

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

### **Introduction**

The thesis of this paper is to examine statements and actions by China and Russia and their leaders, determine what their economic and military objectives are and why, and describe how their powerful “Axis” intends to achieve them.

During and after the Cold War, the Soviet Union (of which Russia was the largest Soviet republic until its 1992 dissolution) and China were longtime, near-peer communist rivals who distrusted each other and frequently engaged in minor armed skirmishes on their 2,615 mile, fortified border. During the 1970’s, President Richard Nixon successfully used diplomacy to further isolate these two communist regimes and keep them apart from each other.

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. But Putin declared in 2005 that the dissolution of the Soviet Union was a mistake and he made it his mission to reconstitute the old Soviet empire in some form. Putin also concluded that China was a good partner to achieve this goal of reestablishing Russia as a world superpower. China has similar expansionist goals and like Russia, has begun turning away from Western influences.<sup>1</sup> As part of this plan, Russia has fought several localized wars on their border in Chechnya, in Georgia, and in the Ukraine province of Crimea. Now, Russia has begun a war in Ukraine with 190,000 battle-tested troops.

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. In the decades since “Nixon went to China,” China has become an economic giant by adopting capitalist principles while maintaining brutal restrictions on individual freedom and liberty, as was demonstrated in the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown. Today, China is on track to surpassing the U.S. as the largest economy. Since the mid 1990’s, China has used their powerful economy to fuel a massive military buildup to challenge U.S. supremacy in the Pacific.

The expansionist agendas by China in Southeast Asia and by Russia in Central Asia and Central Europe are opposed by world democracies, especially in Southeast 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 military buildup programs.<sup>2</sup> Until now, only the economic and military power held by the U.S. and their allies has checked their ambitions.

Understanding their common goals, communist China and authoritarian Russia have now established a new Axis power alliance to promote closer joint economic, political, and military ties.<sup>3</sup> This has caused a revived Cold War between the West and the Axis. President Xi Jinping

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

<sup>2</sup> 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.

<sup>3</sup> 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>.

of China and President Vladimir Putin of Russia both see the new China-Russia Axis as the way for each of them to achieve their individual, expansionist aspirations against Western opposition, much like the Axis powers did in World War II. Significant statements and important strategic actions made by the Axis and their leaders will be detailed, analyzed, and explained in this paper.

### **The China Angle**

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.”<sup>4</sup> In 1949, communist revolutionary Mao Zedong and his Chinese People’s Liberation Army won their three-year civil war. Subsequently, Chiang Kai-shek and his Chinese Nationalist Army retreated to Taiwan. Less than two years later, China entered the Korean War and “the U.S. became China’s primary adversary” when Mao sent a total of 1.4 million battle-tested soldiers onto the Korean peninsula. This massive operation pushed back the UN forces led by Gen. Douglas MacArthur. Eventually, a cease-fire armistice was signed in 1953 that ended the conflict back at the 38th parallel. That conflict convinced China to be militarily prepared for a future U.S. invasion of their mainland.<sup>5</sup>

More recently, Chinese leaders have espoused a policy of expanding their military might and economic strength to gain control over Taiwan (a long-time goal) 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.<sup>6</sup> 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, the “Belt Road” project, and others to expand their markets, grow their economy, and fund their military buildup.<sup>7</sup>

At the end of World War II, the U.S. established a strong military presence in the far East and they continue to build up militarily there today.<sup>8</sup> 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 area and have plans to add more.<sup>9</sup> China sees this U.S. military buildup as a threat to their power, prestige, and sovereignty in Asia.

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<sup>4</sup> 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>.

<sup>5</sup> Seth G. Jones, *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 135.

<sup>6</sup> 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.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-74, 80, 84-85, 163, 268.

<sup>8</sup> 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>.

<sup>9</sup> 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>.

For many decades, China has maintained the largest standing army in the world. China is now using their economic power to significantly strengthen and expand their air force and especially their navy to challenge the growing U.S. military presence in Asia. Today, China has the largest navy in the world with 355 ships and has plans to expand it to 460 ships by 2030.<sup>10</sup> While China's navy is the largest, is not the most modern or advanced. To improve and enhance their naval power, China constructed 16 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.<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup> China's submarine program is notable. Global-range, nuclear-powered ballistic and attack submarines are highly prioritized by the Chinese Navy and are of some concern to the U.S.<sup>13</sup>

China's aircraft carrier program is one of the largest budgetary items in their efforts to enlarge and develop a modern navy. After launching their first carrier in 2012, Chinese Admiral Yin Zhuo called it, "only a first step." Four more carriers are planned with 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."<sup>14</sup>

While China wants a large, powerful, and modern navy that can successfully challenge U.S. naval supremacy in their current area of influence (Southeast Asia), they expect and intend to be a respected military power throughout the Pacific and other regions of the world where they have allies and partners. In 2013, President Xi Jinping called this plan to shift from a "near seas active defense" to "a strong maritime power" as his "China Dream." 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."<sup>15</sup>

China has become skilled at using extensive, clandestine actions (such as disinformation propaganda campaigns and cyber-attack operations) and irregular warfare to secretly advance their totalitarian agenda. From 2009 until 2014, China used cyber-hackers and even high tech spies to develop a sophisticated, cyber-espionage network to steal top-secret files from high tech and defense contractors with high clearance contracts with the U.S. government. The stolen files were plans to "construct the most advanced U.S. military aircraft ever built – the F-35 and F-22

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<sup>10</sup> 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>.

<sup>11</sup> 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.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 107, 112-13, 115, 121.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 107, 238, 240-42.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 249, 252-54, 257.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 261-62.

stealth fighters and the C-17 transport aircraft.” Once the FBI exposed the spy network in 2014, over 630,000 digital files on the aircraft had already been successfully stolen.<sup>16</sup> In the decades 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.”<sup>17</sup>

On a bigger scale, China has creatively used so-called “unsinkable aircraft carriers” to extend their range of self-appointed influence and control. They have done this by creating artificial islands in the South China Sea, a strategic area the size of western Europe that is claimed by at least a half-dozen other countries. 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 and long runways for military aircraft. In addition, the Chinese Navy has an ongoing warning to all approaching ships and planes that the water and airspace around the islands are Chinese territory and to stay away despite being in international waters.<sup>18</sup>

China has used the Covid-19 pandemic to hide their indecisiveness in dealing with the epidemic. Instead, they have disparaged the U.S. Navy with toxic propaganda and deception. In March 2020, Covid-19 was first reported in Wuhan, China and that city quickly 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 worldwide condemnation for their association with the disease, their attempt to cover it up, and for their clumsy effort to portray themselves as innocent victims. To alter the increasingly negative narrative directed towards China, President Xi Jinping presented a carefully worded propaganda statement (full of lies, distortions and misinformation) 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, U.S., and Europe.”<sup>19</sup>

Over the next month, the Chinese government (and most of the world’s nations) imposed mandatory individual “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 epidemic discussion and use the pandemic to embarrass and inflict covert damage on the U.S., China intelligence operatives falsified official U.S. government records that indicated a U.S. aircraft carrier captain in the Pacific was relieved of his command because he sent a letter to superiors insisting that his crew be taken ashore because of Covid-19 fears. Furthermore, the fabricated documents said the captain, “badly damaged the image of the navy” and “seriously harmed the U.S.” The totally fake statements then were “translated into Chinese and posted on social media sites to demonstrate U.S. weakness and incompetence.”<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 42, 45.

<sup>17</sup> Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 146.

<sup>18</sup> Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 106-09.

<sup>19</sup> Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 129, 130.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 130-32.

Mao Zedong understood irregular and multi-domain warfare before it started to become a common practice by totalitarian leaders in China and Russia today. Mao described warfare in three distinctive phases. “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.” 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.<sup>21</sup>

Planting communist propaganda on college and university campuses in the U.S. (and elsewhere in the free world) is a clear example of ongoing irregular warfare being waged by China. First established in 2004, so-called “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 actual 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.<sup>22</sup> After being exposed as fronts for the Chinese government, the Institutes have been closing. Today, only 19 remain in the U.S. and four more are scheduled to close later this year.<sup>23</sup>

China even sees the use of international trade as a means of irregular warfare. Modeled on the old “Silk Road” concept that was pioneered during the Han Dynasty and linked Asia to Europe, China launched the “Belt and Road Initiative” 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.” The plan establishes strategic ports on the “South China Sea, the Indian Ocean, the South Pacific, and the Mediterranean Sea” under their direct influence and control. More than 60 countries who see the economic benefits of this “grand plan” signed on as “Belt and Road’ trade zone partners. A side benefit China desires to exploit is insisting trade partners “enact policies favorable to China on issues like human rights, Taiwan independence, Hong Kong crackdowns, etc.” China also sees military oversight and security of “Belt and Road” as further extending the military footprint of China.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 134-36.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 149-52.

<sup>23</sup> 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](https://www.nas.org/blogs/article/how_many_confucius_institutes_are_in_the_united_states).

<sup>24</sup> Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 165-68.

## The Russia Angle

For 30 years, Russia has used their revitalized economy to rebuild their military and use it in a number of regional conflicts. Now Russia has launched its biggest and boldest war to date with an invasion of Ukraine.<sup>25</sup> They are using newer, multi-domain maneuvers including targeted cyber-warfare, propaganda, misinformation, military proxies, and overwhelming land, air, and sea power via conventional warfare. The man behind these aggressions is President Vladimir Putin. Putin claims he is simply trying to liberate the people of Ukraine. But that is only clever, KGB-style political propaganda and misinformation meant to hide his true agenda.

Putin spent the final years of the Soviet Union as a KGB operative in the former East German city of Dresden. After returning to Russia and working for the Mayor of St. Petersburg, Putin came to the attention of President Boris Yeltsin. Putin quickly moved up through the ranks of Yeltsin's government and was eventually appointed the director of the Federal Security Service (the KGB's successor spy agency) and then Prime Minister in 1999. When Yeltsin resigned, he picked Putin as his successor and helped him win the presidential election in 2000.<sup>26</sup>

Putin quickly became a very savvy and skilled politician. Using capabilities he learned at the KGB, he has successfully used propaganda and manipulation to get what he wants. Educated as a lawyer, Putin is very intelligent. Georgetown University Professor Angela Stent said, "this is someone who is pretty well-informed on issues . . . who is in command of the facts."<sup>27</sup>

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. In fact, Putin stated in 2005 that "the collapse of the Soviet Union was the biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century."<sup>28</sup> 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 (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. China is the crown jewel of Putin's alliance.

In 1945, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin launched the Cold War by reneging on free elections in Poland. The U.S. and their World War II allies created NATO in 1949 to stop the Soviet Union from invading and taking control of western Europe. The Warsaw Pact, led by the Soviet Union, was created in 1955. This Pact was comprised of eight communist-ruled countries in eastern Europe and was formed to stand against NATO. Communism began to crumble in 1990

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<sup>25</sup> 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>.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Longley, "Biography of Vladimir Putin: From KGB Agent to Russian President." ThoughtCo., February 14, 2020, <https://www.thoughtco.com/vladimir-putin-biography-4175448>.

<sup>27</sup> Rebekah Koffler. *Putin's Playbook: Russia's Secret Plan to Defeat America* (Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway, 2021), 43-44.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

and the Pact was dissolved in 1991.<sup>29</sup> But NATO continued to exist and 10 former Warsaw Pact countries/territories have been given NATO membership since 1990. Putin says NATO leaders vowed not to extend eastward after German reunification but nothing was ever put in writing.<sup>30</sup>

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.<sup>31</sup>

Putin 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 in 2010.<sup>32</sup>

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.<sup>33</sup> 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 far eastern Ukraine.<sup>34</sup>

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 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,<sup>35</sup> and solidified key economic and military ties with China’s political leadership to formally establish the China-Russia Axis.

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<sup>29</sup> 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>.

<sup>30</sup> RT contributors, “West promised not to expand NATO.” RT, February 18, 2022, <https://www.rt.com/news/549921-nato-expansion-russia-document>.

<sup>31</sup> Karena Avedissian, “Fact Sheet: What is the Collective Security Treaty Organization?” EVN Report, October 6, 2019, <https://evnreport.com/understanding-the-region/fact-sheet-what-is-the-collective-security-treaty-organization>.

<sup>32</sup> George S. Beebe. *The Russia Trap* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2019), 58-59.

<sup>33</sup> 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-protesters-take-control-of-presidential-residence-in-kiiev/2014/02/22/802f7c6c-9bd2-11e3-ad71-e03637a299c0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/ukraines-yanukovich-missing-as-protesters-take-control-of-presidential-residence-in-kiiev/2014/02/22/802f7c6c-9bd2-11e3-ad71-e03637a299c0_story.html).

<sup>34</sup> George S. Beebe. *The Russia Trap* (New York: Thomas Dunn Books, 2019), 92-93, 100.

<sup>35</sup> Emily Crane, “Russian hackers targeting U.S. networks in ‘very large and ongoing’ cyberattack.” The New York Post, October 25, 2021, <https://nypost.com/2021/10/25/russian-hackers-target-us-networks-in-ongoing-cyberattack>.

## The China-Russia Axis

The Axis became official on February 4, 2022. In a joint statement, President Putin and President Xi expressed, “mutual support” for each other that will “create long-term, legally-binding security guarantees in Europe,” as well as jointly opposing NATO expansion.<sup>36</sup>

Russia has already benefited from their new Axis association. After Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 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. But China, another permanent member of the Council, abstained from the vote along with India and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>37</sup> China has also refused to sanction Putin or Russia. Instead, they expanded trade with Russia.

The formation of the China-Russia Axis was no coincidence. Both Xi and Putin see many long-term benefits from this substantial relationship. While it advances their immediate 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 tyrannical and expansionist objectives of the Axis.

The U.S. and their allies understand the real ramifications and great risks posed by the China-Russia Axis. They see it as a major reset of international influences 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.”<sup>38</sup>

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 that is a former Soviet republic and a current member of NATO) that inflicted damage on the country with hard-to-trace, irregular warfare assaults. 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.”<sup>39</sup>

Russia has employed submarine warfare to guard their territory, to spy on the U.S. and their allies, and to test them while looking for weaknesses. “Silent service” subs can stay below the waves for months at a time while secretly carrying their nuclear powered arsenal anywhere in the world. The U.S. has had the clear advantage with submarines, but it is shrinking.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> 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>.

<sup>37</sup> Sachin Parashar, “Russia vetoes UNSC resolution: India, China abstain.” *msn*, February 26, 2022, <https://www.msn.com/en-in/news/world/russia-vetoes-uns-resolutions-india-china-abstain/ar-AAU16rZ>.

<sup>38</sup> 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>.

<sup>39</sup> Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 26, 29.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 219, 225.



While China is still ramping up their submarine program and will catch up eventually, Russia has spent 20 years modernizing their fleet. Their new subs are “quieter, better armed, can operate and attack land at greater ranges, and operate far from home.” They have a permanent presence in the Mediterranean Sea and are often spotted patrolling the East Coast of the U.S.<sup>41</sup>

To an extent, China and Russia have been “winning a shadow war” against the U.S. and their allies. That is the perception when they are largely unchallenged, be it using clandestine activities to attack U.S. and NATO allies in Europe or 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 secret and undercover operations used by the Axis.<sup>42</sup>

Irregular warfare is rapidly becoming the most effective way for China and Russia to attack and inflict damage on their opponents without committing direct military forces via conventional warfare. The U.S. and their allies are still learning this game. Russia has been especially adept in using “proxies” to achieve their objectives. In the Georgia, Crimea and Donbas conflicts, Russia used special operations forces, also known 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 Kremlin orders. In 2015, Putin signed a treaty with Syria to assist them militarily but not take a lead military role in their civil war, unlike the 1979-89 Soviet-Afghanistan War. This gave Putin and his Russian military commanders the ability to direct war efforts behind the scenes but not be seen as the visible main players in the fight.<sup>43</sup>

Also in 2015, Putin expanded his use of “proxies” by employing private military companies to conduct select security operations. These armed companies undertake “military and information warfare missions overseas including combat support, training, prospective services, and site security.” They are designed to “weaken U.S. authority and respect abroad while increasing Russia’s influence by providing special security the capabilities to train, advise, and assist hand-picked Russian allies and strategic partners.” These security forces “receive guidance and aid from the Russian Federal Security Service” (the KGB’s successor spy agency). Today, they still operate in Africa, Asia, Europe, Central America, and in the Middle East.<sup>44</sup>

In addition to rogue states like North Korea and Iran, China and Russia are building or modernizing their intercontinental and ballistic nuclear missile capabilities on the nuclear front. Meanwhile, the U.S. has greatly reduced nuclear stockpiles. The U.S. 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

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<sup>41</sup> Jim Sciutto. *The Shadow War: Inside Russia’s and China’s Secret Operations to Defeat America* (New York: Harper-Collins Publishers, 2019), 228-31, 233.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 245, 247-48.

<sup>43</sup> 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.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 72-74.

archaic and obsolete nuclear weapon systems.” Obama’s unwise statements and actions greatly emboldened Russia and China to take a clear advantage in this critically important domain.<sup>45</sup>

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.” Russian leaders view possessing powerful nuclear weapons as critical aspect to restoring their empire and regaining superpower status. During the Cold War, 70% of Russia’s ICBM’s 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 ICBM launchers and new submarine-launched ballistic missiles.” In 2020, Russia also unveiled newer and faster strategic long-range bombers.<sup>46</sup>

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 to have at least 300 today and will have over 1,000 by 2030. But in 2012, Russian General Viktor Yesin said China had between 1,600 and 1,800 nuclear weapons and could build up to 3,600.<sup>47</sup> Regardless of the actual number, China is rapidly trying to catch 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.” Only the U.S. and Russia are prohibited from having these nuclear weapon systems under the 1987 INF Treaty. While China says they would only use their nuclear arsenal in a defensive situation, their blatant use of propaganda, deception, and misinformation makes that claim highly suspect.<sup>48</sup>

### Conclusion

In a 2011 speech, President Vladimir Putin said, “The stronger you are, the less likely people will be tempted to mess with you.” This summarizes how Putin has thought, plotted, and acted during his 22 years in office as Russia’s Prime Minister and President. As his aggressive and bold actions in Chechnya, Georgia, Crimea, and now Ukraine show, he takes first-strike initiative when he thinks he is being opposed unfairly or when he wants something and when he thinks he is strong enough to take it. He does it with every offensive tool he has including targeted cyber-warfare, propaganda, misinformation, military proxies, and overwhelming land, air, and sea power via conventional or nuclear warfare. With NATO moving ever closer to Russian soil, Putin is convinced that the U.S. and their Western allies want to destroy him and

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<sup>45</sup> 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.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 157-59.

<sup>47</sup> 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](https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2020/10/24/the_chinese_nuclear_threat_581838.html).

<sup>48</sup> 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.

prevent him from rebuilding his “Great Russian Empire.” Like every Russian leader since Peter the Great, Putin is an opportunistic expansionist and will stop at nothing to achieve his goals.<sup>49</sup>

While just as expansionist as Russia, China has been more cautious and somewhat hesitant to move forward with its daring agenda without better 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. In 1950, China and their communist ally to the South greatly underestimated and misjudged the U.S. reaction to North Korea’s invasion of South Korea. That war cost China roughly 500,000 casualties (killed, wounded, or MIA) and they clearly do not want to make similar mistakes now in the South China Sea or with Taiwan.

The fact that the U.S. is not afraid to engage directly in a major military conflict is not easily forgotten in China. In 1991, the U.S. built a global UN coalition, deployed to the Middle East, and then swiftly crushed Iraq in 43 days in the Gulf War, liberating Kuwait. These actions impressed and terrified U.S. adversaries, especially China’s leaders. This proved to China and the world that the U.S. was the only military superpower on earth and could do as it pleased.

Following the Gulf War, Zhang Youxia, General of the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, said he believed China “lacked the advanced technology” their military would need to win a war with the U.S. At the same time, President Jiang Zemin of China quoted Joseph Stalin, “backwards technology means being in a passive position and taking a beating.” Fearing the West wants to ultimately destroy them (much like Vladimir Putin believes), both Chinese leaders understood the great power the U.S. and their allies possessed. This stark realization jumpstarted their aggressive plan to compete militarily by building up their armed forces and excelling in all multi-domain, irregular warfare procedures. China wants to be ready in the future where war with the U.S. is inevitable. To win that war, China intends to continue expanding the capabilities they need to dominate their sphere of influence in Southeast Asia, the Pacific, and beyond.<sup>50</sup>

China and Russia have similar totalitarian and expansionist ambitions. They know what they want and why they want it. And they believe the China-Russia Axis will get it for them.

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<sup>49</sup> Rebekah Koffler. *Putin’s Playbook: Russia’s Secret Plan to Defeat America* (Washington, D.C., Regnery Gateway, 2021), 57, 70.

<sup>50</sup> Seth G. Jones. *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, China, Iran, and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), 138

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