



The U.S. should beware of the Beijing-Moscow axis

## Description

**In the geopolitics of the 1970s, the United States’ seismic decision to normalize relations with Communist China and lift a ban on sales of sensitive military technology to Beijing was known as “playing the China card” to thwart the Soviet Union. With President Xi Jinping’s high-profile three-day visit to Moscow this month, China has shown it is willing to play what might be called the Russia card to counter what Mr. Xi considers to be U.S. attempts to surround China and contain its economic and military rise.**

This growing alliance between America’s two greatest strategic and military challengers has the potential to shift the global order as profoundly as the United States did a half-century ago. America and its democratic allies had better be ready to respond.

China and Russia share a common apprehension of encirclement by the United States and NATO. Russia sees NATO’s eastward expansion as an existential threat — that was the main stated justification for its invasion of Ukraine. China, meanwhile, fears the United States is trying to create an “Indo-Pacific NATO” with a string of Asian defense agreements from the Philippines to Australia. Moreover, China and Russia both have a disdain for democratic values and a rules-based world order, which they see as outdated and dominated by the United States. Theirs is a confidence in the superiority of their autocratic governing systems. When the two leaders met, Mr. Putin congratulated Mr. Xi on his “reelection” to an unprecedented third term as president. Mr. Xi said he expected Mr. Putin to prevail in his own reelection in 2024.

Then there is the fact that Russia and China also hold the world’s largest and third-largest nuclear weapons stockpiles. China is expanding its nuclear arsenal to try to reach parity with the United States within the next decade.

Russia is clearly now the junior partner in this “no limits” friendship between Moscow and Beijing. Shorn of Western markets and its economy hammered by sanctions, Russia needs China to increase its purchases of oil, gas and grain, and to supply some of the Western goods that have disappeared from the shelves. China has also continued to supply Russia with aerial drones and drone parts, as

well as semiconductors. But there have been no reports so far of Beijing providing lethal weapons — something the Biden administration has warned would be crossing a red line. Despite its openly pro-Russia stance, China has suggested it might be a potential peacemaker in Ukraine. There was some thin hope this might actually be the case, after China helped broker a diplomatic rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia after a seven-year break. And Mr. Xi went to Moscow touting a supposed 12-point “peace plan” for ending the conflict. But unsurprisingly, it turned out to be no more than a series of bromides about the need for dialogue and restraint. Meanwhile, Mr. Xi has shown no interest in going to Kyiv to meet with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky, as have President Biden and other world leaders. Indeed, Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida made a surprise visit to Kyiv the same day Mr. Xi was being feted in the Kremlin.

President Biden has [framed the war in Ukraine](#) as “a battle between democracy and autocracy, between liberty and repression, between a rules-based order and one governed by brute force.” While his line of argument is true, it is of limited persuasiveness with Mr. Xi, who is trying to peddle the idea of Western-style democracy as a spent force.

An appeal to self-interest, however, might help convince Mr. Xi to use his growing friendship with Mr. Putin to push for a real solution to the conflict. China’s economic and trade relations with Europe are far more crucial than with Russia, and Mr. Xi should be reminded of this whenever he meets visiting European officials, starting with Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, who will assume the European Union Council’s rotating presidency this year, and French President Emmanuel Macron, scheduled to visit China next month. The Europeans need to send a clear and unequivocal message that China needs to use its leverage with Mr. Putin to end the conflict, not to bolster Russia’s economy.

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