

Is the United States Creating a ‘Legion of Doom’?
Daniel W. Drezner - Politico

Moscow has directed a lot of vitriol toward the West over the past year. The volume of that rhetoric sometimes drowns out an awkward fact about Moscow’s foreign policy reorientation away from the West and toward allies like China and Iran.

Russian elites are not exactly thrilled with their new partners. In my conversations with Russian academics, there has been plenty of grumbling about the meager quality of Chinese support, for example. This reflects a longstanding Russian hubris toward its eastern neighbor dating back to the days of Stalin and Mao. The Russian disdain directed toward Iran is even greater.



This week’s summit between Vladimir Putin (left) and Xi Jinping should offer some clues about just how robust their partnership is growing. © Pool photo by Alexei Druzhinin

These feelings are mutual. In my conversations with Chinese diplomats, they express considerable exasperation with Russia’s actions in Ukraine. For them, the invasion upset a strategic situation that they believed was favorable to China.

Ordinary Chinese people still harbor resentments toward Russia; I have heard Chinese students vent in great detail about territorial land grabs by 19th century tsars that have yet to be reversed.

Similarly, my Russian colleagues have complained that their bilateral relations with Iran have been stymied by Tehran’s historical grievances.

Despite these lingering resentments, however, the past year has taught all of these countries an important lesson: as much as they might have issues with each other, they have much bigger issues with the United States.

Over the past year, while imposing extensive sanctions on Russia, the United States has also taken an extremely hawkish turn on China. The policies expressing this sentiment range from stringent export controls to public support for Taiwan to the possible banning of TikTok.

At the same time, the Biden administration has essentially continued status quo policies toward Iran. Efforts to revive the Iranian nuclear agreement have failed.

This leaves all three countries under various degrees of U.S.-led sanctions regimes — and, unsurprisingly, they are starting to work more closely together. Iran is in the final stages of [achieving full membership](#) in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, a security forum led by China and Russia.

China helped [broker an entente](#) between Iran and Saudi Arabia. NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg is “[increasingly concerned](#)” that China might supply weapons to Russia to assist Ukraine. The relationship between Iran and Russia has mushroomed during the course of the war in Ukraine, with NSC spokesman John Kirby labeling it “[a full-scale defense partnership.](#)” war in Ukraine would alienate a substantial number of countries.

The United States has valid reasons to oppose all three countries. China is a peer competitor that has behaved in an increasingly autocratic and bellicose manner during Xi Jinping’s rule. Iran’s regime remains wildly illiberal, pursuing policies that have threatened U.S. allies in the Middle East. Russia’s actions in Ukraine speak for themselves. Still, when you throw in allegations like North Korea [allegedly selling weaponry](#) to Russia, it sometimes seems as though the United States has inspired its own [less comical Legion of Doom](#).

This nascent alliance feeds into an American predilection for lumping all U.S. adversaries into the same basket. During the heyday of the Cold War many U.S. policymakers assumed that the communist bloc was monolithic.

In this century, parts of the foreign policy community have frequently posited that the United States faces an Axis of Something. In January 2002, George W. Bush called out Iran, Iraq, and North Korea in [his State of the Union address](#), warning that “states like these and their terrorist allies constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world.” While none of these countries were paragons of virtue, neither were they cooperating with each other or with Al Qaeda.

A decade later during the 2012 presidential election, Mitt Romney’s foreign policy warned about an emerging axis of authoritarianism. Romney’s warning was dismissed at the time, but over the past year [observers from across the political spectrum](#) have wholeheartedly embraced the idea.

The vague unease that U.S. observers feel because most of the Global South is not on board with the sanctioning of Russia feeds into this fear that much of the world is uniting against the United States.

In the current moment, it is difficult to deny that Russia, China, Iran, North Korea are taking actions that run contrary to U.S. interests. It is not obvious, however, that the cooperation between these countries is anything more than tactical in nature.

For Iran and North Korea, any opportunity to tweak the United States' hand and break out of their current economic isolation is a welcome move. Similarly, Russia is desperate for assistance from any quarter as a means of combating the toll that sanctions and the war are inflicting on the Russian economy.

All of the historical grievances and anxieties that Russia, China and Iran have in dealing with each other have not magically disappeared, they have simply been sublimated by their collective resistance to U.S. pressure.

The United States can respond to this emerging coalition in one of two ways, both unappetizing. One approach is to embrace the Manichean worldview and continue to adopt policies that oppose these cluster of countries for the foreseeable future. When one examines each country in this nascent Legion of Doom, the United States has valid grounds for sanctions and other forms of containment.

Iran has been pursuing a nuclear weapons program and a ballistic missile program, and expended considerable funds to destabilize U.S. allies in the Middle East.

Russia has repeatedly invaded its neighbors and bears responsibility for starting the largest land war in Europe since World War II. Beyond that blatant fact, Vladimir Putin has been quite willing to make mischief in NATO countries, ranging from disinformation campaigns to assassination attempts on dissidents.

China's [wolf-warrior diplomacy](#) abroad and increased repression at home do not square with being a responsible stakeholder. North Korea is... well, it's North Korea. We've not seen any trying to provide any material assistance to Russia.

While lumping America's adversaries together might feel conceptually appealing, it also creates complications. First, it makes it that much harder to build coalitions of containment. India might be on board with containing China, for example, but historical ties will make it harder to oppose Russia. The U.S. will have little choice but to rely on ad hoc coalitions that do not entirely sync up.

The bigger problem is that the Manichean worldview overlooks the myriad ways that U.S. foreign policy has thrived when it divided rather than united opposing coalitions.

A key element of George Kennan's doctrine of containment was exploiting fissures in the communist bloc. This led to warming ties with Tito's Yugoslavia in the 1950s and Mao's China in the 1970s.

Neither of these countries resembled anything close to a liberal democracy, but the United States found common cause with them to focus on the greater threat — the Soviet Union.

(In a weird way, this point lies at the root of GOP opposition to supporting Ukraine against Russia. For some in the MAGA crowd, [China is the bigger threat](#) and

therefore any opposition of Russia is either wasted effort or pushing the two largest land powers in Asia closer together.)

The paradox for American policymakers is that of all the countries opposing the United States, China is simultaneously the biggest threat and also the country that would be ripest for more positive outreach.

*By any metric, China is the only country that comes close to being a peer competitor to the United States. Opposing China is one of the few foreign policies that *inspires genuinely bipartisan support*.*

At the same time, compared to the likes of Russia, or North Korea, China is the Legion of Doom member with the greatest equities in the current international system. The primary reason China's support of Russia has been limited to date is because Beijing benefits far more from its trade with the rest of the world than with Russia.

This week's summit between Putin and Xi should offer some clues about just how robust their partnership is growing.

For U.S. policymakers, the question going forward will be to choose from a set of unsavory options. They can continue to implement a foreign policy that midwifes an anti-American coalition.

They can prioritize containing China and soften their approach toward countries that pose a more proximate threat to the United States and its allies and partners. Or they can decide that China is the devil they know best and try to foster a new equilibrium in the Sino-American relationship.

Given the unsteady state of the world, repairing the Sino-American relationship is the option that offers the most promise. Given the unsteady state of American politics, however, it is regrettably the option that both President Joe Biden and his Republican opponents may be least likely to embrace.