>179</sup> On China's illegal wildlife trade, see World Wildlife Foundation, *Demand Under the Ban: China Ivory Consumption Research 2019*, September 25, 2019; Rachel Nuwer, "The Key to Stopping the Illegal Wildlife Trade: China," *New York Times*, November 19, 2018. On drug networks in China, see Tom Allard, "The Hunt for Asia's El Chapo," Reuters, October 14, 2019; John Chalmers, "Meth Gangs of China Play Star Role in Philippines Drug Crisis," Reuters, December 16, 2016.

<sup>180</sup> Alexander Sukharenko and Eric G. Lesneskie, "Russian Organized Crime," in Mangai Natarajan, ed., *International and Transnational Crime and Justice*, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019; "Russian Lawmakers Pass Bill to Punish Organized Crime Bosses," *Moscow Times*, March 27, 2019.

<sup>181</sup> Trump and Xi, 2017.

<sup>182</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "First U.S.-China Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue," October 6, 2017b.

<sup>183</sup> Amir Vera, "China Agrees to Make Fentanyl a Controlled Substance After Talks with US at G20 Summit," CNN, December 2, 2018; Jonathan Landay, "Trade Frictions Raise Questions About China's Fentanyl Promise," Reuters, May 9, 2019a; Jonathan Landay, "Trump Accuses China's Xi of Failing to Halt Fentanyl Exports to U.S.," Reuters, August 2, 2019b.

<sup>184</sup> Ekaterina Stepanova, *Russia's Afghan Policy in the Regional and Russia-West Contexts*, Paris: Institut Français des Relations Internationales (IFRI), May 2018.

Russia's political influence.<sup>185</sup> Consequently, Russia is reluctant to cooperate with the United States to combat one of the very tools it uses in its competition against the West.

## Countering Violent Extremist Organizations

Like countering transnational crime, countering violent extremist organizations—in this case particularly Salafi jihadist groups—should be a common interest to the United States, China, and Russia. Both China and Russia, after all, have good reasons to fight Salafi terrorism. China, for example, fears Islamic terrorism spreading to its own Muslim minorities, particularly to its Uyghur population in Xinjiang, and accuses the minority of being responsible for multiple terrorist incidents over the years.<sup>186</sup> Russia, similarly, views Salafi jihadist terrorism as a matter of regime stability. Russia fears the reemergence of homegrown violent extremists in the North Caucasus region, especially following the return of thousands of former insurgents from the conflicts in Syria and Iraq.<sup>187</sup>

Like with transnational crime, turning interest into cooperation has proven difficult. A 2019 Chinese defense white paper called on the PLA to “fulfill [its] international responsibilities” including in countering violent extremism, but China declined to join the U.S.-led 80-country Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS, even though ISIS at one point pledged to attack China.<sup>188</sup> There are multiple reasons for this reticence. China in general has been reluctant to commit forces much beyond its borders. Joining an American-led coalition could be seen as validating other American military operations overseas. Above all, after a brief period of cooperation right after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Washington and Beijing increasingly disagree about who is a terrorist and counterterrorism tactics. In particular, the United States and its Western allies have raised human rights concerns over China's resettling of over a million Uyghurs into concentration camps.<sup>189</sup>

By contrast, Russia has been more willing to support American counterterrorism efforts. After the 2001 terrorist attacks, Russia cooperated with the FBI in intercepting weapon

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<sup>185</sup> Mark Galeotti, “Crimintern: How the Kremlin Uses Russia's Criminal Networks in Europe,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 18, 2017; UK House of Commons, “Moscow's Gold: Russian Corruption in the UK,” May 21, 2018.

<sup>186</sup> Lindsay Maizland, “China's Repression of Uyghurs in Xinjiang,” Council on Foreign Relations, June 30, 2020.

<sup>187</sup> Joshua Sinai, “The Terrorist Threats Against Russia and Its Counterterrorism Response Measures,” *Connections*, Vol. 14, No. 4, Fall 2015, p. 95.

<sup>188</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, 2019; Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh, “Partners List,” undated; John Irish, “China Rules Out Joining Anti-Terrorism Coalitions, Says Helping Iraq,” Reuters, February 12, 2016; Robbie Gramer, “The Islamic State Pledged to Attack China Next. Here's Why,” *Foreign Policy*, March 1, 2017.

<sup>189</sup> Maizland, 2020.

transfers and collaborated with the United States to help disrupt terrorist financing.<sup>190</sup> More recently, Russian forces targeted ISIS and Al Qaeda–affiliated groups in Syria, as well as other more moderate rebel groups. Further afield, Russian private military corporations have participated in counter–violent extremist organizations operations in Mozambique. The Russian private military corporation Wagner has also fought in Libya on behalf of eastern Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter, who has construed his bid to conquer the country as a fight against extremists.<sup>191</sup>

Cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism, while possible, comes with a price. Although Russia targeted Islamic forces in Syria, it also targeted more moderate opposition elements that the United States backs, while supporting the Assad regime that the United States opposes.<sup>192</sup> Similarly, in Libya, the United States and Russia support opposing factions. And according to media reports, Russia has even colluded with terrorist organizations such as the Taliban to kill American troops in Afghanistan.<sup>193</sup>

As a result, from the United States’ perspective, cooperation with Russia on counterterrorism may be somewhat more plausible than with China, but only just barely. Even on this seemingly shared interest, in practice, the United States and Russia often find themselves on opposite ends of a conflict. Consequently, 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 nominally support promoting stability and ending long-running conflicts, via a mixture of peacekeeping, economic aid and diplomacy. China’s growing role in peacekeeping is one of the more promising areas for U.S.-China cooperation. China has participated in a series of talks run by the Carter Center since 2015 that have brought together U.S., Chinese, and UN special representatives for Africa and covered Sudan and other issues.<sup>194</sup> China also engaged with the United States on Afghanistan, through the Quadrilateral Coordination Group in 2016 and again in a similar effort with the United States,

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<sup>190</sup> Sharyl N. Cross, “U.S./NATO-Russia and Countering Ideological Support for Terrorism: Toward Building a Comprehensive Strategy,” *Connections*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Winter 2006, p. 5.

<sup>191</sup> David Kirkpatrick, “Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War,” *New York Times*, November 5, 2019.

<sup>192</sup> Agence France-Presse, “‘More Than 90%’ of Russian Airstrikes in Syria Have Not Targeted Isis, US Says,” *The Guardian*, October 7, 2015.

<sup>193</sup> Savage, Schmitt, and Schwirtz, 2020.

<sup>194</sup> Carter Center, “China Program’s Africa-US-China Trilateral Cooperation Timeline,” July 25, 2019. For an earlier series of dialogues over 2005–2007, see Council on Foreign Affairs, “Africa-China-U.S. Trilateral Dialogue: Summary Report,” December 2007.

Russia, and Pakistan in 2019, but little progress was made.<sup>195</sup> Moreover, China also has dedicated substantial resources to peacekeeping. In his 2015 UN address, Xi promised to “establish a 10-year, \$1 billion China-UN peace and development fund to support the UN’s work, advance multilateral cooperation and contribute more to world peace and development.”<sup>196</sup> Partly because it views these operations as a good way to get deployed military experience, China also is the largest peacekeeping force amongst UN Security Council members, mostly deployed in Africa.<sup>197</sup>

At the same time, Beijing has benefited from ongoing conflict and weak states. China has supplied arms to one or both sides in several conflicts, including the Iran-Iraq War and more recently the war in South Sudan.<sup>198</sup> China has also exploited fragile, unstable, or otherwise weak governments for access to their resources, such as its 2007 resources-for-infrastructure deal with the Congo, or for political influence, such as using Serbia as a gateway to Europe.<sup>199</sup> And so while the United States can cooperate with China further on peacekeeping, it comes at a cost: China can be expected to use these ventures to advance its own interests and power.

Russia has played an active role in promoting global stability, although from the American perspective Moscow’s role has not necessarily always been a constructive one. Russia seeks to portray itself as a pragmatic international powerbroker that can cooperate with all sides and as an alternative to Western-brokered peace treaties.<sup>200</sup> Russia has leveraged conflicts over separatist regions, including Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Transnistria, to cement its power in the near abroad.<sup>201</sup> Although Russia contributes very few personnel to UN peacekeeping missions (just 89 total persons in 2016), it is the seventh-

<sup>195</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Joint Press Release of the Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan Peace and Reconciliation,” January 11, 2016; “China, Russia, U.S., Pakistan Hold Talks on Afghan Peace Process,” Xinhua, October 26, 2019.

<sup>196</sup> Xi Jinping, “Working Together to Forge a New Partnership of Win-Win Cooperation and Create a Community of Shared Future for Mankind,” speech to UN General Assembly in New York, September 28, 2015a.

<sup>197</sup> See “United Nations Peacekeeping, “Troop and Police Contributors, by Country,” undated.

<sup>198</sup> Cara Anna, “UN: China Arms Firm Sold \$20M in Weapons to South Sudan,” Associated Press, August 25, 2015; United Nations Security Committee, *Interim Report of the Panel of Experts on South Sudan Established Pursuant to Security Council Resolution 2206 (2015)*, August 21, 2015.

<sup>199</sup> William Wallis and Rebecca Bream, “Alarm over China’s Congo Deal,” *Financial Times*, September 19, 2007; Aaron Ross, “China’s ‘Infrastructure for Minerals’ Deal Gets Reality-Check in Congo,” Reuters, July 9, 2015; Scott Wingo, “The Rise and Fall of the Resource-Backed Loan,” Center for Advanced China Research, February 18, 2020; Vuk Vuksanovic, “Light Touch, Tight Grip: China’s Influence and the Corrosion of Serbian Democracy,” *War on the Rocks*, September 24, 2019.

<sup>200</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>201</sup> This approach in Russia’s neighborhood countries allows it to increase its influence through passportization in separatist regions (Philip Remler, “Russia and Cooperative Security in Europe: Times Change, Tactics Remain,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 1, 2019).

largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget.<sup>202</sup> Perhaps more importantly, Russia has deployed military or private military contractors such as Wagner to conflicts throughout the Middle East, Africa, and South America, including Syria, Egypt, Libya, Algeria, South Africa, Central African Republic, and Venezuela, often to prop up authoritarian regimes and put down unrest.

Like with China, the United States can cooperate with Russia on promoting global stability, but at a cost. Russia privileges stability and promoting its own influence over Western values such as democracy, transparency, and human rights.<sup>203</sup> Ultimately, the United States faces a choice in great power cooperation focused on ending long-running conflicts: Does it prefer sharing the burden of these efforts with China and Russia, or is it willing to pay the cost going alone but potentially gain more control over the ultimate outcome?

## Preserving Access to the Air and Maritime Commons

The air and maritime domains have long been the subject of international cooperation. 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 common resources located in the maritime domain. And although it attracts little fanfare, there is significant great power cooperation on a regular basis, as commercial shipping and air travel transits unhindered through these domains daily.

Even here, however, cooperation is neither complete nor without caveat. Although China—unlike the United States—is a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas and has dedicated resources to combating threats to trade like piracy off the Gulf of Aden, escorting over 3,400 foreign vessels through pirate infested waters during the first decade their mission in the region, China’s belief in freedom of navigation is not absolute. China also firmly asserts that coastal states have the right to limit military activities in their exclusive economic zone waters, so expanding this cooperation anywhere close to Chinese-claimed territory a nonstarter for Beijing.<sup>204</sup> China claims that much of the South China Sea is its “blue territory” and has threatened to “expel” U.S. Navy ships from that body of water.<sup>205</sup> In the East China Sea, China unilaterally declared an Air Defense Identification

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<sup>202</sup> Alexander Nikitin, “International Interventions in Conflicts: UN, OSCE, EU, NATO, CSTO Peacekeeping Policies,” Valdai Club, Moscow, June 2017.

<sup>203</sup> Maxim Matusevich, “Are the Russians Forging an ‘Empire’ in Africa?” *Africa Security*, Vol. 6, July 2019.

<sup>204</sup> “Chinese Naval Fleets Escort 3,400 Foreign Ships over Past 10 Years,” Xinhua, January 1, 2019.

<sup>205</sup> Ryan Browne, Steven Jiang, and Mallory Gafas, “US Navy Warship Challenges Chinese Claims in the South China Sea,” CNN, September 13, 2019; Liu, 2020; Sam LaGrone, “China Says PLA Scrambled Aircraft, Ships to ‘Expel’ U.S. Warship from South China Sea Island Chain,” *USNI News*, April 28, 2020.

Zone (ADIZ) in 2013 to advance its disputed territorial claims, including over the Senkaku Islands.<sup>206</sup>

Russia, too, has a similarly selective view of access to the global commons. Although Russia proposed creating a “Structure to Fight Against Maritime Piracy” under the United Nations and participated in counterpiracy operations off the horn of Africa, it has mostly been focused on protecting its own merchant vessels rather international ones at large.<sup>207</sup> Moreover, Russia is also not above challenging access to the global commons. Over the past few decades, Russian aircraft have probed U.S. and other Western countries’ ADIZs and even violated national airspace.<sup>208</sup>

Ultimately, there may be some room for cooperation with Russia and China on air and maritime commons issues, particularly on common threats (e.g., Somali counterpiracy or maritime search and rescue) and in less sensitive parts of the globe (e.g., the Horn of Africa). Moving beyond these handful of issues and select locations, the space for cooperation narrows considerably.

## Preventing Nuclear Arms Races

During the Cold War, nuclear arms control was a bright spot in American-Soviet cooperation. Recently, however, the future of arms control has dimmed. Even though all three powers oppose nuclear arms races, China has shown little interest in arms control, while multiple U.S.-Russia agreements including Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and, most recently, the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty have collapsed. Today, only the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (New START), signed in 2010, remains in force, and that is set to expire in 2021.

Although Chinese officials continually stress that “there is no victory in nuclear war, and we shall never start a nuclear war,” they have shown little interest in even discussing—let alone participating—in any sort of arms control agreements, including those related to constraining the growth and/or modernization of nuclear weapons stockpiles.<sup>209</sup> Consequently,

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<sup>206</sup> Kyle Rempfer, “US Military Posture in Asia Could Change if China Declares Another Air Defense Identification Zone,” *Air Force Times*, September 28, 2018.

<sup>207</sup> EspanarUSA, “Russia Offers to Create Under the Aegis of the UN a Structure to Fight Against Maritime Piracy,” *Maritime Herald*, February 13, 2019. Yet, it has recently been reported that Russia will not establish a military base in the Horn of Africa that could have support and establish a more persistent Russian military presence there (Johanna Look, “Unconfirmed Reports of Russia Abandoning Plans to Build Naval Base in Horn of Africa,” *Maritime Security Review*, February 9, 2020).

<sup>208</sup> Russia has been accused on national airspace violations by such countries as Sweden, Turkey. While entering ADIZ (a 12-mile zone that delimits the border of territorial waters), Russia remained in international airspace (“US Fighter Planes Intercept Russian Combat Jets off Alaska, Sweden Protests ‘Violation,’” *DW*, September 20, 2014; American Security Project, “Russian Military Incident Tracker,” updated February 17, 2020).

<sup>209</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, “The Third Session of the Preparatory Committee for the 2020 Review Conference of the Parties to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear

when the Trump administration pushed for a trilateral arms control agreement to replace New START, Beijing pushed back hard. In August 2019 a foreign ministry official said,

China has no interest in participating in the so-called trilateral nuclear arms reduction negotiations with the U.S. and Russia. . . . Given the huge gap between nuclear arsenal of China and those of the U.S. and the Russian Federation, I do not think it is reasonable or even fair to expect China to participate in any nuclear reduction negotiations at this stage.<sup>210</sup>

In fact, China even refused to hold any Track 1 dialogue on nuclear issues, opting instead for Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, such as the ongoing U.S.-China Strategic Dialogue hosted by the Pacific Forum since the early 2000s.<sup>211</sup> In fairness to China's position, however, outside estimates place the size of the Chinese arsenal as still an order of magnitude smaller than either the United States' or Russia's, so China may feel that any arms control agreement might lock in these disparities.<sup>212</sup>

Russia, by contrast, seems more open to cooperation on nuclear issues. U.S. experts doubt Russian adherence to the nuclear testing moratorium and its arms control obligations under the INF, Russia accuses the United States of being hypocritical about the implementation of major arms control agreements and interpreted the United States' withdrawal from the ABM Treaty as directed against Russia.<sup>213</sup> Nonetheless, Russia has expressed support for renewing New START as the last bastion holding back an arms race.<sup>214</sup>

From a policy perspective, the question for the United States is less whether cooperation is possible and more whether it is worthwhile. The evidence suggests that the United States could possibly negotiate another nuclear agreement with Russia or an extension of New START, thereby potentially avoiding another costly nuclear arms race and stabilizing the nuclear balance between the United States and Russia. At the same time, given that China

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Weapons (NPT) Opens in New York," April 2019a.

<sup>210</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, "Briefing by Mr. FU Cong, Director General of the Department of Arms Control and Disarmament of Ministry of Foreign Affairs," August 2019c.

<sup>211</sup> For a review of these unofficial dialogues, see Michael Wheeler, *Track 1.5/2 Security Dialogues with China: Nuclear Lessons Learned*, Alexandria, Va.: Institute for Defense Analyses, September 2014.

<sup>212</sup> Kelsey Davenport, "Nuclear Weapons: Who Has What at a Glance," Arms Control Association, August 2020.

<sup>213</sup> "U.S. Believes Russia Conducting Low-Level Nuclear Tests: Official," Reuters, May 29, 2019; Olivier Schmitt, "How to Challenge an International Order: Russian Diplomatic Practices in Multilateral Security Organisations," *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2019.

<sup>214</sup> In December 2019, the Russian MFA signaled its readiness to include into New START such future systems as *Kinjal* and *Poseidon*, which Russia considers as a significant step forward to the United States. Russian media has criticized the U.S. conditions for the renegotiation of START (inclusion of tactical nuclear weapons and China) as unrealistic (Lina Davidova, "Putin Names the Last Instrument to Limit the Arms Race After the US Withdrawal from the INF Treaty," TVZvezda, October 13, 2019).

would not participate and Russia's record of compliance with other agreements is disputed, whether the benefits of such agreement outweighs its costs is a separate question.

## Preventing Militarization of the Arctic

Perhaps to a greater degree than any of the other global commons issues, there is a mismatch between the willingness and the ability of the three countries to cooperate in the Arctic. As a self-proclaimed “near-Arctic” nation, China has a growing interest in leveraging the Arctic's resources and its trade routes, especially as climate change makes the region more navigable.<sup>215</sup> On paper, China's “four basic policy goals” for the Arctic—including “to understand” the Arctic (through scientific research); to “protect” the Arctic (through an active response to climate change), to “develop” the Arctic (through a strengthening of technological innovation), and to “participate” in the governance of the Arctic (via international treaties and institutions)—make it roughly aligned with American interests of preventing militarization of the Arctic.<sup>216</sup>

That said, China's ability to affect Arctic policy is rather limited. Although it has observer status in the Arctic Council, China is mostly excluded from Arctic policymaking. The main venue for engagement has been the U.S.-China Arctic Social Science Forum, hosted since 2015 at the Track 1.5 and Track 2 level.<sup>217</sup> And while China has been inching toward developing the capability to operate in the Arctic, as of now it does not have a presence there.

By contrast, Russia—with the largest geographical presence in the Arctic—is fully vested in the region. Putin has described the Arctic region as a “concentration of practically all aspects of national security—military, political, economic, technological, environmental and that of resources.”<sup>218</sup> The importance that Russia places on the Arctic is evident from sheer scale of its military presence in the region. Its military base in the Kola Peninsula hosts two-thirds of its second-strike sea-based nuclear assets in the form of ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) and offers a favorable environment for the deployment of satellite monitoring stations and anti-satellite capabilities.<sup>219</sup> Russia has also refurbished old airbases and built new

<sup>215</sup> Steven Lee Myers, “Arctic Council Adds 6 Nations as Observer States, Including China,” *New York Times*, May 15, 2013. For U.S. criticism of this position, see Somini Sengupta, “United States Rattles Arctic Talks with a Sharp Warning to China and Russia,” *New York Times*, May 6, 2019.

<sup>216</sup> State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, “China's Arctic Policy,” January 26, 2018a.

<sup>217</sup> For an overview of this forum, see Heather A. Conley, *China's Arctic Dream*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2018.

<sup>218</sup> President of Russia, “Meeting of the Security Council on State Policy in the Arctic,” April 22, 2014a.

<sup>219</sup> Harri Mikkola, “The Geostrategic Arctic: Hard Security in the High North,” FIIA Briefing Paper 259, FIIA, April 11, 2019; Nurlan Aliyev, “Russia's Military Capabilities in the Arctic,” International Centre for Defence and Security, June 2019.

ones capable of hosting Tu-142 maritime patrol aircraft, MiG-31 long-range interceptors, and Su-34 fighter/bombers, protecting them with S-300 and S-400 surface-to-air missiles.<sup>220</sup>

The challenge for cooperating with Russia in the Arctic is less capability than will. 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. Consequently, 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, such as demilitarizing or ensuring freedom of navigation through the region, will likely remain challenging.<sup>221</sup>

## Maintaining the Openness of Cyberspace

Today, cyberspace, the most recent domain in the global commons, is arguably the site of some of the most important cooperation and the fiercest competition between the great powers. At a fundamental level, the United States, China, and Russia disagree over how to govern cyberspace. As a liberal democracy, the United States' core objective is to "preserve the long-term openness, interoperability, security, and reliability of the Internet."<sup>222</sup> By contrast, both China and Russia view control over the internet as essential to their respective regimes' survivals and consequently have pushed for "cyber sovereignty," arguing that they should be allowed to control the content their citizens can access online.<sup>223</sup>

The prospects for cooperation, however, improve slightly once we focus on more operational objectives. China, for example, still seeks a common global information and communications technology backbone to facilitate its trade abroad—albeit on its terms—as evident in Beijing's global push for 5G dominance behind state-backed hardware companies such as Huawei and ZTE, which would allow the CCP to access, monitor, and manipulate all data flows on its systems.<sup>224</sup> In his 2015 speech on global cyber policy, Xi said, "Countries should work together to prevent and oppose the use of cyberspace for criminal activities such as

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<sup>220</sup> Such as the new most northernmost airfield *Nagurskoe* on Alexandra Land. See Joseph Trevithick, "Russia Projects Heavy Airpower in the Arctic from Constellation of New and Improved Bases," *The Drive*, January 2, 2019; Pavel Baev, Threat Assessments and Strategic Objectives in Russia's Arctic Policy," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 1, 2019.

<sup>221</sup> Stephanie Pezard, Abbie Tingstad, Kristin Van Abel, Scott Stephenson, "Maintaining Arctic Cooperation with Russia," Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1731-RC, 2017.

<sup>222</sup> The White House, *National Cyber Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2018, p. 24.

<sup>223</sup> See Freedom House, "Freedom on the Net 2018: The Rise Of Digital Authoritarianism," undated; Human Rights Watch, "Joint Statement on Russia's 'Sovereign Internet Bill,'" April 24, 2019; Amanda Azinheira, "Is Russia Going to War Against the Internet?" *National Interest*, March 15, 2019.

<sup>224</sup> Dan Sabbagh, "Using Huawei in UK 5G Networks Would Be 'Madness,' US Says," *The Guardian*, January 13, 2020; Ken Dilanian, "U.S. Officials: Using Huawei Tech Opens Door to Chinese Spying, Censorship," *NBC News*, February 14, 2020.

terrorism, pornography, drug trafficking, money laundering and gambling.”<sup>225</sup> Similarly, the United States also shares common interests—at least on paper—with Russia. At least in theory, Russia wants to restrict “offensive cyber activity and cyber weapons,” although in practice Western experts accuse Russia of using cybercrime as a tool against the West.<sup>226</sup>

Both China and Russia have been willing to negotiate about cybersecurity. Cybersecurity was a key component of Track 1 engagement with China under both the Obama and Trump administrations, although U.S.-China Law Enforcement and Cybersecurity Dialogue was held only once, in October 2017.<sup>227</sup> This has been accompanied by various Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, such as the U.S.-China Cyber Security Dialogue hosted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies since 2009.<sup>228</sup> Similarly, in 2013 Russia and the United States signed a bilateral agreement to establish a secure Direct Communications Line linking the U.S. Cybersecurity Coordinator and the Deputy Head of the Russian Security Council to help manage any crises.<sup>229</sup> Although Russian intervention into Ukraine and meddling in the U.S. elections interrupted bilateral cooperation, in 2019 Russia announced that it expected to gradually restart bilateral relations on cybersecurity.<sup>230</sup>

Whether cooperation can reasonably be expected to produce results—given the significant differences between the three powers—is a separate question. Despite the U.S.-China Cyber Agreement of September 2015, the intrusions attributed to Chinese advanced persistent threat hacking groups connected to its Ministry of State Security and the PLA did not end. China’s engagement in cyber espionage for industrial, political, and strategic purposes and the continuing annual costs due to the Chinese cybertheft of U.S. intellectual property have been estimated at between \$225 billion and \$600 billion.<sup>231</sup> Evidence that Russia will comply with any sort of cyber agreement is similarly slim. Indeed, despite Russia’s announcement about wanting to return to a more harmonious relationship with the United States on cybersecurity, the National Security Agency warned of yet another wave of Russian cyber

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<sup>225</sup> Xi Jinping, “Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People’s Republic of China at the Opening Ceremony of the Second World Internet Conference,” speech at World Internet Conference, Wuzhen, China, December 16, 2015b; Michael Connell and Sarah Vogler, *Russia’s Approach to Cyber Warfare*, Arlington, Va.: CNA, March 2017.

<sup>226</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2016b.

<sup>227</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, 2017b.

<sup>228</sup> Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Track 1.5 U.S.-China Cyber Security Dialogue,” undated.

<sup>229</sup> The link was first used when Michael Daniel, the Obama administration’s cybersecurity policy coordinator, messaged to Russia about Russian attempts to influence the U.S. Presidential election in 2016 (The White House, “Fact Sheet: U.S.-Russian Cooperation on Information and Communications Technology Security,” June 17, 2013).

<sup>230</sup> “Russia Says It Is Starting to Resume U.S. Cyber Cooperation: TASS,” Reuters, October 17, 2019.

<sup>231</sup> Sherisse Pham, “How Much Has the US Lost from China’s IP Theft?” CNN, March 23, 2018.

attacks in May 2020.<sup>232</sup> Still, there might be some room for negotiation between the powers, particularly in terms of nontargeting of critical infrastructure.<sup>233</sup>

## The Narrow Trade Space for Cooperation

Looking across the full spectrum of policy objectives yields three main conclusions. First, across the policy areas, the trade space—the room for cooperation—is relatively narrow, and the reasons for this go beyond mere personality dynamics of the individual leaders. On every issue, there are major, substantive disagreements between the United States, China, and Russia, and the likely room for cooperation exists mostly on the margins, deconflicting interests when possible and instituting deescalation mechanisms to prevent full-on clashes where true deconfliction is not feasible.

That said, some areas are comparatively more ripe for cooperation than others. In general, two conditions need to be present. First, the two sides need to at least partially acknowledge that a problem exists and share some conception of how to mitigate, if not solve it (allowing for some sort of trade space). Second, both sides need to have a significant, but not existential, stake in the outcome. As we see with many of the European and Indo-Pacific issues, part of the challenge for cooperation is that the issue may be of existential importance for either China or Russia (leaving little room for negotiation) and of little or no importance for the other power (leaving little reason to cooperate, especially if competition is the easier path). Overall, the global commons and Middle East issues often present a Goldilocks solution and the most fertile room for cooperation: All three powers often have some sort of stake on the issues (although not an existential one), and there is some common ground between them.

Finally, cooperation is rarely free. As the title of this chapter implies, cooperation revolves around policy “trade space,” implying that the United States, China, and Russia will need to sacrifice some of their interests in pursuit of larger objectives. Whether brokering such compromises is possible, much less beneficial, is a topic we take up in the next chapter.

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<sup>232</sup> National Security Agency, “Exim Mail Transfer Agent Actively Exploited by Russian GRU Cyber Actors,” May 28, 2020.

<sup>233</sup> Scott W. Harold, Martin C. Libicki, and Astrid Stuth Cevallos, *Getting to Yes with China in Cyberspace*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1335-RC, 2016.

## The Significant and Growing Obstacles to Cooperation

Even if there is trade space and the United States, China, and Russia's interests overlap on a given issue, it does not mean that they are likely to choose to cooperate in practice. International cooperation—even among friendly countries, let alone adversaries—often confronts a series of obstacles, some more immutable than others. Consequently, there are costs to cooperating, at least in time spent in making the deals necessary to overcome these obstacles and often in terms of sacrificing other objectives along the way. In this chapter, we define eight different types of obstacles that hinder cooperation, explore how they manifest themselves in the 22 policy areas described in Chapter Two, and examine how significant they are to preventing cooperation. Ultimately, we argue that every area faces multiple, formidable obstacles to cooperation, with the most common being a lack of trust among the parties, an obstacle that is perhaps the hardest to overcome. What is more, the lack-of-trust obstacle is growing, diminishing the chances of cooperation in the future.

### Identifying Types of Obstacles

Of the numerous obstacles that hinder great power cooperation, we identified eight common ones that run throughout our analysis.<sup>1</sup> The most common obstacle is lack of **trust**—the bedrock of cooperation.<sup>2</sup> Since cooperation often requires compromises and sacrificing some interest in the hopes of accomplishing a larger objective, agreements are only beneficial if both sides uphold their sides of the bargain. Given that the United States, China, and Russia have long histories of working with each other on these issues, any cooperative agreement must be built in history's shadow. When one side believes that the other side failed to comply with a previous agreement, they may be less inclined to compromise again. Political scien-

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<sup>1</sup> There is a well-developed literature about the obstacles to cooperation as well. For example, for a game theoretic discussion of the obstacles to cooperation, see Arthur A. Stein, "Coordination and Collaboration: Regimes in an Anarchic World," *International Organization*, Vol. 36, No. 2, Spring 1982.

<sup>2</sup> For an academic treatment of the issue, see Andrew H. Kydd, *Trust and Mistrust in International Relations*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

tist Robert Axelrod refers to this as “shadow of the future” and argues, “without the shadow of the future, cooperation becomes impossible to sustain.”<sup>3</sup> Distrust can become an even greater obstacle if it is harder to independently verify compliance. In those cases, states must trust one another’s word. If their credibility is already tarnished, cooperation becomes more challenging. Finally, distrust can also be inherent to regime type: Democracies may mistrust authoritarian regimes’ lack of transparency, while authoritarian regimes may find policy making in democracies—with the myriad of different voices and constant turnover in key leaders—similarly inscrutable and their promises as fundamentally unreliable.<sup>4</sup>

A second obstacle is **audience costs**.<sup>5</sup> Sometimes, domestic political structures encourage distrust.<sup>6</sup> Even if the countries’ leaders themselves trust that the other side will uphold their end of the bargain, they might still be beholden to more hawkish constituencies who will punish the leader for cooperation with an adversary on a given issue.<sup>7</sup> For example, according to Pew polling in February 2020, nearly 72 percent of Americans believed that Russia would meddle in the 2020 U.S. elections, and nearly 73 percent believed that Putin would not “do the right thing regarding world affairs,” creating significant political headwinds for any attempt by Trump to cooperate with Russia.<sup>8</sup> And while audience costs are most visible in democracies, such as the United States, even leaders in authoritarian countries can face audience costs from their elite political competitors.<sup>9</sup>

A third obstacle comes from **definitional** issues, where even the use of the same terms masks fundamental differences. The United States, China, and Russia might agree on an issue in the abstract but apply the same principles very differently in practice. For example, they might agree in principle that they would prefer a denuclearized North Korea but disagree over what that entails in practice and how to get there. Similarly, the three powers might agree in the abstract that states should be allowed to exploit resources on their sovereign ter-

<sup>3</sup> Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*, New York: Basic Books, 1984, p. 182.

<sup>4</sup> For a good example of how China views the United States, Andrew J. Nathan and Andrew Scobell, “How China Sees America: The Sum of Beijing’s Fears,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 9, No. 5, September/October 2012.

<sup>5</sup> For the classic work on this issue, see James D. Fearon, “Domestic Political Audiences and the Escalation of International Disputes,” *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 88, No. 3, September 1994.

<sup>6</sup> See Deborah Welch Larson, “Trust and Missed Opportunities in International Relations,” *Political Psychology*, Vol. 18, No. 3, September 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Of course, another school of thought suggests that precisely because leaders and particularly democratic leaders face audience costs, their commitments carry more weight and therefore they are more likely to be peaceful. See Charles Lipson, *Reliable Partners: How Democracies Have Made a Separate Peace*, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> Carroll Doherty, “Fast Facts About Americans’ Views on Russia Amid Allegations of 2020 Election Interference,” Pew Research Center, February 21, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See Jessica L. Weeks, “Autocratic Audience Costs: Regime Type and Signaling Resolve,” *International Organization*, Vol. 62, No. 1, Winter 2008.

ritorial waters, but where their boundaries end and the maritime commons begin might be matter of dispute.

Fourth, in some cases, there also are **third-party** obstacles. Depending on the issue, cooperation can involve entities that the governments themselves do not control. For example, cyber agreements often involve private entities who are either targets or, in some cases, the perpetrators of cyber attacks. On other issues, third countries outside of the United States, China, and Russia have equities and an ability to act independently. For example, Arctic governance issues often include other Arctic nations, and while these countries may not necessarily be able to stop cooperation between the United States, China, and Russia, they can complicate these agreements. Political scientists sometimes refer to this as the “number of actors” hypothesis—holding that as the number of actors party to agreement go up, the prospects for cooperation diminish—although some dispute this finding.<sup>10</sup>

Fifth, **issue linkage** becomes an obstacle when positive-sum issues become tied to zero-sum ones.<sup>11</sup> For example, the United States, China, and Russia all have a shared interest in combating piracy (positive-sum issue), but counterpiracy operations—because they can involve power projection capabilities (as in the case of China’s effort in the Gulf of Aden)—can quickly become linked to hard power, national security concerns (zero-sum issue). Another form of issue linkage comes when cooperation with one great power risks tying one’s hands with the other. For example, part of the United States’ reluctance to negotiate follow-on nuclear arms control agreements with Russia comes from a fear that such agreements would limit the United States’ capabilities while leaving China—which has expressed no interest in nuclear arms control—unconstrained.<sup>12</sup>

Finally, there are practical considerations that can inhibit cooperation. Cooperation can suffer from a **lack of immediacy or interest**. Partly because negotiating solutions takes time and faces challenges, competition can be the easier route to take, so unless there is some sort of forcing function that impels the sides to cooperate, the states may default to competition or simply unilateral behavior that may fall into neither category in particular.<sup>13</sup> In some cases, there also are **legal constraints**. For the United States in particular, laws sometimes limit or even prohibit the kinds of deals the United States can cut with a foreign power. Finally, in some cases there are **capability, capacity, or structural constraints**, such that one power simply does not have the resources or the organizational structures necessary to engage in cooperation.

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<sup>10</sup> See Helen Milner, “International Theories of Cooperation Among Nations: Strengths and Weaknesses,” *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 3, April 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Theoretically, issue linkage can also help encourage cooperation when states trade concessions on one issue for another.

<sup>12</sup> For an analysis, see Frank G. Klotz, *The Military Case for Extending the New START Agreement*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-350-AF, 2020.

<sup>13</sup> See Milner, 1992, p. 468.

Importantly, none of these obstacles are necessarily immutable. Confidence-building measures can build trust. Leaders can try to whip up support for their proposals to reduce audience costs. Definitional problems can be clarified, third parties included, issues delinked, bureaucracies energized, laws changed, and resources redirected. Still, they constitute hurdles that need to be overcome. And as we shall see in the subsequent sections, these obstacles are present—to varying degrees—across the 22 issues we discussed in the previous chapter.

## Obstacles to Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

Unsurprisingly, given that the Indo-Pacific is ground zero for U.S.-China competition today, the region faces some of the steepest obstacles to any sort of cooperation.

At the core of many of the obstacles to cooperation in the Indo-Pacific lies a fundamental **mistrust** of each other's motives among the great powers.<sup>14</sup> For China (and to a lesser extent for Russia), American initiatives to strengthen existing alliances with countries such as Australia, Japan, the Philippines, the Republic of Korea, Singapore, and Thailand and to expand and deepen security cooperation and partnerships with Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India is nothing short of a concerted attempt to contain or even prevent China's rise.<sup>15</sup> By contrast, for the United States, China's actions—be they in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, or at home with its mass incarceration of the Uyghur population and suppression of the democratic protestors in the Hong Kong—are tantamount to an increasingly oppressive authoritarian regime with expansionist ambitions that must be stopped at all costs.

This trust deficit, however, also colors issue areas where China, Russia, and United States seemingly have common ground. China believes that the United States and its allies exploit the DPRK threat as a way to cover their military buildup against China, and Beijing views denuclearization as a covert way for Washington to push for the collapse of the Kim regime and unification of the Korean peninsula under South Korean rule.<sup>16</sup> On the other side, the United States believes that China uses North Korea as a proxy to distract U.S. attention in Asia and that both China and Russia have acted duplicitously on North Korean denuclearization, condemning the DPRK's program on the one hand but then turning a blind eye to sanctions violations on the other.<sup>17</sup> Similar mistrust colors counterterrorism in the Indo-Pacific, where China and Russia view the American presence in Afghanistan at least in part as the

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<sup>14</sup> For the seminal work on trust issues in the U.S.-China relationship, see Kenneth Lieberthal and Wang Jisi, *Addressing U.S.-China Strategic Distrust*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, March 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Nathan and Scobell, 2012.

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Adam Taylor, "Why China Is So Mad About THAAD, a Missile Defense System Aimed at Deterring North Korea," *Washington Post*, March 7, 2017.

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Treasury Targets Russian Shipping Companies for Violations of North Korea-Related United Nations Security Council Resolutions," August 21, 2018; Edward Wong and Christoph Koettl, "How North Korea's Leader Gets His Luxury Cars," *New York Times*, July 16, 2019.

United States establishing a base on their borders; the United States views Russia as publicly supporting efforts to counter radical Sunni Islamist terrorism while secretly aiding the same terrorist groups in killing Americans.<sup>18</sup>

**Audience costs**—or domestic political considerations—can act as another obstacle to cooperation. Taiwan enjoys bipartisan support on Capitol Hill, making the United States unlikely to compromise with China over the fate of the island.<sup>19</sup> Conversely, despite being an authoritarian country, China also faces domestic pressures favoring a harder line on Taiwan. Absorbing Taiwan remains a cornerstone of the CCP's legitimacy, making the party unlikely to budge much on this objective. Similarly, longstanding memories of Japanese atrocities in World War II and decades of CCP patriotic education about the continuing threat of latent Japanese militarism mean that any acceptance by the Chinese leadership of Japan's transition toward becoming a "normal" country with a greater security (military) role in the region would very likely be met with opposition by the Chinese public. Finally, some Chinese elites—including some Chinese military officers and some party elites whose families made fought in the Korean war—support North Korea out of nostalgia and pride over their country's performance against the superior U.S. military and sympathize with North Korea's resistance to "oppression" and "coercion" by the United States.

Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific also encounters **definitional issues**. In some cases, the powers do not share a common understanding of certain terms, such as *terrorism*. China justifies its mass incarceration of the Uyghurs in the name of counterterrorism, whereas for many in the United States China's actions constitute genocide.<sup>20</sup> In other cases, the definitional problem becomes where to draw the line. China views Taiwan as a domestic problem and much of the South China Sea as its exclusive economic zone, whereas the United States leaves the former's status deliberately ambiguous and casts the latter as part of the global commons. The United States, China, and Russia even disagree about seemingly less contentious definitions—such as what constitutes North Korean denuclearization.<sup>21</sup>

The Indo-Pacific is also rife with **third-party problems**. Many of the countries of the region—including key partners Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam—remain fiercely independent and can upset any tacit great power cooperation over the region's future architecture, while India, with its massive population and rapid economic growth, is a major power in its own right. Taiwan similarly has agency on cross-Strait relations, and North Korea is an independent actor on denuclearization, and either could take steps that might prompt responses by Beijing, Washington or Moscow, regardless of what the great powers might prefer. Simi-

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<sup>18</sup> Savage, Schmitt, and Schwirtz, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Ralph Jennings, "Why US Lawmakers Introduce Bill After Bill to Help Taiwan," Voice of America, August 4, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> Marlise Simons, "Uighur Exiles Push for Court Case Accusing China of Genocide," *New York Times*, July 6, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> For example, see Anastasia Barannikova, "What Russia Thinks About North Korea's Nuclear Weapons," *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, April 24, 2019.

larly, Pakistan has proven for decades that it can act as a spoiler in Afghanistan and the counterterrorism fight. Even U.S. allies do not always act as unified bloc—the Republic of Korea has at times taken a softer line than the United States on North Korean policy, just as Japan has at times been more assertive about the disputed islands in the East China Sea. In all seven Indo-Pacific policy objectives, there are multiple other actors at the table aside from just the United States, China, and Russia.

In some cases, the flip side of the third-party problems is **issue linkage**. In general, all the alliance and partnership objectives tie to the broader question of whether there is a China- or U.S.-led order in Asia. Beyond that, though, for Beijing, questions over India's strategic direction and over counterterrorism in Afghanistan are bound up in its relationship with Pakistan. China's approach to DPRK denuclearization is similarly tied to its relationship with South Korea and the United States, since China views the DPRK as a convenient issue through which it can impose costs on, and exercise leverage over, the United States. For Washington, by contrast, any cooperation with Russia over arms sales to the region come at the cost of letting Russia out of sanctions imposed after its invasion of Ukraine.

To a lesser extent, the lack of **immediacy**—the lack of a general sense of urgency or real forcing function for cooperation—sometimes poses an obstacle. In general, as noted in Chapter Two, many of the Indo-Pacific issues are not central concerns to Russia, making Moscow unlikely to seek or expend much effort on cooperation. By contrast, most issues in the Indo-Pacific are of central concern to China, but because many of them are also relatively slow-burn issues, the powers can muddle through even if doing so produces inefficient or even unsuccessful outcomes. For example, Taiwan has been a focal point of U.S.-China tensions since 1949; Sunni Islamist terrorism has been a core concern since 2001 and existed long before that; and the DPRK has been a nuclear power since the mid-2000s. The protracted natures of these challenges mean that they sometimes lack the urgency needed to motivate the powers to find some sort of compromise, rather than muddle through.

Finally, there are a host of **legal** constraints that shape and in some cases limit great power cooperation. Although the CCP is not constrained by Chinese law in any meaningful sense, the party has enacted domestic laws that ostensibly constrain its ability to cooperate. For example, China enacted a 2005 Anti-Secession Law that claims the right to “employ non-peaceful means and other necessary measures to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity” in the event of Taiwan's secession, engraining China's combative approach to the island.<sup>22</sup> On the other hand, Beijing has agreed to international treaties that should obligate it to internationally accepted norms under which the United States and China can cooperate. For example, China signed on to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Seas in 1982, which, in theory, should help facilitate cooperation in the South China Sea and move China closer to the values embodied in the United States' vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific, though in practice this has not been the case.

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<sup>22</sup> National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China, “Anti-Secession Law,” March 14, 2005.

For its part, the United States' actions are governed, and in some cases constrained, by various laws that shape its actions on a host of Indo-Pacific agreements. For example, laws set boundaries on U.S. cooperation with China over Taiwan. The 1979 Taiwan Relations Act states that "the future of Taiwan will be determined by peaceful means," that any use of force or coercion against Taiwan would be of "grave concern to the United States," and that the U.S. government must "maintain the capacity of the United States to resist" such actions.<sup>23</sup> By contrast, the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) legislation shapes the bounds of the U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Indo-Pacific because it threatens buyers of Russian military equipment with sanctions.<sup>24</sup> This then forces U.S. Indo-Pacific partners who want to buy Russian equipment to defend themselves from China, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and India, to either seek exemptions, buy other—at times more expensive—equipment elsewhere, or risk U.S. sanctions.<sup>25</sup>

These obstacles are summarized in Tables 3.1a and 3.1b.

## Obstacles to Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

As in the Indo-Pacific, the most salient obstacle to cooperation across the European and Middle East issue areas is lack of **trust**. As described in Chapter Two, whether with regard to the Baltics, the Balkans, Turkey, or the broader future of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, one potential avenue for cooperation consists of some mix of conventional arms control, confidence-building measures, and deconfliction to reduce tensions over key flashpoints. The United States, however, has repeatedly criticized Russia for noncompliance or incomplete implementation of existing agreements, and this has led the United States and NATO to dismiss Russian proposals for future cooperation, such as a moratorium on intermediate-range nuclear forces or the suspension of certain military exercises.<sup>26</sup>

A similar lack of trust stemming from broken promises exists with regard to Middle East stability and countering Iran. For example, despite Russia's original assurances that it would restrain the Assad regime's military offensives in southwestern Syria, pro-Assad forces—backed by Russian airpower—forcefully reclaimed all opposition-held territories in that area

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<sup>23</sup> Public Law 96-8, Taiwan Relations Act, January 1, 1979.

<sup>24</sup> Public Law 115-44, Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act, July 24, 2017.

<sup>25</sup> "US to Exempt India, Indonesia, and Vietnam From CAATSA Sanctions," DefenseWorld.net, July 24, 2018; Donald Greenlees, "Russia Sanctions Putting Strains on US Relationship with Indonesia," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, June 17, 2019; Stratfor, "With CAATSA, the U.S. Is Trying to Make Russia Hurt," May 28, 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Dmitry Stefanovich, "How to Address the Russian Post-INF Initiatives," European Leadership Network, January 20, 2020; Igor Ivanko, "Russia Scales Down Military Drills Near NATO Borders in 2020—Official," *Moscow Times*, June 2, 2020.

TABLE 3.1A

### Obstacles to Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: China

| Issue Area                                                                            | Trust | Audience Costs | Definitional Problems | Third-Party Problems | Immediacy Problem | Issue Linkage | Legal Constraints | Capacity/Capability/Structural |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                        | ✓     | ✓              | ✓                     |                      |                   | ✓             | ✓                 |                                |
| Promoting and preserving regional alliances                                           | ✓     | ✓              | ✓                     |                      |                   | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam                 | ✓     |                |                       |                      |                   |               | ✓                 |                                |
| Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan                            | ✓     | ✓              | ✓                     | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                |
| Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea                                         | ✓     | ✓              | ✓                     | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia | ✓     |                | ✓                     |                      | ✓                 | ✓             |                   |                                |
| India's regional role and strategic orientation                                       | ✓     |                |                       |                      |                   |               |                   |                                |

NOTE: A check mark indicates that the obstacle is present.

by fall 2018.<sup>27</sup> And although Beijing has officially curbed its security assistance with Iran as part of UN sanctions, Chinese front companies continue to support Iranian arms development and military modernization efforts.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Russia has periodically imposed some limits on its arms sales to Iran but continues to provide Iran top-line military equipment.<sup>29</sup>

In a select handful of cases, **audience costs** form another significant obstacle to cooperation. Many European security issues are not front-page stories in the United States, with the notable exception of Ukraine. Given the centrality of Ukraine to high-profile U.S. domestic scandals, including President Trump's impeachment, the United States has been largely silent on Ukraine since special envoy to Ukraine Kurt Volker resigned.<sup>30</sup> Washington has scaled

<sup>27</sup> Sam Heller, "As Assad Turns to Syria's Southwest, Washington Faces a Choice," *War on the Rocks*, June 21, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Scobell and Nader, 2016, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> < گزارش: تحول جدی در توان زرهی نیروهای مسلح/ تزریق صدها تانک جدید به سازمان رزم ارتش و سپاه > ["Report: A Serious Change in the Armament Capacity of the Armed Forces/Injection of Hundreds of New Tanks into the Army and IRGC Combat Organization"], < خبرگزاری تسنیم > [Tasnim News], July 17, 2016; Anton Mardasov, "Why Russia's Grip on Syrian Military Is Weaker Than It Seems," *Al-Monitor*, April 22, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> See Kurt Volker, "How Ukraine Vanished in the Fog of Impeachment," *Foreign Policy*, January 28, 2020.

TABLE 3.1B

**Obstacles to Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific: Russia**

| Issue Area                                                                            | Trust | Audience Costs | Definitional Problems | Third-Party Problems | Immediacy Problem | Issue Linkage | Legal Constraints | Capacity/Capability/Structural |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                        | ✓     |                | ✓                     |                      | ✓                 | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Promoting and preserving regional alliances                                           | ✓     |                |                       |                      | ✓                 | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam                 | ✓     |                |                       | ✓                    |                   | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan                            |       |                | ✓                     | ✓                    |                   | ✓             |                   |                                |
| Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea                                         | ✓     |                | ✓                     | ✓                    |                   |               |                   |                                |
| Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia | ✓     |                |                       |                      |                   |               |                   |                                |
| India's regional role and strategic orientation                                       | ✓     |                |                       | ✓                    |                   | ✓             |                   |                                |

NOTE: A check mark indicates that the obstacle is present.

back its support for the Ukraine peace process, leaving the post Volker vacated unfilled.<sup>31</sup> To a lesser extent, audience costs also exist for negotiating new rounds of arms control, given the recent U.S. withdrawal from the INF Treaty, the Open Skies Treaty, and other conventional arm control–related agreements and the skepticism toward such regimes, particularly on the conservative side of the American political spectrum.

Europe's geography makes **third-party problems** almost inevitable. Almost any arms control or confidence-building measure would require European—as well as American and Russian—participation to be successful. As one expert analysis puts it,

What would it take for all parties to respect a new CAC [conventional arms control] regime or additional confidence and security building measures (CSBMs)? In general, the prospects are constrained by the sheer variety of states participating in the dialogue. Indeed, what are technical issues for some states will be existential ones for others, depending on size, geography, historical experiences and domestic politics.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Amy Mackinnon and Robbie Gramer, "State Department Expected to Scrap Post of Special Envoy to Ukraine," *Foreign Policy*, November 11, 2019.

<sup>32</sup> Engval et al., 2018.

Serbia, Montenegro, and Turkey likely would all have a stake in any potential U.S.-Russia cooperation over Kosovo. Similarly, all NATO countries and other Black Sea countries, including Romania, Bulgaria, and Ukraine—not to mention Turkey itself—have an interest in U.S.-Russia cooperation over Turkey’s strategic direction. Similarly, any potential cooperation over Ukraine would involve not only the United States, Russia, and Ukraine but also the European Union, given that an association agreement with the latter sparked the present crisis.

Similar third-party problems exist for Middle East issues. In terms of promoting Middle Eastern stability, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and, to a degree, the other Gulf States can shape the outcomes of the conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and beyond. Similarly, countering Iranian nuclear proliferation requires more than just U.S. cooperation with China and Russia. Other permanent members of the UN Security Council (France and the United Kingdom) and Germany—the so-called P5 + 1—who brokered the last Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, are also key players. Moreover, Iran’s primary adversaries—the other Sunni states of the Persian Gulf, most notably Saudi Arabia—and Israel are likely to spoil any deal with Iran over its nuclear program or its proxies.<sup>33</sup>

Additionally, partly because Europe has been largely peaceful since the Cold War—with the notable exceptions of the Balkans and, more recently, Ukraine—there is also a lack of **immediacy** about many European security issues. With interstate conventional war in Europe being viewed as a remote possibility, the demand for conventional arms control and other confidence-building measures today is not the same as it was during the heights of the Cold War. Because deconfliction happens routinely at the operational level, even without any overarching agreement, the incentive to bargain for such an agreement may be diminished.<sup>34</sup> In some sense, previous arms control agreements may be the victim of their own successes: As tensions diminish, so, too, does the drive to maintain these agreements.

**Issue linkage** presents another common obstacle to cooperation in Europe. Many of the plausible forms of cooperation involve efforts to reduce tensions around likely flashpoints, be they in the Baltics, Balkans, Ukraine, or the Black Sea/Turkey or those that revolve around conventional arms control and other confidence-building measures. Russia, however, ties these issues to the intractable aspects of Euro-Atlantic security architecture and argues that such measures would be pointless until NATO and the United States drop their policy of “containment” of Russia.<sup>35</sup> In particular, Russia demands that such measures be tied to poli-

<sup>33</sup> Peter Baker, “In Congress, Netanyahu Faults ‘Bad Deal’ on Iran Nuclear Program,” *New York Times*, March 3, 2015; Michael R. Gordon, “John Kerry Wins Gulf States’ Cautious Support for Iran Deal,” *New York Times*, August 3, 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with field grade Air Force officer via Microsoft Teams, June 26, 2020.

<sup>35</sup> PIR Center, “Perspektivy kontrolya nad obychnymi vooruzheniyami v Evrope [Prospects for Conventional Arms Control in Europe],” May 5, 2017 (“Po mneniyu konsul’tanta PIR-Tsentra, dialog po obychnym vooruzheniyam oslozhnyayut dva osnovnykh politicheskikh raznoglasiya. Vo-pervykh, eto vopros posledovatel’nosti: NATO schitayet, chto dialog po KOVE mozhet vestis’ parallel’no so sderzhivaniyem

cies such as allowing Russia to veto further NATO enlargement, placing a moratorium on U.S. basing in Europe, and other issues that the United States views as nonnegotiable.<sup>36</sup> For example, many in the United States, such as former ambassador to Ukraine William Taylor, view Russian aggression in Ukraine as just one front in its “hybrid war against Ukraine, Europe, and the United States.”<sup>37</sup>

If anything, the Middle East has even more cross-cutting issue linkages than Europe does. Any cooperation over Turkey’s strategic direction is bound up both in European security (since it is part of NATO and arguably, the lynchpin to Black Sea issues) and in the security of the greater Middle East, especially because of Turkey’s importance to the Syria and Libya conflicts.<sup>38</sup> Cooperation over Syria, in turn, is bound up in broader questions about whether the United States or Russia will become the dominant power in the Middle East. From an American observers’ standpoint, Moscow’s foremost objective in Syria is, arguably, expelling the United States’ remaining military presence in Syria.<sup>39</sup> The reverse might also be true. In May 2020, U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East James Jeffrey stated that his “job is to make [Syria] a quagmire for the Russians.”<sup>40</sup> Cooperation over Syria is also tied to countering Iranian influence in the region, given the latter’s central role in the country.

Finally, there are also a series of **legal constraints** that inhibit cooperation. Perhaps the most significant of these was the prohibition in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act on bilateral military-to-military cooperation between the United States and Russia until the Secretary of Defense certifies that Russia “has ceased its occupation of Ukrainian territory” and “aggressive activities,” except “for the purpose of reducing the risk of conflict.”<sup>41</sup> This places an upper limit on cooperation on many European security issues, especially given that many of the issues in the Balkans, Baltics, or Black Sea are not active conflicts.

A second legal obstacle is the strength of American sanctions laws. While cooperation with Russia over Ukraine would likely come in exchange for sanctions relief, Russia believes that Congress would be unable—or unwilling—to follow through on any such deal. As Dmitri Trenin comments, “Guided by the memories of the Jackson-Vanik amendment limiting trade relations with countries that restricted human rights, which survived the end of the Soviet

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Rossii, v Moskve polagayut, chto sderzhivaniye i polnotsennyy dialog ne sovместimy, i snachala al’yans dolzhen otkazat’sya ot kursa na konfrontatsiyu”).

<sup>36</sup> Engval et al., 2018.

<sup>37</sup> William B. Taylor, “Yes, Secretary Pompeo, Americans Should Care About Ukraine,” *New York Times*, January 26, 2020.

<sup>38</sup> Michael A. Reynolds, “Turkey and Russia: A Remarkable Rapprochement,” *War on the Rocks*, October 24, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with U.S. Department of State official, Amman, February 12, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> David Brennan, “U.S. Syria Representative Says His Job Is to Make the War a ‘Quagmire’ for Russia,” *Newsweek*, May 13, 2020.

<sup>41</sup> Andrew S. Weiss and Nicole Ng, “Collision Avoidance: The Lessons of U.S. and Russian Operations in Syria,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 20, 2019.

Union by just over two decades, Russians believe that the current sanctions are ‘forever,’ meaning that the current generation of politicians will never see the end of them.”<sup>42</sup> Similarly U.S.-Russia cooperation in Syria would likely focus on reconstruction, but the Caesar Act imposes “secondary” sanctions on foreign individuals or entities seeking to do business in Syria, including reconstruction, until the act sunsets in 2025.<sup>43</sup>

Table 3.2 summarizes obstacles to great power cooperation in the Middle East.

## Obstacles to Cooperation in the Global Commons

By far, the most common obstacle across all the global commons issues is a lack of **trust** driven by perceived hypocrisy. Despite avowed opposition to the weaponization of space, both China and Russia have invested in the development of counterspace weapons including a range of anti-satellite missiles, and the United States has been working on anti-satellite

**TABLE 3.2**  
**Obstacles to Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East**

| Issue Area                                       | Trust | Audience Costs | Definitional Problems | Third-Party Problems | Immediacy Problem | Issue Linkage | Legal Constraints | Capacity/Capability/<br>Structural |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|
| Broader Euro-Atlantic security                   | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                    |
| Baltic security                                  | ✓     |                |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                    |
| Balkan security and strategic orientation        | ✓     |                |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 |               |                   |                                    |
| Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation | ✓     |                |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                    |
| The future of Ukraine                            | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                    |
| Middle East stability and peace processes        | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    |                   | ✓             | ✓                 |                                    |
| Countering Iran and its proxies                  | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    |                   | ✓             |                   |                                    |

NOTE: A check mark indicates that the obstacle is present.

<sup>42</sup> Trenin, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Public Law 116-92, National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020, Title LXXIV, Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act of 2019, December 20, 2019.

weapons since the Cold War and just stood up a separate military service dedicated to space.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, despite seemingly shared interests in countering transnational crime, the United States regularly exposes Russian state-directed criminal actions. In 2017, the Department of Justice charged 33 members and associates of Russian organized crime with carrying out an array of crimes in the United States, and in 2018 it charged officers of the Russian Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU) with hacking, identity theft, and money laundering.<sup>45</sup> For counterterrorism cooperation in Syria, the lack of trust manifests itself more in concerns over intelligence-sharing and risks of counterintelligence threats.<sup>46</sup> Nuclear cooperation arms control agreements are marred by the legacy of alleged violations in previous strategic arms control agreements, most recently the INF Treaty. In the Arctic, despite China's supposedly peaceful intentions, it is potentially developing military capabilities that would allow it to operate in the region.<sup>47</sup> And in cyber, the United States points to several actions—ranging from the Russian interference in the 2016 American elections, and most recently China's alleged breach of Equifax and Russia's alleged involvement in the SolarWinds hack—as evidence that both China and Russia are actively supporting malign actors in this realm, if not conducting these attacks directly, and therefore cannot be trusted to play by the rules.<sup>48</sup>

By contrast, **audience costs** feature most prominently in nuclear and cyber issues, and to a lesser extent in transnational criminal issues. Nuclear arms treaties—and specifically the extension of New START—have been caught up in a wider political debate about U.S.-Russia and U.S.-China relations. Because China has made clear it will not participate in any nuclear agreement, any new arms control agreement would face U.S. domestic opposition both from Russia hawks (who are skeptical of Russia's compliance with arms control agreement in general) and China hawks.<sup>49</sup> Similarly, domestic political sensitivities exist about having China or Russia participate in counternarcotic or counter-transnational crime operations in Latin

<sup>44</sup> Aaron Bateman, "America Can Protect Its Satellites Without Kinetic Space Weapons?" *War on the Rocks*, July 30, 2020; Harrison, Johnson, and Roberts, 2019, pp. 11, 19–20.

<sup>45</sup> U.S. Department of Justice, "Members and Associates of Russian Crime Syndicate Arrested for Racketeering, Extortion, Robbery, Murder-for-Hire Conspiracy, Fraud, Narcotics, and Firearms Offenses," June 7, 2017a; U.S. Department of Justice, "U.S. Charges Russian GRU Officers with International Hacking and Related Influence and Disinformation Operations," October 4, 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Moscow's War in Syria*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, May 2020, p. 58.

<sup>47</sup> "China Mixing Military and Science in Arctic Push: Denmark," Reuters, November 29, 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Office of the Director for National Intelligence, *Background to 'Assessing Russian Activities and Intentions in Recent US Elections': The Analytic Process and Cyber Incident Attribution*, Washington, D.C., January 6, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Chinese Military Hackers Charged in Equifax Breach: Intrusion Affected Nearly Half of All Americans," February 10, 2020; Todd Haselton, "U.S. Feds Say Russians Likely Behind SolarWinds Hack that Breached Government Networks," CNBC, January 5, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> "Olga Oliker on Russia: Insights and Recommendations," *Russia Matters*, July 16, 2020; Dave Lawler, "Trump Could Take the Lid off the World's Largest Nuclear Stockpiles," *Axios*, April 30, 2020.

America, given the region's proximity to the United States.<sup>50</sup> Most of all, audience costs are a central obstacle to cooperation in the cyber domain, especially given the public attention—and anger—over Russian bots and interference in U.S. elections. Indeed, such proposals by the Trump administration generated significant congressional pushback.<sup>51</sup>

Perhaps more so than in other areas, global commons issues suffer from **definitional** obstacles. Although multinational agreements on countering transnational organized crime exist, such as the UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime (2003) signed and ratified by all three countries, these treaties lack specificity to enable their implementation.<sup>52</sup> All three powers are committed to counterterrorism in the abstract, but they disagree about which groups should qualify as violent extremist organizations. In contrast with American definitions, China treats much of its Uyghur Muslim population in Xinjiang as terrorists, and Russia labels all groups opposing the al-Assad regime, regardless of ideology, terrorists.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, all three powers believe in global stability, but they differ on what *stability* actually means and whether authoritarian states are, indeed, stable. Finally, all three powers believe that the air and maritime commons are a shared resource, but they disagree over what constitutes “commons” versus sovereign territory. Perhaps the most noticeable example here is the South China Sea, where China places the so called nine-dash line, which defines its territorial waters, differently than where the United States (and the other Southeast Asian nations) believe the line should be.<sup>54</sup>

**Third-party challenges** present another set of obstacles for several global commons issues. On nuclear issues, China's unwillingness to participate in arms control negotiations complicates U.S.-Russia cooperation, especially given that the United States views China as the greater long-term threat.<sup>55</sup> In the Arctic, multiple other countries—including close NATO allies such as Canada—are present in the Arctic Council and make any great power cooperation in the region a multinational affair.<sup>56</sup> Finally, in cyber, the third-party concerns come

<sup>50</sup> Kurt W. Tidd, “Posture Statement of Admiral Kurt W. Tidd, Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the 115th Congress Senate Armed Services Committee,” February 15, 2018.

<sup>51</sup> Dustin Volz, “No U.S.-Russia Cyber Unit Without Trump Notifying Congress, Bill Says,” Reuters, August 22, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Franca van der Laan, *Transnational Organised Crime: Thematic Study Clingendael Strategic Monitor 2017*, The Hague: Clingendael (Netherlands Institute of International Relations), February 2017.

<sup>53</sup> See Richard C. Baffa, Nathan Vest, Wing Yi Chan, and Abby Fanlo, *Defining and Understanding the Next Generation of Salafi-Jihadis*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-341-ODNI, 2019; Janine di Giovanni, “Why Assad and Russia Target the White Helmets,” *New York Review of Books*, October 16, 2018.

<sup>54</sup> See Chris Buckley, “Beijing Warns U.S. over Navy Patrol in South China Sea,” *New York Times*, August 11, 2017.

<sup>55</sup> The Trump Administration, for example, has explicitly made this argument. See James Anderson, “China's Arms Buildup Threatens the Nuclear Balance,” *New York Times*, July 29, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> For example, see Agence France-Presse, “Iceland Wants to Shield Arctic from Rising US-China Tensions: PM,” *South China Morning Post*, July 31, 2020.

more from the private-public divide. In the United States, 85 percent of all critical infrastructure is owned or operated by private entities, and protecting computer systems also falls mostly to the private sector.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, any cyber agreement—unlike more military-specific ones—needs to extend beyond just governments to private companies as well.

**Immediacy problems** are also an obstacle in global commons issues. Transnational crime and counterterrorism are lower national security priorities for all three countries than more hard power concerns. While this creates opportunities for policy overlap, global commons issues also lack the immediacy of more pressing concerns. Arms control agreements, by contrast, can be core security concerns, but because nuclear arms races are protracted affairs and counterproliferation negotiations are highly technical, agreements can drag on for years—without a forcing function to come to an agreement.

**Issue linkage** becomes an obstacle when global commons come to be viewed through the lens of sovereignty and national security concerns. China uses counterterrorism and the promotion of global stability as pretense to sell authoritarian countries surveillance tools to centralize their control and expand the PRC's sphere of influence, and Russia uses counterterrorism and the promotion of global stability as an excuse to push against American presence in Syria in particular and in the Middle East more generally.<sup>58</sup> Issue linkage also becomes an obstacle to cooperation when the objective may be shared, but the skills developed from performing that mission are strategically sensitive. For example, some analysts speculate that China's decision to send the PLA Navy to combat Somali piracy (theoretically a shared international interest in a strategically less sensitive part of the world) is, in fact, little more than an opportunity for China to enhance its own power projection capabilities under the cover of contributing to global peace and stability.<sup>59</sup> A similar argument can be made about China's supposedly scientific exploration missions in the Arctic. While all powers support scientific cooperation in the region, some observers see China's missions as a military effort in disguise.<sup>60</sup>

In some cases, there are **legal obstacles** that inhibit cooperation. In space, for example, the Wolf Amendment prohibits government funding for NASA, the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy (OSTP), or the National Space Council being used to collaborate

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<sup>57</sup> U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "Critical Infrastructure Protection, Information Sharing and Cyber Security," undated.

<sup>58</sup> Steven Feldstein, *The Global Expansion of AI Surveillance*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, September 2019; Dmitry Peskov, quoted in "Withdrawal of Foreign Troops Stationed in Syria Illegitimately Is Priority, Says Kremlin," TASS, October 24, 2019.

<sup>59</sup> Ankit Panda, "China Dispatches New Naval Fleet for Gulf of Aden Escort Mission," *The Diplomat*, December 11, 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Office of the Secretary of Defense, *Military and Security Developments Involving the People's Republic of China 2019*, Washington, D.C., May 2019; Anne-Marie Brady, "Facing Up to China's Military Interests in the Arctic," *China Brief*, Vol. 19, No. 21, December 10, 2019.

with China or Chinese-owned companies without prior certification from the FBI.<sup>61</sup> With respect to countering transnational crime, the mutual legal assistance agreement between the United States and Russia still prevents cooperation in cases where a request for mutual assistance would interfere with the security or other essential interests of the requested party, and it also does not explicitly include “political offenses.”<sup>62</sup> As regards global security and countering violent extremist organizations, in response to Russia’s actions in Ukraine in 2014, Section 1241 of the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2015 restricted DoD from cooperating with Russia through military coordination on Syria.<sup>63</sup> And on cyber, Congress included in the Intelligence Authorization Act a provision in 2017 that requires prior notification of any joint U.S.-Russia cyber unit.<sup>64</sup> Finally, although neither China nor Russia are bound by legal constraints in the same way the United States is, the authoritarian nature of both regimes prevents cooperation in some cases. For example, on the transnational crime front, the United States, China, and Russia do not have extradition treaties with each other, and the United States recently suspended its treaty with Hong Kong after China’s passage of a National Security Law in that city.<sup>65</sup>

Finally, there are **capability, capacity, and structural constraints**. In some cases, a country may feel like it is falling behind in a certain area and believe that signing on to an international agreement would only lead to them falling further behind. For example, China and Russia likely view the proliferation and success of American and Western commercial space entities such as SpaceX, Blue Origin, and Virgin Galactic as threatening to their national security and international standing.<sup>66</sup> By contrast, the United States is already disadvantaged in the Arctic, at least compared with Russia. Indeed, the unclassified *2019 Department of Defense Arctic Strategy* makes several references to unspecified “capability gaps” in the region and commits the United States to closing them.<sup>67</sup>

In other cases, cooperation proves difficult because the bureaucratic structures are not set up to encourage cooperation. For example, countering transnational organized crime—

<sup>61</sup> Makena Young, “Bad Idea: The Wolf Amendment (Limiting Collaboration with China in Space),” *Defense* 360, December 4, 2019.

<sup>62</sup> Jennifer K. Elsea, *Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty with the Russian Federation: A Sketch*, Washington, D.C.: Congressional Research Service, LSB10176, July 24, 2018.

<sup>63</sup> Public Law 113-291, Title XII, Matters Relating to Foreign Nations, Sec. 1241, Limitation on Military Cooperation Between the United States and the Russian Federation, December 19, 2014. All subsequent NDAAAs through FY 2020 has renewed the restriction on bilateral military-military cooperation between the United States and Russia.

<sup>64</sup> Volz, 2017.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel S. Goldman, “Russian Indictment and Extradition,” American Constitution Society, February 28, 2018; Robbie Gramer and Darcy Palder, “U.S. Preparing to Suspend Extradition Treaty With Hong Kong,” *Foreign Policy*, July 13, 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, Todd Harrison, February 23, 2020.

<sup>67</sup> DoD, 2019, pp. 8, 9; Congressional Research Service, *Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress*, Washington, D.C., R41153, August 20, 2020b.

disrupting and dismantling networks responsible for criminal activity, as opposed to simply stopping the flow of narcotics, which DoD has assisted in for decades—is still a relatively new mission for DoD, appearing for the first time in the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act.<sup>68</sup> In other cases, the mission is old but revolves around military structures built for warfighting rather than cooperation. For example, four different task forces have participated in Somali counterpiracy missions—Operation Atlanta under the European Union; Operation Allied Protector and, later, Operation Ocean Shield under NATO; and Combined Task Force 150 (dedicated to the Global War on Terrorism) and 151 (dedicated to counterpiracy in particular)—but none were designed to cooperate with Russia or China.<sup>69</sup>

All in all, a similarly diverse array of obstacles prevents cooperation on global commons issues as in the other areas (see Table 3.3).

**TABLE 3.3**  
**Obstacles to Cooperation in the Global Commons**

| Issue Area                                                | Trust | Audience Costs | Definitional Problems | Third-Party Problems | Immediacy Problem | Issue Linkage | Legal Constraints | Capacity/Capability/Structural |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------|----------------|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|---------------|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| Maintaining freedom of access to space                    | ✓     |                |                       |                      |                   |               | ✓                 | ✓                              |
| Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks | ✓     | ✓              | ✓                     |                      | ✓                 |               | ✓                 | ✓                              |
| Countering violent extremist organizations                | ✓     |                | ✓                     |                      | ✓                 | ✓             | ✓                 |                                |
| Promoting global stability                                |       |                | ✓                     |                      |                   | ✓             | ✓                 |                                |
| Preserving access to the air and maritime commons         |       |                | ✓                     |                      |                   | ✓             |                   | ✓                              |
| Preventing nuclear arms races                             | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    | ✓                 |               |                   |                                |
| Preventing militarization of the Arctic                   | ✓     |                | ✓                     | ✓                    |                   | ✓             |                   | ✓                              |
| Maintaining the openness of cyberspace                    | ✓     | ✓              |                       | ✓                    |                   |               | ✓                 |                                |

NOTE: A check mark indicates that the obstacle is present.

<sup>68</sup> Angel Rabasa, Christopher M. Schnaubelt, Peter Chalk, Douglas Farah, Gregory Midgette, and Howard J. Shatz, *Counternetwork: Countering the Expansion of Transnational Criminal Networks*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1481-A, 2017.

<sup>69</sup> Neil Melvin, “The Foreign Military Presence in the Horn of Africa Region,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2019.

## The Obstacles to Cooperation Are Significant and Growing

Across all the Indo-Pacific, Europe, Middle East, and global commons issues, there are multiple, significant obstacles to cooperation that need to be overcome. The question becomes: How insuperable are these obstacles? Are they merely a speed bump or are they a roadblock 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 immediacy problem is, perhaps, the easiest for a country to fix, since it simply requires the leadership to make a given issue a priority. Legal restraints and capability, capacity, and structural constraints can be overcome 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 still lie within the realm of the feasible. Issue linkage and definitional problems, presumably, can be resolved through negotiation and by narrowing the scope of the issues at hand. Audience costs and third-party problems may be on the more difficult end of the spectrum to resolve, since they require a country's leaders to get buy-in from external constituencies, either domestically or abroad. Still, politicians and diplomats spend careers building support for policies.

Perhaps the most difficult obstacle to overcome is lack of trust. Distrust is, in some ways, the most amorphous of the obstacles, because it revolves around perceptions of an adversary. Partly because distrust is amorphous, it may also not be issue-specific. Distrust in one area may color perceptions of an actor in others. It is easy to lose trust (e.g., by breaching an existing agreement) and hard to regain it. Even though there are confidence-building measures, behavior needs to be repeated over time in order to regain confidence that one side will live up to its end of the bargain.

As mentioned previously, however, trust arguably serves as the bedrock to overcoming many of the other obstacles. After all, how can one successfully sell the merits of cooperation to more hawkish constituencies at home or external parties abroad if one does not actually believe that the other side will fully commit to the bargain? As noted in Tables 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3, trust problems exist across practically every issue area analyzed here. This poses a significant challenge for cooperation today: distrust is the most difficult obstacle to overcome, but doing so is a prerequisite for reducing other obstacles. Even if we can partially mitigate distrust through verification mechanisms, the nagging suspicion that that other party is shirking their side of the agreement may eventually erode cooperation of the long term.

Moreover, the distrust obstacle is growing. American views of China have been steadily trending down. In Pew surveys since 2005, Americans with a favorable view of China peaked in 2006 at a bare majority (52 percent) and plummeted to 26 percent in 2020.<sup>70</sup> Americans' confidence in Xi Jinping was never particularly high, but it has also collapsed, from 58 per-

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<sup>70</sup> Kat Devlin, Laura Silver, and Christine Huang, "U.S. Views of China Increasingly Negative Amid Coronavirus Outbreak," Pew Research Center, April 21, 2020.

cent expressing no confidence that he will “do the right thing regarding world affairs” in 2013 to 71 percent in 2020.<sup>71</sup> Gallup polling presents only a somewhat more positive picture. Americans’ views of China had been trending positive for most of the post–Cold War period, peaking at 53 percent favorability rating in 2018, but they nosedived even before the COVID-19 pandemic exploded, and by February 2020 only 33 percent of Americans held a favorable view of China (with 67 percent negative).<sup>72</sup>

Likewise, American views of Russia and Russians’ views of the United States were never particularly favorable, and over the years they have only worsened. Since the Pew Research Center began surveying in 2007, Americans with favorable views of Russia peaked in 2010 and 2011 at 49 percent and have since plummeted to a mere 18 percent in 2019.<sup>73</sup> Pew’s surveys of Russian opinions of the United States—which date to 2003—paint a similar story. Positive views peaked in 2010 at 57 percent and have since trended down to 29 percent in 2019.<sup>74</sup> Gallup polling confirms these general trends. In polling dating back to 1989, Americans with an unfavorable view of Russia have trended upward from 29 percent at the end of the Cold War to 72 percent in 2020.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, Americans’ views of Russia as unfriendly and an enemy have likewise grown in Gallup surveys, from a low of 16 and 4 percent respectively in 2006 to 37 and 29 percent today.<sup>76</sup>

International institutions should be one way to mitigate this lack of trust, but, thus far, they have not mitigated the effects of the growing trust deficit. At least in theory, international institutions should provide the transparency and repeated interactions necessary to increase Axelrod’s “shadow of the future.” While there are international institutions in place to perform these tasks, so far, there is little sign that they have been successful at mitigating the growing trust gap. On the contrary, there are at least as many examples of the reverse—that is, of great power tensions bleeding into international institutions—such as in composition of the Arctic Council or suspension of the NATO-Russia Council.

In other words, not only are the obstacles significant, they are growing. 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 that much more difficult and less likely.

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<sup>71</sup> Devlin, Silver, and Huang, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Gallup, “China,” undated-a.

<sup>73</sup> Christine Huang and Jeremiah Cha, “Russia and Putin Receive Low Ratings Globally,” Pew Research Center, February 7, 2020.

<sup>74</sup> Huang and Cha, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Gallup “Russia,” undated-b.

<sup>76</sup> Gallup, undated-b.



## Second-Order Effects: Few Wedges, Mixed Externalities

Assuming for the moment that, despite the narrow trade space and significant obstacles, the United States could cooperate with China and/or Russia on some of these areas, what would be the second-order effects of doing so? All international cooperation—with friends as well as with competitors—can produce downstream ripple effects. Great power cooperation, in particular, could have two types of second-order effects. First, cooperation with China or Russia could affect the United States' relationship with that country. As mentioned in Chapter Two, one of the potential reasons for cooperating with either China or Russia could be to increase the pressure on the other. Second, great power cooperation could affect the United States' relations with other countries for better or for worse, as they see the United States' actions as either reducing regional tensions or as abandoning them to a hostile power. In this chapter, we explore these second-order consequences of cooperation. Ultimately, we find that there are relatively few “wedge” issues—those where the United States could play Russia off China or vice versa—and that cooperation, in general, is not always net-positive. Indeed, in many cases, cooperation could produce as many negative side effects as it does positive ones and hurt as many allies and partners as it helps.

### Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific

As discussed in Chapter Two, there are relatively few areas for meaningful cooperation between the United States, China, and Russia in the Indo-Pacific. Few of these are wedge issues. And of the others, many generate as many negative externalities as they do positive ones. (See Table 4.1.)

#### Impact on the Other Power

Perhaps the most obvious area where the United States could try to play Russia off China is Russian arms sales in the Indo-Pacific. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Russia has been an important arms supplier to many countries in the Indo-Pacific, particularly those who had friendly—if officially nonaligned—relationships with the Soviet Union: strategically important countries such as India and Vietnam that today remain top importers of Russia military

TABLE 4.1

**Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific**

| Issue Area                                                                             | Impact of Cooperating with One Power on the Relations with the Other                                                                                                                    | Positive Externalities                                                            | Negative Externalities                                                                                                                                                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                         | Meaningful opportunities to cooperate do not appear to exist                                                                                                                            | Not applicable                                                                    | Risk of undermining allied confidence by spurring image of great power condominium                                                                                                             |
| Promoting and preserving regional alliance                                             | Meaningful opportunities to cooperate do not appear to exist                                                                                                                            | Not applicable                                                                    | Risk of undermining allied confidence by spurring image of great power condominium                                                                                                             |
| Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam                  | CAATSA waivers might introduce tensions in Sino-Russo relations by spurring sales of Russian arms to region that would most likely be used against China                                | Might help strengthen these countries' relationships with other U.S. allies       | Undercuts U.S. pressure on Russia, suggests U.S. sanctions not a matter of principles just politics, undercuts U.S. arms sales and interoperability, and potentially expands Russian influence |
| Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan                             | Meaningful opportunities to cooperate do not appear to exist                                                                                                                            | Not applicable                                                                    | Not applicable                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea                                          | Meaningful opportunities to achieve complete denuclearization do not appear to exist, but there may be some limited room for cooperation on managing the consequences of a nuclear DPRK | Cooperation if successful would benefit other nonproliferation efforts            | Risks of technology transfer, if the United States and China were to cooperate on countering weapons of mass destruction                                                                       |
| Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan, and Southeast Asia | Meaningful opportunities to cooperate do not appear to exist                                                                                                                            | Might marginally facilitate U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan (though highly unlikely) | Could taint U.S. policy by association with PRC genocide against Uyghurs, Russian human rights abuses in Caucasus                                                                              |
| India's regional role and strategic orientation                                        | CAATSA waivers might introduce tensions in Sino-Russo relations by spurring sales of Russian arms to region that would most likely be used against China                                | Might help strengthen India's relationship with other U.S. allies                 | Undercuts U.S. pressure on Russia, suggests U.S. sanctions not a matter of principles just politics                                                                                            |

equipment.<sup>1</sup> And while these countries want these weapons to counter other threats as well (e.g., India also has concerns about Pakistan), much of the demand comes from a desire to counter an increasingly aggressive China. Tellingly, India pushed Russia to expedite its delivery of its S-400 air defense system in the aftermath of one of its worst border clashes with China in June 2020 and sought assurances that Moscow would not delay delivery of spare parts for India's T-90S tanks, *Kilo*-class submarines, and fighter aircraft during the crisis—indicators of how important Russian arms sales are for India's security vis-à-vis China.<sup>2</sup>

The United States certainly could cooperate with Russia if it so chooses by waiving CAATSA sanctions on Russian arms sales to India, Vietnam, Indonesia, and others. These countries, after all, want to buy these weapons of their own accord. The United States has waived these sanctions in the past for strategic reasons, so it could choose to do so again in the future.<sup>3</sup>

Whether the United States wants to play this card, however, and, if so, for how long and to what end, are separate questions. One effect of the CAATSA sanctions is to pressure India, Vietnam, and others to wean themselves off of their dependency on Russian equipment. But doing so would almost certainly be an expensive proposition for those countries, and so waiving the sanctions and allowing them to upgrade their existing Russian military equipment is probably the more cost-effective option for helping make them more militarily capable of countering pressure from China, at least in the short term. That said, waiving CAATSA to allow for these purchases risks letting Russia off the hook for its aggression in Europe. Moreover, it is an open question whether allowing these sales will make these countries more militarily capable vis-à-vis China. The PRC, after all, buys Russian military equipment as well, giving it firsthand knowledge about the vulnerabilities of these systems. As a case in point, Russia reportedly suspended its delivery of the S-400 to China—Moscow's first foreign buyer of the missile defense system—and some experts assess the reason may be Moscow's concerns about Chinese expropriation of Russian military intelligence and defense trade secrets.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond potentially waiving CAATSA sanctions on Russian arms sales, however, there are few other prospective wedge issues in the Indo-Pacific. As noted in Chapter Two, China and Russia largely share a skepticism of the free and open Indo-Pacific strategy, American alliances in the region, and American outreach to new partners in the region. If the United States were to cooperate with one power to avoid accidental military conflict, it would not directly affect the other's interests much. In other cases, such as cross-Strait relations, Russia simply does not have much of voice on the issue one way or the other. Finally, on a few issues—such as North Korean denuclearization and countering terrorism and violent extremist organiza-

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<sup>1</sup> Wezeman et al., 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Rajagopalan, 2020; Sudhi Ranjan Sen and Henry Meyer, "India Urgently Seeks Russian Missile System After Military Clash With China," *Bloomberg News*, June 23, 2020.

<sup>3</sup> "U.S. to Exempt India, Indonesia, and Vietnam from CAATSA Sanctions," 2018; Greenlees, 2019; Stratfor, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Frank Chen, "Russia May Be Withholding Missile Deliveries to China," *Asia Times*, July 29, 2020.

tions in the Indo-Pacific—all three powers largely agree about the end goal, though not the ways to get there. And while one could imagine Chinese and Russian interests bumping up against each other in Central Asia and other places where both powers are competing for influence, such as Afghanistan, for the moment, whatever rifts there are between the two powers are overshadowed by their common interest in countering American influence.<sup>5</sup>

## Positive Externalities

Given that the prospects for cooperation with China or Russia in the Indo-Pacific are narrow, the positive externalities generated from such limited cooperation are similarly slim. If the United States could convince China or Russia to play a larger role in keeping Afghanistan from once again becoming a haven for international terrorism, the United States could conceivably extricate itself from that nearly two-decades-long conflict. In an ideal world, this could even be part of a cost-imposing strategy on China and Russia, if both powers assume more of the burden for countering terrorism and violent extremist organizations in this part of the world. That said, as discussed in Chapter Two, it remains very much uncertain whether China or Russia could be persuaded to assume this mantle.

Similarly, if the United States succeeded in making India (or, to a lesser extent, some other Indo-Pacific partners, such as Vietnam or Indonesia) a more powerful counterweight to China, that would presumably benefit the United States' other allies in the region. Most directly, U.S. allies Japan and Australia, the two other members of the Quadrilateral Dialogue group, stand to benefit substantially if U.S.-India defense and security cooperation deepens, enabling their own ties with New Delhi to advance and broadening the coalition of status quo-oriented countries that seek to resist Chinese revisionism.<sup>6</sup> So too might South Korea, which has extensive and growing ties with India. Some experts have suggested the Republic of Korea should be the next ally with which the United States seeks to establish a trilateral partnership forum with India.<sup>7</sup>

Another area with significant positive externalities is North Korean denuclearization. Cooperation with China and Russia, if it were to lead to a denuclearized North Korea, could potentially be a boon for nonproliferation efforts at large. North Korea has been directly implicated in exporting nuclear technology, including helping Syria build a nuclear reactor

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<sup>5</sup> Philip Caruso, "COVID-19 Heats Up the New Great Game in Central Asia," *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Scott W. Harold, Tanvi Madan, and Natalie Sambhi, *U.S.-Japan Alliance Conference: Regional Perspectives on the Quadrilateral Dialogue and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CF-414-GOJ, 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Scott W. Harold, Derek Grossman, Brian Harding, Jeffrey W. Hornung, Gregory Poling, Jeffrey Smith, and Meagan L. Smith, *The Thickening Web of Asian Security Cooperation: Deepening Defense Ties Among U.S. Allies and Partners in the Indo-Pacific*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-3125-MCF, 2019; Skand R. Tayal, *India and the Republic of Korea: Engaged Democracies*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2014; Linda Butcher, "Building a U.S.-Korea-India Trilateral Dialogue," Korea Economic Institute, September 10, 2015.

before a 2007 Israeli air raid destroyed the facility.<sup>8</sup> Even if these efforts fail to fully denuclearize North Korea, however, if the United States, China, Russia, and presumably other members of the international community punished North Korea for its actions, it would arguably send more powerful signals to other states who might be considering developing nuclear weapons about the consequences of doing so.

Finally, there is a general positive externality that comes with any tactical cooperation with China or Russia that avoids accidental escalation and conflict. In almost any conceivable conflict in the Indo-Pacific, American allies and partners would bear the brunt of the costs of a clash, since China and/or Russia would presumably target the countries that host American bases. Consequently, American allies would also benefit from any additional mechanisms that could help to deescalate tensions before they become full-on shooting wars.

## Negative Spill Externalities

At the same time, cooperation in the Indo-Pacific also generates a series of negative externalities that need to factor in the equation. As already mentioned, any relief on CAATSA comes at the direct cost of relieving pressure on Russia and granting it a freer hand—or at least more resources—to challenge American interests in Europe and the Middle East. Encouraging Russian arms sales to the region might also complicate military interoperability with the United States. It could also lead some of these countries to reject more American defense initiatives, especially if Russia uses its newfound leverage as an arms supplier to try to undermine these proposals.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, as previously noted, cooperation with China and Russia in Afghanistan risks rubber-stamping both countries' brutal approach to countering terrorism and violent extremist organizations and likely abandoning American democracy-promotion efforts in the country, especially if such cooperation came with a reduction of American forces in the country.

There are, however, perhaps less immediately noticeable negative externalities from cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. For instance, some scholars suggest that the United States should work with China to help secure, disarm, and dispose of North Korean weapons of mass destruction in the event of regime collapse.<sup>10</sup> Such cooperation—if it occurred—would obviously help the United States and China solve a shared problem (preventing loose nuclear weapons) and save the United States from undertaking the task unilaterally, which might unnerve China, given the proximity of these sites to the border. Consequently, a recent

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<sup>8</sup> Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, "Inside Israel's Secret Raid on Syria's Nuclear Reactor," *Politico*, March 20, 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Already, the United States faces skepticism over proposals to forward base intermediate range missiles in the region, for example. If Russia chooses to try to condition arm sales on rejecting such propositions, then partners' reluctance to these proposal may increase. See David S. Cloud, "U.S. Seeks to House Missiles in the Pacific. Some Allies Don't Want Them," *Los Angeles Times*, June 10, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Oriana Skylar Mastro, "Conflict and Chaos on the Korean Peninsula: Can China's Military Help Secure North Korea's Nuclear Weapons?" *International Security*, Vol. 43, No. 2, Fall 2018.

RAND analysis concluded that because “China’s significant interests in North Korea raise the risks that misperception or inadvertent contact between forces could lead to escalation,” “the United States should accelerate discussions with China on this scenario.”<sup>11</sup> Such cooperation, however, might not be easy to secure and might carry a fair degree of operational security risk. Finding and disarming nuclear materials is a highly sensitive area of national security, and cooperating with China in this domain would presumably involve some amount of knowledge transfer to China.

Beyond these tactical and operation risks, however, any cooperation with China and Russia to make competition “safer”—in terms of preventing tension from escalating into conflict—runs the risk of creating the impression that United States is more concerned about avoiding potential conflicts rather than fulfilling its alliance agreements. If so, then this form of tactical cooperation comes with the broader strategic externality of cheapening the strength of alliances and the American deterrent.

## Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East

As with the Indo-Pacific, cooperation in Europe and the Middle East also offers few true wedge issues. China simply is not that invested in most European security matters to make them a useful point of leverage for the United States to wield versus Russia or vice versa. By contrast, in the Middle East, in many cases, Russia or China can free-ride off cooperation with the other power. And as in the Indo-Pacific, cooperation generates both positive and negative externalities (Table 4.2), such that it is not always clear to what extent cooperation—even if it were possible—should be considered a net win for American interests.

### Effect on the Other Power

As noted in Chapter Two, potential cooperation on European security is a one-sided affair. For the most part, China has very little at stake in most European security issues. This relative lack of interest not only makes U.S.-China cooperation on European security issues unlikely, but it also limits the impact of any potential U.S.-Russia cooperation on any European security matter on China. If the United States cooperated with Russia to deescalate tensions in the Baltics, the Balkans, Turkey, or Ukraine or over the broader Euro-Atlantic security architecture, it is hard to see how it would directly affect Chinese interests, and such cooperation might even benefit China, if the agreement results in making these places better for Chinese business interests.

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<sup>11</sup> Michael J. Mazarr, Gian Gentile, Dan Madden, Stacie L. Pettyjohn, and Yvonne K. Crane, *The Korean Peninsula: Three Dangerous Scenarios*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-262-A, 2018b, p. 19.

TABLE 4.2

**Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in Europe and the Middle East**

| Issue Area                                       | Impact of Cooperating with One Power on the Relations with the Other                                                                  | Positive Externalities                                                                                                                                                                                                           | Negative Externalities                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Broader Euro-Atlantic security                   | Europe-focused post-INF agreement could prompt China's displeasure                                                                    | Modest progress on managing risk of conflict is most plausible starting step to ease tensions and build trust.<br><br>U.S. participation in some confidence- and security-building measures (CSBMs) creates benefits for allies. | Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through conventional arms control (CAC), CSMBs, deconfliction, and deterrence                                                                                                             |
| Baltic security                                  | None                                                                                                                                  | Modest progress on managing risk of conflict is most plausible starting steps to ease tensions and build trust                                                                                                                   | Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through CAC, CSMBs, deconfliction, and deterrence                                                                                                                                         |
| Balkan security and strategic orientation        | Kosovo recognition could irritate China                                                                                               | Successful cooperation can contribute to easing U.S.-Russia tensions                                                                                                                                                             | Kosovo recognition likely to be exploited by Russia to maintain influence in Balkans, legitimize Crimea annexation                                                                                                                     |
| Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation | Increased U.S.-Turkey-Russia cooperation may irritate China                                                                           | NATO-Russia deconfliction measures may also reduce risk of escalation between NATO members in Eastern Mediterranean Sea                                                                                                          | Trade-offs between lowering risk of conflict through CAC, CSMBs, deconfliction, and deterrence                                                                                                                                         |
| The future of Ukraine                            | None                                                                                                                                  | Progress on Ukraine likely to have disperse positive effects, as this crisis is at root of the downturn in U.S./West-Russia relations                                                                                            | Any compromise with Russia may seem to legitimate its claims to Crimea and sphere of influence in post-Soviet space.                                                                                                                   |
| Middle east stability and peace processes        | Cooperation with Russia on Syrian reconstruction may benefit Chinese economic interests, may increase Sino-Russo economic competition | Broader regional security gains from conflict resolution in Syria, progress on Israeli-Palestinian peace process.                                                                                                                | Cooperation with Russia on Syria may legitimize its support for bloody Assad regime.<br><br>Cooperation with Russia or China on any issue may further entrench their regional influence, to detriment of U.S. interests down the line. |
| Countering Iran and its proxies                  | None                                                                                                                                  | Broader regional security gains from limiting Iran, including for key U.S. allies such as Israel                                                                                                                                 | Cooperation with Russia or China on any issue may further entrench their regional influence, to detriment of U.S. interests down the line                                                                                              |

To the extent that China would be affected by U.S.-Russia cooperation on European security affairs, it would be indirectly, in three principle ways. First, in general, China stands to lose from any reduction in tension in Europe that could potentially allow the United States and other NATO allies to redirect forces to the Pacific and against China. Conventional arms control measures—as part of an effort to deescalate tensions between Russia and the West—would free up those military assets to be directed against China. Similarly, although China was not part to the INF Treaty, the United States’ withdrawal from the treaty arguably hurt China, because it freed the United States to potentially develop and field these weapons in the Indo-Pacific. Reinstating a revised treaty—that prohibited fielding these weapons in Europe but not elsewhere—could also harm China. As a RAND expert recently testified, “If it were possible to come to a bilateral agreement banning INF missiles in Europe, China certainly would not be pleased, because that would leave no restrictions on future U.S. (or Russian) deployments in Asia.”<sup>12</sup>

Second, and somewhat more unlikely, China’s ability to develop military capabilities could be affected by any U.S.-Russia cooperation. As mentioned in Chapter Two, Ukraine supplies China with weaponry, and the United States has leveraged Ukraine’s dependence on American security guarantees to block arms sales—including sensitive equipment, such as airplane engines—to China.<sup>13</sup> Presumably, if the United States, Russia, and Ukraine reached some sort of lasting settlement, Ukraine’s dependence on American security guarantees would diminish, and China would have a freer hand to buy Ukrainian weapons. Similarly, China has a budding military relationship with Turkey, fostered in part by Turkey being on the outs with both its NATO allies and Russia at alternating points in time.<sup>14</sup> Presumably, if Turkey shifted more into either the United States’ and NATO or Russia’s camp, Turkey would need Chinese support less.

Finally, in some cases, U.S.-Russia cooperation could set a dangerous precedent for China in other parts of the globe. If the United States and Russia—along with other countries of the region—could negotiate a deal whereby Serbia recognized Kosovo’s independence in the Balkans, it presumably could set a precedent for other breakaway regions in the world, including places that China cares a lot about—such as Xinjiang, Tibet, Hong Kong, or Taiwan.

By contrast, cooperation in the Middle East would be a little more even-handed, in the sense that the United States could cooperate with either Russia or China on countering Iranian influence or promoting Middle East peace processes. On the first goal, if the United States was to work bilaterally with Russia on rolling back Iranian influence in Syria or curbing arms sales to Iran, or with China on economic sanctions against Iran, it is hard to see how it would have much of an effect on the other great power, apart from Iran possibly becoming

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<sup>12</sup> Samuel Charap, *The Demise of the INF: Implications for Russia-China Relations*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, CT-507, 2019.

<sup>13</sup> Chan, 2015; Forrest, 2019; “Ukraine Court Rejects Chinese Appeal in Aerospace Deal Opposed by United States,” 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Wolf, 2010; Meick, 2013.

more dependent on the patronage of that power. On the most macro level, Iran relies on its relationship with China and Russia, and a deterioration with its relationship with one might lead Iran to strengthen its ties to the other. That said, given that the likely U.S.-Russia or U.S.-China cooperation on Iran would be limited and tactical in nature, it is unlikely that that cooperation alone would force much of a shift in the relationship.

Middle East peace processes, by contrast, present a more symbiotic great power cooperation dynamic. To the extent that U.S.-Russia security cooperation can help stabilize the region and thereby allow China to tap Middle Eastern energy and enable its other economic ventures in the region, U.S.-Russia security cooperation in the Middle East would probably be a *de facto* win for China. Conversely, to the extent the United States and China could cooperate over economic investment and reconstruction, it could be a net win for Russia if more Middle Eastern countries have the resources to purchase Russian weaponry. After all, the Middle East presents a lucrative and growing arms market, increasing its share of global arms imports from 20 to 35 percent between 2013 and 2018, and it is the second-largest region for arms purchases in the world after the Indo-Pacific.<sup>15</sup> Russia has actively marketed high-end Russian military equipment—such as the S-400—to many Middle Eastern states, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq.<sup>16</sup>

Of course, cooperation among great power rivals is not completely win-win. U.S.-Russia cooperation on regional security issues in the Middle East might limit Chinese influence in the long run. And Chinese investment in the region might not lead to a boost to Russian arms sales. Indeed, China itself has tried to move into the Middle Eastern arms market, particularly on the lower end of the spectrum, selling tactical unmanned aerial vehicles to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Iraq, when they were unable to procure such platforms from the United States.<sup>17</sup> Still, for the most part, China and Russia's interests are not in conflict in the region.

Looking across the range of issues in Europe and the Middle East, then, there are relatively few opportunities for the United States to cooperate with one power to squeeze the other. On European security issues, China does not have much at stake. And in the Middle East, China and Russia's interests are, for the most part, compatible.

## Positive Externalities

Successful cooperation between the United States and Europe could produce a series of benefits for American allies and partners. By dint of geography, any conflict in Europe between the United States and Russia would inflict as much, or more, damage on the United States' European allies than on U.S. forces. Even if the European ally in question was not in a front-

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<sup>15</sup> "The Battle for the Middle Eastern Arms Market is Heating Up," *The Economist*, February 13, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Rumer, 2019, p. 28; Charles Forrester, "Iraq Moves Towards S-400 Acquisition," *Jane's*, April 21, 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, data files on UAV arms transfers to Middle Eastern countries, 2020.

line region at risk of direct invasion (e.g., the Baltics), Russia could—and presumably would—target American military bases, even in Western Europe.<sup>18</sup> In the most extreme cases, Russia could even employ nuclear weapons.<sup>19</sup> As such, any agreement between the two powers to mitigate friction and reduce the risk of accidental war is a good thing for all concerned. Moreover, presumably the United States would push to include NATO allies in any deconfliction mechanism. And, partly because Russia views the United States as the primary threat, any reduction in tensions between the two may allow for more cooperation between Europe and Russia.

Beyond these general benefits, however, European allies sometimes offer very specific benefits to U.S.-Russia cooperation. Most directly, Ukraine could arguably directly benefit, if the United States and Russia brokered a lasting peace. In other cases, other European allies can piggyback off U.S.-Russia cooperation. For example, the United States' European allies arguably gain as much, or more, from the overflight reconnaissance rights granted under the Open Skies Treaty as the United States does, especially because these allies lack the same space-based reconnaissance capabilities and so are more dependent on these flights.<sup>20</sup> If the United States withdrew from the treaty, Russia might also limit these benefits to European allies.

In the Middle East, the positive externalities are, if anything, more acute. Multiple Sunni Arab countries, most notably Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, and Israel likely would welcome any attempt to curb Iranian nuclear ambitions and roll back its influence in the region as a net gain for their security, given the historical animosity between these powers and Iran. For example, any U.S.-Russia cooperation to control Iran or its proxies, such as Lebanese Hezbollah in Syria, would likely be seen by Israel as mitigating a potentially mortal threat to its existence, and also as minimizing the chances that Israel could inadvertently be drawn into an unwanted conflict with Russia.<sup>21</sup> After all, in 2018, Russia blamed Israel when the Syrian regime accidentally shot down a Russian reconnaissance plane during an Israeli airstrike on Iranian and Lebanese positions in Syria.<sup>22</sup> Should U.S.-Russia-China cooperation accomplish the same objective, such sticky situations could be avoided in the future.

In terms of stabilizing the Middle East, there are a similar set of positive externalities. In some peace processes, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, one or more sides might welcome Russia's or China's participation in addition to the United States', because the latter is not viewed as viewed as an honest broker. In other cases, such as the Syrian civil war, the coun-

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<sup>18</sup> Scott Boston and Dara Massicot, *The Russian Way of Warfare: A Primer*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, PE-231-A, 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Boston and Massicot, 2017, pp. 5–6.

<sup>20</sup> Steven Pifer, "Is This the End of the Open Skies Treaty?" *National Interest*, March 7, 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Judah Ari Gross, "Gantz Tours North, Hears Threats Assessment From IDF, Meets Local Mayors," *Times of Israel*, June 2, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> "Russia Blames Israel After Military Plane Shot Down off Syria," BBC, September 18, 2018.

tries might welcome Russian and Chinese involvement if their involvement is viewed as the most expedient option to ending a long-standing conflict and starting reconstruction.

## Negative Externalities

At the same time, cooperation with Russia and China in Europe and the Middle East comes with drawbacks, as well. Any cooperation—even if it were intended to reduce tension—could be perceived by American allies as appeasement and abandonment, particularly if it involves reducing or limiting American military presence in a region. Indeed, many of the countries most likely to be the subject of U.S.-Russia cooperation (or deescalation/confidence-building measures) are also likely to be some of those most concerned about the prospect of the United States deserting them at a time of crisis. The Baltic countries are geographically highly vulnerable to Russian aggression.<sup>23</sup> Montenegro is a new NATO member and the previous target of a Russian coup d'état.<sup>24</sup> And Ukraine has been at war with Russia since 2014 and, as a non-NATO member, does not have any formal alliance to guarantee its security. Even beyond these countries, their neighbors—such as Poland, Romania, and Bulgaria, each of which has its own historical experiences with Russian aggression—might view any U.S.-Russia cooperation in the Baltics or Turkey/the Black Sea as potentially detrimental to their security.

And then there is the substance of the cooperation. Whether it is a deal over the status of eastern Ukraine or an agreement on the status of Kosovo in the Balkans, it will almost certainly leave unhappy parties. Whether Crimea and the Donbass are part of Russia or Ukraine are zero-sum issues. Anything less than full recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty and territorial integrity would displease Kosovo; anything less than fully reclaiming Kosovo as part of Serbia would displease at least some sectors of society in Serbia.

The Middle East, similarly, poses trade-offs. Like in Europe, whether the United States' allies and partners in the Middle East would view great power cooperation on regional stability and peace processes favorably depends largely on what form that cooperation takes. Even cooperation on countering Iran could just as easily backfire as succeed with U.S. allies. After all, the last multilateral effort to counter Iran—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—arguably led to the lowest point in U.S.-Israeli bilateral relations and had a negative impact on the administration's relations with U.S. allies in the Gulf. While these states backed the overarching objective (stopping the Iranian nuclear program), they criticized the deal for failing to curb Iran's other problematic behavior from its missile program to its backing of proxies, allowing to Iran to escape sanctions and only delaying Iranian nuclear ambitions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> David A. Shlapak and Michael W. Johnson, *Reinforcing Deterrence on NATO's Eastern Flank: Wargaming the Defense of the Baltics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1253-A, 2016; also see Välisluureamet (Estonian Foreign Intelligence Service), *International Security and Estonia 2020*, January 31, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> "Montenegro Jails 'Russian Coup Plot' Leaders," BBC, May 9, 2019.

<sup>25</sup> "Why Saudi Arabia and Israel Oppose Iran Nuclear Deal," *Al Jazeera*, April 14, 2015.

## Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in the Global Commons

The global commons provides relatively few opportunities to meaningfully play China off Russia (or vice versa), provides relatively few positive externalities, and could produce several negative ones (Table 4.3).

### Impact on the Other Power

For the most part, partly because global commons issues are *global* in nature, these issues offer few opportunities for the United States to play China off Russia or vice versa. On the contrary, while there have been bilateral agreements—between the United States and China, the United States and Russia, and between China and Russia—the impact on the third country, for the most part, has been relatively limited, and in some cases the excluded power might even benefit indirectly from this cooperation, if such cooperation produces a global good (e.g., fewer criminals, safer seas and air corridors, reduced nuclear stockpiles).

In space, the United States, China, and Russia have cooperated on a bilateral basis with limited effect on the other power. For almost a decade, following the end of the shuttle program in 2011, the United States relied on Russia to lift its astronauts to the International Space Station.<sup>26</sup> More recently, Sino-Russo cooperation in space has expanded. In 2019, the two countries agreed to work together on exploration of the moon. They also recommitted to previous plans to create a joint lunar and deep space data center with hubs in both countries.<sup>27</sup> Russia is motivated, for the most part, by strategic reasons—to counteract the United States and the West in space—whereas China shares these motives but also seeks to become an established spacefaring country in its own right.<sup>28</sup> Still, because all three countries mistrust each other's intentions in space, this bilateral cooperation is fairly limited and consequently, the impact on third parties is also fairly minimal.<sup>29</sup>

Bilateral cooperation on transnational crime often does not affect the third power. For example, U.S. law enforcement agencies already engage with their Chinese counterparts on combating the flow of illicit drugs from China into the United States.<sup>30</sup> The Drug Enforcement Agency maintains a liaison in China and contact with the Chinese drug control authori-

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<sup>26</sup> Daniel Oberhaus, "The US Hitches Its Final Ride to Space from Russia—for Now," *Wired Magazine*, April 8, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Russia has also provided a generator for China's Chang'e-4 lunar landing mission, and Russian and Chinese universities are cooperating on research in ultrasonic drilling techniques (Jones, 2020).

<sup>28</sup> Andrew Jones, "China, Russia to Cooperate on Lunar Orbiter, Landing Missions," *Space News*, September 19, 2019.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with a think tank expert, February 26, 2020; interview with think tank expert, via telephone, February 23, 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Paul E. Knierim, "Statement of Paul E. Knierim Before the Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health, Global Human Rights and International Organizations Committee on Foreign Affairs U.S. House of Representatives for a Hearing Entitled "Tackling Fentanyl: The China Connection,"" September 6, 2018.

TABLE 4.3

**Second-Order Effects of Cooperation in the Global Commons**

| Issue Area                                                | Effect of Cooperating with One Power on Relations with the Other                                                                                              | Positive Externalities                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Negative Externalities                                                                                                                                                                                       |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Maintaining freedom of access to space                    | None                                                                                                                                                          | Enhanced ability to manage issue of space debris, prevent weaponization of space                                                                                                                                                     | May constrain U.S. freedom of access to greater degree than Russian/Chinese freedom of access                                                                                                                |
| Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks | None                                                                                                                                                          | Potential benefits in select, tightly scoped areas (e.g., drug trade)                                                                                                                                                                | May affect the United States' reputation as a champion for the rule of law and affect its cooperation with partners and allies                                                                               |
| Countering violent extremist organizations                | Expanding Russian influence in Africa through conducting counterterrorism operations could engender competition with China on the continent                   | Facilitates economy of force, more efficient CT campaigns, and improves security of regional partners                                                                                                                                | Complicity with or tacit endorsement of heavy-handed methods and broad applications of "extremist" could exacerbate drivers of radicalization                                                                |
| Promoting global stability                                | Increasing Russian or Chinese influence through engagement on stability promotion could drive competition for natural resource equities, especially in Africa | Addresses instability driving refugee and migrant crises, alleviating pressure on neighboring states                                                                                                                                 | Provides opportunities for China and Russia to expand influence and military presence, could drive arms proliferation and undermine democracy development                                                    |
| Preserving access to the air and maritime commons         | None                                                                                                                                                          | Safer air and maritime traffic for anyone transiting the region                                                                                                                                                                      | None                                                                                                                                                                                                         |
| Preventing nuclear arms races                             | None                                                                                                                                                          | Prevent nuclear escalation and arms race<br>Ensure U.S. remains a reliable provider of a nuclear security umbrella for its allies, and reduce the need for European allies to potentially increase their respective nuclear arsenals | Provides clear red lines that Russia and China may seek to work around, while immediately available nuclear arms control agreements may not include the breadth of capabilities that the United States wants |
| Preventing militarization of the Arctic                   | Supporting China's bid for more open access to the Arctic could squeeze Russia's interests                                                                    | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | Bilateral cooperation risks undercutting the other Arctic nations, many of whom are U.S. allies                                                                                                              |
| Maintaining the openness of cyberspace                    | None                                                                                                                                                          | None                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 | May diminish the United States and its allies' leadership of free and open access to internet and independent and objective online information                                                               |

ties, and the United States and China also cooperate via the Bilateral Drug Intelligence Working Group and two bilateral formats on law enforcement and counter-narcotics issues.<sup>31</sup> Joint counternarcotics operations have also yielded results, such as tracing down an international cocaine trafficking case in cooperation with Canada in 2007.<sup>32</sup> The impact of this U.S.-China cooperation on Russia is minimal.

Bilateral cooperation in cyberspace, too, rarely affects the other power. Although it was shortly eclipsed by the Ukraine crisis and the events that followed, in 2013 Russia and the United States signed a bilateral agreement on confidence-building in cyberspace. The agreement established a secure direct communications line linking the U.S. Cybersecurity Coordinator and the Deputy Head of the Russian Security Council to help manage any potential crises related to information and communications technology.<sup>33</sup> And in September 2015, the United States and China concluded the U.S.-China Cyber Agreement.<sup>34</sup> It remains an open question to what extent, if any, such cooperation has actually reduced harmful Chinese or Russian cyber activity, but in neither case did this cooperation—to extent it occurred—meaningfully affect the other power.

For the most part, air and maritime commons issues fall in the same boat. Bilateral cooperation on air or maritime safety rarely, if ever, affects the excluded power, and in some cases, such as counterpiracy, the excluded power might indirectly benefit (e.g., if the net result of these actions is fewer pirates). Perhaps the only exception to this is in the South China Sea, where the definition of the maritime commons is disputed and where Russia and China are opposite sides of the issue. Russia's Rosneft partnered with Vietnam and the Philippines to search for and exploit seabed energy resources and theoretically would benefit from pushing back on China's claims to the resources of the region.<sup>35</sup> Still, given Russia's emphasis on its overarching relationship with China relative to the economic gains Rosneft might capture, there is not much room for the United States to drive a wedge over this difference in interests.

Nuclear arms control is another area where bilateral cooperation often can work to the benefit of the excluded power. China arguably has benefited from U.S.-Russia nuclear arms control agreements that served to limit their respective nuclear arsenals, while remaining unconstrained by these agreements itself. China would likely welcome future U.S.-Russia nuclear cooperation in the future for similar reasons.

By contrast, there is more of a zero-sum dynamic at play with countering violent extremist organizations, promoting global stability, and preventing militarization in the Arctic. For

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<sup>31</sup> Knierim, 2018.

<sup>32</sup> Zhang Yong-an, *Asia, International Drug Trafficking, and U.S.-China Counternarcotics Cooperation*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, February 2012.

<sup>33</sup> The White House, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Pham, 2018.

<sup>35</sup> Huong Le Thu and Sunny Cao, "Russia's growing interests in the South China Sea," Australian Strategic Policy Institute, December 18, 2019.

promoting global stability and countering violent extremist organizations, DoD has signaled that it wants to reallocate counterterrorism resources in U.S. Africa Command to more-direct arenas of competition with China and Russia.<sup>36</sup> While, ideally, U.S. allies would fill the void, the United States could explore cooperation with China or Russia in counterterrorism in Africa, where both countries are expanding their presence.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, when the Russian private military company Wagner deployed to Mozambique, Russian media outlets warned that its counterterrorism mission was “threatening both China and the West in Africa.”<sup>38</sup> China and Russia also compete with each other for the African arms market. China is Africa’s second-biggest arms supplier, with a 17 percent share of the market compared with Russia’s 35 percent, and as China cultivates its robust commercial interests in Africa it will likely seek to grow its share of the market, possibly at Russia’s expense.<sup>39</sup> In some cases, China and Russia find themselves on opposing sides of peace agreements—for example, in the Central African Republic.<sup>40</sup> Consequently, in this zero-sum world, should the United States work with one or the other power, it could be to the detriment of the other.

Finally, the Arctic offers potentially the most promising issue to play China off Russia because, in some ways, the two powers’ interests are at odds, though for the United States to cooperate with either would come at a cost. On the one hand, as noted in Chapter Two, Beijing’s position on the Arctic—that it should be open for use by all nations—is at least rhetorically in line with U.S. policy. At the same time, working with China on the Arctic would potentially come at a cost of de facto legitimating its claim as “near Arctic” nation. Conversely, the United States could work with Russia to exclude China from the region, but this would come at the cost of legitimizing Russian claims to sovereignty over large swathes of the region and de facto U.S. acceptance of Russia’s militarization of the region. In other words, the United States does have options to play the two powers off each other in the Arctic, but whether it wants to exercise these options is an open question.

## Positive Externalities

Sino-Russo-American cooperation on many of these issues would likely benefit other countries as well, including some U.S. allies and partners. If cooperation resulted in better tracking of space debris, less international crime, fewer violent extremist organizations, fewer

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<sup>36</sup> Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, Charlie Savage, Eric Schmitt, “Pentagon Eyes Africa Drawdown as First Step in Global Troop Shift,” *New York Times*, December 24, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> Lead Inspector General, *East Africa and North and West Africa Counterterrorism Operations, October 1, 2019–December 31, 2019: Lead Inspector General report to the United States Congress*, 2020, p. 14.

<sup>38</sup> Evgeny Krutikov, “Rossiya v Afrike pugayet Zapad i Kitay [Russia in Africa Scares the West and China],” *Vzglyad [Sight]*, October 24, 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Jidefor Adibe, “What Does Russia Really Want from Africa?” Brookings Institution, November 14, 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Leslie Minney, Rachel Sullivan, and Rachel Vandenbrink, “Amid the Central African Republic’s Search for Peace, Russia Steps In. Is China Next?” United States Institute for Peace, December 19, 2019.

failed states, safer air and maritime travel and transport, or less likelihood for nuclear calamity, the effects would be felt globally. For example, to the extent that U.S.-Russia deconfliction enabled the territorial defeat of ISIS in Syria, it benefited U.S. partners in Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey, who subsequently had to contend with a greatly diminished threat of ISIS orchestrating and conducting terrorist attacks from within Syria. Communities elsewhere in the Middle East and Africa affected by ISIS and other violent extremist organizations would also stand to benefit from U.S.-Russia cooperation on counterterrorism issues.

Moreover, if cooperation on these issues built trust between the great powers, and thereby opened the door to cooperation on more-contentious issues, we can presume the benefits to other powers would only increase. For example, the hope could be that efforts to improve maritime safety in the Arctic could eventually lead to a lessening of the security dilemma and more comprehensive security arrangement in the region that would reduce the tensions for all Arctic nations, many of which are U.S. allies.

Finally, U.S.-led great power cooperation on global commons issues might reinforce the United States' image as a global leader.<sup>41</sup> Provision of common goods is partly what makes the international system function and what gives global hegemons their status and power.

## Negative Externalities

Unfortunately, the extent of these positive externalities may be more limited than they appear. First, for reasons discussed in Chapter Three, cooperation in the global commons is likely to encounter a series of obstacles and might not come to fruition. Even if it does, such cooperation would likely be narrow in scope, limiting the extent of the positive externalities. Beyond the scope question, however, the approach China and Russia take to many of these issues might create a series of negative externalities that could outweigh many of the prospective positive externalities that would come from potential cooperation.

First, China and Russia's approach to counterterrorism and promoting global stability often centers around backing authoritarian regimes, cracking down on political opposition elements, and, at times, blocking American objectives in the region. By cooperating with China and Russia, the United States risks encouraging other states to pursue similarly authoritarian policies. For example, China's approach to counterterrorism—as well as its general approach to building global influence—has been to export its artificial intelligence–driven surveillance technology, which experts warn could be used for good or evil, depending on the user.<sup>42</sup> For some of China's customers—such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—it is likely that the security technology will be used to monitor and suppress activists, journalists, and political dissidents, in addition to bona fide terrorist threats.

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<sup>41</sup> For example, Barry R. Posen, "Command of the Commons: The Military Foundation of U.S. Hegemony," *International Security*, Vol. 28, No. 1, Summer 2003, p. 8; Abraham M. Denmark, "Managing the Global Commons," *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 3, July 2010.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Chau of Dahua Technology, cited in Center for Strategic and International Studies, "China in the Middle East: Part Six," February 25, 2020.

Russia, by contrast, often approaches counterterrorism and stability through brute force, as highlighted by its recent operations in Syria, in which Russian have forces not only suppressed moderate opposition voices but risk fomenting future unrest and terrorism. U.S. officials have also voiced their aversion to cooperating with Russia on counterterrorism issues, citing Moscow's "heavy-handed style of fighting terror" and association with the al-Assad regime's myriad war crimes, all of which may drive future cycles of radicalization in Syria.<sup>43</sup>

Second, and relatedly, the United States may incur reputational costs. If the United States cooperates with China and Russia on counterterrorism and global stability and explicitly or implicitly accepts their heavy-handed tactics, the United States risks undermining its own efforts to promote democracy and human rights. Similarly, cooperation with China or Russia in the legal realm risks undermining the United States' international reputation for other values, such as due process.

Third, cooperating with China and Russia could mean accepting both countries' presence in areas where they previously had not been and where allies and partners likely would prefer that they not be. As mentioned above, the Arctic is one such place where cooperating with China would amount to recognizing its claims to rightful access to the region, but the same applies to other issues in other parts of the world. For example, cooperating with Russia over stabilizing Libya would likely legitimize Russia's position, entrench its military presence in the country, and potentially threaten NATO's southern flank.

Fourth, cooperating with China or Russia on global commons issues may legitimize a new means for them to gain more military capabilities. One of the primary drivers behind China's participation in peacekeeping operations might be so that PLA forces can gain combat experience.<sup>44</sup> Though conducting antipiracy operations in the Red Sea in parallel to, and not part of, multilateral antipiracy Combined Task Force 151, the PLA Navy nevertheless gained valuable experience from the operations. Additionally, China's anti-piracy operations culminated in China establishing a naval base in Djibouti, its first official military base in a foreign country.

Finally, by pushing for cooperation with China and Russia in some areas but not others, the United States risks sending mixed messages to allies. For example, the United States has actively asked its allies to invest more in their own defense, and, whether because of American prodding or increasing threats from China and Russia, there is some evidence of this effort paying off. Following the United States' creation of the Space Force, and partly thanks to the growing activities in space by China and Russia, in 2019, France created a space command within its air force with the aim of protecting French space capabilities.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, in

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<sup>43</sup> U.S. government official, cited in Jack Detsch, "Report: China, Russia Worried About Militants' Return from Syria," *Al-Monitor*, December 2, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Elor Nkereuwem, *Nontraditional Actors: China and Russia in African Peace Operations*, Washington, D.C.: Stimson Center, March 2017, p. 35; Timothy R. Heath, "China's Military Has No Combat Experience: Does It Matter?" *Foreign Policy*, November 27, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> "Macron Announces Creation of French Space Force," *France 24*, July 13, 2019.

May 2020, Japan created a new space defense unit, the Space Operations Squadron.<sup>46</sup> Turning around and then pushing for more cooperation or some form of arms control in space might incentivize allies to not further invest in building military capabilities in space.

## Few Wedge Issues and Mixed Externalities

International cooperation—with all countries, not only with competitors—is sometimes treated as a good unto itself. As President Obama said in his first inaugural address, he sought to “meet those new threats that demand even greater effort, even greater cooperation and understanding between nations.”<sup>47</sup> President Trump has similarly said that “It would be great if we could get along with Russia.”<sup>48</sup> This view that international cooperation is good stems from a normative judgement that harmonious interactions between states are better than conflictual ones, but also from a strategic premise that international cooperation is a prerequisite for solving the world’s most difficult problems. The preceding analysis casts doubt on both claims.

For the United States, one of the foremost geopolitical challenges today is dealing with multiple great power adversaries simultaneously. In the abstract, one of the most promising ways to tackle this problem would be to play the two great powers off one another. And yet as the preceding analysis has shown, there are far fewer opportunities to do this than one might hope for or expect.

Another argument for treating cooperation as good unto itself rests on the idea that cooperation in one area sparks a virtuous cycle, such that cooperation begets more cooperation. The underlying logic here is that trust built from successful cooperation in one domain can permeate the relationship, leading to more harmony between states and ultimately to a more peaceful world. The evidence suggests that sparking these virtuous cycles of cooperation often proves more difficult. As already noted, there are few clear-cut successful cases of cooperation on national security matters, and the mixed cases of cooperation—on issues like Middle East peace, counterpiracy or counterterrorism—may have reduced great power friction in select areas but have not yet produced such a snowball effect.

On a more fundamental level, however, this chapter shows the benefits but also the costs of cooperation. Indeed, in practically every potential plausible case, great power cooperation would produce both positive and negative side effects, and in many cases it is not clear whether cooperation is *a priori* the good that we sometimes think it is. And so, we turn to the concluding chapter and what this should mean for American foreign policy, the Department of Defense, and the Department of the Air Force.

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<sup>46</sup> Mari Yamaguchi, “Japan Launches New Unit to Boost Defense in Space,” *Defense News*, May 18, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> Barack Obama, “Inaugural Address,” January 21, 2009.

<sup>48</sup> Dan Mangan, “President Donald Trump Says Getting Along with Russia is ‘Not Terrible, It’s Good,’” *CNBC*, February 16, 2017.

## The Vanishing Trade Space

As of late 2020, the United States, China, and Russia are locked in a global strategic competition and will likely remain so for the foreseeable future. As the preceding chapters have demonstrated, great power cooperation on national security matters is difficult, and those dynamics are unlikely to change. Simply put, if we focus on the United States' core strategic priorities, the United States, China, and Russia have relatively few overlapping interests and face significant obstacles to meaningful cooperation. And because these dynamics are largely structural—rather than leader-specific—they are unlikely to change with a change of administration. In this chapter, we explore the overarching findings of this series as well as its key recommendations for the U.S. government, the Joint Force and the Department of the Air Force.

### The Prospects for Cooperation Are Narrow and Growing Narrower

The overarching finding of this series is that the prospects for cooperation on national security issues between the United States, China, and Russia are gloomy. As discussed in Chapter Two (and captured in Table 5.1), across the 22 issue areas analyzed in this project, the only areas where the equities of the three powers all aligned are North Korean denuclearization and the prevention nuclear arms races. More often, the United States, China, and Russia have only partially or marginally overlapping interests, if they are aligned at all. In other words, if we assume that states only cooperate when it is in their self-interest to do so, the trade space for cooperation is relatively slim. This contributes, in turn, to the checkered track records of China and Russia on committing resources to cooperation.

Moreover, the available trade space for cooperation is diminishing. As discussed in Chapter Three, successful cooperation faces multiple obstacles, but ultimately needs to be predicated upon trust—even if that trust is supplemented by verification mechanisms—and levels of trust are trending downward. Arguably, this decline in trust creates a vicious cycle: The less trust each great power has in the others, the more likely it is to treat them as adversaries, the more likely they are to behave as adversaries in return, and the more reasons each great power has to distrust the others. The net result is that the prospects for cooperation are narrow and may be growing slimmer in the days ahead.

**TABLE 5.1**  
**The Narrow Trade Space for Cooperation**

| Issue Area     |                                                                                       | Prospects for Security Cooperation with the United States |        |
|----------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|--------|
|                |                                                                                       | China                                                     | Russia |
| Indo-Pacific   | Maintaining a peaceful and open regional order                                        | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Promoting and preserving regional alliances                                           | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Expanding strategic cooperation with Indonesia, Malaysia, and Vietnam                 | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Managing cross-Strait differences between China and Taiwan                            | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Achieving the denuclearization of North Korea                                         | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Countering terrorism and violent Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Southeast Asia | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | India's regional role and strategic orientation                                       | Low                                                       | Low    |
| Middle East    | Middle east stability and peace processes                                             | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Countering Iran and its proxies                                                       | Medium                                                    | Medium |
| Europe         | Broader Euro-Atlantic security                                                        | N/A                                                       | Medium |
|                | Baltic security                                                                       | N/A                                                       | Medium |
|                | Balkan security and strategic orientation                                             | N/A                                                       | Low    |
|                | Turkey's regional role and strategic orientation                                      | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | The future of Ukraine                                                                 | N/A                                                       | Medium |
| Global Commons | Maintaining freedom of access to space                                                | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Dismantling transnational criminal organizations/networks                             | Medium                                                    | Low    |
|                | Countering violent extremist organizations                                            | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Promoting global stability                                                            | High                                                      | Medium |
|                | Preserving access to the air and maritime commons                                     | Medium                                                    | Medium |
|                | Preventing nuclear arms races                                                         | Low                                                       | Medium |
|                | Preventing militarization of the Arctic                                               | Low                                                       | Low    |
|                | Maintaining the openness of cyberspace                                                | Medium                                                    | Low    |

## No Grand Strategic Bargains in Sight

There are two ways to respond to this gloomy forecast. One is for the United States to cooperate in the few places where it can with China and Russia but otherwise prepare for long-term strategic competition. The second is to look for a “grand bargain” that can reset the proverbial great power playing board. But though a dramatic change to the status quo has a certain allure, no grand bargains are in sight.

Over the years, several experts, mostly in academia, have searched for the next grand bargain with either China or Russia. For example, George Washington University political scientist Charles Glaser floated the idea that the United States “should negotiate a grand bargain that ends its commitment to defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression. In return, China would peacefully resolve its maritime and land disputes in the South China and East China Seas, and officially accept the United States’ long-term military security role in East Asia.”<sup>1</sup> Lyle Goldstein of the Naval War College, likewise, has called for “meeting China halfway” in hopes of sparking a “cooperation spiral” with Beijing.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, University of Chicago political scientist John Mearsheimer has argued that “The United States and its allies should abandon their plan to westernize Ukraine and instead aim to make it a neutral buffer between NATO and Russia, akin to Austria’s position during the Cold War,” as part of a broader effort to reset the West’s relationship with the Russia.<sup>3</sup> In a way, these leaps for cooperation aim for the next Nixon-to-China moment—a reference President Richard Nixon’s visit to Communist China and meeting with Mao Zedong in 1972 during the height of the Cold War, which reset great power relations for decades to come.

While grand bargains such as these can be thought-provoking, they are rarely practical. First, Nixon-to-China moments are historically rare events. A unique set of circumstances allowed the ardent anti-Communist Nixon to establish relations with Mao’s China during the last stages of the Vietnam War, and these political and strategic stars rarely align. Second, and more importantly, even if these grand gestures are possible, they do not always work. Nixon’s trip to China did not end the Cold War, nor did it permanently put the U.S.-China relationship on a cooperative footing. Indeed, the Trump administration’s China policy reflects a repudiation of the Nixon opening to China and the nearly five decades of U.S. China policy since that time. More recent attempts at grand bargains—the Obama administration’s nuclear deal with Iran and the Trump’s administration’s rapprochement with Kim Jung Un’s North Korea—have similarly faltered and, ultimately, failed.

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<sup>1</sup> Charles L. Glaser, “A U.S.-China Grand Bargain? The Hard Choice Between Military Competition and Accommodation,” *International Security*, Vol. 39, No. 4, Spring 2015, p. 50.

<sup>2</sup> Lyle J. Goldstein, *Meeting China Halfway: How to Defuse the Emerging US-China Rivalry*, Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, “Why the Ukraine Crisis Is the West’s Fault: The Liberal Delusions That Provoked Putin,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, 2014.

Grand bargains most frequently fail for one of two reasons. First, grand bargains are costly. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, cooperation is rooted in self-interest. States will only cooperate when they view it as beneficial to do so. The United States, China, and Russia have clear strategic, economic, and/or cultural/moral interests at stake in many of these issues, and most grand bargains involve concrete sacrifices in the hopes of achieving some greater—but often more nebulous—goal(s). Second, even if there is enough policy trade space to allow for such a bargain, as discussed in Chapter Three, cooperation often encounters obstacles. The grander the bargain, the more complex the issues involved, and the more formidable these obstacles become.

As noted at the outset of this report, even with the pressure of a global pandemic, the United States, China, and Russia do not seem to have the political will to make the costly sacrifices to strike a large-scale compromise. If anything, as of late 2020, the relationship seems to be spiraling in the opposite direction.<sup>4</sup> And so, for the time being, the era of strategic competition likely is here to stay.

Consequently, across the board, we found no grand bargains that showed promise of becoming feasible policy. In the Indo-Pacific, the most promising areas for cooperation involve North Korea and Russian arm sales to American partners for use against China. Additionally, the United States could potentially include allies and partners in crisis communications and risk reduction agreements with the PLA. In Europe, most of the promising forms of cooperation involve decreasing tensions over flashpoints between the West and Russia for accidental conflicts—either through confidence-building measures, arms control agreements, or coordination hotlines. In the Middle East, there is some prospect for cooperation with Russia and potentially China over reconstruction in Syria and over limiting the type of arms sales to Iran, but even these measures are not guaranteed. Even our analysis of the global commons issues yielded comparatively few opportunities for big deals and instead suggested that cooperation will be most likely on a few, mostly non-hard power issues, such as tracking space debris, or counterpiracy in strategically unimportant areas such as the Gulf of Aden. Across the board, these measures are more half-steps toward tepid cooperation, rather than leaps toward grand bargains.

## Few Potential Wedge Issues

Another commonly debated idea for cooperation is that the United States should try to leverage Russia to counter China.<sup>5</sup> Mearsheimer, for example, has argued that one of the reasons to reset the United States' relationship with Russia is because "the United States will also some-

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<sup>4</sup> Edward Wong and Steven Lee Myers, "Officials Push U.S.-China Relations Toward Point of No Return," *New York Times*, July 25, 2020; Savage, Schmitt, and Schwirtz, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Kathrin Hille, Katrina Manson, Henry Foy and Christian Shepherd, "US Urged to Exploit Cracks in Russia-China Relationship," *Financial Times*, July 26, 2020.

day need Russia's help containing a rising China.”<sup>6</sup> Some policymakers have also advocated for this approach. Reportedly, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger told Trump that Washington should work with Moscow to pressure Beijing.<sup>7</sup> Former Ambassador to India Robert Blackwill has similarly suggested that, “The United States, in coordination with allies, should attempt to initiate an extended conversation with Vladimir Putin and the Russian government on world order and the security of Europe and Asia,” all in an effort to better counter China.<sup>8</sup> Arguably, even Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made a nod in this direction when he called for “new grouping of like-minded nations” to counter China and, when asked, noted that there are areas where “we need to work with Russia” in this effort.<sup>9</sup>

In the abstract, these proposals have an intuitive appeal. What better way for the United States to counter two great powers than to play the two of them off each other? Given China's rapid economic and military growth, Russia seems like the lesser of the two evils. Moreover, at first blush, the idea does not seem all that far-fetched. Russia and China share one of the longest borders in the world and have clashed over it in the past. At some level, Russia needs to be concerned about its increasingly powerful southern neighbor, and so should be interested in such an arrangement, if only for its own self-preservation.

Yet the prospects for such diplomatic jujitsu remain relatively limited, for a host of reasons. First, Russia has repeatedly denied any interest in joining an anti-China alliance.<sup>10</sup> China remains a valuable market for Russian exports of natural resources and military hardware. Moreover, as noted in the previous section, such cooperation would come at a cost—particularly to other allies and partners. Another reset in U.S.-Russia relations—along the lines that was tried at the beginning of the Bush and Obama administrations—may not be domestically palatable in the United States or among U.S. allies in Europe, especially given the amount of bad blood between the United States and Russia over issues from Ukraine to election meddling to supporting the Taliban in Afghanistan. Finally, there are questions of whether great power partnerships between authoritarian regimes and democracies are viable over the long term.<sup>11</sup>

Beyond these very real considerations, however, there are practical considerations related to how the United States would go about implementing such a strategy, even if it wanted to.

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<sup>6</sup> Mearsheimer, 2014, p. 89.

<sup>7</sup> Bethany Allen-Ebrahimian, Andrew Desiderio, Sam Stein, and Asawin Suebsaeng, “Henry Kissinger Pushed Trump to Work with Russia to Box in China,” *Daily Beast*, July 31, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Robert D. Blackwill, *Implementing Grand Strategy Toward China: Twenty-Two U.S. Policy Prescriptions*, Washington, D.C.: Council on Foreign Relations, Council Special Report No. 85, January 2020, p. 35.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Pompeo, “Communist China and the Free World's Future,” speech at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum, Yorba Linda, California, July 23, 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Dimitri Simes, “Russian Lawmaker on US-China Power Game: Don't Play Us ‘as a Card,’” *Nikkei Asia*, June 12, 2020; “Kremlin Says Russia Won't join U.S. Alliance Against China” CGTN, July 25, 2020.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Kroenig, “The United States Should Not Align with Russia Against China,” *Foreign Policy*, May 13, 2020.

Indeed, this study found relatively few wedge issues—areas where cooperation with Russia or China would be to the detriment of the other. Russia has far more at stake in European security issues than does China, so cooperation with Russia in Europe would not really harm Chinese interests—apart from allowing American military assets to focus more on the Pacific. Conversely, China has much more at stake in the Indo-Pacific than Russia does, but Russia also lacks the ability to affect many of these issues. And on many global commons and Middle East issues, bilateral cooperation with Russia—without China—acts to China’s benefit. If U.S.-Russia cooperation leads to fewer pirates or a more stable Middle East, then China gains, as well.

Admittedly, there are a handful of true wedge issues. Encouraging Russian arms sales to U.S. partners in Asia—or at least not punishing partners for buying this equipment—might be one such case. The Arctic might be another, given the opposing Russian and Chinese positions on this region. But these types of wedge issues are relatively rare, and whether there are enough true “wedge” issues to make them part of a coherent strategy to pressure China remains an open question. Consequently, the United States’ simultaneous competition with both powers will likely continue.<sup>12</sup>

## Dubious Benefits of Cooperation

Finally, cooperation is sometimes treated as a reflexive good. After all, who can object to a more cooperative world where rival great powers seek more harmonious relationships with each other? And if the United States military can cooperate with its Chinese and Russian counterparts, might this not lead to general warming of relations between the respective countries and ultimately a more peaceful world?

Unfortunately, as we examined in Chapters Three and Four, cooperation always involves transactional costs, and some fights are not worth fighting. In some cases, cooperation comes with as many negative externalities as positive ones. Cooperation over Taiwan or Ukraine, for example, may mean at least partially sacrificing the democratic principle that all people should be free to chart their own destiny. Even in less extreme cases, cooperation can mean trading concrete capabilities and posture for reciprocal guarantees, which can have second-order effects for American alliances and relationships abroad. Of course, there can be positive second-order effects to cooperation as well, but comparing the positive and negative effects reinforces that cooperation is a strategic choice—rather than an end in and of itself—and the United States must treat it as such.

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<sup>12</sup> See “Experts: US Dual Containment of Russia, China Is Flawed, but Will Continue,” *Russia Matters*, June 11, 2020.

## Recommendations for the U.S. Government

If the United States chooses to pursue great power cooperation on national security matters, there are several ways in which it can increase the chances that such efforts ultimately will prove successful.

### View Cooperation as Strategic Choice, Rather Than an Objective Unto Itself

First, as alluded to in the last finding, the U.S. government should start by recognizing that cooperation is a strategic choice, not a reflexive good. In all 22 areas discussed in this report, cooperation—to the extent that the possibility for it exists—is never cost-free. It involves trade-offs and almost always generates negative as well as positive effects. Consequently, the United States needs to weigh the risks and benefits carefully before choosing cooperation as a course of action.

### Embrace Self-Interested Cooperation

Across all 22 of the policy areas examined in this report, the most common obstacle cited was lack of trust. The United States, China, and Russia have been interacting with each other over decades or even centuries, and with these long, often spotty, track records comes a lot of bad blood. Whether it is Russia's history of wriggling out of arms control agreements or China's evasion of North Korean sanctions, the United States has plenty of reasons to distrust the two countries. And unlike some of the other obstacles, trust cannot be rebuilt in a short time through skillful negotiations.

Instead, the better approach to achieving cooperation is embracing the fact that great powers operate out of their narrow self-interest. Indeed, when we look at most examples of successful cooperation—be they over counterterrorism, counterpiracy, counternarcotic trafficking, or air and maritime safety—China and Russia are acting not out benevolence or altruism but because it is in their self-interest to do so. Simply put, they stand to gain more by cooperating with the United States—even in some limited form—than by opposing it, and so they choose the former approach. Understanding when great power cooperation is possible starts from a clear-eyed assessment of what policies serve China, Russia, and their respective leaders.

### Concentrate on the Global Commons and Middle East for Areas of Cooperation

As argued in Chapter One and as mostly borne out in Chapter Two, the prospects for cooperation are greatest when countries' interests are somewhat aligned *and* they are somewhat invested in the outcome. If the countries' interests are not aligned, then they will likely not cooperate because they do not view it as in their interest to do so. Similarly, if the stakes are

too high or too low, they are unlikely to take the necessary risks or make the necessary effort to find common ground. As a result, we do not find much room for great power cooperation in either the Indo-Pacific or Europe. The stakes for China in the Indo-Pacific are high, whereas for Russia they are low; in Europe, the opposite is true. Add to this fact that both powers' interests are rarely aligned with the United States in either region, and the net result is that the trade space for cooperation is minimal.

By contrast, *ceteris paribus*, there is more room for cooperation on global commons and Middle East issues. All three powers have a stake in the outcomes of these issues, though rarely existential ones. And because all three powers often have some—although almost never completely—overlapping interests, these areas may prove more fertile spaces for cooperation. Unsurprisingly, this is also historically where we see the most great power cooperation—for example, with the nuclear arms control agreements of the Cold War, the various Arctic treaties, and the Iran nuclear deal—cooperation more often occurs in the global commons and the Middle East than elsewhere. If the United States wants to focus on cooperation, it should look to these areas.

Even in the global commons and the Middle East, however, the United States should approach cooperation with the two powers somewhat differently. For example, Russia has a long history of engaging with the United States on nuclear arms control, whereas China does not, and so there is more of a starting point for cooperation with the former than the latter. Similarly, because Russia has a significant military presence now in the Middle East, whereas China has more of an economic presence, there is more room for discussions about deconfliction with the former and about reconstruction in the region with latter.

## Utilize International Organizations, but Also Accept Their Limitations

International institutions should facilitate cooperation by providing the transparency and repeated interactions necessary to build trust. To some extent, this study confirms this theory. International organizations such as the International Maritime Organization and International Civil Aviation Organization facilitate cooperation in the maritime and air commons, while the Arctic Council helps cooperation in that region as well. International organizations, however, are not a panacea. As seen in the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and more recently with the WHO during the COVID-19 pandemic, these organizations too are often mired in great power politics. And as we saw with China's observer status—but not full membership—in the Arctic Council, even the degree of inclusion in these organizations can be a matter of great power competition. For U.S. policymakers, the key is to neither shun nor embrace these organizations wholeheartedly but to accept them for what they are—moderately useful vehicles for easing the obstacles to great power cooperation, but not a solution in and of themselves.

## Divide Issue Areas into More Narrowly Focused Topics

If the United States does choose to pursue cooperation as a strategy, there are several ways to help increase the likelihood that such efforts are successful, starting with narrowing down the focus of cooperation. As noted in Chapter Three, two of the more common obstacles to cooperation are definitional issues and issue linkages. For example, while the United States, Russia, and China largely agree on the need to combat terrorism or transnational criminal networks, they disagree on who precisely should be considered terrorists and criminals. Similarly, while the three powers share an interest in maintaining access to space and keeping the seas free of pirates in the abstract, these issues are often linked to national security concerns, given space's importance to national security and that piracy occurs in strategically sensitive locations (e.g., the South China Sea).

Often the most expedient ways of resolving these definitional and issue linkage obstacles is to bracket the controversial aspects and focus on areas of overlapping interest—hence the recommendation to focus on the common threats of space debris, piracy off the Gulf of Aden, or Sunni jihadist groups in Afghanistan rather than bundling these issues with more thorny ones, such as the military application of space or counterpiracy in the Straits of Malacca or elsewhere in the South China Sea. In many cases, this means separating traditional hard power security concerns from other areas.

Even within hard power concerns, narrowing the scope of the issue may open the door to limited cooperation. For example, the United States and Russia are fundamentally at odds over the future of Ukraine. Still, the two sides might be able agree on more-limited issues, such as controlling escalation and limiting the more acute humanitarian consequences of the conflict. Over the long run, this tactical cooperation may yield positive second-order effects for more significant issues down the line.

## Prepare for Long-Term Competition

Finally, even if the United States chooses to pursue a more cooperative path with China and/or Russia, it needs to remember that the era of strategic competition will likely endure. In the immediate aftermath of the invasion of Ukraine, a series of Obama administration officials argued that Russia's actions did not fit with the norms appropriate for the 21st century. President Obama argued, "The United States does not view Europe as a battleground between East and West, nor do we see the situation in Ukraine as a zero-sum game. That's the kind of thinking that should have ended with the Cold War."<sup>13</sup> Secretary of State John Kerry, similarly, commented, "You just don't in the 21st century behave in a 19th century fashion by invading another country on a completely trumped up pre-text."<sup>14</sup> Less than a decade and

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<sup>13</sup> "Obama Says Ukraine Crisis Not 'a Zero-Sum Game' as Russian Forces Overrun Third Crimea Base," *Fox News*, March 24, 2014.

<sup>14</sup> Will Dunham, "Kerry Condemns Russia's 'Incredible act of Aggression' in Ukraine," *Reuters*, March 2, 2014.

several international crises later, Washington is probably more downbeat on the prospects of cooperation with either China or Russia. Still, even if the situation improves and the air of optimism returns, great power politics—as discussed in Chapter One—will likely retain a zero-sum character, and great power competition will remain a feature of 21st century international relations, just as it was in the 19th century, for the foreseeable future.<sup>15</sup> The United States, China, and Russia have very different interests, regime types, and visions for where they would like the world to go, and that will force great power competition, whether the United States likes it or not. So, even if the United States remains open to cooperation, it must also simultaneously prepare for long-term strategic competition as well.

For the Joint Force, this principle has somewhat different implications. Especially in an era of constrained defense spending, the Joint Force has a resource-driven incentive to focus on one potential adversary, while hoping that a mix of cooperation and diplomacy can mitigate tensions with the other power. This undoubtedly has its appeal, but it likely is both imprudent and strategically implausible. For reasons discussed in this series of reports, large-scale military cooperation in particular is unlikely with either power, and while the Joint Force can take small measures to lessen the risk of accidental conflict, it must continue to consider the demands imposed by both powers from a force planning perspective—as costly and unattractive as those choices may be.<sup>16</sup>

## Recommendations for the Department of Defense and the Joint Force

As discussed in the preceding chapters, the prospects of cooperation in the military context are even narrower than across the whole of government. Still, DoD and the Joint Force can focus their efforts in certain areas to make the most of the limited options they have.

### Focus on Deconfliction and Deescalation

The cornerstone for the Joint Force is to focus on operational cooperation in order to make competition safer. While the phrase sounds like an oxymoron, it captures several recommendations that are designed not to stop competition per se, but to ensure that competition, particularly in volatile areas of the world, does not accidentally escalate into conflict.

The Joint Force already has deconfliction mechanisms in place with China and Russia—a “patchwork of bilateral agreements between NATO member states and Russia that aim to

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<sup>15</sup> Raphael S. Cohen and Gabriel M. Scheinmann, “The Foreign Policy Essay: Revenge of the Great Game,” *Lawfare*, April 20, 2014.

<sup>16</sup> For a similar analysis, see Raphael S. Cohen, Nathan Chandler, Shira Efron, Bryan Frederick, Eugeniu Han, Kurt Klein, Forrest E. Morgan, Ashley L. Rhoades, Howard J. Shatz, and Yuliya Shokh, *The Future of Warfare in 2030: Project Overview and Conclusions*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2849/1-AF, 2020.

manage military-military encounters in international airspace and on the high seas.”<sup>17</sup> In some cases, such as in Syria, there are specific mechanisms for deconflicting air space that are unique to the location. Similarly, in Asia, the United States has coast guard and air annex deconfliction mechanisms with China.<sup>18</sup>

Both sets of agreements, however, could be streamlined and expanded. This type of operational cooperation can take several forms—advance notification of exercises, limits on conventional forces in certain regions, hotlines to deescalate crises, and the like. For example, deconfliction mechanisms presently in place with Russia in Syria can be applied to other flashpoints in Europe as well. These actions will not resolve crises in Ukraine, Syria, or the South China Sea, but by working with China and Russia, the Joint Force can ensure that safeguards are in place to prevent accidental contact or unintentional conflicts from spiraling out of control.

## Coordinate with Allies for “Safe Competition” Practices

Along a similar line to the previous suggestion, the Joint Force should work with partners, and especially allies, on practicing “safe” competition. Whether it is with Japan or the Philippines in the Indo-Pacific, or Poland or Romania in Europe, allied militaries are often on the front lines’ most likely flashpoints with China or Russia. Currently, many of the deconfliction measures are handled on a bilateral basis. For example, Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines (as part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations) already have their own hotlines connecting them with the PLA or PRC Foreign Ministry.<sup>19</sup> That said, if there is an altercation between these allies and China or Russia, the United States is treaty-bound to come to their aid. Consequently, the United States needs to work with its allies on deconfliction and controlling escalation, as well.

In some ways, coordinating with allies on “safe competition” practices may be even more difficult than doing so with China or Russia, for two reasons. First, China and Russia may be willing to be more aggressive against a weaker power than with the United States, especially if either believe that the United States may not come to the ally’s aid. Second, in many cases, allies may have more at stake and different red lines than the United States. Japan, for example, views the Senkaku Islands as sovereign territory, and Romania shares cultural ties with Moldova/Transnistria, giving both countries more vested interest in the disputes with China and Russia, respectively, in these areas. Consequently, the Joint Force needs to build in allies

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<sup>17</sup> Thomas Frear, *Lessons Learned?: Success and Failure in Managing Russia-West Incidents 2014–2018*, European Leadership Network, 2018, p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Scott W. Harold, “Optimizing the U.S.-China Military-to-Military Relationship,” *Asia Policy*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Summer 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Tetsuo Kotani, “Crisis Management in the East China Sea,” Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, February 2015; Ankit Panda, “China, South Korea Establish Military Hotline,” *The Diplomat*, July 25, 2014; “China, Southeast Asia to Set Up Hotline for South China Sea Issues,” Reuters, July 31, 2015.

and partners into its escalation management planning and press China and Russia to include allies and partners in the various crisis communications and risk reduction frameworks.

Promoting “safe competition” among allies may be a tougher task in the Indo-Pacific with China than in Europe with Russia. In the latter, NATO already forms a bedrock for multi-lateral coordination between allies and the NATO-Russia Council provides an institutional framework for such interaction, whereas no such institutions exist to that degree among the United States’ allies in Asia. Still, “safe competition” remains a common objective in all theaters.

## Concentrate on DPRK Contingency Planning, Counterpiracy, and Counterterrorism

None of the military issues examined in this series looks particularly promising for future cooperation, but some have more of a potential than others. All three powers have a vested stake in managing the collapse of North Korean and locking down that country’s nuclear weapons were it to implode; they would also need to cooperate in the event of a second Korean War, if only to evacuate their citizens from South Korea and from harm’s way.<sup>20</sup> Although all three powers differ on how to handle the Kim regime, this may serve as the starting point for a discussion. Even this discussion, however, still requires all sides to compromise their stated positions: The United States would need to accept that the Kim regime would not voluntarily denuclearize, and China and, to a lesser extent, Russia would need to accept the possibility that the Kim regime might at some point collapse.

Arguably, a similar logic holds true for counterterrorism and counterpiracy. Although all three powers have different definitions of who they consider to be terrorists and different locational sensitivities when it comes to counterpiracy operations, they at least share a common threat of Islamist terrorism and a similar desire for unmolested maritime trade that can serve as a starting point for future military cooperation in some form. As the United States withdraws from Afghanistan and loses the capability to unilaterally police it, the United States may have no other option than to work with China and Russia to ensure that Afghanistan does not once again become a safe haven for Islamist terrorism, and Beijing and Moscow might see some merit in coordinating with the United States in the hopes of preserving as much stability as possible.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Gian Gentile, Yvonne K. Crane, Dan Madden, Timothy M. Bonds, Bruce W. Bennett, Michael J. Mazarr, and Andrew Scobell, *Four Problems on the Korean Peninsula: North Korea’s Expanding Nuclear Capabilities Drive a Complex Set of Problems*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, TL-271-A, 2019.

<sup>21</sup> Katie Bo Williams, “Trump: US to Withdraw 4K Troops from Afghanistan by Election,” *Defense One*, August 4, 2020.

## Weigh the Utility of Russian Arms Sales to Budding U.S. Partners in U.S. Indo-Pacific Command

As discussed in Chapters Two and Three, one of the few potential areas to cooperate with Russia at the expense of China is with lifting sanctions on Russian arms sales to Indo-Pacific partners such as India, Indonesia, Malaysia, or Vietnam. Of course, in the ideal world, these countries would buy their weapons from the United States or from U.S. allies, but this may not always be possible, for several reasons. There is the direct cost of equipment, of course, but there are indirect costs, as well. Thanks to the legacy of the Cold War, many of these countries operate predominantly Russian equipment, and the cost of transitioning their entire logistical tail to Western systems might be prohibitive. On top of these considerations, the United States and its allies might not always be willing to sell sensitive hardware (fifth-generation fighters, for example) to countries that are not formal allies and/or are still authoritarian regimes. For these reasons, and because this military equipment will most likely be used to counter Chinese aggression, the United States has in the past exempted some states from Russian sanctions, although not consistently.<sup>22</sup>

Of course, there are also countervailing reasons not to loosen sanctions on Russian arms sales. Most notably, every exemption the United States makes weakens the sanctions regime on Russia and reduces the leverage of the United States on deterring future Russian aggression in Ukraine and elsewhere. Consequently, the United States could consider conducting a comprehensive review of the sanctions on Russian arms sales specifically to the Indo-Pacific, weighing whether the benefits of exempting each type of weaponry from sanctions in terms of military capacity gained versus China outweighs the strategic cost of doing so. In addition to the strategic calculus, the review could also consider the costs for these countries of fielding and maintaining American versus Russian equipment, and whether the United States or its allies can feasibly transition these countries off Russian equipment.

## Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

Finally, although the U.S. Air Force (USAF) and U.S. Space Force (USSF) play important roles in the Joint Force's efforts toward cooperation, there are a few USAF- and USSF-specific recommendations from this analysis.

### Expand Air Deconfliction Mechanisms

Since the Russian intervention in Syria in 2015, USAF has had to operate near Russian aircraft and Russian air defenses. Especially as China's and Russia's air forces grow increasingly aggressive abroad, USAF may find itself operating in close proximity with these rival forces

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<sup>22</sup> "US to Exempt India, Indonesia and Vietnam from CAATSA Sanctions," 2018; Jon Grevatt, "Update: US Highlights CAATSA Risk in Indian Fighter Procurement," *Jane's*, June 29, 2020.

in other regions and encounter similar operational challenges in other contested air spaces, be it over Libya, the Black Sea, the South China Sea, or elsewhere. Consequently, USAF needs to actively expand protocols on how to deconflict air space with Russian and Chinese air forces and work on how to safely manage intercepts. Some of these protocols may need to be tailored to the region (e.g., Russian bomber intercepts near Alaska pose different issues than over Libya, and so require a different response). Still, regardless of where they occur, USAF needs to work with its counterparts to manage these interactions accordingly.

## Increase Communication on Space Debris Management

Although most of the issues discussed in this series are focused on terrestrial challenges, there is some prospect for cooperation in space, despite the intensifying extraterrestrial great power competition. While some aspects of space cooperation remain more on the civilian side (e.g., the International Space Station), there are other issues, such as managing space debris, that straddle the military and civilian line and might prove fertile ground for future cooperation, especially given that they pose a common threat to all spacefaring nations—United States, China, and Russia included.

## Conclusions and Final Thoughts

As of this writing, the United States is on the eve of the 2020 presidential election. With every election comes an opportunity to shift policies—either because the party in power changes or because the officials themselves, even within a given party, are replaced. And while the Xi and Putin will remain in power for the foreseeable future, they will—at some point—turn their power over to others. Given that Trump, Xi, and Putin all have taken hardline, assertive foreign policy stances in the past, a change in personalities might ease some tension between the powers, at least on the margins.

And yet no matter who leads these three powers in 2021 and beyond, the room for great power cooperation on national security matters in an era of strategic competition will remain narrow for some time to come. For the most part, the United States', China's, and Russia's core strategic interests are not likely to change quickly, nor will their relative stakes on certain issues shift in short order; instead, the broad brushstrokes of their strategy—to the extent they do change—are likely to do so only slowly.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, while a change in administration or change in personalities within an administration may ease some obstacles (e.g., trust on a personal level), many of these obstacles go beyond single individuals. Ironically enough, this may make what little space remains for cooperation that much more important. In this new period of strategic competition, arms control, deconfliction, and crisis management may very

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<sup>23</sup> For a similar argument, see Raphael S. Cohen, *The History and Politics of Defense Reviews*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-2278-AF, 2018.

well be essential if armed conflict is to be avoided. The United States will need to contend with a world of vanishing trade space with limited prospects for cooperation and growing strategic competition for the foreseeable future.



# Abbreviations

|           |                                                         |
|-----------|---------------------------------------------------------|
| ABM       | anti-ballistic missile                                  |
| CAATSA    | Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act  |
| CCP       | Chinese Communist Party                                 |
| DAF       | Department of the Air Force                             |
| DoD       | U.S. Department of Defense                              |
| DPRK      | Democratic People's Republic of Korea (aka North Korea) |
| FOIP      | free and open Indo-Pacific                              |
| INF       | Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces                       |
| NATO      | North Atlantic Treaty Organization                      |
| NDS       | National Defense Strategy                               |
| New START | New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty                     |
| NSS       | National Security Strategy                              |
| PLA       | People's Liberation Army                                |
| PRC       | People's Republic of China                              |
| USAF      | U.S. Air Force                                          |
| USSF      | U.S. Space Force                                        |
| WHO       | World Health Organization                               |



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**T**o what extent can the United States still cooperate with China and Russia in certain areas even in this era of strategic competition? On which issues? What are the obstacles, the potential benefits, and the risks associated with great power cooperation? This report, the first of a four-part series, presents the overarching findings of a study that explored these questions.

The authors find that the trade space for cooperation is already narrow; that the obstacles to cooperation—particularly the absence of trust—are growing; that there are comparatively few wedge issues to play China and Russia off of one another; and that the side benefits of pursuing cooperation over competition do not clearly outweigh the costs of doing so. In other words, any cooperation between the powers will be rare and needs to be narrowly focused on making competition safe, and U.S. leaders should expect that the era of strategic competition will be here to stay for the foreseeable future.

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