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To cite this article: Timothy W. Crawford (2021) How to Distance Russia from China, The Washington Quarterly, 44:3, 175-194, DOI: [10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903](https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903>



Published online: 22 Sep 2021.



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Military alignment between Russia and China is increasing.¹ Although some still downplay its significance, alarm is warranted.² Many perceive the dangerous trend but conclude that the United States can do little to detach Moscow from Beijing.³ Still, there are serious calls for the United States to find ways to improve relations with Moscow and draw it away from China.⁴ These are, in essence, calls for the United States to use a wedge strategy—a policy to move or keep a potential adversary out of an opposing alliance.⁵ Yet, when it comes to how to do that, debate is constricted by the usual grooves of foreign policy orthodoxy and flawed answers to two basic questions: first, what is the mainspring of Russia-China convergence? Misdiagnosis here makes it harder to discern potential remedies and easier to prescribe ones that make matters worse. Second, what is the essential danger that their convergence poses? Confusion here makes it harder to gauge whether this can and should be changed at an acceptable cost.

I argue that the mainspring of Russia-China convergence is their growing encirclement by the United States' amalgamating system of formal military alliances, such as NATO, and less formal strategic partnerships, such as with India, Georgia, and Ukraine. This increasing organization of military relations against Russia and China pushes them together in a way that would not otherwise occur. The main problem this convergence poses for US grand strategy is not that Russia and China will better combine military forces, but that increased expectations of support from Moscow will encourage greater Chinese risk-taking in Asia. The political focus of a wedge strategy to divide Russia from

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© 2021 The Elliott School of International Affairs
The Washington Quarterly • 44:3 pp. 175–194
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903>

China should be to weaken those expectations; nothing more extravagant. It will require costly steps to reduce the pressure of US military alignments against Russia, even as such pressure against China increases. The drawbacks of this costly approach must be considered alongside their potential to boost efforts to restrain and deter China.

What Is the Mainspring?

To form a clear picture of how the United States can distance Russia from China, one must first diagnose what is now causing them to converge. Several causes are often cited, usually in combination. One catalyst is said to be their authoritarianism and ideological animus toward a US-led liberal international order.⁶ Writ large, that order is thought to pose “an existential threat” to them.⁷ A more policy-specific view holds that the strongest force for Russia-China alignment is, as professor Thomas Christensen puts it, their “shared aversion” to Washington’s previous “pursuit of regime change and so-called color revolutions in areas ruled by repressive regimes.”⁸ Vaguer notions like US pursuit of leadership, hegemony, or primacy are also typically thrown into the mix.

But the last five years have proven that the most important cause of Russia’s and China’s moves toward military alignment is the spread of the US alliance system around their borders, especially Russia’s. (This is not the same thing as saying that US preponderance and pursuit of primacy drives them together, because a large and ever-growing alliance system is not necessary for the

The Trump administration’s distinctive approach helped get a firmer grasp on the cause of alignment

United States to preserve its relative power position and could, on net, weaken it.) The alliance system’s role as a general source of their convergence is easy to discern: the network of US military ties expanded in a big way after the Cold War, well before Russia and China began serious moves toward alliance, and it continues to sweep forward in US efforts to groom new allies and strategic partners around Eurasia. Given this expansion, it would be strange if Russia and China did not increasingly align. Even-

tually, the basic dynamic of an alliance “spiral” goes to work, with one alliance’s growth feeding fears that prompt another’s.⁹

But it is possible to get a firmer grasp on the matter now, thanks to the Trump administration’s distinctive approach to competing with Russia and China. When Trump took office in 2017, the White House dialed down ideological

and institutional competition. He praised the governing prowess of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, winked at their success in entrenching personal rule, and routinely flattered other authoritarian “strongmen.”¹⁰ He ignored the human rights agenda. It is hard to imagine a more decisive reversal of the “color revolution” cheerleading of previous administrations. Trump also often disparaged the competency and reliability of allied liberal democratic governments while cultivating deeper strategic ties with authoritarian regimes. At the level of the liberal rules-based order, the Trump administration, with its “America First” formula, targeted multilateral enterprises—like the Trans Pacific Partnership, the WTO, the Paris Accords, and the JCPOA—that expressed US leadership in global trade, climate, and non-proliferation agendas.¹¹ It largely neglected the United Nations, where Russia and China—with permanently institutionalized peer status at the apex of the organization—gained practical influence as a result. In sum, many of the conditions thought to drive Russia and China convergence were sharply weakened by the White House in those years.

But with military alignments, it was rather different. There, the Trump administration continued military counters to Russian and Chinese activism. The president’s rhetorical slams on NATO free-riders notwithstanding, Washington bolstered the alliance—especially the eastern flank—in significant ways. It turned the 2014 European *Reassurance* Initiative into the European *Deterrence* Initiative (EDI) to accentuate its anti-Russia focus and multiplied the DoD budget for EDI activities.¹² It pressured NATO allies into higher levels of defense spending and approved NATO membership for Montenegro and North Macedonia. It ratcheted up US troop rotations in Poland, the Baltics, and Romania; programs to prepare longer-term basing arrangements in such countries; and naval activities in the Black Sea region. It adopted a more confrontational approach to security assistance for Ukraine and Georgia. In Asia, meanwhile, it revived efforts to consolidate an anti-China front with Japan, Australia, and India, via the “Quad” (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue). It launched the 2019 “Indo-Pacific Strategy” to restore US primacy in the region by building up its own forces and investing in old allies and new strategic partners to lean against China’s growing power and influence. It forged new agreements to deepen strategic partnership with India, courted Vietnam, boosted arms sales to Taiwan, and encouraged important increases in Japanese defense spending. And to complete the picture, the Trump administration—along with allied governments—sought to promote stronger strategic linkages between the NATO and Indo-Pacific alignment networks.¹³

All of this activity culminated in a rapid magnification of military alignments against Russia and China. It is not surprising, then, that some of Russia’s and China’s most eye-catching moves toward military partnership occurred in the last few years, including step-level changes in the pattern and qualities of military technology transfers, collaboration and planning, and joint training exercises and

maneuvers.¹⁴ The Office of the Director of National Intelligence's annual worldwide threat assessments provide a useful barometer of the progression. The 2016, 2017, and 2018 reports discussed at length the challenges posed by Russia and China in their respective regions and at the level of global influence, but they did not raise alarms about their military cooperation.¹⁵ The 2019 report, however, placed special emphasis on this cooperation and warned that the two powers had become more aligned than they had been at any time since the early Cold War.¹⁶ The 2021 report treats deep military cooperation between the two as a given.¹⁷ When other ideological and institutional factors thought to encourage Russia-China convergence were most muted, their military partnership advanced rather significantly. What were not muted at that time—indeed were intensified—were US efforts to strengthen and enlarge military alignments against them both.

Many obscure, if not altogether ignore, this driver. The latter approach appeared in former Secretary of Defense James Mattis' September 2018 assertion: "I see little in the long term that aligns Russia and China."¹⁸ Ironically, he was then leading the long-term project of expanding US military presence in Eastern Europe and the rollout of a new Indo-Pacific strategy aimed at extending and deepening military partnerships in South and East Asia. A similar kind of omission appears in more serious analyses calling for the United States to ratchet up military and economic pressure on Russia that do not note that such actions will drive Russia deeper into alignment with China much less consider the costs for US grand strategy of such consequences.¹⁹

Even when one recognizes that US military policies stimulate Russia-China convergence, it is easy to minimize or obscure the implications of that mechanism.²⁰ So it is with the claim that the two regimes' authoritarianism and revisionist hostility to the US-led liberal order makes their alignment natural and inevitable.²¹ Presuming these to be primary drivers of their convergence makes the growing US alliance system seem epiphenomenal and implies that their alignment trajectory cannot be changed by any restraint in America's. National security strategist Matthew Kroenig goes further, suggesting that closer Russia-China military ties would not be so bad for American security because the authoritarian defect that unites them also makes them poor cooperators "unlikely to form an enduring and coordinated alliance that will pose a major threat to the United States."²²

The implications of the mainspring are also obscured in the new mantra that the American alliance system is a powerful source of "leverage" against the Russia-China combination.²³ There is an obvious truth in this, if we think of leverage like investors do, as borrowed power. But the image skips over the way that the creeping expansion of the alliance system—especially toward Russia's border—can backfire and drain leverage by weakening the unity

within NATO that helps deter Russia and by strengthening the Russia-China alignment that makes it harder to deter China.

What Can Be Gained from Weakening the Convergence?

Whether or not it would be worth making concessions to Russia to distance it from China depends on the difference it would make for America's primary strategic priorities to have a Russia that is (or is not) closely aligned with China. Those priorities concern China and how to restrain and deter its ambitions in Asia. One can approach this issue by asking how closer alignment with Russia can affect China's military capabilities, or its political calculations, or both. But one should not treat it as primarily a military capabilities issue and conclude that matters are overblown because a closer Russia will only marginally add to Chinese military strengths. This is doubly flawed: while Russian cooperation can (and does) help China's military strength in important ways, the graver concern is how expectations of Russian support may affect China's strategic intentions and willingness to run risks.

The issue is how expectations of Russian support may affect China's willingness to run risks

Others have compiled a convincing case that Russian defense ties help China field forces better able to challenge US military power in the air and seas around China.²⁴ Two recent step-level changes in their cooperation are worth noting: Russia is helping China upgrade its strategic early warning missile system, a very high-end capability, and the two are increasingly doing combined military exercises of conventional war scenarios that give Chinese forces unique opportunities to train with and learn from an advanced military power with recent, tangible experience in conducting major military operations.²⁵

But more than these material aids to China's military strength, Russia's alignment with China increases the likelihood of Chinese adventurism. It is not only that political crises or military confrontations between the United States and Russia in Eastern Europe will invite China to "exploit US preoccupation" by applying pressure on points of conflict in Asia²⁶—even absent such European crises, closer Russian partnership with China can embolden Beijing because the increased potential of Russian involvement in a US-China clash significantly boosts the risks and complications of a US response.²⁷ And the plausible prospect that such risks and complications would inhibit, delay, or weaken US reaction will enlarge China's perceived freedom of maneuver. The closer their military

ties, and the more complex and engrained the channels of strategic cooperation, the larger the “halo” of political expectations of support will become, particularly if the two cross the formal alliance threshold.²⁸

This potential points to an important benefit of doing things now to weaken Russia-China alignment. If expectations of direct support from Russia (or a diversionary reaction by it), will make China’s leaders willing to run greater risks of conflict with the United States, reducing or complicating such expectations should, by the same token, make it easier for the United States to deter China. The pay-off, then, could be very large, even if it only comes in the invisible currency of bad things that don’t happen. Because it is hard to quantify how these risks aggravate the military power problem, it is tempting to dismiss them. But anyone who worries, for example, that China’s newly minted “strategic partnership” with Iran will embolden Tehran to step up its regional or nuclear ambitions surely intuitively gets the logic.²⁹

This issue of expectations is skirted by those who argue that because Russia cannot be flipped into an ally against China, there can be no significant payoff

A wedge strategy need not lead an adversary to switch sides; there is value in less dramatic changes

from weakening its ties with China, or that even if it could be flipped there is little to gain because Russia cannot help in any serious way to balance against China.³⁰ Both arguments incorrectly suggest that a wedge strategy must lead an adversary to switch sides to be successful and, more practically, they ignore the strategic value to the United States of less dramatic changes in Russia’s alignment. Depriving China of a close Russian ally may cause it to avoid a war that it would be willing to risk if it were more con-

fident of Russian support, whether it was actually forthcoming or not, or to pursue more limited aims if it does use force. There are two other cardinal virtues of trying to weaken, rather than reverse, Russia’s alignment: it is easier and less costly to do.

Selective Accommodation: Distancing Russia from China

What might a serious attempt—one involving real costs—to distance Russia from China look like? In terms of general principles, it would conform to the “selective accommodation” logic of wedge strategy.³¹ It is called that because the state doing it does not accommodate opponents indiscriminately, but rather does so in a fashion calculated to achieve strategic effects against the constellation of opposing forces. The point, as international relations scholar Frederick

Hartmann once put it, is to “deliberately hol[d] down the opponent’s number of allies by making policy adjustments that satisfy the requirements of third nations.”³²

A policy of selective accommodation to divide Russia from China would thus avoid simultaneously confronting Russia and China with heavy alliance pressures: on one side or the other, it would restrain those pressures. To do it right, it would need to distinguish between the two powers and prioritize, which means resisting the prescriptions of ideological bloc concepts that encourage the kind of simultaneous confrontation that drives Russia and China together.³³ If China is the primary great power competitor, then the weight of US confrontation should fall on China, not Russia. This also implies that a serious policy to distance Russia from China would not treat all of the interests, commitments, and relationships covered by the US alliance system writ large as if they were equally important, interconnected, and indispensable. Concessions somewhere must be made.

More specifically, a policy to accommodate Russia to distance it from China should reflect five principles. First, the goal should *not* be to flip Russia into an ally against China, but to stop its strategic ties with China from growing deeper and to weaken them. If the purpose is to reinforce deterrence of China by reducing the expectations halo created by closer Russian alignment, that may be enough. And it is easier and less costly to induce limited alignment change than to produce dramatic realignments.

Second, accommodations should focus on the mainspring of Russia’s convergence with China—the creeping growth of US military alignment against Russia on its western frontier.³⁴ There, discussed further below, the United States has accommodation options that are very valuable for Russian security, less so for the United States, and largely under Washington’s control; such asymmetry is helpful.

Third, the adjustments should offer Russia some immediate or near-term benefits that involve tangible security gains, not just symbolic, nebulous, or distant ones. While avenues of longer-term potential engagement and cooperation between the United States, its allies, and Russia (such as in cyber, energy, or environmental issue areas) should be exploited, they will not influence Russia’s trajectory toward China if the pressures of US-led military alignments against Russia remain unchanged.

Fourth, the move to extend these tangible security benefits should be credible—that is, not made subject to others’ vetoes or predicated on the outcome of lengthy and indeterminate multilateral political negotiations in Europe.

A strategy to distance Russia from China should reflect five principles

Fifth, the accommodations should be compatible with the preferences of America's most important and capable ("core") allies: Britain, France, and Germany. Thus, the accommodation policy should conserve America's existing formal NATO alliance commitments and improve cohesion between the United States and its primary allies.³⁵

At least in the public sphere, cohesive proposals for how to accommodate Russia in a way that will divide it from China are rare.³⁶ Usually, they are replaced by blanket statements about what the mainstream policy consensus will not countenance or about the futility or unacceptability of anything that grants Russia a veto, a sphere of interest, or the rewards of aggression or in any way relinquishes American military advantage, values, commitments, credibility, leverage, or leadership. To stimulate serious thinking about what even a modestly ambitious policy to divide Russia from China would have to entail, and to clarify trade-offs that are often muddled, the framework that follows is guided by the general principles laid out above.

End Formal NATO Enlargement

A serious move to distance Russia from China would start with a public signal that Washington's drive for further NATO enlargement is over.³⁷ The United States has always been the prime mover behind enlargement. As a practical matter, an administration can unilaterally stop it by announcing that it will oppose the extension by the North Atlantic Council of any more Membership Action Plans (MAPs) to partners seeking to join the alliance. Such a declaration would be highly controversial and could not tie the hands of future administrations, but it would make it harder to go back to a pro-enlargement stance

and would consolidate the existing resistance of core NATO allies—like France and Germany—to further expansion on Russia's periphery.

This declaration would credit Russian security interests in two major areas. The first concerns Finland and Sweden, who have longstanding close strategic ties to the United States and NATO and are often described as allies "in all but name."³⁸ Moscow has clearly warned that their going further by formally joining NATO would be a major provocation.³⁹ Because some NATO

A US declaration to oppose further MAPs to join NATO would credit Russian security interests in two ways

members would welcome them—if only they would ask for admission—the general US signal that it opposes further MAPs would be a valuable assurance to Russia on this score.

The second, and more important, area concerns Georgia and Ukraine. For Russia, the tightening of US military alignments against it is most caustic in these two former Soviet republics. Indeed, Russia accepted the high costs of using force against them in 2008 and 2014 to impose situations that complicated their admission into NATO.⁴⁰ Here, the general policy against further NATO enlargement would both directly accommodate Russian vital interests *and* improve NATO cohesion by bringing US policy into line with the preferences of core NATO allies, Germany and France. For over a decade now, they have mounted persistent opposition to approving MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine.

This opposition emerged at the April 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, when the United States first pushed for NATO to offer them MAPs. France and Germany blocked it then, but as a concession to Washington agreed to a collective statement that Georgia and Ukraine would in the future “become members of NATO.”⁴¹ Russian intervention in Georgia in August 2008 halted its progress toward formal membership, for many NATO allies are unwilling to assume the obvious and immediate risks of direct conflict with Russia.⁴² Since then, there has been no explicit retraction of NATO’s promise to eventually admit Georgia. Something similar would only come if the United States issued a blanket abeyance of support for further MAPs.

But in reality, such a declaration would be less of a concession than it might seem because there has not been any sign of consensus within NATO’s ranks to offer Georgia a MAP. At NATO’s 2014, 2016, and 2018 Summits, France and Germany quashed calls to expedite Georgian membership, insisting that it can only become a member through the MAP-to-accession requirement, ensuring that any NATO member can single-handedly block it.⁴³ In August 2018, Chancellor Angela Merkel left little ambiguity on the matter: “I do not see Georgia’s prompt accession to NATO. This is the position of Germany.”⁴⁴

A parallel pattern has solidified with respect to Ukraine. After Russia’s 2014 seizure of Crimea and its deeper intervention in Ukraine’s civil war, opposition to admitting it into NATO’s ranks—already pronounced—became rooted in the warranted fear of entrapment in conflict with Russia.⁴⁵ Thus, in 2015, French President Francois Hollande stated publicly that membership for Ukraine was “undesirable ... we must state it clearly, we should tell other countries the truth, including what we are not ready to accept. This is the position of France”; in 2016, at the NATO Warsaw Summit, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier stated, “I see a partner relationship between Ukraine and NATO, but not membership.”⁴⁶

In sum, a declared end to US support for further MAPs will ameliorate primary points of friction in the US-Russian strategic relationship, helping to distance Russia from China *and* to improve NATO unity by bringing US policy into line with the revealed preference of core NATO allies against Georgian and Ukraine membership.

Unwind US Military Ties to Georgia and Ukraine

But the substance of US military alignments with Georgia and Ukraine runs far deeper than official support for their joining NATO. Indeed, absent adequate support within the alliance for their admission, the United States has steadily groomed them as *de facto* military allies and NATO auxiliaries (which politically implicates even NATO members that do not want them as allies). To the goal of preparing them for eventual NATO membership, the United States has added the more immediate one of improving their capacity to fight jointly with NATO against Russian forces.⁴⁷ Both are now designated Enhanced Opportunity Partners (EOP) of NATO, part of a select group that significantly contributes to its operations, missions, and exercises, with forces and equipment that meet (or are training to meet) NATO interoperability standards.

For Georgia, this boost came with the 2014 “Substantial NATO-Georgia Package,” which led in 2015 to the creation of a NATO-Georgia Joint Training and Evaluation Center (which now partners directly with NATO’s Joint Force Training Center) and the integration of Georgian troops in NATO’s rapid-reaction Response Force; the hosting of NATO-Georgia joint exercises in 2016, 2019, and 2020; and the integration of Georgia into NATO’s Black Sea forward presence project starting in 2017.⁴⁸ There have also been many US-led multinational exercises with Georgian forces—reflecting increasing troop levels and sophistication—that have involved the participation, not under formal NATO auspices, of forces from other countries in the alliance.⁴⁹

In 2020, Ukraine likewise attained EOP status after receiving a 2016 NATO Comprehensive Assistance Package. That program coincided with an increasing tempo of US-led multinational training missions, outside the formal NATO context, with the Ukrainian armed forces centered in the expansion of the Yavoriv Combat Training Center, under the lead of the US 7th Army Training Command (based in Germany), and including the participation of elements of the 173rd Airborne Brigade and 2nd Infantry Brigade and several national guard contingents.⁵⁰ In 2018, the United States also led the Ukraine-centered multinational Clear Sky air force exercise, which, along with the United States and Ukraine, involved forces from Belgium, Denmark, Estonia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, and the UK and included flights from bases in Poland and Romania to practice ground support missions in western Ukraine.

The United States supports these developments with bilateral military aid agreements. Thus in 2017, it began the three-year Georgia Defense Readiness Program to upgrade Georgian forces’ ability to interoperate with NATO and, according to the State Department, “defend [Georgian] territory and deter Russia.” The same year, it began to provide major lethal weaponry, with an initial transfer of 400 Javelin portable anti-tank missiles.⁵¹ At the same time, over opposition from some NATO allies, the United States moved forward

with similar aid to Ukraine.⁵² In 2018 and 2019, for example, it provided Ukraine 360 Javelin portable anti-tank missiles and two coastal patrol boats. In 2019, Washington promised Ukraine an additional 391 million dollars in military aid, including other lethal weapons systems and another patrol boat for the Ukrainian navy in the Black Sea.⁵³

If the nature of US military alignment with Georgia and Ukraine goes much deeper than rhetorical support for their bids to join NATO, a serious policy to relax tensions with Russia would go beyond softening that position to include more concrete reduction of military ties to those countries. In practice, that would mean stopping further transfers of lethal military hardware and scaling back US-led multilateral military exercises and training with them, and the prodigious flow of legislation out of Congress to extend such activities. It would also mean additional signals against other formal steps to strengthen the alignment, for which Ukraine's and Georgia's governments consistently lobby.⁵⁴ Thus, an administration could indicate that it will not support legislation out of Congress to grant Ukraine's and Georgia's requests to be designated as "major-non-NATO allies," an upgrade that would, among other things, permit permanent basing of US forces in their territories.⁵⁵

Curtailing US military ties to Georgia and Ukraine would be a potent reduction of the creeping pressure that pushes Russia toward China. No doubt these concessions to Russia's security interest would be costly—a point I will return to later—but they need to be if they are to have an impact on Russian alignment. Unlike other possibilities, which might carry similar political weight as accommodation signals, Washington has greater flexibility to politically decouple from Georgia and Ukraine and can do so without contravening its formal NATO collective defense commitments.⁵⁶ The flexibility is also enhanced by the political fact that core NATO allies are likely to welcome such steps. The United States can magnify this advantage by combining the retraction of military ties to Georgia and Ukraine with continuing efforts under the European Deterrence Initiative to bolster NATO's primary collective defense missions.⁵⁷

Curtailing US military ties to Georgia and Ukraine could be a potent reduction of Russia-China alignment

Other Opportunities for Military Restraint to Create Distance

Within that latter NATO context, there are several other ways the United States could conciliate Russia with signals of military restraint. First, it could re-affirm that—consistent with understandings in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act—it will avoid permanent stationing of substantial combat forces in the

territory of Eastern allies. This re-affirmation would not contradict the current practice of the United States and NATO to maintain enduring or continuous multilateral force rotations and frequent complex defense exercises in those allied territories. But against the background of frequent calls, intensive lobbying, and Congressional support for the permanent, forward basing of high-end conventional US forces in the East—in Poland especially—it would still convey an important message of restraint. And insofar as core NATO allies are themselves averse to violating the terms of the 1997 Founding Act, it would once again boost NATO cohesion.⁵⁸

Second, Washington could declare its continued intention to limit the mission of its Aegis Ashore Ballistic Missile Defense systems in Romania and Poland (the latter of which remains under construction and suffers chronic delays) to targeting the Iranian missile threat. The more important implication of this would be that the United States and NATO—which have considered the option—would refrain from steps to “re-calibrate” these systems to shoot at Russian cruise missiles, which Moscow would see as a move to weaken its nuclear deterrent.⁵⁹ The less important implication, because the repurposing is far less feasible, would be that the systems would not be converted in some way into an offensive strike capability against Russia.⁶⁰ If such assurances are unlikely to allay Russian suspicions, they too would have the advantage of protecting NATO cohesion, because any decision to repurpose those sites requires NATO-wide consensus and would almost certainly engender strong internal resistance.⁶¹

Third, Russia’s deployment of SSC-8 nuclear-capable cruise missiles in its western areas starting in 2017 and the 2019 US withdrawal from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty make it likely that the United States will further respond by deploying some equivalent new nuclear forces in Europe. While doing so, Washington could re-affirm that it will continue to conform to the commitment (also in the 1997 NATO-Russia Founding Act) not to store or deploy nuclear weapons in NATO’s Eastern allies. Even if Washington also claims that this part of the Founding Act has become defunct due to changed strategic circumstances, the signal to continue this “practice” until further notice will offer Russia some accommodation and hold out the prospect of a larger agreement to restrain nuclear deployments in Europe. Alongside this, then, the United States should initiate efforts to negotiate a new treaty with Russia to prevent or limit the forward deployment of intermediate range nuclear missiles in Eastern Europe and in Western Russia.⁶² Beyond the direct goal of trying to avoid a new arms race in this domain, the political point would be to bring Moscow into a new channel of bilateral bargaining over US-Russia security cooperation in Europe focused on a matter of strategic significance to both sides, which will help distance it from China.

Across the spectrum of measures described above, the ones involving NATO enlargement, Georgia, and Ukraine would be the most influential. They would also be the most politically costly, in both domestic and foreign policy arenas. They would undoubtedly face resistance from the foreign policy bureaucracy, Congress, and public discourse more broadly for appeasing Russia and rewarding Putin's pressure tactics. In light of this certain opposition, it is worth noting that these recommendations do *not* mean abandoning the policy of not recognizing Russian moves to absorb captured Georgian and Ukrainian territory nor lifting economic sanctions imposed in response to those moves and other recent provocations. Military opposition is not a necessary component of such stances. Likewise, the approach does not require an end to values-based criticism of Moscow's human rights record. The idea is not a grand bargain with Russia but a more focused and incremental reduction of military pressure in Europe to offset the opposite pattern in Asia.

The idea is not a grand bargain with Russia but an incremental reduction of military pressure in Europe

Strategy and Priorities

The accommodations sketched above would nevertheless entail other serious foreign policy downsides.⁶³ There is risk that Moscow will perceive a general weakening of US resolve and thus challenge NATO more directly (e.g., in the Baltics). There is risk that Beijing too will perceive a general weakening of US resolve and step up its challenges in Asia. Perceptions of US reliability held by its formal allies, in NATO and elsewhere, may also suffer. So too would the perceived value of NATO partnership status and programs for other countries (such as Bosnia-Herzegovina today) that might seek to convert partnership into full membership in the alliance. There will also be a loss of some US leverage to pressure Russia to withdraw from captured Georgian and Ukrainian territory and settle those conflicts on terms acceptable to Tbilisi and Kiev.

Such costs cannot be valued in isolation. The calculus for accepting (or rejecting) them should consider two kinds of off-setting considerations. Above all, there is the first-order strategic priority to balance against China and the potential strategic gains in relation to that purpose. In short, accommodating Russia could strengthen deterrence and restraint of China by reducing its chances of forming closer alignment or even a strategic alliance with Russia—one that might encourage China to expect Russian support in a US-China conflict. The calculus would recognize too that by reducing confrontation of Russia in

Europe, the United States can better concentrate on balancing in Asia and even, perhaps, encourage America's most capable European allies to do the same. Reducing US-Russia tensions more generally may also advance the Indo-Pacific strategy indirectly by further encouraging India's growing strategic partnership with the United States in efforts to deter China. Russia and India maintain traditionally strong defense ties; as long as they do, US-Russia conflict will limit Washington's efforts to align New Delhi with its Indo-Pacific strategy. It is easier for countries to ally with each other when they do not have contradictory relations with important third parties.

The calculus would also include other ways in which accommodation's effects could mitigate the most salient downside risks outlined above. Thus, the danger that Russia might misinterpret the concessions as a weakening of US commitment to NATO's core collective defense mission would be offset by improved NATO cohesion resulting from bringing US policy into line with its core European allies. Likewise, the danger of emboldening China by suggesting a weakening of general American resolve would be offset by the overt purpose of reducing tensions in Europe to distance Russia from China and to concentrate US efforts on bolstering its Indo-Pacific strategy to deter China.

One final point about this approach should be emphasized. The movement to these accommodations should come before a major crisis in Asia or step-level

Moving to these accommodations should come *before* a major crisis, or their utility would be diminished

strengthening in Russia-China alignment occurs. Such situations might create an urgency to divide Russia from China that would make accommodating Russia in these ways more politically conceivable in the United States, but the potential influence and utility of accommodations would then be much diminished. Extending them in reaction to a crisis in Asia would be far more damaging to US credibility than doing so in a deliberate fashion, from a position of strength, in the context of an overall upgrade of NATO's

core collective defense posture. And the closer Russia-China alignment becomes, the less influence accommodations like those described above will have on Russia. With selective accommodation, it is harder to divide a tight alliance than to prevent one from forming.

For US grand strategy, the biggest problem posed by Russia and China's growing alignment is that it encourages China to expect Russian support in conflicts with the United States and its allies and thus makes deterring China more difficult. The point of trying to distance Russia from China is to discourage such

expectations—not to flip Russia into a balancer against China, but to remove it as an enabler of Chinese risk-taking.

To do this, it is necessary to address the mainspring of their strategic convergence which, on Russia's side, is the expansion and intensification of US military alignments against it on its borders. If the goal is to distance Russia from China now, before their strategic partnership deepens, the United States should begin to scale back its military ties to Georgia and Ukraine.

Of course, a full-fledged effort to pull Russia from China's orbit should involve the pursuit of many other kinds of concrete cooperation with Russia, across issue areas and different time horizons. The pursuit of a next-generation US-Russia strategic arms control framework, in particular, offers special opportunity to influence Russia's alignment longer term, because of the unique salience and strategic interdependence of the US-Russia relationship in this area.⁶⁴ But such avenues of engagement will gain little traction if the increasing pressure of US military alignments on Russia's border that are driving it toward alliance with China today is not altered.

Notes

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