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Alternative Worldviews

Understanding Potential Trajectories of Great-Power Ideological Competition

The National Security Strategy of the United States indicates that the United States is engaged in competition with China, Russia, and other rivals. This competition is taking place not only in military and economic spheres, but also in the realms of information, ideas, and ideology.¹

Authors of recent analyses have examined changes in the military and economic balance of power. The competition over ideas has received much less notice, reflecting the predominance of material factors in most studies of international relations. Failing to account for the role of non-

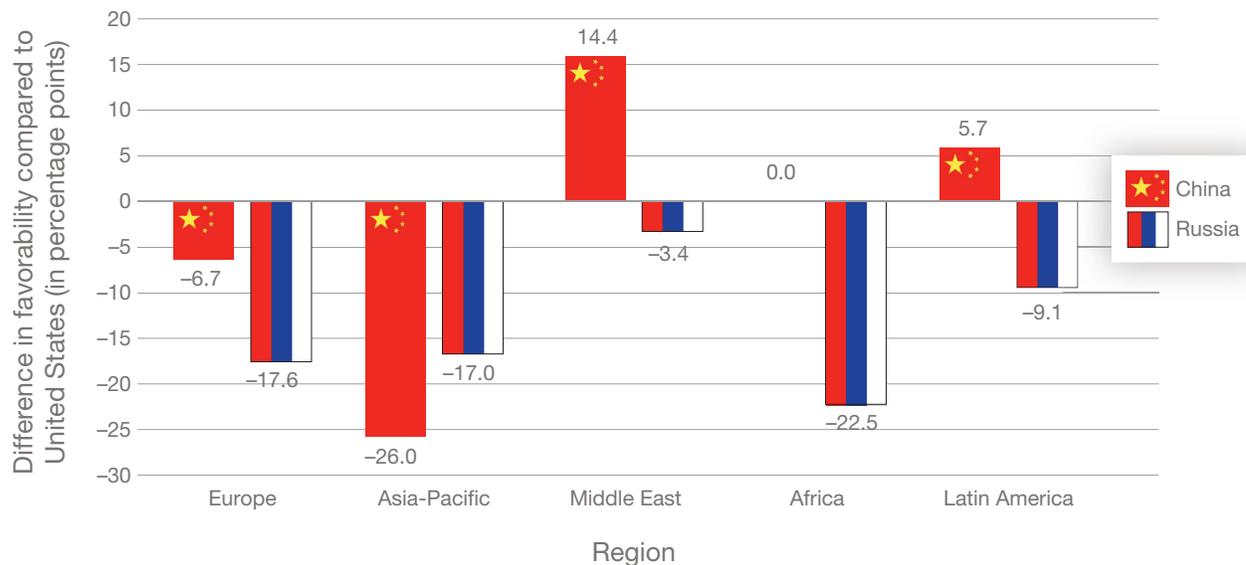
material factors, however, risks overlooking a major source of change in world affairs. It is hard to fully understand such major events as the Cold War, liberation movements and decolonization, the fall of the Soviet Union, nationalist violence in the Balkans and elsewhere, the formation of the European Union (EU), or the rise of jihadist movements without any reference to ideas and ideologies.

If the United States currently is indeed in a competition for influence, it is not at all clear that it is winning. Recent data from the Pew Research Center (see Figure 1) suggests that China is perceived as well as or more positively than the United States throughout much of the developing world, while Russia is roughly as well regarded as the United States in much of the Middle East.²

KEY FINDINGS

- State power is reflected in ideological ambitions: As states become more powerful (or perceive themselves as such), their ideological ambitions tend to grow accordingly.
- States tend to externalize their domestic forms of governance: States with the power to do so typically try to reproduce themselves on the world stage.
- Divergent governing ideologies heighten threat perceptions: States with divergent ideologies tend to perceive actions of the other as more threatening than they otherwise would.
- Rapid ideological change typically occurs in periods of crisis: In ordinary times, most people tend to resist sweeping updates to their political ideologies.
- At its core, the narrative of China's governing ideology centers on development, as opposed to the Western liberal focus on freedom. This ideology is only one part of the competition between China and the United States, but it is one that could contribute to a shift in the power balance without the need for military force or economic leverage.
- How Russia's ideas evolve over time will depend, in part, on the perceived success of the current anti-Western, conservative narrative that its leaders are promoting.
- In the age of the internet and social media, social resilience appears to be at particular risk in the face of *narrowcasting*—the targeting of content (including political content) to narrow subpopulations.

Figure 1
Global Competition for Influence



SOURCE: Pew Research Center, Global Attitudes Survey, data set, Spring 2017b.

Research Questions

This report examines how this ideological competition might evolve over the next two decades. More specifically, this report seeks answers to the following questions:

- To what extent have China and Russia formulated alternative ideologies or worldviews that challenge today’s international order? Because such alternatives have not yet been articulated, what factors might drive the emergence of a cohesive, alternative ideology?
- How do these rivals currently pursue ideological competition with the United States, and how might they do so in the future?
- How do other actors, including nonstate actors, influence this competition?
- Under what conditions are China and Russia likely to persuade audiences around the world of the advantages of alternatives to the current international order?
- What is at stake for the United States and its allies in this competition?

The goal of this report is to help decisionmakers better anticipate changes in the global competition of ideas and adapt U.S. policy accordingly.

Definitions

This report seeks to understand the role of ideas and ideology on the international order. Observers frequently use these terms in different ways, making it important to define our terms.

Ideas and Ideologies

Ideas are mental representations of reality—both how it is and how it should be. They can take the form of principled beliefs: “normative ideas that specify criteria for distinguishing right from wrong and just from unjust,” as the scholars Judith Goldstein and Robert Keohane wrote.³ Alternatively, they can take the form of causal beliefs: “beliefs about cause-effect relationships which derive authority from the shared consensus of recognized elites, whether they be village elders or scientists at elite institutions.”⁴ Ideas can change on the basis of new information or successful persuasion.

The sociologist Ann Swidler defines an *ideology* as “a highly articulated, self-conscious belief and ritual system, aspiring to offer a unified answer to problems of social action.”⁵ Ideologies can be understood as a coherent set of ideas about politics or social organization that combines beliefs about norms (e.g., a belief that a given set of policies is morally superior or culturally appropriate) and causality (e.g., a belief that a given set of policies will yield superior outcomes). Because ideologies offer coherent, normatively grounded solutions to social problems, they are potent sources of political action. By the same token, new ideologies are more likely to conflict with people’s existing worldviews than simple ideas (which can be more easily adopted piecemeal and integrated into previously held beliefs).

International Orders

This report focuses on the potential for U.S. rivals—in particular, China and Russia—to articulate ideologies for organizing international politics that differ from the international order that the United States has maintained since the end of World War II. An *international order* is a complex concept, so it is worth citing at length one recent definition that sought to eliminate several sources of ambiguity:

An international order is a regular, lasting pattern of state behaviors (foreign policies and transaction flows). . . . International orders are constituted by an underlying structure of institutions, rules, norms, and discourses that structure and shape state practices. . . . The patterns of behavior can pertain to the conduct of war and diplomacy, financial systems, trade regimes, development strategies, humanitarian action, and so on. . . . In coherent, lasting orders, practices across domains are tied together by overlapping values and norms, such as the prominent role of liberal norms in international orders since the 1860s. . . . A hegemonic order is a particular kind of international order in which a leading state or coalition can establish and impose rules on other great and secondary powers.⁶

This report adopts a similarly expansive view of international orders that encompasses political,

Abbreviations

AIIB	Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative (China)
CCD	community of common destiny
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia
EU	European Union
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
UN	United Nations

security, and economic affairs at both the domestic and interstate levels.

Research Approach and Report Outline

The discussion in this report proceeds in three parts. The next section examines the worldviews and activities of two major state actors, China and Russia. It reviews their historical motivations and goals, their ideas and ideologies in current and potentially future foreign policy discourse, the means through which they propagate ideas and ideologies, and the consequences of their ideological projects (that is, their active efforts to project their ideas and ideologies abroad). A second section briefly reviews the social science literature on the dissemination of ideas and the implications of this literature for understanding efforts to redefine the world order. The final section explores potential trajectories of ideological competition, using recent developments in the global ideological landscape, current trends that might influence the power of non-Western ideas about international order, and findings from the social science literature on the causes and consequences of ideological competition. In a separate online volume, there are four appendixes, each of which provides greater detail on these themes and a review of selected nonstate actors.⁷

China and Russia in Ideological Competition

To fully understand the role of ideas in world politics, an analysis should examine state, nonstate, and international actors. An analysis of states would include not only major powers (such as the United States, China, and Russia) but also emerging powers (such as India) and smaller powers that “punch above their weight” (such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway). Important nonstate actors might include well-known religious communities and movements (such as the Catholic Church or Salafi Islamists), liberal transnational advocacy groups (such as Amnesty International), populist movements, and even such “super-empowered individuals” as Bill and Melinda Gates. Finally, many international actors (e.g., the United Nations) might best be understood not simply as convenings of states but as semiautonomous actors with their own agendas.

A full analysis of the role of ideas would also not focus simply on a “snapshot” of actors’ ideas at any particular point in time but would look at interactive processes and the potential for actors to update their beliefs through iterative processes of persuasion. Such an analysis would allow for the possibility of novel syntheses of contending worldviews.

Unfortunately, a full inventory of global ideas about the current international order and potential alternatives is likely impossible and, in any case, is well beyond the scope of this report. To simplify the analysis to a manageable scope, we focus in this section on the current roles of China and Russia, because of their power, ambition, and very different approaches to ideological competition with the United States. In a subsequent appendix, we also examine the role of two key types of nonstate actors, populist movements and transnational advocacy groups. Our emphasis in the initial analysis is on these actors’ current ideas and ideologies and on understanding recurrent patterns of ideological change in the history of international relations. In a final appendix, we examine the potential for an evolution in these actors’ beliefs.

China

As China rises, Beijing is acquiring a greater ability to shape the world in its image. Beijing is being driven by not only purely realist power dynamics but also by the ideas and concepts offered by the Chinese leadership and policy elite to woo the global community. China is aware of the potential for its rise to spark conflict with the United States or neighboring countries. This has led it to embrace many rhetorical formulations to assuage such concerns, such as its pledge for “peaceful development” and its rejection of the “Thucydides trap,” the realpolitik notion that dominant powers attack rising powers when the latter pose a threat to the current order.⁸

China nevertheless seeks to secure what it perceives as its rightful place in the world: dominance over Asia and expanded influence globally, with the United States’ role correspondingly weakened.⁹ Chinese President Xi Jinping has described his vision for China as “the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”¹⁰ This is based on achieving “two centenary goals”: “building a moderately prosperous society” by the 100th anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)’s founding in 2021, and “building a modern socialist country” by the 100th anniversary of the founding of modern China in 2049. These goals are the party’s promise to continue delivering economic growth to its citizens, but they also portend China’s ambitions to be a “global leader in terms of composite national strength and international influence” by 2049, backed up by a “world-class military.”¹¹ Following 30 years of economic growth and 20 years of concerted military modernization that is finally delivering rapidly advancing capabilities to support the military’s regional objectives, China is now in a position to assert its vision.

Interests and Ideas

China’s twin commitments to building a moderately prosperous society and building a modern socialist country lay bare one of the central tensions in Chinese governance and ideology since the time of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms more than three decades ago: To what extent is the government of China truly dedicated to socialist goals? To what

extent does the Chinese government use socialist rhetoric merely as a legitimating device that draws on decades-old tradition while also conveniently using that rhetoric as a contrast to American liberal hegemony? The CCP describes itself as a Marxist-Leninist political party, but its ongoing process of “Sinification and modernization” of these foreign concepts has provided the CCP flexibility for what Marxism-Leninism actually means for China.¹² This flexibility leads many foreign analysts to adopt a cynical view of the CCP’s rhetorical embrace of these ideas, arguing that this reflects a utilitarian approach to intellectually expedient justifications of desired policy decisions. Deng Xiaoping, for example, was able to justify in ideological terms his abandonment of the core communist tenets of equality and communal ownership, along with the organizing concept of class struggle.

More-recent events, such as the CCP’s repression of student support for Shenzhen-based factory workers, suggest that if the CCP is still pursuing the realization of communism within China, it is doing so in a highly equivocal way. Despite such inconsistencies between rhetoric and action, the CCP’s worldview is still defined by the intellectual legacies of Marx and Lenin. Marxism provides a logical framework for interpreting China’s current conditions and the CCP’s goals through the “scientific truth” of “dialectical and historical materialism.”¹³ Leninism, on the other hand, provides an organizing principle for the CCP’s continued existence: “perpetual struggle with the ‘hostile’ forces of Western liberalism” as a way to avoid “the calcification and putrefaction that has destroyed every previous dynasty, dictatorship and empire.”¹⁴ The CCP’s commitment to core tenets of Marxism in China’s Reform and Opening era has been very limited in practice, as the CCP frequently has not supported workers’ rights and has tolerated high levels of income inequality, though leaders occasionally remark this inequality is a problem to be addressed.¹⁵ The more important intellectual legacy of Marxism for Chinese leaders is their belief in the inevitable progress of history and the role of economics as the core driver of political affairs.¹⁶ These two ideas can create a heady combination of antagonism against the “hostile” democratic West and a deterministic self-confidence based on the CCP’s

assessments of global trends—seizing the moment to usurp the fading power of the United States following the 2008–2009 financial crisis, for example.¹⁷

At its core, China’s governing ideology centers on development—which might be appealing to some in the developing world—as opposed to the Western liberal focus on freedom. Most of China’s current governing ideas in the international, domestic, and economic realms are underpinned by the government’s emphasis on national sovereignty. However, an important—if unrealized—strain of China’s historical worldview is *Tianxia*, or “all under heaven.” *Tianxia* prescribes an almost supranational elite global governance centered on Beijing, which presents a fundamental contradiction with Beijing’s traditional acceptance of Westphalian concepts of sovereignty.¹⁸ This inherent tension is an important intellectual thread to monitor because it could challenge the core tenet of the U.S.-led order. Ironically, though *Tianxia* is a traditional concept with deep historical roots, it resonates with the more recent Marxist-Leninist ideology espoused by the CCP. In particular, the Marxist concept of dialectical and historical materialism similarly suggests an arc of history in which Chinese governing concepts provide a locus for a new global order.

In the international realm, China’s offers of development through trade, investment, and loans are intended to override other countries’ security concerns about territorial disputes and other Chinese threats to their sovereignty. The core concept of China’s approach under Xi is the “community of common destiny for mankind” (CCD), built on a “new type of international relations” that is based on “mutual respect, fairness, justice and win-win cooperation,” and reflects “major country diplomacy with Chinese characteristics.”¹⁹ Xi also espouses a “new security concept,” defined in a 2014 speech as “new thinking on common, comprehensive, cooperative, and sustainable security” and a desire to form “partnerships, not alliances.”²⁰ These concepts are intended to draw a contrast with the United States’ allegedly militaristic foreign policy and hegemonic approach to global affairs, painting China as the peaceful and benevolent alternative.

Domestically, Chinese leaders purport to guide the country as a Leninist vanguard for the good of

all people toward the common cause of development and national security, subsuming individual effort and concerns under the needs of the nation. China's domestic governance philosophy includes a "socialist consultative democracy," "socialist rule of law," and "holistic national security." In the economic domain, despite decades of liberalization since the 1980s, under China's "socialist market economy," state-led planning and state-owned enterprises take precedence over private businesses, and even those must reserve a role for party guidance.

Ability to Implement Its Ideas

China's central focus for its ideological projects so far is the countries on its periphery in Asia and other developing countries. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is already being positioned as the platform for realizing China's ideological projects, especially the CCD.²¹ According to Nadège Rolland, senior fellow for political and security affairs at the National Bureau for Asian Research, "whereas BRI provides physical connectivity, the CCD represents the intangible bonds that would tie the region together around China."²² The hope is that deepened economic relations with Beijing through BRI leads to economic dependence on China, which in turn leads to "greater political and security cooperation with China . . . to protect the fruits of their economic interactions" and that this real or perceived sense of community "will pave the way for China to emerge as a regional and global leader."

China could potentially implement its ideas through the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). At CICA's May 2014 meeting, Xi proposed making CICA "a security dialogue and cooperation platform that covers the whole of Asia, and, on that basis, explore the establishment of a regional security cooperation architecture," including a "defense consultation mechanism of member states."²³ Although Washington considers the AIIB a rival to established Western institutions, the AIIB has partnered with rival lenders and has generally adopted Western-style practices, and China's role so far has been minimal.²⁴ Looking forward, however, the AIIB would allow

China to support other state-led economies that might otherwise have adopted Western standards to qualify for loans.

Beyond these public-facing efforts, China is also engaged in a long-standing and massive campaign of influence operations around the world, including attempts to manipulate international institutions such as the United Nations (UN), outreach through co-opted individuals,²⁵ and possible interference in U.S. and other elections.²⁶ But, so far, the efforts do not appear to specifically support China's ideological projects.

Measuring China's Success

Despite China's efforts to popularize its ideology, the results are uncertain. There is no specific polling on China's ideological projects that would help to disentangle their effects from China's material sources of influence, and global public opinion of China is uneven. According to Pew Research Center polling in spring 2018, China had a small net favorability across all countries surveyed, but "favorable attitudes [are] most prevalent in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia," with a recent decline in the United States but an increase in Europe.²⁷ The United States is still favored for global leadership, as "63% [of global respondents in 25 countries] say they prefer a world in which the U.S. is the leading power, while just 19% would favor one in which China leads."²⁸ There is little doubt that China's economic largesse (through initiatives such as the BRI and AIIB) play a role in China's favorability ratings, but it is worth noting that the United States has often been viewed unfavorably even in regions in which it provides considerable aid. China has a long road before it surpasses the United States as the favored international leader, but it already has some advantages in the developing world.

Conclusion

China's economic and military power will very likely be enough to rival the United States as a "strategic competitor" for decades to come. This ideological component is only one part of the larger U.S.-China competition already underway, but it is one that has

the potential to shift the balance without the need for military force or even economic leverage.

Russia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russia has primarily railed against Western ideals but struggled to articulate its own ideologies. However, more recently, Russia explicitly embraced “conservative and anti-liberal elements.”²⁹ Russian President Vladimir Putin argued in late 2013 that it was “natural and right to defend [the values embedded in Christianity and other world religions],” including a strong role for religious authority, traditional gender relations and family structures, and the centrality of patriotism and a strong state.³⁰

Interests and Ideas

With the exception of survival of the regime, regional influence is the most important strategic interest of Russia, largely to avoid exposure to political currents (e.g., Ukraine in 2014; color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s; and large-scale protests in Moscow in 2011 and 2012) that could pose a threat to the regime. Another key interest is that Russia be regarded as a “leading world power” whose role is to maintain strategic stability and act as a check against the United States and the West.³¹ A common narrative that has emerged in Russian geopolitical discourse is the impact of globalization dominated by a liberal worldview, and the need for Russia to offer a “traditional” or anti-Western alternative, although this was not the official view for the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union.³²

In fact, Russian ideology has evolved under Putin from rhetorically embracing Western norms of governance to championing a separate but equal Eurasian bulwark against the reckless geopolitical and cultural overreach of the U.S.-led liberal order. For example, support for the U.S.-led war on terrorism was replaced with criticism of the United States as an irresponsible, unchecked actor that cynically uses democracy as a geopolitical tool at the expense of regional and global stability. Russian endorsement of European “integration processes” was exchanged

for an emphasis on “sovereign democracy” and traditional religious beliefs, considered under threat from an out-of-touch elite who arrogantly promote “universal values.”

The key ideas underlying this evolving narrative are anti-Westernism, polycentrism, antiliberalism, and conservatism, which are, in some respects, a reversion to the mean of Russian political and cultural history that goes back centuries.³³ According to the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, Dmitri Trenin, Putin determined that Russia “needed a sense of spiritual sovereignty” in the leadup to his return to the presidency in 2012. He became “preoccupied with helping Russia achieve self-determination, aided by answering questions such as ‘What are we?’ and ‘What do we want to be?’”³⁴ Putin then called on others within Russia with disparate views—“so-called Neo-Slavophiles and Neo-Westernizers, statist and so-called liberals”—to come up with a “development ideology” for Russia bound by the constraint that Russia could not simply follow the Western path.³⁵

At least part of the answer lies in the role of Russia protecting so-called conservative values against the export of a development model that threatens to rapidly upend long-held cultural norms in regions around the world, including in the former Soviet space. Indeed, Putin has argued that some countries are not only rejecting Christian values and “denying moral principles and all traditional identities: national, cultural, religious and even sexual,” but are “aggressively trying to export this [cultural] model all over the world.”³⁶ Trenin explains that these traditional values include “the sanctity of the family as a union between a man and a woman, the indispensable role of religious faith, the function of traditional religions as spiritual compasses, the centrality of the state among all political and social institutions, and, of course, patriotism.”³⁷ According to Mark Galeotti, an expert on Russia’s intelligence services, the decision to promote social conservatism as a wedge issue within Europe was debated at the highest levels of the Russian security establishment, perhaps around 2013, and subsequently adopted as policy.³⁸

From a geopolitical perspective, the idea of supporting like-minded conservative groups—particularly in Europe—that might also want to

wall off parts of the world from the influence of the Western development model fits with the Russian vision of polycentrism, in the sense that each power center should be free to build its own regional political, economic, security, and cultural architecture without the invasion of nontraditional foreign ideas. Furthermore, groups in the West that find common cause with Russian positions on cultural issues tend to support Russian positions on security and the international order.³⁹ In a recent speech before the UN General Assembly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov commingled the ideas of polycentrism and rejection of the Western model of development that offended cultural sensitivities: “On the one hand, the polycentric principles of the world order are growing stronger and new economic growth centers are taking shape. We can see nations striving to preserve their sovereignty and to choose the development models that are consistent with their ethnic, cultural and religious identity. On the other hand, we see the desire of a number of Western states to retain their self-proclaimed status as ‘world leaders’ and to slow down the irreversible move toward multipolarity that is objectively taking place.”⁴⁰

The extent to which these ideas are deeply held among the Russian elite or are being opportunistically exploited as relations with the United States and the West deteriorate is difficult to know. However, a multiyear Hamilton College survey of Russian political, security, and business leaders offered some perspective. The poll showed a significant plurality—43 percent—supported the political system under Putin in 2016, up from approximately 25 percent in 2004. The same survey also found that 80 percent of the Russian elite saw the United States as a threat in 2016. At the same time, it is perhaps notable that in 2012, which marked the end of the relatively friendly U.S.-Russia relations of the Medvedev presidency, 48 percent of the Russian elite perceived the United States as a threat and approximately 27 percent supported a Western-style democracy, which was the highest point in the period from 2004 to 2016 covered by the survey.⁴¹ These results preliminarily suggest there could be some flexibility among the Russian elite in response to geopolitical shifts between the two countries, or between Russia and the West more broadly. Regardless of such shifts,

however, history and polling suggest that there will likely be, at a minimum, a substantial minority of the Russian elite, particularly in the security and military sectors, that will see a Russian embrace of Western political and cultural ideas as antithetical to Russia’s national identity.⁴²

Ability to Implement Its Ideas

Russia has developed the capabilities to promote its ideas on a global scale. As far back as the early 2000s, Putin claimed that there needed to be greater balance among global media outlets. Since then, Russia has developed such outlets as Russia Today with the goal of “break[ing] the Anglo-Saxon monopoly on the global information streams.”⁴³ Russia has gone on to develop social media capabilities that have facilitated the propagation and, in some cases, weaponization of information and that appeal to disaffected groups to capitalize on political and cultural divisions.

At the governmental and nongovernmental levels, Russia has engaged in efforts to cultivate relationships with so-called fringe political parties (e.g., the Freedom Party in Austria, Northern League in Italy, National Front in France, and Alternative for Germany in Germany) and other actors across Europe and the United States that reject the status quo on a variety of issues important to Russia.⁴⁴ Russia has reportedly attempted to influence elections in Spain,⁴⁵ France,⁴⁶ and the United States.⁴⁷

Russia’s appeal to conservative values and traditions might have some resonance—particularly in eastern Europe—but, in many cases, there is relatively strong support for Western institutions across the continent (in addition to hostility toward Russia), which limits the ability of actors receptive to this message to affect the policy changes that Russia seeks.

Measuring Russia’s Success

Recent election results are, in some cases, consistent with Russia’s efforts to influence Western political debates, though the causal role of Russian activities is the subject of considerable debate.⁴⁸ In such countries as Hungary, Italy, and Austria, and, to a much lesser extent, in the United States, “anti-Western” or “Russia-friendly” parties or leaders have come

to power in recent years. To the extent that Russian ideas and information operations are indeed shifting political debates in targeted countries, these types of results could alter policy toward Russia and potentially play a role in a broader reordering of European politics in the years ahead.

At the same time, there are several caveats to consider in thinking about future outcomes. First, rhetoric does not always translate into corresponding action. In Hungary, Italy, and Austria, where there have been actual shifts in the balance of power, 67 percent, 57 percent, and 61 percent of the populations, respectively, have favorable views of the EU; meanwhile, no more than 40 percent of those populations view Russia favorably. Second, in key countries in western Europe, such as the United Kingdom, France, and Germany, support for Western institutions remains high and participation of anti-Western parties is low. Finally, the Russian appeal promoting traditional values finds resonance, especially in the eastern portions of Europe—but several Eastern European countries (e.g., Poland and Lithuania) have a long-held history of antipathy toward Russia.⁴⁹

Conclusion

From the Russian perspective, the contest hinges on whether Russia can dictate the development of the Eurasian region without interference from abroad. Looking ahead, the extent to which Russia will succeed in achieving its vision depends largely on the continuity of the political status quo across the Western world. How Russia's ideas might evolve over time will depend, in part, on the perceived success of the current anti-Western, conservative narrative.

Broad Patterns in International Ideological Competition

Both China and Russia have embarked on nascent ideological projects that contest key aspects of the Western-oriented global order. It remains unclear, however, the extent to which these projects will coalesce into coherent alternatives to the current order and the aggressiveness with which these powers will press these alternatives.

Thus, although the previous sections' reviews of recent developments are important to ground our understanding of ideological competition, by themselves they provide only limited insights into where these actors and the liberal world order more generally are likely to be five, ten, or twenty years in the future. To begin to understand potential trajectories of ideological competition in world affairs, it is helpful to combine these insights with a review of broad patterns in past great-power rivalries. Social scientists have long debated the role of ideas in world affairs. Their studies help to elucidate both how ideas shape the motives of international actors and the conditions under which new ideas are likely to be persuasive.⁵⁰

Ideas as Motives for Action in World Affairs

Ideas shape actors' conceptions of themselves and their interests, of other actors, and of who counts as a legitimate actor in world affairs. Understood in these terms, there are no areas of international affairs in which ideas do not play a role. But scholars have highlighted two ways in particular that ideas shape the motives of major powers: as determinants of threat perceptions and as blueprints for shaping major powers' relations with other countries.

Alternative Worldviews as Sources of Threat

Most of the great conflicts of the past century were not simply clashes of great powers seeking positional advantage; they were clashes of political ideologies or worldviews. World War II was prompted by the ideology of fascism. The Cold War pitted the capitalist and generally liberal democratic powers of the United States and its key allies against the communist Soviet Union, China, and their various satellites and allies. Great-power conflict does not always follow ideological lines; the United States, United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union allied against Nazi Germany despite their political differences. But the potential for conflict is often magnified when states are organized according to different political ideologies, for two reasons: Differences in ideologies or worldviews tend to heighten perceptions of hostile intent, and such

Ideologies, however, do not simply influence how states react to other powers; they shape what states seek to accomplish in international affairs.

differences represent objective threats to the domestic political stability of rival states.

The “true” motivations of other states are always ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations. In general, humans tend to ascribe others’ negative actions to flaws in their nature, whereas they understand their own actions as justifiable responses to circumstance.⁵¹ This tendency is magnified when the actors in question hold different worldviews, and it is particularly pronounced when decisionmakers passionately believe in a specific political ideology.⁵² Most scholars of the Cold War, for instance, believe that some level of rivalry was inevitable between the two major powers left at the end of World War II, but the differences in ideology between the United States and the Soviet Union exacerbated leaders’ tendency to perceive the actions of the other as motivated by hostile intent. Others have attributed the lack of major war among modern liberal democracies to these countries’ tendency to perceive one another as less threatening than countries organized on alternative political principles.

Aside from perceptions, when two states hold widely divergent political ideologies, each can pose objective threats to the other’s political stability if its ideology is attractive. Revolutionary Iran, for instance, represented a potential model for Shi’a populations denied political power throughout the Middle East.⁵³ Both China and Russia feel threatened by liberal democracy’s attractiveness to parts of their

populations. Indeed, many of Russia’s actions in the former Soviet Union (such as its invasion of Ukraine) can be understood as an effort to create an “ideological buffer zone” to insulate itself from the threat of political revolution.

Alternative Worldviews as Blueprints for International Organization

Ideologies, however, do not simply influence how states react to other powers; they shape what states seek to accomplish in international affairs. Social scientists have repeatedly observed that countries tend to “externalize” their domestic institutions of governance—that is, they often structure interstate relations on their own political systems, and they often seek to reproduce their institutions in other countries’ domestic governance.

At the domestic level, examples abound. Some observers have detected the tendency of great powers to export their domestic institutions in instances going back to Imperial China and the Ottoman Empire.⁵⁴ The European overseas empires of the 19th and early 20th centuries were often justified as helping prepare local populations to assume the responsibilities of the liberal democratic practices of the metropolises.⁵⁵ Many historians have interpreted much of the United States’ behavior during the Cold War as a crusade to export its vision of capitalist democracy.⁵⁶

At the international level, there is a similar tendency for major powers to externalize their domestic norms of governance. Efforts in the 19th and 20th centuries to create “rules of the road” for international relations, for instance, paralleled the rise of constitutionalism in the West, and the specific provisions of many of the most famous treaties and international institutions closely followed the passage and implementation of domestic laws of the major powers that promoted them.⁵⁷

Ideas as Tools in International Competition

Ideas can help to shape international relations by influencing how a great power understands its national interests, including its perceptions of others’

hostile intent and its goals for maintaining or altering the world order. But great powers can also shape the world through their power to persuade and inspire others. To understand this role of ideas, we must understand the conditions under which ideas and ideologies are most likely to be persuasive.

Successful persuasion in international affairs depends in part on the characteristics of the actor who seeks to persuade and the nature of that actor's message. Messages tend to be more persuasive when the actor making the attempt to persuade—the sender, in the language of communications theory—is well-regarded. Positive perceptions of the sender derive in part from the sender's perceived successfulness and in part from cultural similarity.

In international relations, countries that are perceived as powerful and prosperous are more likely to be considered models worth emulating.⁵⁸ For example, the legitimacy crisis that the Soviet Union suffered in the 1980s—and the corresponding strength of Western political ideas—was derived, in large part, from the comparisons that Soviet citizens drew between their own circumstances and those that predominated in the West.⁵⁹ Conversely, Russia's long-running economic stagnation has made it difficult for Moscow to articulate a forward-looking ideology that is attractive to its own and other populations. Instead, the Kremlin has sought to legitimize itself and articulate a vision for international politics based on Russia's "past glory."⁶⁰

A country's cultural affinity with the intended audience also influences the likelihood that its messages will be persuasive.⁶¹ But even in cases where the communicator and the audience do not belong to the same culture, audience perceptions of a sender's empathy or respect can influence the success of communication. In international relations, a country's multiculturalism or cosmopolitanism can enhance its persuasiveness.⁶² In many of these respects, the United States enjoys advantages over its rivals. The United States' social diversity and the accessibility of its culture (due in part to the pervasiveness of the English language and American dominance in many forms of entertainment) help to bridge differences between the United States and potential audiences.⁶³

The persuasiveness of a message also depends on the characteristics of the message's receivers—in

particular, the extent to which a potential receiver is undergoing a broader crisis and its levels of social resilience.

Most people seldom engage in extended reflection about how society should be governed; such work is cognitively demanding and potentially time-consuming. Beyond these practical costs, people are reluctant to update deeply held beliefs about politics because their existing beliefs are often closely associated with their value systems and pattern of past actions.⁶⁴ Consequently, in periods of everyday life, political beliefs normally change only slowly, across periods often measured in generations.

In periods of crisis, however, people might be confronted with a gulf between their understanding of "what works" or is "appropriate" and the actual performance of their past beliefs. In these circumstances, ideological change might occur much more quickly. For entire political ideologies to be disrupted and populations to become open to alternatives, the scale of the crisis required is normally substantial.⁶⁵ Such crises are often associated with defeat in war and deep economic dislocations. In such circumstances, new ideas about politics can disseminate rapidly across wide areas. Political revolutions, such as the revolutions of 1848, the fall of Communism beginning in 1989, the color revolutions of 1998–2005, and the Arab Spring of 2011 are perhaps the most obvious examples.⁶⁶ The rapid shift toward Keynesian economics and social democracy in the wake of the Great Depression similarly illustrates the potential for rapid, widespread change in the period following a widespread crisis.⁶⁷ In the future, catastrophic environmental degradation might play a similar role in areas most deeply affected.

Societies possess differing degrees of resilience during periods of crisis. Resilience can be undermined by the existence of deep, politically relevant social cleavages. Such cleavages can be exploited by other states seeking to undermine the social stability of their rivals. Arab nationalist state elites, for instance, stoked anti-Zionist sentiment in the Middle East not only to strengthen their own domestic legitimacy but also to undermine monarchical regimes that were more oriented toward the status quo in the region. In these cases, tensions between traditional

and nationalist legitimization principles functioned as weapons of statecraft.⁶⁸

In the age of the internet and social media, social resilience appears to be at particular risk in the face of *narrowcasting*—the targeting of content (including political content) to narrow subpopulations. Such a fracturing of the media landscape can exacerbate polarization.⁶⁹ We should be careful before assuming that new information and communication technologies will necessarily destabilize politics, however. Previous waves of new technologies were often greeted with alarm, and they similarly held the potential to disrupt and even overthrow settled political orders. The printing press, for instance, undermined the authority of the Catholic Church in Europe when it was first introduced.⁷⁰ Similarly, when radio was once a revolutionary new communications technology, it played a role in the Nazi rise to power in Germany.⁷¹ Yet these same technologies have the potential to reinforce authorities' ability to communicate their own messages to large numbers of people and eventually came to be seen as useful tools in support of existing political orders.⁷²

Potential Future Trajectories for Ideological Competition

Ideas thus shape actors' perceptions and motivations, but actors also employ ideas and ideologies to try to shape the behavior of others. Underlying structural factors—such as differential economic growth rates, innovations in information and communications technology, social cleavages, and geographic proximity—can influence which ideas are most likely to be persuasive, which audiences are most persuadable, how rapidly ideas spread, and so on. But the effects of ideas and ideologies cannot be reduced to these factors. There is a considerable degree of contingency involved, deriving both from the nature of new ideas themselves and the decisions of key actors. This section assesses the different trajectories that future ideological competition might follow, based on insights from the review of recent ideological projects and the review of the social science literature on the role of ideas in world affairs.

The social science literature suggests four broad, recurring patterns in the roles of ideas and ideologies

in world affairs. Each of the following patterns has implications for China and Russia in the coming years:

- *State power is reflected in ideological ambitions:* As states become more powerful (or perceive themselves as such), their ideological ambitions tend to grow accordingly. Both China and Russia have nascent ideological projects. In neither case is the ideology particularly coherent nor consistently articulated or followed. Past patterns suggest, however, that as China becomes more powerful, its ideological ambitions are likely to grow. Russia is a more complex case. Measured solely by its economy, it is not a first-tier power. Russian policy elites and public tend to view Russia as a major power, however—one that was temporarily weakened by the collapse of the Soviet Union but has returned to the world stage and stands to benefit from the United States' apparent relative decline. Russia's likely future ideological ambitions are thus less clear than China's; Russia might continue to act opportunistically, using ideology as a weapon when it suits its immediate interests, or it might commit itself to a more consistent message.
- *States tend to externalize their domestic forms of governance:* States with the power to do so typically try to reproduce themselves on the world stage. At the domestic level, they often support other regimes that resemble their own, and at the international level, they often advocate "rules of the game" that parallel their own domestic governance practices. China and Russia are likely to follow in this general pattern. Their ideological messages, however, will be shaped by their circumstances. In the case of China, its rapid economic growth has imbued it with a faith in its own progress, which it offers to share with other states that follow its example. This message seems to have particular resonance among developing countries. Russia, suffering from years of economic and demographic stagnation, would struggle to articulate such a forward-looking message. It instead articulates a rearward-looking conservative message focused

on order over progress. This message seems to resonate with certain subpopulations among the economically developed countries of the West.

- *Divergent governing ideologies heighten threat perceptions:* States with divergent ideologies tend to perceive actions of the other as more threatening than they otherwise would. The amplified threat perceptions derive from a systematic bias in how the other's actions are perceived but also from potential domestic political vulnerabilities. Because ideologies often diffuse geographically, threatened states sometimes react by creating ideological buffer zones. Russia's actions in the former Soviet Union—and particularly its actions in Ukraine—can be understood as a reaction to ideological threats in addition to more-material ones.
- *Rapid ideological change typically occurs in periods of crisis:* In ordinary times, most people tend to resist sweeping updates to their political ideologies. However, in times of crisis—especially following defeat in war or deep and sustained economic dislocations—people might become much more receptive to ideas that appear to offer solutions to systemic problems. Such rapid propagation of new ideas occurred during the collapse of the Soviet Union. Depending on the duration and depth of current economic dislocations, including those from automation, global trade, and potential environmental catastrophes, rapid ideological change might occur again. Continued innovations in and diffusions of information and communication technologies might further undermine stability.

Despite the fact that these patterns can be observed frequently throughout history, there is a considerable role for contingency in determining the direction of ideological competition and ideological change over the coming years. Two factors in particular stand out. First, leaders of major powers often differ considerably in the ideological projects they pursue, even when faced with similar circumstances. Some take approaches that are much more

aggressive and cost-acceptant, while others pursue more-modest goals and do so in cooperation with other major actors.⁷³ Second, the success (or at least speed) of ideological propagation depends in substantial part on crises in the societies being targeted. Several factors suggest there will be ample opportunities for ideological upheaval. Certainly, there are signs of large-scale economic dislocations caused by automation, global trade, and other factors. At the same time, new developments in information and communication technology might disrupt established patterns of politics more quickly than societies can adapt. But whether such developments are likely to yield widespread and destabilizing crises in the coming years is a matter of debate.

In this report, we do not seek to specify which ideological projects China and Russia are likely to pursue in the coming years, nor do we seek to determine whether social instability will provide fertile ground for new ideological messages. Instead, we can combine the broad patterns of ideological competition observed by social scientists with an appreciation of the role of contingency to sketch potential trajectories that great powers in competition might pursue. More specifically, borrowing from debates about hegemonic transitions, we characterize

Several factors suggest there will be ample opportunities for ideological upheaval. Certainly, there are signs of large-scale economic dislocations caused by automation, global trade, and other factors.

potential ideological projects as falling into the following three categories:⁷⁴

- *Evolutionary* ideological projects are ones in which actors accept the core principles of the existing international system. They also accept pluralism in domestic governance. Actors focused on evolutionary change instead seek to alter how certain core precepts of the international system are interpreted, adjust the allocation of decision rights in the international system in their favor, and win legitimacy for their own forms of governance.
- *Revolutionary* ideological projects are ones in which actors—typically rising great powers, but potentially others—seek to overturn core elements of the international system, discredit interpretations of the international order that differ from theirs, or both. Such actors seek not to reform many existing international institutions but to undermine or paralyze them while creating rival institutions. Alternative domestic-level systems of governance and economics are considered threatening and are weakened when possible. Revolutionary ideological projects carry a high risk of violent conflict.
- *Parallel* ideological projects represent a middle ground between these two extremes. In these cases, actors dissatisfied with the current international order neither modify it nor destroy it, but simply “route around” it by building alternative norms and institutions. Strengthening these alternatives might weaken or undermine the liberal order, especially if many states and other actors find the alternatives attractive, but direct conflict is not an inevitable—or even likely—outcome.⁷⁵

In reality, ideological projects might easily combine elements of all three of these ideal types. They are, nonetheless, useful for sketching a full range of possible trajectories.

Potential Chinese Trajectories

Drawing on the ideological projects highlighted above, there are three possible futures in which

China could leverage these ideas toward greater international influence and power.

Evolutionary: Reformed Global System

China could follow its long-standing approach to reform global institutions and the international order from the inside out. This would position China to inject its ideas, norms, and concepts into global governance over time, weakening Western norms as the world’s leading principles and creating greater room for China’s system without the need for new institutions. In this evolutionary future, China would seek to accord itself on equal footing with the United States in Asia, garner developing countries’ support to normalize the state-led economic model in the World Trade Organization, reorient universal human rights toward human development, and reform the United Nations to strengthen state sovereignty and weaken the responsibility to protect.

Xi claimed in his 19th Party Congress speech that China is increasing its “international influence, ability to inspire, [and] power to shape,” and will seek to “ensure we have our say in the realm of ideology,” reflecting consistent calls to improve China’s “international right to speak,” or ability to define terms for itself.⁷⁶ This weakening of Western definitions for international norms not only legitimizes China’s governing philosophy at home but also provides a convenient cover for world leaders who do not aspire to these Western notions and are attracted to Beijing’s looser standards. Yet the fact that China often feels compelled to redefine and rebrand Western concepts—socialist market economy, socialist rule of law, and socialist consultative democracy—shows the potential staying power of these Western core values.

Parallel: Creation of a Rival “China Model”

China could view current international institutions and ideas as incompatible with China’s chosen path and instead seek to offer the world a rival vision of governance, economic development, and security in some version of the “China model” as an explicit alternative to Western liberal capitalism. Beijing would draw on a common heritage with Asian and developing countries to provide an alternative path to development through greater reliance, and likely

dependence, on China's economy and diplomatic clout. In this parallel future trajectory, China would build support for a pan-Asian order that excludes the United States but would not explicitly form new security ties to counter it, instead seeking to weaken U.S. alliances and recast development as the foundation of security under the guise of its "new security concept." This order might be extended, in a less intensive form, to other countries. Depending on the overall hostility of the U.S.-China relationship, this parallel order could turn from strategic competition to global conflict in a new cold war.

China has already created some institutions that could function as a parallel system of global governance. In the economic domain, the BRI and AIIB provide platforms for state-led economies to trade and invest with each other, marginalizing those states' connections to liberal trading partners and even allowing for China to mediate and settle disputes. For security, China can leverage CICA and perhaps the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), as open membership organizations for "collective" security against Western interference, with peacekeeping for member states prioritizing sovereignty (and regime security) above humanitarian missions. Because creating alternative institutions is impractical, as with the UN, China could instead simply use its leverage to weaken or paralyze these institutions, as the UN Security Council was during the Cold War.

Revolutionary: A New World Order Centered in Beijing

In the more distant future, an ambitious China, desiring to make the world a safe place for its way of life and working against an adventurous democratic alliance, could seek to create an entirely new world order with new institutions, norms, and relationships. In this future, Beijing goes outward to proselytize its authoritarian political and state-led economic system to other countries, supporting political movements and defending like-minded regimes. China would position itself as the global center of a CCD.

Asia would be transformed into a region in which U.S. presence would not be tolerated. The aggressive promotion of authoritarian regimes tied

tightly to a Chinese-dominated economic network, potentially in cooperation with Russia, would curtail the number of functional democracies around the world, even if those countries still held elections. An active campaign led by Beijing to undermine Western-led Bretton Woods institutions would leave China's alternative as the only viable platform for countries to settle economic, diplomatic, and security issues. Even the UN could be either marginalized or, in the extreme, abandoned under a universal Chinese-led mediation system, eliminating the notion of state representation in the global community and giving Beijing the ability to dictate terms for the betterment of all from the center. Abandoning the UN as the hallmark of Westphalian sovereignty would indeed be a major shift away from China's traditional foreign policy, but a cynical interpretation of China's past engagement is that this would be the most expeditious way to effectively amplify Chinese power when it was weak, leverage coalitions of countries to augment China's voice, and constrain U.S. power. If China becomes the dominant power in the world and no longer needs to constrain the United States, would it still benefit from self-restraint, like previous superpowers, or instead transition toward centralized supranational global governance reminiscent of *Tianxia*? Such scenarios likely represent at best a long-term prospect but are worth considering as part of an effort to consider the full range of possibilities implied by Chinese ideas.

Potential Russian Trajectories

Although there are few indications that Russia is likely to substantially diverge from its current trajectory, there are opportunities for it to take relatively more-oppositional and higher-risk approaches or to reach at least partial reconciliation with Western powers.

Evolutionary: Mutual Recognition of Privileged Interests

Although recent competition with the West has produced short-term gains in legitimation for Putin and his regime, this competition has been relatively costly for Russia, and it is not clear what its end game

is. In an evolutionary trajectory, Russia would come to terms with its limited capabilities by seeking solely a measure of protection from the encroachment of either a Western- or Chinese-dominated world order. Russia would seek to achieve de facto recognition of areas of privileged interest in exchange for Chinese economic influence in Central Asia and a cessation of its information war to sow discord and instability in the West.

Parallel: Polycentrism and Tacit Spheres of Influence

A second option, the parallel trajectory, could be characterized as a live-and-let-live approach in which Russia neither actively challenges the Western model in a zero-sum game nor seeks gradual change through mutual accommodation. From an ideological perspective, the parallel trajectory would not explicitly threaten the Western model or seek to undermine it through the propagation of “weaponized” ideas. Instead, Russia would join with other states to build alternative institutions which, by definition, would be more representative of the interests of so-called non-Western countries. To a certain extent, this is already taking place with Russia’s participation in the Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa (BRICS) bloc and SCO. However, these initiatives are limited or regional in scope. Looking ahead, there would be an attempt to expand these organizations with additional members and concrete agreements. In regard to ideas, Russia, through such institutions, would advocate for an alternative to the Western model built on such norms as nonintervention in domestic affairs, respect for traditional religious values, and nondiscrimination against authoritarian regimes.

Revolutionary: A Conservative Eurasian Protectorate

In the case of a revolutionary ideological trajectory, Russia would likely intensify its anti-Western, anti-liberal, and religious conservative ideas in pursuit of a formal Eurasian protectorate built on a model of autocratic governance, traditional values, and preferential economic agreements that would be dictated from Moscow. This “Eurasian Union”

would include the former Soviet republics, with the exception of the Baltic states, and be recognized by other great powers as a Russian sphere of influence protected from outside meddling in internal political, economic, and cultural affairs of its members. Russia would also—through the promotion of anti-Westernism and conservatism—seek to achieve a fundamental shift in the foreign policy of Washington and Brussels, not only vis-à-vis Russia but also toward the international order more broadly. To be sure, because Russia garners numerous benefits from the current international order (including its permanent place on the UN Security Council), even a revolutionary trajectory almost certainly would not involve advocacy for abolishing the key tenets of the postwar system. Cooperation with Western powers would be strictly transactional and suffused with suspicion, though there might be increasing opportunities for cooperation with China.

Comparing Potential Chinese and Russian Trajectories

These evolutionary, revolutionary, and parallel categories of ideological competition are useful intellectual tools for assessing a range of alternatives, even though no actual ideological project is likely to fall entirely in one category or the other. Table 1 summarizes the potential ideological projects that China and Russia might adopt.

Conclusion

What causes individuals to change their minds is a complex question. The issue becomes astronomically more complex when it is aggregated up to the level of whole societies. Social scientists have identified a variety of commonly observed patterns in the history of ideological competition—the tendency of countries’ ideological ambitions to increase as their power increases, their tendency to export their own domestic forms of governance, the tendency of divergent ideologies to exacerbate threat perceptions, the tendency of most societies to resist widespread ideological change absent a major crisis, and so on. But all of these trends are subject to a considerable degree

Table 1
Potential Reinterpretations of the Current International Order

Trajectory	Security	Economics	Governance
Evolutionary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: “Asia for Asians”; pan-Asian security order weakening but not entirely replacing U.S. role Russia: De facto mutual recognition of regions of “privileged interest,” albeit not formal spheres of influence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Legitimization of a “socialist market economy” Russia: not applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: “People-centered governance” emphasizing development and stability under strong state authority Russia: Mutual accommodation with the West on extent to which information operations and similar measures would be permitted in each other’s areas of “privileged interest”
Parallel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: New security concept centered on development as security, elimination of traditional military alliances Russia: Polycentrism, factoring in both regions of privileged interest and great-power veto rights on major security issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Active support for China model as alternative to liberalism, routing around Bretton Woods institutions Russia: not applicable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Active support for “people-centered governance” in other countries Russia: Strengthening ties with illiberal and “traditionalist” elements, particularly in Eastern Europe
Revolutionary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Explicit spheres of influence reflecting dynastic “Middle Kingdom” worldview Russia: Formal Eurasian protectorate, formed on basis of “shared values” and global support for revisionists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: Preferential trading under China-centered (global) BRI for countries that adopt China model Russia: Rejection of Western development model as affront to traditional values and sovereignty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> China: “Community of common destiny” positions China as center of regional and even global order Russia: Aggressive measures to delegitimize most international institutions, support traditional and authoritarian regimes

of contingency, including the preferences of individual leaders and the long-term economic viability of different courses of action.

Despite these potential contingencies, the trajectories of Chinese and Russian worldviews certainly appear to be increasingly divergent from accepted Western norms. New moments of crisis—such as a global economic downturn on the scale of the 2008

financial crisis, or even more disruptive roles for information and communication technologies—might further undermine the already shaky foundations of the current global order, and create more space for populist parties. In such circumstances, new ideas and ideologies could cause rapid changes to that order and the United States’ place in it.

Notes

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² Data in Figure 1 represent averages of public opinion data from countries in the Pew Research Center's sample, not from all countries in each region. The figure should therefore be regarded only as a very rough approximation of public opinion in these regions.

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About This Report

The National Security Strategy of the United States indicates that the United States is engaged in a new era of great-power competition not only in the military and economic spheres but also in the realms of information, ideas, and ideology. This ideational dimension of competition, however, has received much less attention in studies of international affairs than security and economic issues. This report examines ideological competition among the United States, China, Russia, and various nonstate actors and suggests ways in which observers and decisionmakers can better understand the likely trajectory of this competition.

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The associated appendixes for this report can be found at www.rand.org/t/RR2982.

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