



AMERICAN FOREIGN
POLICY COUNCIL

US Needs More Holistic Response to Emerging Axis

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With NATO's latest gathering this week in Vilnius, Washington is understandably focused on what the United States and its allies should do next to help Ukraine rebuff Russia. Moscow's invasion, however, is part of a larger, multi-nation challenge to which Washington has not yet developed a comprehensive response.

That challenge is the axis of deepening diplomatic, military, and economic cooperation between China, Russia, and Iran. Washington is responding to individual provocations in ways that seem to contradict one another.

To be sure, the China-Russia-Iran axis is no formal alliance; the relationship is more a marriage of convenience. What unites them is a deep antipathy to the U.S.-led global order, a desire to upend it, and a belief that the "American experiment" in self-government — as well as America's global supremacy — are creaky and vulnerable to challenge.

For all their bluster, however, the regimes in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran are the ones that have more glaring vulnerabilities. And by confronting their expansionism more aggressively and promoting freedom for those who suffer under their autocratic rule, Washington could put these autocrats on their heels.

Here are three elements of a comprehensive, internally consistent approach that would boost U.S. global leadership.

First, Washington should promote NATO membership for Ukraine.

Seasoned foreign policy aficionados worry that doing so would draw Washington and its allies into a direct military confrontation with Moscow. But NATO's Article V, which declares that an attack on one member "shall be considered" an attack on all, directs members to "assist" an attacked nation as they choose — and not inevitably with "the use of armed force." The robust military and economic support that the West is already providing to Kyiv seems to constitute a reasonable Article V-like response to Moscow's invasion.

Besides, NATO membership (and the valuable mystery of what an Article V response would constitute) has proved an effective deterrent to Vladimir Putin's imperial aspirations. It's hardly a coincidence that he invaded non-NATO members Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 (when his regime seized Crimea) and more fully last year — and not Poland or the Baltic States, which also were part of the Soviet empire but are now NATO members.

Washington can shore up the Atlantic Alliance — and weaken Russia — in other ways as well. With Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan no longer opposing Sweden's membership in NATO, Washington should press hard to make Stockholm a member as quickly as possible. It also should push NATO members to fulfill their commitments to spend two percent of their gross domestic product on defense. Both steps would bolster the pact and send Putin a clear message about the costs of further Russian aggression.

Second, Washington should fully enforce sanctions against Tehran while supporting those protesting its human rights abuses.

The recent news that Iranian oil exports hit a five-year high raised suspicions that Tehran is finding ways around U.S. sanctions — or that Washington is not fully enforcing them as it seeks a revived global deal to restrict Iran's nuclear program.

Iranian oil shipments are reportedly double the level of last year and the highest since 2018, and Iran earned almost four times more from crude sales in the year that ended March 2023 than it did in 2021.

If a revived nuclear deal is anything like the loophole-filled original of 2015, any temporary benefits in slowing Iran's nuclear progress are hardly worth the cost. Easing sanctions would soften grassroots pressure on Tehran by rescuing the nation's battered economy, and it also would give the regime more funds to re-arm Russia, strengthen its own Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and sponsor Hezbollah and other terrorist groups.

Washington should maintain the economic pressure on Tehran while providing stronger support for those who are risking their lives by continuing to protest the regime's authoritarian rule and human rights abuses — especially since those protests may be weakening the regime's grip on power.

Third, Washington should highlight China's human rights abuses while continuing to challenge its expansionism in the Pacific.

Yes, U.S. efforts to cool U.S.-China tensions could prove useful as Beijing threatens Taiwan and seeks to expand its footprint across the Pacific. But U.S.-China global competition will continue, if not intensify, because China seeks to upend the global order and replace America as the world's leading power.

So, if U.S.-China competition for the loyalty of unaligned nations is inevitable, let's compete. That is, let's highlight the differences between U.S.-led freedom and Chinese-led authoritarianism.

Freedom House reports that Beijing is growing "increasingly repressive," while the Human Rights Measurement Initiative ranks China as the world's worst country "for safety from the state and the right to assembly." The regime continues to commit atrocities against more than a million Muslim Uyghurs, and it's constricting freedom and democratic rights in Hong Kong.

Against this backdrop, the three steps listed above would constitute a coherent approach to the challenges that an emerging China-Russia-Iran axis is presenting, boosting America's credibility with its allies and adversaries alike.

Lawrence J. Haas, senior fellow at the American Foreign Policy Council, is the author, most recently, of "The Kennedys in the World: How Jack, Bobby, and Ted Remade America's Empire," from Potomac Books.