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The China-Russia Axis: What does it want and how will it get it?

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Introduction

China and Russia have forged an influential new partnership in the 21st century to strengthen their individual economies, build powerful militaries, and aggressively challenge the West (the U.S. and NATO) in its joint quest to dominate the world over the past 20 years. Understanding their common goals, the Chinese President Xi Jinping and the Russian President Vladimir Putin have taken significant actions to determine what their economic and military objectives are and why, and to describe how their powerful “Axis” intends to achieve them.

After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Russian leaders spent the next decade rebuilding their wrecked economy and decimated military. By 2000, Russia was under the leadership of President Vladimir Putin who initially indicated an interest in forging closer ties to the West as his predecessor Boris Yeltsin wanted. In 2005, however, Putin had changed his mind, declaring that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a mistake. He made it his mission to reconstitute the old Soviet empire in one form or another. Putin also concluded that China was a good partner in achieving this goal of reestablishing Russia as a world superpower. Like Russia, China has similar expansionist goals and has begun turning away from Western influences.¹ As part of Putin’s plan, Russia has fought several localized, offensive wars on the southern and western edges of their country in Chechnya, in Georgia, in the Crimea, and now in Ukraine.

Since 1949, China has maintained a long-range plan to take control of Taiwan, territory they view as part of China. More recently, China has engaged in massive “island building” operations in the South China Sea to strengthen their influence over a strategic region as large as Western Europe. After the U.S. normalized relations with China in 1972, China became an economic giant by adopting capitalist principles while maintaining limits on individual freedoms, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. China is now poised to surpass the U.S. as the largest economy as soon as 2028.² Since the mid-1990s, China has used their powerful economy to fuel a large military buildup to challenge U.S. naval supremacy in the Pacific and elsewhere in the world.

The expansionist agendas by China in Southeast Asia and by Russia in Central Asia and Eastern Europe are opposed by world democracies, especially in Asia, in Europe, and in the U.S. To test the West, China and Russia have used cyber-warfare, irregular warfare, military proxies, puppet governments, and huge military buildup programs.³ Until now, only the economic and military power held by the U.S. and their allies has checked their expansionist ambitions.

Understanding their common goals, China and Russia have now established a new Axis power alliance to promote closer joint economic, political, and military ties.⁴ This has caused a new Cold War between the U.S. and the West against this powerful Axis of the East. Chinese President Xi Jinping and Russian President Vladimir Putin both see the new China-Russia Axis as the way for each of them to achieve their individual aspirations against Western opposition.

¹ Alexander Lukin, “Russia’s Image of China and Russian-Chinese Relations,” Brookings Institution, May 1, 2001, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/russias-image-of-china-and-russian-chinese-relations>.

² CNBC contributors, “China set to surpass U.S. as world’s biggest economy by 2028, says report.” CNBC, December 25, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2020/12/26/china-set-to-surpass-us-as-worlds-biggest-economy-by-2028-says-report.html>

³ Douglas E. Schoen and Melik Kaylan, *Return to Winter: Russia, China, and the New Cold War against America* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2015), 35, 75, 109, 113.

⁴ David Leonhardt, “A New Axis: China and Russia have formed an “alliance of autocracies,” The New York

Times, February 9, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/09/briefing/china-russia-alliance.html>.

The China Angle

Historical Background

For thousands of years, China saw themselves as the “Chung-Kuo – the Middle Kingdom, the center of the universe, and the world’s oldest culture and society.”⁵ In 1949, communist revolutionary Mao Zedong and his Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) won their three-year civil war. Subsequently, Chiang Kai-shek and his Chinese Nationalist Army retreated to Taiwan. Less than two years later, Mao sent a total of 1.4 million battle-tested soldiers into the Korean peninsula, entering China in the Korean War. This massive operation pushed back the UN forces led by General Douglas MacArthur. A Korean cease-fire armistice was eventually signed in 1953 that ended the Korean War with the Northern and Southern Korean border again being established along the 38th parallel. That conflict convinced China to be militarily prepared for a future war with the U.S.⁶

More recently, Chinese leaders have espoused a policy of expanding their economic and military strength to gain control over Taiwan and extend their influence throughout Southeast Asia, the Central Pacific, and globally through strategic partners. Those partners include Russia and smaller, authoritarian-minded countries in Africa, Central America, the Middle East, and South America.⁷ China has also used their memberships in key global organizations including the UN, the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and others to expand their markets, grow their economy, and fund their aggressive military buildup.⁸

At the end of World War II, the U.S. established a strong military presence in the far East and they have continued to build up militarily there today.⁹ In Japan and South Korea, the U.S. maintains six naval bases. In the Central Pacific, the U.S. has major bases at Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. The U.S. also maintains five air force bases in the region and has plans to add more.¹⁰ China sees this massive U.S. military buildup as a major threat to their power, prestige, and sovereignty in Asia.

China Today

For decades, China has maintained the largest standing army in the world.¹¹ China is now using its economic power to significantly strengthen and expand their air force and even more so

⁵ Richard Lewis, “Why China considers itself the Center of the World,” Business Insider, July 9, 2014, <https://www.businessinsider.com/understanding-chinese-perspectives-2014-7>.

⁶ Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 135.

⁷ Clyde Prestowitz, *The World Turned Upside Down: America, China, and the Struggle for Global Leadership* (New Haven, CT & London: Yale University Press, 2021), 82, 133-34, 230.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-74, 80, 84-85, 163, 268.

⁹ John Reed, “Surrounded: How the U.S. is encircling China with military bases.” *Foreign Policy*, August 20, 2013, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/20/surrounded-how-the-u-s-is-encircling-china-with-military-bases>.

¹⁰ David Axe, “Anticipating war with China, the U.S. Air Force is fanning out across the Pacific.” *Forbes*, June 21, 2021, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidaxe/2021/06/07/anticipating-war-with-china-the-us-air-force-is-spreading-across-the-pacific/?sh=558578826d78>.

¹¹ Sebastien Roblin, “China’s military is the biggest on the planet (but can it fight America and win?)” *The National Interest*, May 22, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/chinas-military-biggest-planet-can-it-fight-america-and-win-58862>

their navy to challenge the growing U.S. military presence in Asia. China also has the largest navy in the world with 355 ships and has aggressive plans to expand it to 460 ships by 2030.¹² While China's navy is the largest, it is not the most modern or advanced. To improve and enhance their naval power, China constructed 16 new shipyards to create a modern and elite navy capable of taking on U.S. military forces in the Far East and ultimately, in the Pacific and beyond.¹³ In 2010, China accelerated their shipbuilding program and budgeted \$84.8 billion (USD) by 2024 on new submarines, aircraft carriers, cruisers, destroyers, and frigates. This new fleet with advanced "sensors and armaments" replaces obsolete ships based on old Soviet designs.¹⁴ China's submarine program is also notable. Global-range, nuclear-powered ballistic and attack submarines are highly prioritized by China's People's National Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and are of some concern to the U.S. given their sophistication.¹⁵ China's aircraft carrier program is one of the largest budgetary items in their efforts to enlarge and develop a modern navy. China's first carrier was launched in 2012 and four more carriers are planned: one scheduled for completion in 2025 and another in 2030. Additional carriers are expected to be completed after that. They view this program as a "visible symbol of China's growing naval prowess."¹⁶

While China wants a large, powerful, and modern navy that can successfully challenge U.S. naval supremacy in Southeast Asia, it expects and intends to be a respected military power throughout the Pacific and other regions of the world where they have allies and strategic partners, such as Argentina and Iran. In 2013, President Xi called this plan to shift from a "near seas active defense" to "a strong maritime power" as his "China Dream."¹⁷ The U.S. strongly believes that China "will press forward with their goal regardless of political or economic obstacles, will have a clear military shipbuilding advantage over adversaries (like the U.S.), and will overcome technical challenges in creating a modern and powerful navy."¹⁸

China has also become skilled at using extensive, irregular warfare and clandestine actions, such as disinformation campaigns and cyber-attack operations, to secretly advance its agenda. China used cyber-hackers and high-tech spies to develop a sophisticated, cyber-espionage network to steal classified files from technology and defense contractors with high clearance contracts with the U.S. government, especially from 2009 until 2014. The stolen files included plans to "construct the most advanced U.S. military aircraft – the F-35 and F-22 stealth fighters and the C-17 transport aircraft."¹⁹ Once the FBI exposed the spy network in 2014, over 630,000 digital files on these aircraft had already been successfully stolen.²⁰ In the decades

¹² Mallory Shelbourne, "China has World's largest Navy with 355 Ships and counting, says Pentagon." USNI News, November 3, 2021, <https://news.usni.org/2021/11/03/china-has-worlds-largest-navy-with-355-ships-and-counting-says-pentagon>.

¹³ China Maritime Studies Institute and the Naval Institute Press, *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 8, 63, 69, 141, 150-51.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107, 112-13, 115, 121.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 107, 238, 240-42.

¹⁶ China Maritime Studies Institute and the Naval Institute Press, *Chinese Naval Shipbuilding: An Ambitious and Uncertain Course* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016), 249, 252-54, 257.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 261-62.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 261-62.

¹⁹ Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia's and China's Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 42, 45.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 42, 45.

before, China used their cyber-espionage operations to steal the “most advanced and complex U.S. land and sea-based missile designs, including the Minuteman III and the Trident C4.”²¹

On a grander scale, China is starting to use so-called “unsinkable aircraft carriers” to extend their range of self-appointed influence and control by creating artificial islands in the South China Sea, a strategic area claimed by at least six other countries.²² These islands are more than 600 miles from China’s coastline and provide a greatly expanded defense zone. While China says the islands are for non-military purposes, they have been designed to accommodate deep-water harbors for warships and attack submarines, as well as long-runways for military jet fighter and bomber aircraft. In addition, China’s PLAN has an ongoing warning to approaching ships and planes that the water and airspace around the islands are Chinese territory and to stay away despite being in international waters.²³ Additionally, China attempted to hide their indecisiveness in dealing with COVID-19 in 2020 as it quickly began to spread from China into a global pandemic.

In March 2020, COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China and that city immediately became the epicenter of the global pandemic. Despite multiple denials of being behind the creation of this disease, China soon came under unwanted scrutiny and harsh worldwide condemnation for their association with the disease, their attempt to cover it up, and for their clumsy effort to portray themselves as innocent. To alter the increasingly negative narrative directed towards China, President Xi presented a deceptive, carefully worded propaganda statement to the worldwide media that depicted China as the “global leader in containing the crises and declaring that the worst of the pandemic was over – just as the disease was spreading like wildfire throughout China, [the] U.S., and Europe.”²⁴

Over the next month, the Chinese government and most of the world’s countries imposed mandatory “lockdowns” that resulted in constricted supply chains and vast shortages of critical commodities, including food and water. These actions greatly weakened the world economy. To redirect the overall epidemic discussion, Chinese intelligence operatives disparaged the U.S. Navy with toxic propaganda that falsified official U.S. government records that indicated a captain of a U.S. aircraft carrier in the Pacific was relieved of his command because he sent a letter to his superiors insisting that his crew be taken ashore due to COVID-19 fears. The fabricated documents said the captain “badly damaged the image of the [U.S.] navy” and “seriously harmed the U.S.”²⁵ Furthermore, these documents were also “translated into Chinese and posted on numerous social media sites to demonstrate U.S. weakness and incompetence.”²⁶

Mao Zedong understood irregular and multi-domain warfare before it became a common practice by totalitarian leaders in China and Russia today. Mao described warfare in three distinctive phases:

²¹ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 146.

²² Rich Smith, “China builds an ‘Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier’ in the South China Sea” Fox Business Channel, January 7, 2016, <https://www.foxbusiness.com/markets/china-builds-an-unsinkable-aircraft-carrier-in-the-south-china-sea>

²³ Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 106-09.

²⁴ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 129, 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 130-32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 130-32.

“1) When the enemy has a clear advantage in numbers and power, the goal should be to avoid direct confrontation and focus on defense. 2) The focus should be on asymmetric tactics where forces ‘attack, deliver a strong blow, withdraw, and repeat’ and to engage the enemy when they are not expecting it or are tired of battle in what Mao called ‘strategic stalemate.’ 3) The focus should be on conducting offensive, conventional operations to vanquish the enemy.”²⁷

Irregular warfare falls under phase 2 and has been used effectively by China for the past 30 years. Until recently, China has seen the U.S. as a phase 1 military superior and their long-range military buildup as the way to achieve phase 3 capabilities.²⁸

Planting communist propaganda on college and university campuses in the U.S., and elsewhere in the free world, is another clear example of ongoing, irregular warfare by China. First created in 2004, Confucius Institutes were established on 90 U.S. campuses and at least 440 campuses total throughout the world by 2009. Under the guise of “promoting Chinese language and culture, supporting local Chinese teachings overseas, and facilitating cultural exchanges,” the underlying mission of these institutions was to “recruit spies and collect intelligence on Chinese in the U.S.” according to U.S. intelligence and law enforcement officials.²⁹ After being exposed as communist fronts for the Chinese government, many of the Institutes have closed. By late 2021, only 19 remained in the U.S. and four more were scheduled to close in 2022.³⁰

China also sees the use of international trade as a means of irregular warfare. Modeled on the old “Silk Road” concept pioneered during the Han Dynasty that linked Asia to Europe, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013. This giant, \$1.3 trillion (USD) investment plan intends to extend China’s economic power and political influence well beyond their borders. Through the construction of transformational “highways, railways, oil and natural gas pipelines, and seaports, China seeks to create direct networks under their control throughout Asia and extend them to Russia, the Middle East, and Europe.”³¹ The far-reaching plan establishes strategic ports on the “South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific, and [throughout] the Mediterranean Sea” under their direct influence and control.³² More than 60 countries who saw potential economic benefits of this “grand plan” signed on as BRI trade zone partners. The Chinese leadership also desires to “enact policies favorable to China on issues like human rights, Taiwan independence, Hong Kong crackdowns, etc.” as side benefits to exploit in insisting trade partners.³³ China also sees military oversight and security of the BRI trade zone as further extending the military footprint of China.³⁴

²⁷ Ibid., 134-36.

²⁸ Ibid., 134-36.

²⁹ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 149-52.

³⁰ NAS contributors, “How many Confucius Institutes are there in the United States.” *National Association of Scholars*, February 22, 2022, https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how_many_confucius_institutes_are_in_the_united_states.

³¹ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 165-68.

³² Ibid., 165-68.

³³ Ibid., 165-68.

³⁴ Ibid., 165-68.

The Russia Angle

Historical Background

For 30 years, Russia has used its revitalized economy to rebuild its military and use it in a number of regional conflicts. Now Russia has launched a full-scale war in Ukraine.³⁵ They are using newer, multi-domain maneuvers including: targeted cyber-warfare, propaganda, military proxies, misinformation, and overwhelming land, air, and sea power via conventional warfare. President Putin claims he is simply trying to de-Nazify Ukraine and bring peace to the people of that country, though this newfound campaign reveals an alternate agenda.³⁶ fd

In 1945, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin launched the Cold War by refusing to allow free elections in Poland. The U.S. and their allies in Western Europe created NATO in 1949 as a response and to deter the Soviets from further aggression against Western Europe. The Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviets and comprised of eight communist-ruled countries in eastern Europe, was created in 1955 to oppose NATO. Soviet-led communism began to crumble in 1990 and the Pact was dissolved in 1991.³⁷ NATO continued to exist and 10 former Warsaw Pact countries and territories have been given NATO membership since 1990. Putin says NATO leaders vowed not to extend eastward after German reunification, though nothing was ever put in writing.³⁸

Russia Today

President Putin watched the Soviet empire implode, Russia's economy collapse, and the Russian military decimated. He has said he does not miss communism but has decried Russia losing the superpower status the Soviet Union enjoyed for five-decades. Putin stated in 2005 that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."³⁹ From that point on, Putin has strived to recreate the Soviet Union, and its power, in some form. Seeing the West, and NATO especially, as dangerous adversaries intruding on Russia's historical sphere of influence and control over former Soviet-bloc countries, Putin developed a calculated plan to rebuild his military and create strategic allies that would help him build an alliance to turn Russia into a global superpower.

To start the process of bringing back Soviet-era political influence, military power, and authoritarian control in Eurasia, Putin created the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) in 2002. This military coalition currently consists of six former Soviet republics led by Russia. The Baltic States, NATO members since 2004, and Ukraine, who wants NATO membership, are the most significant former Soviet republics that are not CSTO members.⁴⁰

³⁵ AP contributors, "Russia invades Ukraine on multiple fronts in 'brutal act of war.'" PBS NewsHour, February 24, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/russia-invades-ukraine-on-multiple-fronts-in-brutal-act-of-war>.

³⁶ Max Fisher, "Putin's Case for War, Annotated." The New York Times, February 24, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/24/world/europe/putin-ukraine-speech.html>

³⁷ History.com editors, "NATO and the Warsaw Pact." History, January 25, 2022, <https://www.history.com/topics/cold-war/formation-of-nato-and-warsaw-pact>.

³⁸ RT contributors, "West promised not to expand NATO." RT, February 18, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/news/549921-nato-expansion-russia-document>.

³⁹ Rebekah Koffler. Putin's Playbook: Russia's Secret Plan to Defeat America (Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway, 2021), 48.

⁴⁰ Karena Avedissian, "Fact Sheet: What is the Collective Security Treaty Organization?" EVN, October 6, 2019, <https://evnreport.com/understanding-the-region/fact-sheet-what-is-the-collective-security-treaty-organization>.

Russia has long viewed Ukraine, and its strategic location and natural resources, as very important to his plans to reconstitute Soviet-style strength and influence in Europe. To install pro-Russian leadership in Ukraine that would oppose NATO membership and align with his goals, Putin strongly promoted the narrow election of Viktor Yanukovich as president of Ukraine in 2010.⁴¹ In 2014, Yanukovich was removed from office by the Ukrainian parliament for various charges of corruption, personal excesses, voter fraud, and Russian collusion. Putin declared that the removal of Yanukovich was an “illegal coup” and refused to recognize the pro-West, pro-NATO successor political leadership.⁴² Simultaneously, Putin launched a successful, multi-domain campaign to take control of the southern Ukrainian province of Crimea and backed Ukrainian separatists in a “proxy war” in the pro-Russian Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine.⁴³

After Putin consolidated his political and military power in Crimea, he made plans to establish a strong military presence on three Ukrainian borders: Crimea from the South, Russian-ally Belarus from the North and Russia-proper from the East. To prepare for this next phase of his plan to regain power over Ukraine, Putin continued to develop and train his military, honed and sharpened various Russian cyber-war attack capabilities, and solidified key economic and military ties with China’s political leadership – the China-Russia Axis.⁴⁴

The China-Russia Axis

Establishment of the Axis

The Axis became official on 4 February 2022. President Putin and President Xi expressed in a joint statement “mutual support” for each other that would “create long-term, legally-binding security guarantees in Europe.”⁴⁵ This agreement also included expressing mutual Russian and Chinese opposition to NATO expansion into Eastern Europe.

Russia has benefited from this new Axis association. After Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022, the 15-member UN Security Council attempted to pass a resolution condemning Russia’s unprovoked war against Ukraine. As a permanent member of the Council, Russia vetoed the resolution, and China (another permanent member of the Security Council) abstained from the vote, along with India and the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁶ China has also refused to sanction Putin or Russia. Instead, the Chinese expanded trade with Russia.⁴⁷ The formation of the China-Russia Axis was no coincidence. Both Putin and Xi see many long-term benefits from this substantial relationship. While it advances their immediate

⁴¹ George S. Beebe. *The Russia Trap* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2019), 58-59.

⁴² William Booth, “Ukraine’s parliament votes to oust president; former prime minister is freed from prison.” *The Washington Post*, February 22, 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraines-yanukovich-missing-as-protectors-take-control-of-presidential-residence-in-kiiev/2014/02/22/802f7c6c-9bd2-11e3-ad71-e03637a299c0_story.html.

⁴³ George S. Beebe. *The Russia Trap* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2019), 92-93, 100.

⁴⁴ Emily Crane, “Russian hackers targeting U.S. in ‘very large’ cyberattack.” *New York Post*, October 25, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/10/25/russian-hackers-target-us-networks-in-ongoing-cyberattack>.

⁴⁵ Rajeswari Rajagopalan, “Putin and Xi frame a new China-Russia partnership.” *The Diplomat*, February 15, 2022, <https://thediplomat.com/2022/02/putin-and-xi-frame-a-new-china-russia-partnership>.

⁴⁶ Sachin Parashar, “Russia vetoes UNSC resolution: India, China abstain.” *msn*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/russia-vetoes-unsc-resolution-india-china-abstain/ar-AAU16rZ>.

⁴⁷ Sam Meredith, “China says it wants to steer clear of U.S. sanctions over Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.” *CNBC*, March 15, 2022, <https://www.cnbc.com/2022/03/15/ukraine-crisis-china-wants-to-avoid-us-sanctions-over-russias-war.html>

goals in their respective spheres of influence, their bigger objective is a joint, autocratic quest to each expand their global power while combating and defeating the U.S. and their democratically-elected allies – adversaries who oppose the expansionist objectives of the Axis.

Axis Objectives and Western Concerns

The U.S. and their allies in the West understand the ramifications and risks posed by the China-Russia Axis. They see it as a major reset of international influences and power, where “the current Russia-Ukraine crisis is just one battle within a grander, multi-domain global war already underway – the war between democracy versus autocracy.”⁴⁸ Like China, Russia has used extensive clandestine actions such as disinformation propaganda campaigns and cyber-attack operations to secretly advance their totalitarian agendas. In 2007, Russia launched a series of cyber-strikes against Estonia, a small Baltic State and a current member of NATO, that inflicted economic and infrastructure damage on the country. While Estonia defended themselves against the attacks, they did not attempt to retaliate directly. Instead, they publicly engaged in finger-pointing to “name and shame . . . Russia as the culprit.”⁴⁹ Additionally, Russia has employed submarine-warfare to guard their territory, to spy on the U.S. and their allies, and to test the West while looking for weaknesses. Silent service submarines can stay below the waves for months at a time while secretly carrying their nuclear-powered arsenal anywhere in the world.⁵⁰ The U.S. has had the clear advantage with nuclear-armed submarines in the past, but it is shrinking.

While China is still ramping up their submarine program and will catch up eventually, Russia has spent 20-years modernizing their fleet.⁵¹ Their new subs are “quieter, better armed, can operate and attack land at greater ranges, and [can] operate far from home.”⁵² They have a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea and are often spotted patrolling the Eastern Coast of the U.S.⁵³ To an extent, China and Russia have been winning a stealth, ‘shadow war’ against the U.S. and their allies. The term “shadow war” refers to the perception that a country is largely unchallenged;⁵⁴ in Russia and China’s case, this is highlighted through clandestine activities to counter U.S. and NATO allies in Europe or to build military bases on artificial islands in international waters. China and Russia will continue to use these methods until the U.S. and their allies develop better ways to combat undercover operations from the Axis.⁵⁵ Furthermore, irregular warfare is rapidly becoming the most effective method for China and Russia to attack

⁴⁸ Douglas E. Schoen, “The risks and implications of China and Russia’s unholy alliance.” The Hill, February 20, 2022, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/594927-the-risks-and-implications-of-china-and-russias-unholy-alliance>.

⁴⁹ Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 26, 29.

⁵⁰ Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 219, 225.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 219, 225.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 228-31.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 228-31, 233.

⁵⁴ Jim Sciutto, “The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America” October 30, 2019, [https://som.yale.edu/event/2019/10/the-shadow-war-inside-russias-and-chinas-secret-operations-to-defeat-](https://som.yale.edu/event/2019/10/the-shadow-war-inside-russias-and-chinas-secret-operations-to-defeat-america#:~:text=China%20and%20Russia%20are%20waging%20their%20shadow%20war,satellites%20in%20space%20to%20undermine%20the%20U.S.%20military.)

[merica#:~:text=China%20and%20Russia%20are%20waging%20their%20shadow%20war,satellites%20in%20space%20to%20undermine%20the%20U.S.%20military.](https://som.yale.edu/event/2019/10/the-shadow-war-inside-russias-and-chinas-secret-operations-to-defeat-america#:~:text=China%20and%20Russia%20are%20waging%20their%20shadow%20war,satellites%20in%20space%20to%20undermine%20the%20U.S.%20military.)

⁵⁵ Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 245, 247-48.

and inflict damage on their opponents without committing direct military forces via conventional warfare. Russia has been especially adept in using proxies to achieve its objectives. In the Georgia, Crimea, and Donbas conflicts, Russia used special operation forces, also referred to as ‘little green men’ for the color uniforms they wore. They provided the “training, weapons, money, and other assistance” to allied separatists operating on secret, but very specific, Kremlin orders.⁵⁶ In 2015, Putin signed a treaty with the Syrian government to assist them militarily but not take a lead military role in their civil war, unlike the 1979 Soviet-Afghanistan War. This gave Putin and his Russian military commanders the ability to direct war efforts from behind the scenes but not be seen as the visible main players in the fight.⁵⁷

Also in 2015, Putin expanded his use of proxies by employing private military companies to conduct select security operations. These well-armed companies undertake “military and information warfare missions overseas including combat support, training, prospective services, and site security.”⁵⁸ They are designed to “weaken U.S. authority and respect abroad while increasing Russia’s influence by providing special security and the capabilities to train, advise, and assist hand-picked Russian allies and strategic partners.”⁵⁹ These security forces “receive guidance and aid from the Russian FSB,” the KGB’s successor spy agency.⁶⁰ Today, they still operate around the world, primarily in Africa, Asia, Europe, Central America, and in the Middle East.⁶¹

In addition to rogue states like North Korea and Iran, China and Russia are building modern intercontinental and ballistic nuclear missile capabilities. Meanwhile, the U.S. has greatly reduced nuclear stockpiles and has also reduced or outright canceled deployments of missile defense shield systems. In 2010, President Barack Obama declared he would “limit the use of nuclear weapons, even in the case of a direct attack on the U.S.” He also said the U.S. would not “develop any ‘new generation’ missiles to replace archaic and obsolete nuclear weapon systems” on his watch as president.⁶² Obama’s statements and actions significantly emboldened Russia and China to take a clear advantage in this critically important domain.⁶³

In a 2012 speech, outgoing Russian President Dmitri Medvedev said Russian youth needed positive role models to inspire them to be successful in the future in important areas including, “literature, art, education, and . . . nuclear weapons.”⁶⁴ Russian leaders clearly view possessing powerful nuclear weapons as a critical aspect to restoring their empire and regaining superpower status.⁶⁵ During the Cold War, 70% of Russia’s Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) were stationary in land-based missile silos. Today, Russia is spending roughly \$30 billion (USD) a year (or about 40% of their overall defense budget) on “mobile, land-based

⁵⁶ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 61, 65-66.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 61, 65-66.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 72-74.

⁶¹ Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 72-74.

⁶² Douglas E. Schoen and Melik Kaylan. *Return to Winter: Russia, China, and the New Cold War against America* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2015), 144-48.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 144-48.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 157-59.

⁶⁵ Elbridge Colby, “The role of nuclear weapons in the U.S.-Russian relationship.” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 26, 2016, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/26/role-of-nuclear-weapons-in-u.s.-russian-relationship-pub-62901>

ICBM launchers and new submarine-launched ballistic missiles.”⁶⁶ In 2020, Russia also unveiled newer and faster strategic long-range bombers.⁶⁷

During the Cold War, the U.S. and Russia controlled virtually all of the nuclear weapons in the world. This is not the case today. While Russia is known to have at least 5,900 and the U.S. has about 5,500 currently, the U.S. believes China has at least 300 today and will have over 1,000 by 2030. But in 2012, Russian General Viktor Yesin [sic] said China already had between 1,600 and 1,800 nuclear weapons and could build up to 3,600.⁶⁸ Regardless of the actual number, China is catching up to the world’s two premier, nuclear-superpowers with land and sea-based nuclear programs. China has also engaged in a “pan-Asian arms race over short and intermediate range weapons with smaller nuclear powers.”⁶⁹ Only the U.S. and Russia are prohibited from having these nuclear weapon systems under the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty. While China says they would only use their nuclear arsenal in a defensive situation, its use of propaganda, deception, and misinformation casts doubt on this claim.⁷⁰

Conclusion

In a 2011 speech, President Putin said, “The stronger you are, the less likely people will be tempted to mess with you.”⁷¹ This summarizes how Putin has thought, plotted, and acted during his more than 22-years as Russia’s top leader. His aggressive and bold actions against his neighbors shows that he takes first-strike initiatives. He does it with every tool he has including targeted cyberattacks, propaganda, military proxies, misinformation, and overwhelming land, air, and sea power via conventional or nuclear warfare. As NATO continues to expand into Eastern Europe and closer to Russia’s borders, Putin is convinced that the U.S. and their Western allies in NATO want to destroy Russia and prevent him from rebuilding his “Great Russian Empire.”⁷²

While just as expansionist as Russia, China has been more cautious and somewhat hesitant to move forward with its daring agenda without knowing how the U.S. would ultimately respond to aggressive actions by themselves, or another major military power. The current Russia-Ukraine War is showing that the U.S. and the West are willing to fight back to defend an ally with their vast arsenal of economic weapons and massive military support – and make an aggressive opponent pay for their actions.

⁶⁶ Douglas E. Schoen and Melik Kaylan. *Return to Winter: Russia, China, and the New Cold War against America* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2015), 157-59.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 157-59.

⁶⁸ Mark Schneider, “The Chinese Nuclear Threat.” Real Clear Defense, October 24, 2020, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/10/24/the_chinese_nuclear_threat_581838.html.

⁶⁹ Douglas E. Schoen and Melik Kaylan. *Return to Winter: Russia, China, and the New Cold War against America* (New York & London: Encounter Books, 2015), 161-63.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 161-63.

⁷¹ Rebekah Koffler. *Putin’s Playbook: Russia’s Secret Plan to Defeat America* (Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway, 2021), 57.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 57, 70.

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