

Russia:

A Bit Player in the “New World Order”?

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¹ *Opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Air University, the United States Air Force, the Department of Defense, or any other US government agency."*

No two nations consume U.S. defense and foreign policy bandwidth like Russia and China. They dominated the latest National Security Strategy (NSS), including prominent place in the analysis of “the Competition Between Democracies and Autocracies” and separate discussions of each as a global priority.² Given the clear importance of the two as actors on the world stage and Russia’s increasing reliance on China as a junior partner in what could be termed the *axis of autocracies*, this paper explores what Russia’s subservience to China means for the future of the international order as the two become ever more closely aligned. In counterpoint to a close Sino-Russian alliance it will also look at the prospects for Russian rapprochement with the West.

From a U.S. perspective, a Russia on its knees and subservient to China presents serious challenges for maintaining the existing liberal international order. An economically and socially isolated Russia that is experiencing significant military challenges in an ill-fated war gives China a position of extraordinary leverage from which to manipulate the clash between Russia and the broadly defined “West” to its own advantage. This increasingly binds Russia – wittingly or otherwise – to China in the Chinese-led effort to build an autocratic bloc to oppose the liberal democratic world order that has underpinned international relations for the last 80 years.³ On the margins of the G-20 in Jakarta for example, when Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was ignored by his other counterparts, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi announced “China is ready to work with Russia and other like-minded countries to advance multipolarity in the world.”⁴ In pursuit of this goal, Russia has become a major energy supplier for China, is working with China to de-dollarize international trade and has become a prime importer of Chinese goods as they continue to re-orient to more friendly markets.

² White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*.

³ “Wang-Lavrov Statement.”

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Given the advantages accruing to China with Russia as a virtual appendage, it would be in the West's interests to attempt to fracture this alliance. The prospect of the West reaching an accommodation with Russia in its current state, however, seems remote. President Putin has been indicted by the International Court of Justice – just the third time in history for a sitting world leader.⁵ Clearly, this is not a regime most leaders of the West want to engage. But Western leaders must keep the communication channels open and begin to map out how, once the Ukraine war ends, they can constructively deal with Russia again. A Russia largely outside of the international system is an asset to China; a Russia can be brought to the negotiating table to end the war and return to the international system is of no real benefit to the Chinese axis.

China is forming a new bloc of like-minded nations to counter the West. This axis of autocracies includes malleable countries like North Korea, Iran and Belarus who have nowhere else to turn. It also increasingly includes nations not ideologically aligned but who are hedging their bets on the international stage; these include South Africa, Saudi Arabia and Brazil. The biggest prize of all would be Russia in a second-string role as junior partner in this axis. The other members of the axis are of secondary importance, but Russia would be a real and formidable addition. In order to counter this potential alliance, the West must re-double efforts to identify and begin moving the Ukraine war in the direction of acceptable off ramps. Additionally, in order to be in a position to work with Russia in a post-Putin world, we must continue to engage with members of the regime as well as civil society within Russia and exiled Russian dissidents. These efforts will ensure the West is positioned to fracture China's axis and bring Russia back into the existing international order.

⁵ "Leaders Facing Justice."