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On October 28, 2024, a group of South Korean intelligence officials briefed NATO members and the alliance's three other Indo-Pacific partners—Australia, Japan, and New Zealand—on a shocking development in the war in Ukraine: North Korea's deployment of thousands of its troops to Russia's Kursk region to aid Moscow's war effort. The fact that Seoul sent its top intelligence analysts to Brussels for the briefing was nearly as stunning as North Korea's decision to enter the war in Ukraine.

Both developments reflected a new reality. The United States' adversaries are coordinating with one another in unprecedented

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ways, creating a more unified theater of competition in Eurasia. In response, U.S. allies are coalescing. For a few years, the United States led that effort. In 2021, it formed AUKUS, a security arrangement with Australia and the United Kingdom. In 2022, NATO began inviting Asian countries to participate in its annual summits. And in 2024, Japan, South Korea, the United States, and the EU created a coalition to loosen China's grip over pharmaceutical supply chains.

Today, however, the United States appears to be dispensing with a transregional approach to great-power competition. In May, Elbridge Colby, the undersecretary of defense for policy, dissuaded British officials from sending an aircraft carrier on a scheduled deployment to the Indo-Pacific. The gist of Colby's position, according to an anonymous source quoted by *Politico*, was simple: "We don't want you there." He urged them to focus instead on threats closer to home—namely, Russia.

Washington is now encouraging its Asian and European allies to stick to their neighborhoods—a throwback foreign policy that is ill suited to the current moment. China and Russia are synchronizing their transgressions and sharing weapons and know-how. Together, they pose a threat more formidable than any the United States has faced in decades. The lines between Asia and Europe are blurring, and crises on one continent have spillover effects in the other. The United States should try to influence the new networks its allies are crafting, not resist them. Otherwise, Washington may find itself on the fringes of a new global order.

COME TOGETHER

American primacy depends on Asian and European security. In the 1940s, the political scientist Nicholas Spykman argued the importance of commanding the coastal edges, or rimlands, of Eurasia. "Who controls the rimland rules Eurasia," he wrote. "Who rules Eurasia controls the destinies of the world."

Since then, every U.S. president—with the exception of Donald Trump—has shared Spykman's conviction. They have also shared a belief that the United States should never again allow the emergence of a powerful Eurasian bloc that could threaten American interests. Any alignment of regional powers, whether as allies or in coordinated opposition to the United States, could pose a threat to U.S. preeminence. When that happened in the 1910s and again in

the 1930s, the United States was drawn into two devastating world wars. Thus, while American leaders firmly committed themselves to both Asian and European security after World War II, they also spent most of the next 50 years trying to keep U.S. adversaries divided and U.S. allies apart.

This approach sustained American dominance for decades. But it is no longer fit for purpose. The United States now faces the prospect of an emerging Eurasian military-industrial bloc. China, the world's largest economy by purchasing power parity, is building a partnership with Russia that is an alliance in all but name. Both countries have formidable militaries and years of experience carrying out hybrid operations, such as cyberattacks, maritime disruptions, and disinformation campaigns. Last year, Russia signed a mutual defense treaty with North Korea. China has conducted joint military exercises with Belarus and Serbia. Meanwhile, China and Russia use institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the BRICS, a group named after its first five members—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—to provide a veneer of legitimacy to their plans.

The lines between Asia and Europe are blurring.

Although this loose coalescing of adversaries is driven more by shared grievances than by common interests, the United States cannot ignore it. Washington must unify its alliances by investing in cross-regional ties. U.S. President Joe Biden recognized that need and sought to build "the muscle of democratic alliances." The AUKUS pact, for example, was an ambitious effort to forge connections among allied defense industries across the Atlantic and the Pacific in fundamentally new ways.

With Chinese technologies and North Korean troops aiding Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, European partners know they can't sit on the sidelines of Asian geopolitics. And Indo-Pacific partners understand that what happens in Ukraine today could influence how China approaches Taiwan tomorrow. As Japan's former foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi has put it, security in Europe and security in the Pacific "are not separable." Over the past seven years, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the EU all drafted new Indo-Pacific strategies that stress the importance of working with Asian democracies to build resilient supply

chains and protect freedom of navigation. In 2021, Germany and the Netherlands deployed frigates to the Indo-Pacific for the first time in decades. And according to the Kiel Institute, a German think tank, Japan has sent more bilateral economic and humanitarian aid to Ukraine than have Finland, France, or Poland.

Since January, the United States has resisted the growing ties between its Asian and European partners. In September, Trump said that he was "not concerned at all" about a Chinese-Russian axis forming against the United States. At the 2025 Shangri-La Dialogue, Asia's largest annual defense conference, U.S. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth called for the United States' European allies to "maximize their comparative advantage" on their own continent and reminded them that "the N in NATO stands for 'North Atlantic.'" Readouts of meetings between Pentagon officials and European allies no longer mention Indo-Pacific security, as they frequently did over the past few years. And meetings between the United States and Asian countries have stopped referring to the importance of peace in Ukraine. In June, for the first time in three years, Indo-Pacific leaders were absent from NATO's summit, despite their countries' significant contributions to European defense.

The Trump administration seems to want its allies, especially those in Europe, to stick to their own backyard so that they can

MICHAELA STATON; REUTERS

shoulder a larger responsibility for their own security. The United States is focused on maintaining order in the Western Hemisphere, defending the homeland, and limiting U.S. commitments abroad. U.S. adversaries, however, are sharing their technological and military resources in ways that could wear down individual U.S. allies and prolong regional conflicts. Moreover, China and Russia are deploying cyber, space, and other tools around the globe, reducing the chance that any one crisis will be contained within a single geographic region.

Walling off Asian and European allies from one another would leave the United States and its friends weaker. The risk of a multitheater crisis is growing. Washington and its allies need to prepare to deter multiple adversaries in different regions. Their ability, or lack thereof, to muster a unified front will shape the calculus of leaders in Beijing and Moscow. The United States' friends and foes are realigning. Washington can sit on the sidelines or try to mold the emerging order to its favor.

DOUBLE TROUBLE

China and Russia are collaborating in ways that the United States is not prepared for. The two countries are leveraging their relationship and also their respective partnerships with North Korea and Iran to cause trouble. In Asia and Europe, Beijing and Moscow are using "gray zone" operations to bully U.S. allies, weaken their militaries, and call into question the unity and capability of democratic groups such as the EU, the G-7, and NATO. For instance, China and Russia have tried to intimidate Japan and South Korea by conducting joint air patrols off their coasts. European officials have investigated Chinese- and Russian-linked ships for sabotaging undersea cables in the Baltic Sea. And according to the European Policy Center, Chinese and Russian online disinformation campaigns now "increasingly converge in both tactics and objectives." For example, Chinese and Russian state media have amplified each other's narratives, including by blaming NATO for the war in Ukraine and spreading conspiracy theories about the COVID-19 pandemic.

China and Russia are also integrating their capabilities in ways that will shape future wars. Russian President Vladimir Putin's years-long bombardment of Ukraine would not have been possible without access to Chinese, Iranian, and North Korean weapons, technologies, and personnel. And U.S. officials have said that Moscow is repaying

Beijing and Pyongyang by sending them stealth, submarine, missile, and satellite technologies it had previously been unwilling to share. The U.S. intelligence community's most recent threat assessment warns that this greater alignment of adversaries "increases the chances of U.S. tensions or conflict with any one of these adversaries drawing in another." In 2024, a bipartisan congressional commission of former senior civilian and military officials similarly concluded that the United States "should assume that if it enters a direct conflict involving Russia, China, Iran, or North Korea, that country will benefit from economic and military aid from the others."

The Trump administration wants its allies to stick to their own backyard.

China and Russia are making themselves more capable of sustaining regional conflicts for a longer time. The United States and its allies will not be prepared to manage this challenge unless they also collaborate militarily. Fortunately, Washington's friends are already doing so. Just as Russia has relied on Chinese and North Korean assistance to keep up its assault on Ukraine, NATO has been able to sustain Ukrainian defenses because Australia, Japan, and South Korea have been quietly backfilling U.S. stocks of 155-millimeter artillery rounds and Patriot missiles. Similarly, European deployments to the Indo-Pacific theater, although limited, have helped maintain allied presence around the South China Sea and in the Taiwan Strait, especially as U.S. ships have been redeployed to the Middle East and elsewhere.

These initiatives are a good start, but the United States and its allies will have to do much more to counter China and Russia. The potential for China or Russia to come to each other's aid also increases the risk of a multitheater conflict. In July, NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte warned that, in the event of a crisis over Taiwan, China could ask Russia to keep Washington and its partners "busy in Europe by attacking NATO territory." Moscow could also distract or dissuade countries from helping Taiwan through nonkinetic means, such as by launching a cyberattack on European power grids. Allied militaries and defense planners will need to address the prospect of a multitheater war collectively. The United States and its partners should begin by expanding real-time information sharing between their capitals, reducing vulnerabilities

in their critical infrastructure, planning for shocks to the energy market, and integrating their space and cyber capabilities.

The United States and its friends should also coordinate defense industrial production to fill gaps in one another's arsenals. They should aim to double their overall production of long-range strike weapons, munitions, and drones within the next five years. If the United States and its allies don't pool their resources, they could face critical shortages in a future conflict. War games conducted by the Center for Strategic and International Studies have suggested that the United States could run out of munitions within the first eight days of a war with China over Taiwan. The United States and its partners would need to share resources to take on Beijing's military-industrial capacity alone. If Russia were to send munitions to China, the need for U.S. allies to leverage their collective resources would be even greater.

Washington should work to build munitions factories across the European and Indo-Pacific theaters, thereby reducing the chance that U.S. adversaries could sever supply lines. It should establish more maintenance, repair, and overhaul facilities for U.S. platforms in allied countries, which would enhance the readiness and preparedness of American forces during a crisis. Washington and its partners also need practice when it comes to surging capabilities across theaters. The United States should, for example, include more European and Indo-Pacific allies in Mobility Guardian, a biennial exercise in which Australia, Canada, France, Japan, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States practice moving troops and weapons over long distances.

LEFT OUT OF THE GROUP CHAT

U.S. allies have already grasped the need to work more closely together. Indeed, Asian and European partners have long turned to one another as a way to hedge against the United States. When Washington is unreliable or unpredictable, ties between Asia and Europe tend to strengthen. The first Trump administration's retreat from free trade prompted the EU to sign comprehensive trade deals with Japan and Vietnam. Under the second Trump administration, the EU is finalizing new trade deals with India and Indonesia. Standing next to Indonesian President Prabowo Subianto in July, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said that "when economic uncertainty meets geopolitical volatility, partners like us must come closer together."

Because of Chinese-Russian cooperation and the United States' erratic foreign policy, countries in the Atlantic and the Pacific are aligning on security issues at a scale not seen before. In 2023, Japan and the United Kingdom signed an agreement that opens the door to joint training and rotational deployments. France and the Philippines are considering a similar deal. That same year, Australia became the first non-NATO member of the Movement Coordination Centre Europe, a logistics organization that allows its members to pool military ships and planes for transport. In November 2024, the EU signed new security and defense partnerships with both Japan and South Korea, the first time Brussels has done so with Asian partners.

Rather than resisting or dismissing this cooperation, Washington should shape it. European leaders have already signaled their interest in eventually joining Asia's Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, a move that could leave Washington outside a trade bloc representing roughly 30 percent of global GDP. The United States can still steer the direction of international trade by offering attractive alternatives or harmonizing standards with partners and allies, such as for data-privacy rules or AI regulation.

A more integrated bloc of friendly countries should be a boon for Washington. Its allies are finally stepping up to share international burdens. France, India, and the EU, for example, are collaborating to improve maritime surveillance in the Indian Ocean. Germany is offering maritime training to countries, such as the Philippines, facing Chinese aggression in the South China Sea. And Australian troops have trained Ukrainian military recruits in the United Kingdom.

But other forms of coordination among allies could prove risky for the United States. Italy, Japan, and the United Kingdom are jointly designing a new fighter plane—a test bed for future projects. For decades, allied interoperability has centered on American technologies. If Asian and European allies make their own, such integration could become more difficult. And without American expertise, allied assets could be less competitive.

If the United States abstains from new groups or institutions formed by its allies, it will lose its chance to set the terms for international trade and security. The EU and members of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership have already expressed interest in aligning rules on digital trade across

Asia and Europe without U.S. input. Such networks could eventually align more directly against U.S. policy or soften their resistance to Chinese or Russian objectives. Countries in Asia and Europe could create more permissive environments for Chinese investments and technologies, halt their nascent cooperation with Taiwan, or temper their support of Ukraine. They could also adopt Chinese telecommunications infrastructure, such as for 5G and 6G networks, that would make them vulnerable to Chinese espionage or create leverage for Beijing. Washington has the capacity to prevent some of these more troubling outcomes if it keeps its seat at the table.

NEW BLOC ON THE BLOCK

The realignment of U.S. allies and adversaries could undermine the institutions that have enabled American primacy. Although the United States' industrial heartland provided the muscle to win World War II, it was Washington's ability to set the terms of international rules that reinforced U.S. dominance throughout the Cold War. China and Russia understand this power and seek it for themselves. Cross-regional institutions such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the BRICS have supplanted international bodies, including the United Nations, as venues for multilateral collaboration. Through these institutions, China and Russia are building new financial tools and state-led cybersecurity models.

The SCO's Tianjin summit in September laid bare what's at stake for the United States. At the meeting, which was attended by more than 20 world leaders and the UN secretary-general, Chinese leader Xi Jinping made clear that his government is unwilling to let "the house rules of a few countries" dominate global affairs. SCO countries announced the formation of a new development bank, which will join the ranks of a similar BRICS-led institution and also China's Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, as well as new regional centers to coordinate law enforcement, counterterrorism, and antidrug campaigns. Beijing also used the meeting to announce its Global Governance Initiative, an effort to dilute Western influence in global institutions.

Bodies such as the SCO and the BRICS have been in place for decades, but because they have yielded mixed results for China and Russia, they have been easy to dismiss. Central Asian member states are hesitant to rely too much on either Beijing or Moscow. And members are not always aligned. India and Pakistan, for example, both

belong to the SCO but remain bitter rivals. Despite these limitations, cross-regional bodies give China and Russia a leg up in building a new world order.

China and Russia have much more power over the organizations they lead than the United States has over the United Nations or the G-20. Beijing and Moscow use Eurasian-centric institutions as laboratories to refine new counter-Western initiatives and to give a sheen of global legitimacy to their ideas. Both the SCO and the BRICS have brought on new dialogue partners in recent years that allow China and Russia to claim leadership and influence not only throughout Eurasia but also across the so-called global South.

U.S. allies can't reach their full potential without Washington.

The practical effects of these institutions can sometimes be hard to see. But their endurance and growth reflect the fact that Beijing and Moscow are steadily harnessing disaffection with Western standards and trade practices. Beijing has gained tremendous influence by directing development spending across Africa, Asia, and Europe. Although the world is far from ditching the U.S. dollar, the SCO and the BRICS are trying to accelerate de-dollarization. Their members are swapping currencies and signing cross-border payment agreements.

Chinese and Russian efforts to remake the world order have worried American allies and spurred them to come together in new and powerful ways. Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, NATO deepened its relationships with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. The Five Eyes intelligence alliance—comprising Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and the United States—has taken steps to enhance information sharing and to bolster the security of supply chains. And the G-7 has regularly invited Australia, India, and South Korea to participate in its summits.

The Trump administration can take advantage of this momentum to encourage allies to assume more responsibility. The G-7 Plus, an intergovernmental organization of conflict-affected countries, could become a forum for cooperation on securing critical minerals or countering drug traffickers. A combined meeting of the two Quads to which the United States belongs—in the Indo-Pacific with

Australia, India, and Japan, and in Europe with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—could help the two regional groups coordinate their export controls, industrial policies, and technology development.

U.S. allies will continue to work with one another whether or not the United States joins them. But they can't reach their full potential without Washington's involvement. Eighty years ago, it took bold U.S. leadership and diplomacy to create the global order. It will take equally innovative leadership to remake it. The U.S. alliance system, built for a previous era, must be overhauled to reflect the new reality of adversarial alignment. Trump has shown little interest in revitalizing or redesigning alliances beyond pushing partners to spend more on defense. U.S. allies are now stronger as a result but still lack a clear strategy for integrating their new capabilities. Without U.S. leadership, allied coalitions might not have the muscle to successfully counter Beijing and Moscow.

On its own, the United States cannot manage Chinese-Russian alignment. But neither can Washington ignore any conflict in Eurasia that comes from it. American allies are rapidly transforming their relationships whether Washington likes it or not; these networks can either serve or undermine U.S. interests depending on how Washington engages with them. If the United States fails to reset ties with Asian and European partners, it risks being left on the sidelines of a rapidly changing world order.