The Weakest Link: The Impact of the Trump Administration on the Sino-Russian-American Trilateral Relationship

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATED WORDS
APEC   Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
ASEAN  Association of Southeast Asian Nations
B&RI   Belt and Road Initiative
CCP    Chinese Communist Party
CYL    Communist Youth League of China
DPRK   Democratic People’s Republic of Korea
FONOPS Freedom of Navigation Operations
FTA    Free Trade Agreements
ICBM   Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
MENA   Middle East and North Africa
MSRI   Maritime Silk Road Initiative
NAFTA  North American Free Trade Agreement
P4     Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership
PRC    People’s Republic of China
RCEP   Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership
SCO    Shanghai Cooperation Organization
S&ED   Strategic and Economic Dialogue
SREB   Silk Road Economic Belt
TIP    Turkistan Islamic Party
TPP    Trans-Pacific Partnership
TTIP   Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership
UNFCCC United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNSC   United Nations Security Council
USIC   United States Intelligence Community
USTR   United States Trade Representative
WTO    World Trade Organization
A note on language:

I relied on both English and Mandarin language sources. When quoting from Mandarin sources, I preferred to use translations by Western media outlets. If none were available, I relied on the official translation published by the Chinese government. All sources are in the footnotes and bibliography.

A note on the timeframe:

In order to research, analyze and produce this paper, only the first year of the Trump administration (January 20, 2017 to January 20, 2018) will be addressed.

I recognize that many of these issues are still in flux, and that policy changes have occurred outside of the timeframe I am considering.

A note on the graphs:

Figures 1-4 reflect travel records and United Nations Security Council voting data. To gather this information, I relied on material found on the official White House, Kremlin, and State Council websites. The UNSC voting data was collected from the official records on the United Nations Security Council website.
Chapter One: Introduction and Literature Review

Introduction

On November 8, 2016, Donald Trump shocked the world by winning the United States presidential election. Having an unconventional candidate, the Trump campaign embraced growing populist and nationalist movements to claim victory over former Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton. Never in modern history had the United States endured such an ugly campaign season. Both the primary and general election cycles were characterized by open hostilities between the two political parties, a growing lack of decorum, and increasingly personal attacks on opponents. While tensions between the Democratic and Republican Parties cannot be blamed on any particular candidate, the Trump campaign’s tactics certainly exacerbated, and in many instances encouraged, these hostilities. The heated political atmosphere and candid display of partisan politics embarrassed many in the United States.

The international community looked on from afar, judging the state of American democracy. When Donald Trump was sworn in as President of the United States of America on January 20, 2017, the world waited to see what this would mean. For the first time, the United States commander in chief had no political, military or diplomatic experience. After sixteen months of campaign speeches, debates and press events, Trump’s foreign policy playbook remained unclear. Trump’s victory, and decision to embark upon an American First approach to foreign policy, fundamentally changed the international balance of power. The United States decision to take a more isolationist position to global affairs created a vacuum in the international order. Trump’s inaugural address
deviated from those of past presidents, employing jingoistic language that confirmed that the isolationist America First policies of the campaign would continue on to the Presidency. While many countries struggled to assess their future security options without the American umbrella of protection, others looked to exploit this opportunity. China and Russia are two countries that have a lot to gain from American weakness. The suggested changes of the Trump administration not only have the potential to alter the United States standing in the international community, but also impact bilateral, trilateral and multilateral relationships.

This thesis seeks to address how the first year of the Trump administration has impacted the China-Russia-United States trilateral dynamic. In any trilateral relationship, it is typical for two of the parties to gravitate towards each other. Under Stephen Walt’s theory of alliance formation, a country will either choose to align themselves in opposition to the principle source of power in order to balance power, or will choose to bandwagon onto the state that poses the greatest threat.¹ The creation of alliances may be due to a commonality of beliefs, for convenience, or (in balancing situations) to offset the perceived greater power of the third party. It may also be for reasons that cannot clearly be enumerated. In many cases, it is preferable to be the entity that has a strong relationship with one of the other parties and not be the odd man out. In a triangular relationship, there is also a benefit to aligning with the weakest side.

By avoiding bandwagoning behavior, where the nation would have a clearly

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¹ Walt, Stephen M. “Alliance Formation and the Balance of World Power.” *International Security*, vol. 9, no. 4, 1985, p.4
inferior position, a country would have the opportunity to gain more power as a balancing force. However, being the isolated entity is acceptable so long as the strength of that one is still greater than the combined strength of the other two.

The point of this thesis is to evaluate the fluctuations of the China-Russia-United States trilateral relationship during 2017. Which nations are more closely linked, and who is the odd man out? Is the strength of the one stronger than the combined strength of the other two? The first step in alliance formation is determining the most pressing threat. In the past decade, Russia and China have strengthened their relationship in order to attempt to balance the United States. Should the role of the United States change such that it is no longer the principle source of danger to them, the common goal of the relationship would be diminished. China might then become the country that needs to be bandwagoned with, or balanced against.

In any multilateral relationship there are issues that the countries see as a commonality of interests that bring the connection closer together and reinforce a sense of mutual regard. In contrast, there are also contentious issues that would tend to taint the relationship and, if escalated, could become points of dispute or even conflict. These negative issues tend to push the countries farther apart whereas the positives pull them together. As three of the most powerful countries in the world, the United States, China and Russia all have the ability to put stress on contentious issues in order to cause problems or weaken the bilateral relationship of the other two nations. The question then becomes whether or not a nation decides to act upon this ability.
This thesis will analyze the policy positions and values of the current leaders of China, Russia and the United States, and the major economic and foreign policy issues of the past year. It will also examine figures regarding the travel data of the three presidents, and United Nations Security Council voting records. From this analysis, it becomes clear that the Trump administration enacted policies that weakened the United States role in the trilateral, and strengthened the China-Russia relationship without taking any actions to bolster its international standing.

**Literature Review: Balance of Power**

Exploring the literature on global balance of power, specifically the potentially shifting roles of China, Russia and the United States, reveals a general consensus amongst international relations theorists. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the international system is undoubtedly unipolar. With the world’s largest defense spending, research and development budget, unprecedented military superiority and economic dominance, the United States is the superpower in this system. However theorists disagree as to the longevity and stability of this system.

Brzezinski (1997) declared the United States the unquestionable leader of the free world in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union, but suggested that democracy doesn’t naturally lend itself well to running an empire. In order to remain on top of the international order, strong interventionist foreign policy is a necessary pillar of the United States national security strategy. He theorized that the Eurasian sub-continent lays at the foundation of twenty-
first century geostrategy, and would be "the chessboard on which the struggle for global primacy continues to be played." Brzezinski’s analysis called for the United States and China to be natural allies in order to focus on suspected problem areas in the middle of the Eurasian region. While time has proven that to not necessarily be the case, the fact that a strong Sino-American alliance was once theorized to combat an increasingly aggressive Russia is indicative of the roots of the United States and China’s relationship. Finally Brzezinski defied historical precedent by asserting that the current American-led unipolar system would be the last. The idea that a multipolar system is the future of international relations suggests the dual strengthening of multiple regional powers and the weakening of the United States. In order to head this off, the United States must ensure that no other state gains the capacity to limit an American presence in Eurasia, and strengthen relations with prominent regional powers so as to integrate the United States into the success and stability of Asia.

Global polarity has traditionally been categorized as unipolar, bipolar, or multipolar. Samuel Huntington (1999) defined a unipolar system as one with “one superpower, no significant major power, and many minor powers.” A bipolar system has “two superpowers, and the relations between them are central to international relations” and a multipolar system has “several major powers of comparable strength that cooperate and compete with each other in shifting patterns.” Huntington argued that there is a difference between the

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world having one superpower and being unipolar. The current post-Cold War international system does not fit into any of the traditional categories. Instead, he suggested the idea of a ‘uni-multipolar system’, which has one superpower (the United States) and multiple major powers. In this system, the United States faces a threat from various second level regional powers, including Russia in Eurasia and China in East Asia. However, Huntington posited that a great risk to the American dominance of the uni-multipolar system is the United States tendency to act as if the world is unipolar. The failure to recognize the severity of the threats from increasingly strong regional powers, coupled with ignorance of growing anti-American sentiments, could lead to the transition from uni-multipolar system with American dominance to a truly multipolar system.

Wohlforth (1999) refuted the belief of international relations scholars that unipolarity is the least stable system of government and prone to create conflict in order to balance power. Instead, he found that unipolarity is “durable and peaceful”, but that the “chief threat is U.S. failure to do enough.” A passive and isolationist America poses the greatest threat to the stability of Wohlforth’s peaceful unipolar system because a hegemonic rivalry over international power, which is typically the greatest cause of conflict, is absent. Should the United States lose its ‘raw power advantage’, it will also lose the ability to minimize security competition.

More recently, Brooks and Wohlforth (2016) asserted that the turning point in the international order is constantly fluctuating and, in order to remain

on top, the United States must maintain its efforts to remain engaged in global affairs. Since the end of World War II, there have been two constants in international relations: the United States is a superpower (in a bipolar system with the Soviet Union and by itself after 1991), and that its superpower status is contingent upon continuing with a ‘deep engagement’ strategy of international affairs. Brooks and Wohlforth defined deep engagement as “managing the external environment to reduce near- and long-term threats to U.S. national security; promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity; and creating, sustaining, and revising the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to U.S. interests.” In order to fend off the growing threat of various regional powers, it is necessary for the United States to defends its status as a superpower by continuing to involve itself in multinational efforts, bolster relations with developing countries and assert its sphere of influence.

It is important to note that the era in which these theories were created. As time goes on, the specific presumptions of the theories are either proven or disproven. For example, Brzezinski’s prediction that China may come to view the United States as a natural ally to counterbalance Russia and Japan has not occurred. By analyzing multiple principles from different eras, it is possible to look at the evolution of the theory of global polarity as international events change. There is a clear consensus that the United States is the only superpower

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but disagreement about how long this will be the case, what will replace American hegemony, and the severity of the threat from other nations. Brzezinski and Huntington both believe that a multipolar system is to follow the inevitable collapse of American hegemony. Brooks and Wohlfarth are more optimistic and believe that, pending a continuation of deep engagement, China and other regional powers will not be able to overcome the United States.

**Literature Review: China’s Rising Power and the Role of Russia**

Research on China’s potential to overtake the United States as the global superpower remains inconclusive. Theorists are divided as to whether China has the ability, or the desire, to ascend to such a leadership position in the international community. For their part, the Chinese government has openly spoken out against the principle of unipolarity. President Xi Jinping told the United Nations that China actively “supports progress towards a multipolar world”, citing participation in multinational organizations, and commitment to the principles of the United Nations.7

Pillsbury (2015) asserts that the Chinese are engaging in a long-term strategy of misdirection and deception in order to conceal their true intention to replace the United States as the global hegemon. As a result of the United States underestimating the strength of conservative leaders in the Chinese Communist Party, the plot is already being carried out. Pillsbury relies heavily upon personal sources and anecdotal information collected over many years of working with American intelligence agencies and various government offices. According to his

sources the long-term American strategy of promoting democracy in China has yielded little results, the fear of China collapsing if pressed too hard on controversial issue is unfounded, and that these assumptions are all part of the greater Chinese plan to make China appear weaker than it truly is. Based on the evolution of the Sino-Soviet relationship and eventual Sino-Soviet split, Pillsbury derived the Chinese strategy as first making its partner think that China is content being the weaker of the two in the relationship in order to garner as much assistance as possible. Not only does Pillsbury think that the Chinese are capable and willing to displace the United States as a global hegemon, but believes that “because we have no idea the Marathon is even under way, America is losing.”

While not as pessimistic about America’s odds of fending off a Chinese push for global hegemony, Mearsheimer (2006) also believes that the threat is imminent. Based on the past decades impressive economic growth, demographics, and concentration on military development, conflict between the United States and China is inevitable and has the possibility to descend into war. The first signs of China seeking more power on the international stage would be by trying to push the United States out of Asia, and to “dictate the boundaries of acceptable behavior to neighboring countries.” In this scenario the United States would naturally seek to create strong alliances with China’s neighbors, all of which will likely want to counter China’s power. However, this assumes that

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other East Asian countries continue to view a powerful U.S. as a more appealing alternative. A military conflict is not an ideal situation for either country. However, as China’s regional influence continues to expand, there is only so long it will be willing to accept an American military presence in Asia. Mearsheimer’s theory posited that, despite an increasingly strong relationship with China, Russia would join other Asian powers in looking to contain China. 10 Mearsheimer goes so far as to predict the creation of an American-led balancing coalition. Typically a balancing coalition is composed of secondary states looking to protect themselves against the larger threat. 11 Given the shifting foreign policies of many Asian countries over the past decade, China and the United States have been viewed as both the threat to be contained and the leader of the balancing force.

On a more optimistic note, Christenson (2015) does not believe that China is threatening American hegemony. Instead, the risk from China is its potential to destabilize East Asia. Despite a booming economy and growing military capabilities, Beijing will remain bogged down in domestic crises for the foreseeable future. The Chinese Communist Party is still taking extreme, and controversial, measures to ensure political stability. A lack of international allies and international territorial disputes prevent China from fully emerging as a superpower. Christenson maintained that the rise of China is real. As a regional power, China has the ability to influence international affairs and counter

10 ibid
American influence. Christenson did not rule out the possibility of a future Sino-American conflict. The key to preventing such a conflict and integrating China into the international community is “a strong U.S. presence in Asia combined with deft diplomacy.”12

Experts are divided on the nature of the threat China poses to American hegemony. Some believe it is imminent and inevitably violent, some think it is ongoing in a more subtle fashion, and some do not believe it will ever occur. What all the theorists can agree on is that the rise of China is a threat to American interests in Asia, and that the best way to protect those interests is to maintain a strong economic, military and diplomatic presence in the region.

Russia’s role in China’s possible ascension to power is similarly uncertain. While Russia has not established the same global sphere of influence as the Soviet Union once held, it still possesses an intimidating nuclear arsenal, is an important player in the global energy markets, and remains one of the greatest threats to the post-World War II American-led international order. Russia cannot be considered just a regional power, but does not have the same growth potential as China. Under President Putin, Russia has made no secret its desire to end American hegemony, but the rise of China is not necessarily in Russia’s best interest. While the Sino-Russian relationship is improving, and that poses an increasingly strong threat to the United States, in the long-term China and Russia have too many potential clashes of interest for Russia to ever be comfortable with China as a superpower.

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Conclusion

The political theories regarding the global balance of power have evolved over decades of research and analysis. However, the Trump administration is completely unlike any previous administration. An atypical government with an erratic president, the White House appears to being going down a deliberately destructive path. On the campaign trail, Trump promised to “drain the swamp”, and former Chief Strategist Steve Bannon discussed the “deconstruction of the administrative state.” Not knowing to what degree this goal would be accomplished, it is therefore difficult to predict the effect on the country’s political activity and leadership.

The common thread within the literature is that, while the United States is unquestionably the global superpower, the rise of China poses a very real threat to many core principles of American hegemony and American national security interests. In order to combat China’s growing influence and the increasingly strong Sino-Russian friendship, it is necessary for the United States to remain involved in international affairs. Despite this consensus, the Trump administration enacted policies that marked America’s sharpest turn towards isolationism since World War II. In one year the United States has allowed China and Russia to forge closer relations while doing nothing to counter it or strengthen American influence abroad.

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Chapter One: Leadership Profiles

This chapter offers the historical background necessary to understand the remainder of this thesis. It will begin with a brief biography of Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping, followed by an overview of U.S.-Chinese, U.S.-Russian and Chinese-Russian relations. In *The Hero as Divinity*, Thomas Carlyle described the history of the world as “but the biography of great men.”\(^\text{14}\) It is therefore important to understand who Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping are as leaders, and the political systems under which they ascended to power. Their family history, childhood upbringing and pre-political careers all provide an insight into who they are today and the important characteristics of their leadership style.\(^\text{15}\)

The political systems of China, Russia, and the United States are extremely different. The Russian Constitution classifies its political system as a “democratic federative law-bound state with a republican government”, in which the President is head of state and the Prime Minister is in charge of the government.\(^\text{16}\) In actuality, Russia has a history of authoritarian leaders rising through the ranks and consolidating power. As exemplified during Putin’s time as Prime Minister when his presidency was constitutionally limited, true power is associated with the person, not the office. China is officially considered a

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\(^\text{15}\) Ludwig, Arnold M. *King of the mountain: The nature of political leadership*. University Press of Kentucky, 2002.

\(^\text{16}\) *Russian Constitution*. Chapter 1. Article 1
“socialist republic under the people’s democratic dictatorship.”¹⁷ Since the Chinese Communist Party’s ascension to power in 1949, China has remained a one-party state. Party loyalty, long-term service, and proper factional alignment are all essential in order to rise to the top spot. The United States is a federal presidential constitutional republic. The President is the head of the Executive branch and acts as head of state and government. Of the three, the United States is the only country in which the distinction between the office and the individual, or the party, is easily apparent. These differences between these three political systems can be seen in the path each leader took to rise to power, and their methods of leadership since becoming President.

**Donald Trump:**

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States of America. It is safe to say that this came as a surprise to many Americans and the international community. Even before his entrance into politics, Trump was a controversial figure. After spending most of his professional career in real estate and media, Trump broke into the field of politics, establishing himself as a political outsider. Donald Trump had no record of public service and arguably lacked the experience and qualifications previously considered necessary to hold the office of President of the United States.

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¹⁷ *Chinese Constitution. Chapter 1. Article 1*
In his inaugural address Donald Trump proclaimed, “the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.”\(^\text{18}\) This sentiment, of working on behalf of the overlooked, was commonly invoked on the campaign trail. However, Donald Trump and his family have done little, if anything, to help the less fortunate. Since immigrating to the United States in the 1880s, the Trump family has gone to great lengths to avoid public service, either militarily or philanthropically. Donald Trump was raised in a relatively privileged environment. His father’s construction and real estate company, Elizabeth Trump & Sons, afforded Trump the ability to attend private school. In fact, Trump himself recalled as a child an interest “in creating mischief…not malicious so much as it was aggressive.”\(^\text{19}\) At age thirteen, Trump was sent to New York Military Academy, which he accredits with helping him “learn a lot about discipline, and about channeling my aggression into achievements.”\(^\text{20}\) It is important to note that, while NYMA is a military academy, it is not considered a military pre-professional educational facility. Trump graduated from NYMA in 1964, in the middle of President Johnson’s escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. Instead of matriculating to the military, Trump received four successive educational deferments. After being admitted to Fordham University, he transferred to the University of Pennsylvania. Upon completion of his undergraduate degree Trump once again became eligible for military service in 1968. However, after being diagnosed with bone spurs in his foot, Trump was

\(^{18}\) Trump, Donald J. “The Inaugural Address.” White House. The Inauguration of the President of the United States, Washington D.C.


\(^{20}\) ibid. p.50
deemed unfit for military service. At one point, when asked by a journalist which foot had the injury, Trump said he could not recall.\textsuperscript{21} Trump is by no means the first person in his family to go to great lengths to avoid military service. Fred Trump, Donald Trump’s father, also did not serve despite being of age during World War II. Fred Trump spent the 1930’s and 1940’s building barracks and apartments for Navy personnel near major shipyards on the East Coast.\textsuperscript{22} After the war Fred Trump was investigated by the Department of Justice for wartime profiteering. In one of his autobiographies, Trump asserts that he “spent my entire career standing up for this country.”\textsuperscript{23} However, in three generations of the Trump family, not one person has served in the military.

Military service aside, the Trump family has little history of documented charitable activity. While campaigning, Trump frequently described himself as charitable, asserting that he’s “given away millions.”\textsuperscript{24} Mike Pence and Eric Trump echoed this sentiment, but were similarly vague regarding specific amounts. The Trump campaign stated that between 2009 and 2014 Trump gave away $102 million.\textsuperscript{25} Further analysis of the ninety-four page list of charitable donations revealed several inconsistencies, most notably that the $26 million land donation to New York State occurred in 2006 and that there is no evidence of a single cash donation to charity made by Trump personally.\textsuperscript{26} An individual’s

\textsuperscript{22} ibid. p.11
\textsuperscript{23} Trump, Donald J. Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again. Threshold Editions, 2016. p.104
\textsuperscript{25} ibid
\textsuperscript{26} ibid
personal charitable donations are usually of little interest to the public, but the frequency with which Trump brings up his donations (and the apparent lack of actual charity to back up these claims) is significant.

Donald Trump marketed himself as a savvy businessman, and therefore qualified to run the country. After graduating from the University of Pennsylvania with an undergraduate degree in economics, Donald Trump took over the family business and set about turning Elizabeth Trump & Sons into a multimillion dollar corporation. The company expanded beyond the New York real estate market into resorts, golf clubs and hotels around the world. The growing company faced significant hardships along the way. Trump filed for chapter eleven bankruptcy four times within twenty years and has been involved in over three thousand five hundred federal and state lawsuits. The scope of these lawsuits ranged from discriminatory rental practices to contractual disputes to sexual harassment allegations to defamation claims. Over sixty of those lawsuits are related to the Trump Organization’s failure to pay employees and contractors. The impacted employees mostly consist of blue-collar workers, those who Trump pledged to look out for as President. Despite these challenges, the Trump name became an internationally recognized brand. The international recognition, and financial success, of the Trump Organization led to media interest in the Trump family. While the Trump Organization is a multi-million dollar company, multiple bankruptcies, allegations of defrauding

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workers and potentially illicit dealings all speak to questionable practices that do not equate to success as President.

Trump first emerged as a media personality in the 1990s, with guest appearances in multiple films and television programs. After a stint hosting professional wrestling, Trump moved on to become the executive producer and host of The Apprentice in 2003. While not seen through a political lens, the Trump family became tabloid fodder as his three marriages and two divorces played out in the public eye. During his campaign and presidency, Trump kept his family front and center. His adult children frequently joined him on the campaign trail and act as advisors in his administration. Donald Trump was a new kind of political candidate. While not the first outsider to enter the field of politics, Trump has no binding ties to one political party. Instead, he has links to all. Since 1987, Trump has been a registered Democrat, Republican, Independent, Reform party member and on occasion has declined to enroll in any political party.28

Running as an alternative to what he described as “the very stupid leaders in Washington DC,” Trump ran a no-holds-barred campaign. With the campaign promise to “Make America Great Again”, Trump reached out to those who believed they were being left behind. The majority of this support came from white, lower-middle class, non-college graduates and included

29 Trump, Donald J. Crippled America: How to Make America Great Again. Threshold Editions, 2016. p.2
endorsements from far-right and white nationalist organizations. The Trump campaign weathered allegations of sexual assault and Russian collusion, and Donald Trump became the fifth President in United States history to win the election without winning the popular vote.

Despite spending most of his adult life in the public eye and rising to the highest political office in the country, Donald Trump’s true political philosophy remains somewhat of an enigma to the public. Aside from his consistent reliance on family, few remain within Trump’s inner circle for long. The eldest Trump sons, Donald Jr. and Eric, took over for their father in running the Trump Organization after his inauguration. Trump’s eldest daughter, Ivanka, and her husband, Jared Kushner, have been fixtures in the Oval Office from the beginning, acting as senior advisors to the President. Other than family, Trump’s inner circle has seen unprecedented turnover. The first months of the Trump Presidency saw the hiring and firing of many officials, most notably Chief Strategist Steve Bannon, National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Chief of Staff Reince Priebus and Press Secretary Sean Spicer.\(^\text{30}\) Trump’s indecisiveness with regards to those high level political positions is mostly clearly highlighted by the short tenure of Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci. Scaramucci worked in the West Wing for ten days, only officially holding the position for six.\(^\text{31}\) It is difficult to say whether or not Trump values the advice he is given. There is no way of knowing whom he listens to. However, given the rate of


turnover in his administration, it is indicative that those who have remained within Trump's inner circle are of more value to the President. Understanding who has the ear of the President is essential to evaluating the decisions made by the administration.

**Vladimir Putin:**

After almost two decades at the helm of the largest nation in the world, Vladimir Putin remains somewhat of an enigma to much of the international community. After fifteen years in the Soviet Union's notorious KGB, Putin’s entrance into politics came during the country’s tumultuous transition from communism to a capitalist democracy. Putin’s origin story provides context for his meteoric rise to power. After only a ten-year political career, six of which was spent in St. Petersburg, Putin emerged as the President of the Russian Federation.

Public service, to both the country and to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, ran in the Putin family. Spiridon Putin, President Putin’s grandfather, supported the Bolsheviks during the civil war and later worked as a private cook for Vladimir Lenin’s widow.\(^{32}\) The history of public servitude continued on to his son, Vladimir Spiridonovich Putin. Vladimir Spirinovich served the military in World War II as a part of the NKVD, a secret police force that evolved into the KGB, of which his son would one day become the head.\(^{33}\) Just as service to the country was part of the Putin family tradition, so was

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\(^{33}\) ibid p.9
sacrifice and loss. Vladimir Spiridonovich lost two brothers during the World War II. His wife, Maria, lost her mother and a brother. 34 Before his birth, Putin’s parents suffered the loss of two sons during infancy. 35 This undeniably had an impact on Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin. He grew up “in the overly protective, if not outwardly loving embrace of parents who had miraculously survived and would do everything to ensure that their son did too.” 36 As a child, Putin had a reputation for delinquency. He later described himself as “a hooligan, not a Pioneer.” 37 Many biographers cite his introduction to martial arts, specifically judo, as the foundation for Putin’s eventual drive and determination. As a teenager, Putin directed this drive towards a goal: becoming a spy for the KGB. After three attempts to enter the KGB facility in Leningrad, Putin finally met an officer face to face. During a brief conversation, Putin learned what skills, both academic and professional, are most desirable for KGB recruitment. 38 With a long-term goal in mind and short-term steps laid out in front of him, Putin approached school with a new enthusiasm. He started studying German and was allowed to join the Pioneers, became the leader of his schools branch and eventually was chosen for the Komsomol (Communist Party Youth Organization.) 39 Putin matriculated to Leningrad State University and, in 1975, fulfilled his childhood dreams of joining the KGB.

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34 ibid p.1
35 ibid p.10-11
36 ibid p.15
39 ibid p.19
A fifteen-year career with the infamous espionage agency undoubtedly had a significant impact on Putin. As a part of the Second Chief Directorate for counterintelligence and later the First Chief Directorate for intelligence beyond USSR borders, Putin became familiar with the inner workings of the massive bureaucracy and the advantages of networking. After a decade of service in the KGB’s domestic offices, Putin was assigned to Dresden, East Germany. However, by 1985 Dresden was no longer the hub of action portrayed in the spy movies Putin watched as a teenager. The objective of the KGB in East Germany was “to gather intelligence and recruit agents who had access to the West.” The Dresden office’s first priority assignment was to gather lists for potential recruits. The end of Putin’s service in East Germany came about with the end of East Germany. With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Putin returned to Leningrad having witnessed the tumult and chaos that came with the collapse of communism in a major European nation.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Putin continued to work for the KGB domestically as a recruiter at Leningrad State University. He remained connected to the agency until Anatoly Sobchak was elected mayor of Saint Petersburg. Sobchak, a lawyer by trade, became a professor of international affairs late in his career. He met Putin during their overlapping time at Leningrad State University. After becoming the first democratically elected

40 ibid p.18
41 ibid p.43
mayor, Sobchak appointed Putin his advisor on international affairs.\textsuperscript{42} This not only marked the beginning of Putin’s political career, but also affixed his reputation to that of Sobchak. Putin quickly moved up the political ranks, forming networks and alliances that would continue to serve him throughout his career. From 1991 to 1996, Putin held various jobs in the Sobchak administration, from head of the committee for external relations to the first deputy chairman of the government of St. Petersburg.\textsuperscript{43} However when Sobchak lost reelection in 1996, Putin was out of a job. It is important to note that during this time, Putin and Sobchak faced many accusations of corruption\textsuperscript{44} Despite those allegations, Putin did not remain on the political sideline for long. After Sobchak’s fall from power, Putin moved to Moscow. In only three years, Putin rose from the deputy head of the Presidential Property Management Department to acting President.\textsuperscript{45} Putin’s political profile was significantly heightened upon his appointment as deputy chief of staff to President Yeltsin. From there, he worked as the Director of the FSB, deputy Prime Minister and Prime Minister. After Yeltsin resigned, Putin ascended to the office of the Presidency.

Putin did not make this meteoric rise to power alone. The inner circle of Vladimir Putin is composed of some of Russia’s most powerful men. However, these connections came about in many ways, varying from childhood friends to KGB allies. Putin’s inner circle has certainly changed during his two decades as

\textsuperscript{42}Zygar, Mikhail. \textit{All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin}. Public Affairs, 2016. p.20
\textsuperscript{43}Myers, Steven Lee. \textit{The new Tsar: The rise and reign of Vladimir Putin}. Simon and Schuster, 2015. p.88
\textsuperscript{44}Dawisha, Karen. \textit{Putin’s kleptocracy: who owns Russia?}. Simon and Schuster, 2015. p.148
\textsuperscript{45}ibid p.165
the Russian defacto leader, but key individuals have remained by his side. One way to easily identify who Putin has close ties to is to look at who the United States and European Union personally sanctioned after the Russian invasion of Crimea. These men include Sergey Glazyev, Sergei Ivanov, Viktor Ivanov, Yuri Kovalchuk and Vladimir Yanukovych.46 Notable members of the inner circle that were not targeted for sanctions include Igor Sechin, who is widely considered “the second most powerful person in Russia,”47 as well as childhood friends and judo partners Boris and Arkady Rotenberg. It is difficult to ascertain the extent to which their advice impacts Putin’s decisions. However, the fact that they have remained within the inner circle for twenty years certainly suggest they have some influence.

Xi Jinping:

Of the three leaders examined here, Xi Jinping took the most traditional path to the presidency. As a member, and now leader, of the fifth generation of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), Xi’s relationship to the party is different from that of previous leaders. Xi is the first Chinese leader to be born after the creation of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and establishment of a system of leadership under Communist rule.

Xi was born in 1953 and grew up during the tumultuous Cultural Revolution. His father, Xi Zhongxun, served in the Red Army with Mao Zedong

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46 Zygar, Mikhail. All the Kremlin’s Men: Inside the Court of Vladimir Putin. Public Affairs, 2016. pp. viii-xviii
47 ibid p.xvi
and was a member of the CCP Central Committee.\textsuperscript{48} His mother, Qi Xin, was a member of the female cadre branch of the CCP and a professor at the Marx Institute.\textsuperscript{49} Due to his father’s high position in the party, Xi Jinping was dubbed a “red princeling”, a child of the political elite. This all changed in 1962 when Xi Zhongxun was purged from the CCP. After being accused of leading an anti-party clique, Xi Zhongxun was sent to prison and his family lost their political protection. When the Cultural Revolution cut his secondary education short, Xi was sent to Yanchuan County as a part of Mao’s Down to the Countryside movement.\textsuperscript{50} Xi spent seven years in Yan’an, exceeding the typical stint of three to four years. It was during this time that Xi gained a true understanding of the lifestyle of Chinese peasants. After seven attempts at joining the Communist Youth League of China (CYL), his application was accepted in 1973. By 1974 Xi Jinping was officially named the chief of the Liangjiahe Brigade of the CCP.\textsuperscript{51} With his new party affiliation, Xi left the countryside to return to the capital and attend university.

Xi Jinping matriculated to Tsinghua University in 1975. Tsinghua is one of China’s most prestigious and influential universities. As a part of Mao’s “worker-peasant-soldier student” program, Xi did not finish his secondary schooling. At Tsinghua, he received a full education in Marxist and Maoist thought, all while pursuing a chemical engineering degree. At university Xi also joined what came

\textsuperscript{48} Andresy, Agnes. \textit{XI Jinping Red China, the Next Generation}. University Press of America, 2016. p.7
\textsuperscript{49} ibid p.8
\textsuperscript{51} Andresy, Agnes. \textit{XI Jinping Red China, the Next Generation}. University Press of America, 2016. p.24
to be known as the Tsinghua Clique, an informal college association club.

Multiple members of the CCP’s fourth and fifth generation leaders have attended Tsinghua University and are part of the Tsinghua clique, including previous PRC president Hu Jintao.\textsuperscript{52} A disproportionate number of high-ranking Chinese politicians are part of this clique, making their alumni ties an important networking system. Factionalism is extremely prevalent within the Chinese Communist Party. Although the CCP presents a united front to the international community, there is a noticeable bipartisan dynamic. Referred to as “one party, two coalitions”, the divide falls along socioeconomic and geographic lines. The members of the elitist faction, commonly referred to as the Shanghai Clique, are from high-ranking families on costal cities and represent the interests of business and entrepreneurs. The populist coalition members are typically from less privileged backgrounds in inland provinces that rose through the ranks of the Communist Youth League, and represent the farmers, migrant workers and urban poor.\textsuperscript{53} The lines between the two coalitions were especially clear during the presidencies of Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, with each acting as the leader of the populist and elitist factions respectively. As leadership passed down to the next generation, the coalitions remained relatively balanced on the seven person Politburo Standing Committee. Xi Jinping emerged as the head of the Shanghai faction, while Premier Li Keqiang has strong ties to the populist coalition.

Xi finished his undergraduate education in 1979 and began working for Geng Biao, general secretary of the Standing Committee of CCP’s Central Military Commission. Biao, a friend of Xi’s recently rehabilitated father, made Xi his mishu or secretary.\(^{54}\) During this time Xi worked with all three branches of the armed forces, completed his military service, and participated in an official state visit to the United States. After spending seven years in the capital, Xi returned to the Chinese countryside in 1982, working as the deputy party secretary in Zhengding County. One year later Xi was promoted to party secretary. Over the next twenty-five years, Xi served as party secretary in five provinces.\(^{55}\) The last of these appointments, Shanghai in 2007, put Xi in charge of China’s most profitable county and significantly increased his national profile. In 2007 he was appointed to the Politburo Standing Committee of the CCP. He notably ranked higher than Li Keqiang, the other fifth generation member of the Standing Committee, an indication that he was tapped to succeed President Hu. One year later he was named vice-president of the PRC. At the 2012 18\(^{th}\) National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi Jinping was officially named as Hu Jintao’s replacement. As the paramount leader of China, Xi took over for Hu as the General Secretary of the CCP, Chairman of the Chinese Military Commission and President of the PRC. Xi further consolidated his power at the 19\(^{th}\) National Congress of the Communist Party of China. During the weeklong event, over two thousand CCP delegates unanimously affirmed Xi Jinping’s personal, political,

\(^{54}\) Andresy, Agnes. *XI Jinping Red China, the Next Generation*. University Press of America, 2016. p.31
\(^{55}\) ibid p.57
and military ideology as the official guiding principles of the Party. This vote elevated Xi to the a status on par with Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping and above his two predecessors, Hu Jintao and Jiang Zemin, who were both present at the event. Xi Jinping Though on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, or Xi Jinping Thought, is essentially a pathway to the consolidation of power on both a national and personal level. It calls for the strengthening of China’s economy and military, and greater support for Xi Jinping as “lingxiu” (a more respectful term for ‘leader’ not used since Mao).  

On the last day of the Congress, the new Politburo Standing Committee was announced. This group is commonly referred to as the most powerful seven men in China. Typically in a second term president, one member is from the younger generation, and is therefore presumed to be the President’s choice of a successor. Five of the seven members of the 18th Standing Committee were no longer eligible due to the CCP’s mandatory retirement age. All five of the new appointments are of the same generation of Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang, and thus ineligible to take over for President Xi.

Xi’s rise to power came with the support of multiple networks of influence. Xi is connected to the aforementioned “red princelings”, Shanghai Faction and the Costal Base. The red princeling network is composed of children of the third and fourth generation political elite. Currently four of the

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57 Andresy, Agnes. Xi Jinping Red China, the Next Generation. University Press of America, 2016. p.89
seven members of the Politburo Standing Committee are pricelings.\textsuperscript{58} Xi’s strongest connection to the Shanghai Faction is through his wife, Peng Liyuan. Before Xi assumed the vice-presidency, he was most commonly known as Peng’s husband. As a famous folk singer, Peng Liyuan is a part of the Shanghai Faction’s “culture clique.”\textsuperscript{59} This group is directly tied back to Jiang Zemin. As the leader of the third generation of the CCP, President Jiang’s political connections and support went a long way to helping Xi rise up the ranks of the CCP. Another group Xi is linked to, the Costal Base, is also connected back to Jiang Zemin. Once Xi inherited control of the Shanghai Faction from Jiang, Xi began to expand his network towards youth supporters. This group was named the coastal base as most of the connections were formed while Xi was stationed in the costal cities of Fujian, Shanghai and Zhengjiang. This network is composed of young cadres suspected to be up and comers in the CCP. Aside from these networks, Xi also has his own personal inner circle. This group of six trusted advisors includes Ding Xuexiang, He Yiting, Li Zhanshu, Liu He, Zhong Shaojun and Chen Bin.\textsuperscript{60} These men all hold high-ranking positions in the Xi administration and are believed to enjoy the trust of President Xi. It is difficult to concretely ascertain the extent to which Xi confides in these men, but their continued presence within his inner circle speaks to a level of trust and value.

\textsuperscript{58} ibid p.72
\textsuperscript{59} ibid p.47
\textsuperscript{60} ibid p.86
Chapter Two: Tracking Leaders’ Movements

Before looking at the changes incurred in 2017, it is imperative to look back at the state of China-Russia-U.S. relations before Trump. The strength of the relationship between two nations is difficult to quantify. This section examines three indicators as proxy measures for the potency of the China-Russia, United States-China and United States-Russia relationships: official state visits of executive leadership, Presidential bilateral meetings and voting records at the UN Security Council. These sources, coupled with major national and international events, provide a baseline for evaluating the strength of these three nation’s relationships with one another.

United States-China:

At the first United States-China bilateral meeting of 2009, newly elected President Obama declared “the relationship between the United States and China will shape the twenty-first century, which makes it as important as any bilateral relationship in the world.” 61 The eight-year tenure of the Obama administration saw China transition from the Hu regime into the Xi presidency. During this time period, China progressed from a regional power to the second-largest economy in the world with rapidly developing military and technology prowess. The Sino-American relationship can best be described as one of cooperation and competition. The Obama administration approached an increasingly powerful China with improved channels of communication via the creation of the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue, an increased

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numbers of state visits and bilateral meetings and renewed cooperation on international affairs.

The importance of the United States-China relationship is signified by discussions of creating a Group of Two to supplement the G-7 group of leading industrial countries that excluded China. Zbigniew Brzezinski and Fred Bergsten first proposed the idea of a G-2 conference as primarily an economic forum with geostrategic benefits. Brzezinski, former National Security Advisor to President Carter, agreed with a Chinese magazine’s characterization of U.S.-China relations as “complex interdependence.” Given the challenges both nations faced in the coming years, the relationship “cannot remain static; it will either expand or narrow.” 62 Brzezinski believed that it would be to the benefit of the United States, China and the international community for the relationship to expand. He proposed informal, yet regularly scheduled, high-level bilateral meetings for the discussion of global issues. Fred Bergsten, former assistant secretary for international economic affairs at the Treasury Department, also argued for the creation of a G2 as “imperative if the world economy is to move forward.” 63 Brzezinski and Bergsten agreed that these meetings must remain informal as to not offend other international powers. While this idea was not carried forward into practice, its importance inspired high-level U.S. diplomats and strategic thinkers to consider this proposal. Bergsten’s initial argument for a G2 was that the United States and China are the world’s most important economies, largest

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trading countries, account for half of global output and are the two largest polluters.\textsuperscript{64} These conditions remain true to this day. The G2 never came to fruition, but the U.S.-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue fulfills many of the purposes of the G2. The United States-China Strategic and Economic Dialogue (S&ED) was an update to the Bush administrations separate senior dialogue meetings and strategic economic dialogue. The combination of the two conferences created an official channel for discussion of all bilateral and global issues. Starting in 2009, high-ranking officials from the United States and China met annually, rotating hosting in Washington D.C. and Beijing. The conference split into two sessions: the strategic track and the economic track. The Secretary of State and Secretary of Treasury represented the United States for the strategic and economic tracks respectively. The State Councilor and the Vice Premier represented China. This forum served as a platform for the discussion of over one hundred high-priority global issues, including the security of the Korean Peninsula, counterterrorism, global development and climate change.\textsuperscript{65}

Since 2008, communication at the highest level increased between China and the United States. One of the greatest signs of respect between two nations is an official presidential visit. These trips convey a sense of importance greater than that of a bilateral meeting at a third party location. Going back to the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of official state visits between China and the United States has increased overall, however, significantly more

\textsuperscript{64} ibid
by the Chinese to the United States. Since 2000, the President of the United States visited China a total of seven times, three of which were during President Obama’s administration. The President of the People’s Republic of China visited the United States thirteen times in the past eighteen years, nine of which occurred after 2008. (See Figure 1) Official visits are time consuming, expensive and cannot be employed to handle every issue. Bilateral meetings during global conferences help fill this gap. Presidential bilateral meetings between China and the United States totaled thirty-five since 2000, twenty-three of those meetings occurring within the past 10 years and eleven meetings occurred within the past 5 years. (See Figure 2) There appears to be a direct relationship between number of visits and the temperature of the relationship. An increase of bilateral meetings and official visits correlate with an increase in communication.

Despite this progress, contentious issues remain unsolved and new policies increased tensions. China’s expansionist ideology remained a disputed point between the two nations, specifically China’s claims of sovereignty over Taiwan, Tibet and islands in the South China Sea. The Obama administration’s second term “pivot to Asia” strategy was proposed as a renewed United States focus on Asia, with the added advantage of countering China’s expansion. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton first defined the new geopolitical strategy as “a substantially increased investment — diplomatic, economic, strategic, and otherwise — in the Asia-Pacific region”, the goals of which were “strengthening bilateral security alliances; deepening our working relationships with emerging powers, including with China; engaging with regional multilateral institutions;
expanding trade and investment; forging a broad-based military presence; and advancing democracy and human rights.” However, the pivot to Asia program is seen by many in China as a part of the United States goal to contain the expansion of Chinese influence. In response to Obama’s policy, Xinhua News, the official media outlet of the CCP proclaimed that “East Asia needs partners, not meddlers.”

**United States-Russia:**

At the 2009 G-20 conference in London, President Obama and President Medvedev declared a reset on United States-Russian relations. In a joint statement, the two presidents called for a “time to get down to business and translate our warm words into actual achievements of benefit to Russia, the United States and all those around the world interested in peace and prosperity.” This optimism at the beginning of both administrations resulted in the creation of the Obama-Medvedev Commission, signing of a new nuclear arms reduction treaty (START) in 2010 and the United States support of Russia joining the WTO in 2011. This is not to say that the relationship did not have problems. Serious disagreements about missile defense in Europe, democracy and human rights remained. Relations weakened with the re-emergence of Vladimir Putin and worsened during his third term as President. After an unexpectedly difficult campaign, and despite allegations of election fraud and

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corruption, Vladimir Putin won a third term as the President of the Russian Federation. In a speech to supporters Putin accused Secretary of State Hillary Clinton of “setting the tone for some actors in our country and gave them a signal…. and with the support of the U.S. State Department began active work.”

This allegation marked the beginning of regressing U.S.-Russian relations. During Putin’s third term, the United States and Russia found each other on opposite sides of major international events. The crises in Syria and Ukraine, and Russian interference in the U.S. 2016 presidential election, showcased the deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations.

When the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region erupted with pro-democracy movements in 2011, Russia remained supportive of the Assad regime. This support remained constant as the situation in Syria devolved into a civil war. After a UN fact-finding mission confirmed the use of sarin gas by the Assad regime on civilians in August 2013, the United States and Russia agreed that the Syrian government’s chemical weapons would be placed under international control before being destroyed. However, Obama’s failure to use military action to respond to the Syrian government’s violations of his “red line” was seen by many as weakness. In contrast, Russia led the way in collecting Syria’s stockpile of chemical weapons. The United States remained dependent on Russia, as Syria’s closest ally, to influence Assad into complying with the United

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Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution.\textsuperscript{71} U.S.-Russian cooperation was limited to finding and eliminating Syria’s chemical weapons stash.

Russia and the United States once again found themselves on opposite sides of an international crisis after Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea. Russian involvement in what most nations believe to be sovereign Ukraine led to international condemnation. Only twenty-years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the thought of Russian expansion into Eastern Europe was particularly worrisome. In response to Russia’s action in Crimea, the United States and others imposed economic sanctions on individuals thought to have “asserted governmental authority in the Crimean region without the authorization of the Government of Ukraine.”\textsuperscript{72} Many members of Putin’s inner circle and high-ranking figures in Putin’s United Russia party were personally targeted.

While Russian involvement in Ukrainian and Syrian affairs weakened the United States-Russia relationship, Russian interference with the 2016 United States presidential election took relations to a significant new low. On October 17, 2016, the United States Intelligence Community (USIC) announced that it was confident that the Russian government directed hacks and leaks of e-mails from American political organizations.\textsuperscript{73} The USIC’s January 2017 report specified that Russian military intelligence services hacked the Democratic National Committee’s servers and the personal email accounts of the Clinton

\textsuperscript{72} Executive Order. No. 13685, 2014.
campaign chairman and forwarded the information to WikiLeaks.\textsuperscript{74} It has since been revealed that Russia’s interference also extended to promoting fake news on social media.\textsuperscript{75} In response to these allegations, Putin characterized the hacking as the actions of private “patriotically minded” individuals.\textsuperscript{76}

Travel data correspond with the historical context of relations improving until 2012, with a significant drop after 2014. Since 2000, there have been forty-seven meetings between the President of Russia and the President of the United States. Of these forty-seven meetings, twenty-two took place within the last ten years and seven within the last five years. 2014 marked the first year that the presidents of the two nations did not have a single bilateral meeting. (See Figure 1) Official presidential state visits between Russia and United States also decreased. In eighteen years, the United States President traveled to Russia ten times, only three of which occurred within the last decade. An American president has not visited Russia since the 2014 Crimean annexation. Accordingly, the Russian President visited the United States twelve times since 2000, six of which took place during the Obama administration. (See Figure 2)

\textbf{China-Russia:}

Despite signing multiple treaties of friendship, international support and mutual cooperation, Russia and China refuse to characterize their relationship as an alliance. Nevertheless, the Sino-Russian bond is one formed in opposition to a

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{74} United States, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, “National Intelligence Council.” \textit{National Intelligence Council,} 6 Jan. 2017.
\item \textsuperscript{75} ibid
\end{itemize}
United States led and Western dominated world order. Four decades after the powerful Sino-Soviet alliance and the subsequent Sino-Soviet split, relations between China and Russia are once again on an upswing. Beginning with Medvedev’s first term and continuing into Putin’s third, Sino-Russian relations improved through increased trade and communication, but handle issues of foreign policy on a case-by-case basis.

Trade between Russia and China has significantly increased under the leadership of Putin and Xi. The two nations signed a thirty-year $400 billion gas deal in 2014 calling for a contract between Gazprom and the China National Petroleum Cooperation. In 2015 the two countries signed a $2 billion weapons deal, the first in over a decade. Bilateral trade has continued to grow, from $38.3 billion in 2009 to $90 billion in 2012. A Sino-Russian increase in trade was not just limited to financial action, but also included more military and cultural ties. In 2012 China and Russia held their first joint naval exercise, followed by a Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) anti-terror drill in 2013. Sino-Russian military exercises and exchanges have since become a regular occurrence. These joint military exercises, coupled with Russia once again selling weapons to China, speaks to converging interests in Asian regional security.

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80 ibid p.482
Since 2008, communication at the highest level increased between China and Russia. Going back to the beginning of the twenty-first century, the number of official Presidential state visits between China and Russia has increased, however, significantly more by the Russians. Since 2000, the President of the Russian Federation visited China a total of eighteen times, four of which were during Medvedev's administration and seven during Putin's third term. The President of the People's Republic of China visited Russia sixteen times in the past eighteen years, ten of which occurred after 2008. (See Figure 1) In an extremely symbolic move, President Xi's first foreign visit was to Russia. Bilateral meetings between the presidents at third-party locations also increased. Presidential bilateral meetings between China and the Russia totaled seventy-one since 2000, forty-eight of those meetings occurring within the past 10 years and twenty-three meetings occurred within the past 5 years. (See Figure 2)

Sino-Russian relations expanded from bilateral trade to increased international cooperation. In a 2016 visit to Beijing, Putin referred to the Sino-Russian relationship as an “all-embracing and strategic partnership”, with Xi responding that the two nations ought to “promote widely the idea of being friends forever.”81 China and Russia have united in support of the Assad regime in Syria, and in opposition to the U.S. deployment of THAAD to the Korean Peninsula and U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. A common link between these issues is that the United States is the opposition, giving Russia and China a

common enemy. This unity can be seen in Russia and China’s voting records at the UN Security Council. Since 2000, China and Russia have jointly vetoed seven motions. Both Russia and China are permanent members of the UNSC and only one veto is necessary to sink a motion. It is then very telling that these vetoes were submitted together, especially since Russia and China are the only two countries to jointly veto a UNSC resolution since 1989. (See Figure 3 and Figure 4) However, the two nations do not always agree on matters of global importance. Russia’s annexation of Crimea is one example of diverging foreign policy goals. The annexation of Crimea, and resulting referendum could be seen as providing a precedent for similar calls for freedom in Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang.\textsuperscript{82} It also threatened Chinese technological and economic interests in Ukraine. However, China refused to condemn Russia alongside the rest of the international community, opting to abstain from voting for the UNSC resolution. This is indicative of a certain amount of importance being placed on the relationship. In both instances, Russian actions did not accord with China’s best interests. However, the importance of the relationship superseded domestic benefits.

However, the Sino-Russian relationship is only as strong as their mutual interests. The partnership between Russia and China is not borne out of ideological similarities but one of convenience. China is a rising superpower and Russia is struggling to hold onto international prestige. Russia is increasingly dependent on Chinese energy consumption after international sanctions

\textsuperscript{82} Bolt, Paul J. \textit{Sino-Russian relations in a changing world order}. AIR UNIV MAXWELL AFB AL AIR FORCE RESEARCH INST, 2014. p.2
weakened the economy. Furthermore, both nations are vying for influence in Central Asia, through economic and diplomatic channels. For the time being, their interests in the region align. However, with massive energy, mineral and natural gas reserves at stake, there is no long-term plan for cooperation in the region.\(^3\) China and Russia are bound together by the common desire to bring about a world order that is not defined by American hegemony. As long as the steps to completing this goal align, the Sino-Russian relationship remains strong.

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Chapter Three: Economic Policies

Trans-Pacific Partnership:

On October 5, 2016, after over a decade of negotiations, the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was finalized. A trillion dollar deal involving twelve countries and 40% of global gross domestic product (GDP), the TPP was hailed as the future of trade agreements for addressing twenty-first century issues such as ecommerce, financial services and cross-border Internet communication. The TPP served the dual purpose of increasing American trade relations and economic influence in the Asia-Pacific region and countering China’s growing power. However, before the deal was put up to vote before Congress, the United States withdrew from the TPP. By withdrawing from the TPP, the United States not only excommunicated itself from the world’s largest multinational trade deal, but also broke with a consistent, decades long policy of countering China. In order to understand the importance of the Trans-Pacific Partnership to the United States and the reciprocal importance of the United States to other nations in the TPP, one must look at the origins of the deal.

In 2005, representatives of Brunei, Chile, New Zealand, and Singapore met to discuss the creation of the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement (P4), a comprehensive trade deal that expanded upon APEC attempts in the 1990s to create larger economic free trade areas. The agreement entered into force in July 2006, but did not resolve two key areas of discussions; financial
services and investment. When negotiations to address those issues began again 2008 the United States entered as a new participant. By September 2008 the United States had announced its intention to join the agreement in its entirety. The United States not only brought economic weight and global attention to the deal, but also changed P4 from a small free trade experiment into a larger, more interesting, and more promising agreement. In the four months after the United States announced its intention to join the deal, Australia, Peru and Vietnam all joined the talks.

As the United States continued its involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations, it also began discussions with the European Union for the creation of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). The TTIP is “an ambitious, comprehensive, and high-standard trade and investment agreement” between the U.S. and E.U. Projected benefits for the United States included the elimination of tariffs on agricultural, industrial and consumer products, the establishment of labor commitments to ensure U.S. workers remain competitive, and increased security for American investors. The TTIP has less of a strategic component than the TPP, as the United States and European Union already have close relationship through NATO.

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87 “U.S. Objectives, U.S. Benefits In the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership: A Detailed View.” *United States Trade Representative,* United States Trade Representative.
Negotiations for the TTIP were put on hold after the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and have not yet resumed. The two multinational free trade agreements present two paths for the international community in the wake of a more isolationist United States: move on without American involvement or wait out the Trump administration.

In 2009, under the new Obama administration, the Trans-Pacific Partnership took on greater importance as China emerged as a regional power. At his first speech to APEC leaders, President Obama laid out the United States intentions in the Asia-Pacific region, namely that “the United States expects to be involved in the discussions that shape the future of this region and to participate fully.”88 The original P4 agreement set the stage for the much more ambitious Trans-Pacific Partnership. In March 2010, representatives of the P4 nations, the United States, Australia, Peru, Vietnam, and the newly joined Malaysia, all met in Australia.89 This meeting marked the official end of the P4 agreement, and the beginning of negotiations for the Trans-Pacific Partnership. With a significantly larger population, GPD, and global influence, the United States dominated the negotiating table. Even after Canada, Mexico and Japan all joined the agreement, the United States maintained significant influence in drafting policy and language. The greatest challenge the United States faced was gathering domestic support.

89 ibid p.1023
Despite negotiations being conducted in secret, with details of the agreement not coming out until its final publication in 2016, the TPP was a polarizing policy. Proponents of the policy believed the deal would expand American exports and create better paying domestic jobs. Critics cited a fear of unfair competition and outsourced labor jobs. After the final text was agreed upon by the twelve nations in October 2015, the agreement needed to be voted on by Congress. While President Obama lauded the agreement as opening new markets to the United States and establishing the rules of international commerce, the TPP was met with criticism and reservations from legislators of both parties. Congress never had the opportunity to vote on the TPP. On January 23, 2017, the first full workday of the Trump administration, the President fulfilled one of his earliest campaign promises and withdrew the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership. While campaigning, Trump referred to the TPP as “a disaster done and pushed by special interests who want to rape our country, just a continuing rape of our country.”90 In a speech promoting jobs in June 2016, he outlined the many dangers of the TPP, most specifically putting the interests of foreign countries ahead of domestic issues. Trump focused on the economic implications of the deal, and did not comment on the greater significance of the TPP’s role in containing China.

The United States withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership has both economic and geostrategic consequences. The United States Trade Representative (USTR), the government agency in charge of negotiating the TPP

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announced the deal as a “new, high-standard trade agreement that levels the playing field for American workers... supporting more Made-in-America exports and higher paying American jobs.”

These benefits included the elimination of over eighteen thousand taxes on American exports, enforcement of strong labor standards to protect against forced labor and keep American labor forces competitive, and the implementation of anticorruption legislation. The Trump administration has advocated for increased bilateral trade deals, as opposed to one large multinational agreement, to achieve the same goals. During a speech at the 2017 APEC CEO Summit in Danang, Vietnam, Trump announced his willingness to make bilateral trade agreements with any Pacific Rim nations that will “abide by the principles of fair and reciprocal trade” in order to guarantee a negotiation basis of mutual respect and benefits. He dismissed larger trade agreements as something that “tie our hands, surrender our sovereignty and make meaningful enforcement practically impossible.”

As of December 2017, the United States has Free Trade Agreements (FTA) with six of the eleven countries involved in the TPP. The bilateral trade agreements between the United States and Australia, Canada, Mexico, Chile and Singapore were all negotiated and signed into effect during the Clinton and Bush administrations. The United States-Peru FTA entered into force during the first year of the Obama

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91 TPP Full Text | United States Trade Representative, Office of the United States Trade Representative.
93 “Free Trade Agreements.” Free Trade Agreements | United States Trade Representative.
administration. The United States does not have bilateral arrangements in effect with Brunei, New Zealand, Vietnam, Malaysia or Japan. Negotiations between the United States and Malaysia for a free trade agreement stalled out in 2008. Trump has consistently been in favor of free trade, so long as the agreements are fair. Trump announced his opposition to the TPP during his campaign’s kickoff speech, saying the negotiators “don’t have a clue. Our president doesn’t have a clue. He’s a bad negotiator... so we need people – I’m a free trader.” However, his actions during his first year in office have not reflected this position. His longstanding position as a free trader conflicts with the populist narrative he employed on the campaign trail. Free trade would benefit large businesses and consumers in the United States but not blue-collar workers, a demographic he overwhelmingly carried in the 2016 election. It may be too early to draw conclusions as to why the Trump administration has been unable to successfully negotiate bilateral trade deals with the five remaining nations involved in the TPP. It is possible that these bilateral agreements were simply empty campaign promises or that the State Department, due to organizational disarray, has been unable to begin the negotiation process. It is also possible that Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei and New Zealand are unwilling to enter into trade negotiations with the United States. For whatever

94 “Peru Trade Promotion Agreement.” United States Trade Representative, 15 Nov. 2016.
95 “Free Trade Agreements.” Free Trade Agreements | United States Trade Representative.
96 “Malaysia Free Trade Agreement.” United States Trade Representative.
reason, while the United States remains uncommitted to advancing free trade agreements of any kind, China has certainly picked up the ball.

China has free trade agreements in effect, or in negotiation, with every nation involved in the TPP. Bilateral agreements or the ASEAN-PRC Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement cover all countries involved in the TPP except for Canada and Mexico.98 However, in the wake of the Trump administration’s unclear stance on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) both Canada and Mexico are turning closer to China. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Chinese Premier Li Keqiang began exploratory talks for a bilateral free trade agreement in December 2017 at a meeting in Beijing.99 Representatives of China and Mexico have not had any official discussions, but trade between the two countries has steadily increased in the past decade. As of 2016, imports from China account for 18% of total imports, equal to $69.5 billion, making China Mexico’s second biggest trading partner (only behind the United States).100 Mexico also recently partnered with Alibaba, a Chinese technology company, to get more Mexican products into the Chinese market.101 The Chinese ambassador to Mexico has announced that China is open to starting negotiations for a bilateral free-trade agreement.102 Canada and Mexico’s turn
towards China for trade deals is understandable, given the Trump administrations’ various positions on NAFTA. On the campaign trail, one of Trump’s most frequently made promises was to terminate NAFTA. During a post-election rally, Trump referred to NAFTA as “the worst trade deal ever made by any country, I think, in the world.”\textsuperscript{103} However, during his first year in office, Trump did not take steps to remove the United States from NAFTA. At a conference with the Canadian Prime Minister and Mexican President during the most recent renegotiations in October 2017, Trump broke rank with Trudeau and Peña-Nieto and indicated that if a deal could not be made “it’ll [NAFTA] will be terminated and that will be fine.”\textsuperscript{104} Furthermore, the Chinese government is in the process of negotiating the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), a free trade agreement seen as an alternative to the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The RCEP would tie together the ten ASEAN nations and the six countries with which ASEAN has existing free trade agreements. Six nations (Brunei, Japan, Malaysia, Vietnam, Australia and Singapore) involved in the TPP negotiations are also taking part in the RCEP discussions. Similar to the United States dominance in the TPP discussions, China, as the largest economic power in the RCEP nations, controls the negotiations. RCEP member states account for over half the world’s population and $49.5 billion (39\%) of the world’s GDP.\textsuperscript{105}

The RCEP agreement is projected to be signed by November 2018.\textsuperscript{106} With the future of NAFTA uncertain, the RCEP growing and the TPP moving on without the United States, China is emerging as the natural successor to the United States for matters of trade. The benefits of the United States withdrawal from the TPP to China are not just economic. With the Trump administration projecting an “America first” perspective, China has expanded where the United States has retreated.

The United States involvement in the Trans-Pacific Partnership was for more than just economic reasons. The TPP was one key element of the Obama administration’s greater “pivot to Asia” strategy. A term officially coined in an article by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, “pivot to Asia” refers to the United States increased investment in the Asia-Pacific region through diplomatic, economic and strategic means.\textsuperscript{107} With much of the twenty-first century spent focused on the Middle East and North Africa region, the pivot to Asia aimed to reaffirm the United States as a Pacific power. Increased American involvement in the Asia-Pacific region also served the practical purpose of containing a rising China. By pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the United States not only tarnished its reputation with nations of great geostrategic importance, but also left an economic opening that China has already begun to exploit. Containing China, through various means, has been a consistent policy of the United States since the 1950s. The theory of containment, which dates back to the beginning of the Cold War, calls for the United States, via economic, diplomatic and/or

\textsuperscript{106} “RCEP Likely to Be Signed in November 2018: PM.” TheSundaily, 15 Nov. 2017.
military means, to prevent Chinese hegemony in Asia. The United States has sought to disrupt China’s rise as a regional power by establishing strong economic and diplomatic ties with neighboring countries, and by demonstrating a strong military presence in the region. As already discussed, the Trump administration, through the withdrawal from the TPP and failure to negotiate bilateral agreements with Pacific Rim nations, has effectively shut the United States out of Asia-Pacific economic affairs. Doing so has diminished the United States reputation as a trustworthy partner in the region.

On the diplomatic front, the Trump administration has maintained the status quo. Trump has partaken in, and received, diplomatic visits with the TPP countries. In November 2017, Trump visited Japan, South Korea, China, Vietnam, and the Philippines in order to participate in the APEC and ASEAN Summits. There are conflicting reports about whether Trump attended the East Asia Summit, or skipped in in favor of meeting with President Duterte for bilateral discussions.\(^{108}\)\(^{109}\) Trump also welcomed leaders from Japan, Canada, Peru, China, Australia and Vietnam for official state visits.\(^{110}\) Any substantive policy outcomes of these meetings remain unknown.

Finally, under the Trump administration, the United States has maintained a strong military presence in the Asia-Pacific region. Building up to Trump’s visit to Asia, seven out of eleven of the United States aircraft carriers


(accompanied by destroyers and submarines) were sent to the Asia-Pacific region. Covering the Western Pacific, Eastern Pacific and Atlantic Oceans, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs General Dunford referred to this action as “a routine demonstration of our commitment to the region.” Deploying a nuclear aircraft carrier, let alone seven, sends a very clear message to American adversaries in region. As President Clinton said in a speech on the USS Roosevelt in 1993, in the event of a crisis “it's no accident that the first question that comes to everyone’s lips is, where is the nearest carrier?” Parking an aircraft carrier on the shore of an ally is indicative of a strong bond and trusting relationship. Sailing an aircraft carrier near the territory of an adversary is a signal of overwhelming force.

Another way the United States Navy asserted its dominance in the Asia-Pacific region was by sailing through disputed waters in the South China Sea. On several occasions during the past year the United States Navy deployed ships into the South China Sea, both near and within the twelve-mile radius of islands China claims as sovereign territory. Despite the 2016 United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) ruling against China’s nine-dotted line claim of historical rights, China continues to lay claim to the disputed territory, including the Parcel Islands, Spratley Islands, and the Scarborough Shoal. The United States Navy has conducted several freedom of navigation

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operations (FONOPs) within the South China Sea in order to encourage maritime stability and adherence to the rulings of UNCLOS.\textsuperscript{114} Despite China’s naval development over the past decade, the United States remains the most powerful navy in the world, and has demonstrated that fact within Asia many times this past year.

Between the TPP and the RCEP, every major economy in the Asia-Pacific region is represented, except for Taiwan and Russia. Taiwan’s exclusion is a result of China’s unwillingness to compromise its “One China” policy and recognize Taiwan as a sovereign state. Long standing diplomatic tensions between the United States and Russia accounts for Russia’s exclusion from the TPP. With the United States no longer participating in the TPP negotiations, it is unclear what role, if any, Russia may undertake. President Putin has publicly spoken out against TPP, stating “the absence of two major regional powers such as Russia and China in its composition will not promote the establishment of effective trade and economic cooperation.”\textsuperscript{115} Despite Putin’s linking Russia and China together in opposition of the American-led TPP negotiations, China has not reciprocated this dynamic. Since Russia is not a member of ASEAN, nor does Russia have a free-trade agreement with ASEAN, it has been kept out of the RCEP negotiations. Russia’s exclusion from both major free-trade agreements in the Asia-Pacific region is a clear message as to China’s, and other Pacific Rim nation’s, opinion of Russia’s status as an Asian power.

\textsuperscript{114} Freund, Eleanor. \textit{Freedom of Navigation in the South China Sea}. Harvard University Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, June 2017.
\textsuperscript{115} “US Seeks to Create Economic Cooperation for Its Own Benefit - Putin on TPP.” \textit{RT International}, 6 Nov. 2014.
In 2017, the Trump administration embraced certain elements of the greater containment strategy, while completely disregarding others. This strategy is consistent with an administration that has been wildly unpredictable in terms of a greater strategy for Sino-American relations. During a speech kicking off his run for President, Trump expressed admiration for the Chinese government, specifically their ability to create a military island without being hindered by environmentalists, and for their strategy of buying American debt.\textsuperscript{116} At the Republican National Convention, Trump condemned China’s “outrageous theft of intellectual property, along with their illegal product dumping, and their devastating currency manipulation.”\textsuperscript{117} As President, after meeting Chinese President Xi Jinping in Beijing, Trump “gave China great credit” for the “one sided and unfair playing field” in previously established trade deals.\textsuperscript{118} In the two years between announcing his candidacy for President and representing the United States in China as the President, Trump has not maintained a consistent strategy relating to China. In his 2017 National Security Strategy, Trump referred to China as “challenging American power, influence, and interests [and] attempting to erode American security and prosperity.”\textsuperscript{119} However, any growth in China’s international, or regional, status can be tied back to the changes in United States policy. As the United States takes steps to

\textsuperscript{119} Trump, Donald J. \textit{The National Security Strategy of the United States of America}. Executive Office of the President Washington DC, 2018. p.2
once again become an isolationist country by putting “America First”, China is stepping up to fill the vacancy, and going further.

**Belt and Road Initiative:**

On September 7, 2013, President Xi announced the creation of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB) with Central Asian countries during a speech in Kazakhstan. With an overall goal of promoting regional cooperation, the outlined proposal emphasized China’s desire to have peaceful relations with neighboring countries, jointly combat international extremism, and contained a vow to “never intervene in internal affairs, seek leadership in regional affairs, or operate spheres of influence.”

One month later, on October 3, 2013, President Xi spoke in front of Indonesian parliament, and announced the development of a Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI). Similar to the SREB, the goals of the MSRI include building trust and good neighborliness, standing together as a united Asia-Pacific region, and enhancing mutual understanding. Together, these two programs form the Belt and Road Initiative (B&RI). A cornerstone of Xi Jinping’s presidency, the Belt and Road Initiative has been described by the CCP as “the project of the century... that will benefit people across the world”.

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120 “President Xi Jinping Delivers Important Speech and Proposes to Build a Silk Road Economic Belt with Central Asian Countries.” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China,* 7 Sept. 2013.

121 Xi, Jinping. “Speech by Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament.” *Reconnecting Asia Project. Speech by Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament, Jakarta.*

Road Initiative consists of a series of infrastructure networks, financial institutions and cultural ties that connect China to Eurasian countries. The Silk Road Economic Belt accounts for all of the land-based projects. These developments take place along six different corridors towards Europe: the China-Mongolia-Russia corridor, the China-Pakistan corridor, the China-Central Asia-West Asia corridor, the Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar corridor, and the New Eurasian Land Bridge corridor.\textsuperscript{123} The Eurasian Land Bridge is modeled after the historic routes of the Silk Road, which linked China and Europe through Central Asia. The network of roads gave way to economic trade and cultural development, as well as the spread of technology and disease. The New Eurasian Land Bridge covers China, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, and Russia. The Maritime Silk Road Initiative aims to connect the South China Sea, the South Pacific Ocean, and the Indian Ocean.\textsuperscript{124} In the four years since President Xi announced the creation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China has made significant progress in jumpstarting the project. A 2015 Chinese report identified sixty-four countries along the Belt and Road Initiative that have indicated a willingness to participate. An additional forty-eight countries not on the pathway have shown a desire to join as well. (See Figure 5) Involvement in the Belt and Road Initiative has been indicated via membership in the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, deepening bilateral cooperation, and transport infrastructure cooperation.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{123} “CBBC - Belt and Road Reports.” \textit{China Britain Business Council}.
\textsuperscript{124} Tiezzi, Shannon. “China Pushes 'Maritime Silk Road' in South, Southeast Asia.” \textit{The Diplomat}, The Diplomat, 17 Sept. 2014.
\textsuperscript{125} Chin, Helen, and W. He. "The Belt and Road Initiative: 65 Countries and Beyond." \textit{Hong Kong: Fung Business Intelligence Center} (2016).
With over one hundred estimated participants spanning the entire Western hemisphere, the Belt and Road Initiative will be both costly and extended over many years.

The two predominant sources of funding for this project are the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Silk Road Fund. The AIIB is a multilateral development bank with eighty-four approved members and the goal of expanding infrastructure projects across Asia. The bank, which began operating in January 2016, has invested $4.2 billion USD in twenty-four projects over the past two years.126 However, there is no status report or update listed on the AIIB website regarding the progress of these projects. All of the projects are classified under one of the six focus areas of the bank (rural infrastructure, energy and power, environmental protection, transportation and telecommunications, water supply and sanitation, and urban development and logistics). The priority for the past two years has been energy and transportation projects, with funding granted for ten and seven developments respectively.127 This is indicative of the needs of the CCP. Although China is one of the world’s top producers of crude oil, the country continues to rely on crude oil imports. At 6.1 billion barrels per day, China imports the second greatest amount of oil, lagging only the United States.128 Beginning the Belt and Road Initiative with energy related projects serves the dual purpose of working to alleviate China’s reliance on historically unsteady oil imports from the Middle East, as well as

127 “Approved Projects Overview - AIIB.” Overview – AIIB.
providing the necessary resources to launch all the following projects. All of the approved projects and ten proposed projects are located in countries thought to be participating in the Belt and Road Initiative. The Silk Road Fund, which was established in December 2014, is a Chinese state owned investment fund created for the specific purpose of increasing investment in countries along the Silk Road. The fund received a contribution of $40 billion from the Chinese government, via the Export-Import Bank of China (15%), China Development Bank (5%), China Investment Corporation (15%), and the State Administration of Foreign Exchange (65%).\textsuperscript{129} As of 2017 the Silk Road Fund has committed an estimated $6 billion to fifteen upcoming projects.\textsuperscript{130} Between these two initiatives, the Chinese government has, directly and indirectly, spent over $5 billion USD on launching the first phase of Belt and Road Initiative projects. Over the past four years, China has made inroads in over one hundred nations to continue building the Belt and Road Initiative, and increased funding for upcoming projects. However, this is a long-term project that will take decades to come to fruition. Furthermore, the Chinese government has not published any outline for the future of the Belt and Road Initiative. Since the timeline has not been made public, it is difficult to say whether the initiative is progressing according to plan. An initiative of this scale is not without controversy. There have been concerns over China’s use of imported labor and technology, as well

\textsuperscript{129} “丝路基金.” 公司概况, Silk Road Fund.
\textsuperscript{130} “Scope of Investment.” The Silk Road Fund.
as questions regarding the economic viability of the projects.\textsuperscript{131} A reliance on Chinese labor and equipment, rather than creating local jobs and bolstering domestic industries, has the potential to cause resentment with the host country. Additionally, it remains unclear what would happen to the greater initiative should a project fail or if countries are unable to pay back Chinese loans.

Despite these questions, the Belt and Road Initiative is a cornerstone of Chinese foreign policy. This was made clear during the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, when it was written into the Chinese Constitution that the CCP shall “pursue the Belt and Road Initiative.”\textsuperscript{132} Not only did this mark the first time since Mao that a leaders’ pet project was put into the Constitution, but also ensures the furtherance of the Belt and Road Initiative after President Xi’s administration. Through increased economic, security and cultural connections, China is essentially laying out the blueprints of its transition from a regional to a global superpower. What makes the Belt and Road Initiative so attractive for cooperating nations is the opportunity for substantial benefits. One country that is slated to reap these benefits is Russia.

The Belt and Road Initiative garnered a complicated reaction from the Russian government. On one hand Russia has indicated a willingness to participate, with two of the Silk Road Fund’s first projects going to Russian


\textsuperscript{132} “Resolution of the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China on the Revised Constitution of the Communist Party of China.” \textit{Full Text of Resolution on Amendment to CPC Constitution.}

ventures. On the other hand, China’s growing economic interests in Central Asia pose a threat to Russian influence in these former Soviet republics. Russia is one of the earliest participants in projects linked to the Belt and Road Initiative. In July 2017, after President Xi visited President Putin in Moscow, both governments announced the creation of the China-Russia RMB Investment Cooperation Fund. This fund allocated ten billion dollars to investment activities that focused on Belt and Road Initiative projects. The Chinese government and China’s Natural Petroleum Company have also loaned over $13 billion to Russian energy companies. In January 2017, the Silk Road Fund acquired 10% equity in SIBUR, a Russian gas processing and petrochemical company. Later that same month, YAMAL LNG, a liquefied natural gas plant, became operational with the CNPC owning a 20% stake in the company. In the short-term, this partnership is mutually beneficial. Both Russian energy companies are located in Eastern Russia, and do not necessitate long and expensive pipelines to reach the European markets. Instead, they can do business with China, a relatively cash-rich and oil-poor country. The real threat to Russia is the expanding role of China in Central Asia. Multiple projections of the Silk Road Economic Belt call for infrastructure projects in the former Soviet republics. The AIIB has already approved two of these projects, the Nurek Hydropower Rehabilitation Project

133 “丝路基金董事长金琦接受《中国金融》专访.” 丝路基金, Silk Road Fund.
135 “Silk Road Fund Successfully Closed the Acquisition of a 10% Stake in SIBUR.” SIBUR, 25 Jan. 2017.
and the Dushanbe-Uzbekistan Border Road Improvement Project. Combined, the two projects secured loans of $87.5 million USD.\(^{137}\) Promoting domestic economic growth and quality of life through infrastructure, transportation and urban development projects has already proven to be a successful method of increasing Chinese influence in the region. Since 2001, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and bilateral energy trade deals, China has been bolstering its soft power capacity in Central Asia. Thus far, it appears that Russia is regarding the Belt and Road Initiative with cautious optimism. The initiative is still in its early stages, such that it is difficult to predict long-term success or failure. So long as Russia continues to benefit from the arrangement, closer economic ties through the Belt and Road Initiative serve to strengthen the China-Russia relationship. However, the role of the Central Asian republics in the Belt and Road Initiative, and Russia’s reaction to increased Chinese influence, remains an area of potential conflict.

With the United States withdrawal from the Trans-pacific Partnership, the Belt and Road Initiative is poised to take on a new, and possibly, greater role in the Asia-Pacific region. The Trump administration has not put forward an alternative to the TPP, or a strategy for combatting China’s rising power. Instead the United States recognized the importance of the Belt and Road Initiative, and sent delegates to attend the May 2017 Belt and Road Forum.\(^{138}\) The United States continual deference to China on issues relating to the economic future of


the Asia-Pacific region puts American allies in a precarious position. Since the Cold War, the United States policy of containment included a strategy to increase bilateral relations with Asian nations vulnerable to Chinese influence. This strategy put a greater importance on United States bilateral relations with countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, and Vietnam. As the United States backs away from these countries, they are left with few options for economic assistance and security. Not only does this risk the United States reputation as a partner in democracy, but also actively pushes Asian nations that were once seen as strong American allies into the arms of China.

The Belt and Road Initiative is not only a projection of Chinese power abroad, but also a method of ensuring domestic political stability. In the aftermath of the 2008 global recession, China’s unemployment rates skyrocketed to a conservative estimate of 2.7 million. As the global economy recovered, infrastructure projects took a backseat and the market for Chinese steel fell. Around this time, ‘ghost cities’ began to emerge in many coastal urban areas. The empty skyscrapers and unoccupied housing developments have typically been seen as symbolic of China’s eagerness to urbanize, but the construction of these cities created a purpose for Chinese steel and manual labor jobs. Employment is an important component of ensuring political stability, with President Hu Jintao calling unemployment China’s most serious challenge.

Keeping people working is key to dissuading political dissent. With most of the

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140 Singh, Maanvi. “We Know China Has Ghost Cities, But Where Are They Hiding?” NPR, NPR, 18 Nov. 2015.
labor force coming from China, the Belt and Road Initiative is a continuation of this practice. While it is too early to project the outcome of the Belt and Road Initiative, in the short-term the project is helping the CCP maintain political stability.

Over the coming decades this Chinese-lead multinational project could progress in many ways, ranging from a successful implementation of Chinese power on a global scale, to a failure and abandonment of the project. Looking at the trends of the past year, China has continued to make steady progress on multiple fronts. This progress includes gathering more funding from the Silk Road Fund and Chinese banks, approving more infrastructure projects, welcoming more nations into the imitative, and celebrating the official launch of the first annual Belt and Road Forum. However, many steps in the implementation of this massive infrastructure project were, for the most part, understated. There are many possible explanations for this decision. First, maintaining the secrecy of the initiative’s future plans makes it more difficult for adversarial nations to block or counteract China’s progress. A second possibility is the intent to keep the initiative as a whole off the radar of the Trump administration. As has been reported by many sources within Washington DC, Trump is believed to focus his attention on whatever political issues are shown in television news. For the most part, the Belt and Road Initiative has not been covered in depth in American news television programs. While the Belt and Road Initiative has been studied and written about at length in think tanks, the public sector and in academia, progress of the initiative has not been covered on
a daily basis on cable news networks. A third possibility is that China is
growing according to plan, unrelated in any way to the new leadership of the
United States. The Chinese government is known to operate in secrecy. Access to
information that would be public in many democratic societies is kept
confidential by the CCP. For whatever reason, the Belt and Road Initiative
remains shrouded in secrecy. What little can be discerned about the it's progress
is indicative of China looking to leverage its economic success as soft power, to
foster a compliant partner in Russia, and an attempt to diminish United States
role in what may become a key element of the new world order.

**Paris Climate Accords:**

In November 2015, the United Nations Convention on Climate Change
(UNFCCC) met in Paris, France to discuss strategies to make reducing global
warming practices an international priority. The outcome of the convention was
a pledge to keep a global temperature rise well below two degrees Celsius above
pre-industrial levels.\(^{142}\) At the end of the twelve-day conference, one hundred
ninety five countries and the European Union signed onto the Paris Climate
Accord. This agreement has significant implications for China, Russia and the
United States. As three of the world’s greatest carbon dioxide emitters (at 29.4%,
4.9% and 39.5% respectively), their intended nationally determined
contributions (INDC) are essential to the success of the Paris Climate Accord.\(^{143}\)

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\(^{143}\) Ibid
The Paris Accord builds on the 1992 Kyoto Protocol, which formally acknowledged that global warming was occurring as a result of human-made carbon dioxide emissions. The Kyoto Protocol established two periods of adherence, 2008 to 2012 and 2012 to 2020 (known as the Doha Amendment). For the first period, the United States signed the Kyoto Protocol but never ratified the agreement, and eventually dropped out in 2001. China and Russia both signed and ratified the agreement, Russia with a binding target and China without. After providing minimal effort to reduce carbon emissions, Russia did not take on new targets for the second period. China was one of the first countries to accept the Doha Amendment, pledging a 40% to 45% reduction in carbon dioxide intensity. The Doha Amendment did not get the requisite three quarters of parties’ participation for it to enter into force, and was overtaken by the negotiations in Paris.

In supporting the Paris Climate Accord, every participating country agreed to submit a proposal for how they planned to comply with the agreement. China signed the Paris Climate Accord in April 2016, ratified it in September 2016, and approved its entry into force in November 2016. Their climate action plan needed to address China’s high rates of carbon dioxide emissions, the second highest in the world. China committed to reducing its carbon intensity

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60% to 65% by 2030, based on 2005 levels.\textsuperscript{146} As part of its thirteenth Five-Year Plan, covering 2016 to 2020, China pledged to peak carbon dioxide emissions by 2030, lower carbon dioxide emissions per unit of GDP by 60%, and increase renewable and nuclear energy sources.\textsuperscript{147} Additionally, China announced its intentions to continue its climate mitigation policy to promote clean energy in developing countries through the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and Belt and Road Initiative. Russia also signed the Paris Agreement in April 2016, but has yet to ratify it. Russia remains the only big emitter not to do so. Russia pledged to limit anthropogenic greenhouse gases by 25% to 30% by 2030, using 1990 levels. These reduction targets have been deemed “critically insufficient”, and are the weakest put forward by any country.\textsuperscript{148} The United States signed the Paris agreement in April 2016, ratified it in September 2016, and approved its entry into force in November 2016.\textsuperscript{149} As outlined in the U.S. Climate Action Plan, the United States pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 26% to 28% by 2025.\textsuperscript{150} In order to do so, the United States sought to lessen its reliance on burning fossil fuels, using fertilizer and maintaining landfills.

As some of the most serious contributors to climate change, China and the United States assumed a leadership position in driving the movement forward. However, on June 1, 2017, the Trump administration fulfilled one of its campaign promises and withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Accord. In

\textsuperscript{146} CARBON, CHINA WILL PEAK ITS. "THE ROAD FROM PARIS: CHINA'S PROGRESS TOWARD ITS CLIMATE PLEDGE." (2017).
\textsuperscript{147} ibid
\textsuperscript{150} House, White. "The President’s climate action plan." Executive Office of the President (2013).
withdrawing from the Paris agreement, Trump cited the American workers and taxpayers unfairly bearing the burden of the global initiative. Trump later announced his intention to negotiate eventual reentry into the agreement with a more fair deal to the United States, noting, “If we can, that’s great. And if we can’t, that’s fine.”151 Withdrawal from the Paris Agreement is not a widely shared opinion in the United States. Only 28% of American’s support the United States withdrawal, with Americans preferring to stay in the agreement by a two to one margin.152 Despite Trump’s position in opposition to the Paris Climate Accord, the United States cannot withdraw from the Paris agreement until it has been in force for three years, in 2020.153 As of January 2018 the United States is the only country in the world that has indicated a desire to abandon the agreement.

China and Russia’s positions on the Paris Climate Accord are consistent with their unique economic, strategic and social situations, whereas the rationale for the United States stance is unclear. The Paris Agreement, and action to prevent climate change, hurt the Russian economy. Oil and mineral fuels make up almost half of Russia’s exports, most of which goes to Europe.154 It would significantly hurt the Russian economy should those European countries abide by the agreement and seek to lower their use of fossil fuels. Furthermore, rising temperatures associated with global warming helps Russia accomplish its long-standing strategic goal of acquiring warm-water ports. It is therefore

153 UNFCCC, V. “Adoption of the Paris Agreement.” I: Proposal by the President (Draft Decision), United Nations Office, Geneva (Switzerland) s 32 (2015). p.15
understandable why Russia would not strictly enforce the agreed upon regulations. Similarly, China's position on climate change is in accordance with its best interests. After investing over $100 billion in renewable technologies China has emerged as the leader of the green energy industry, including solar cells, batteries and wind turbines. Reducing fossil fuel emissions and cutting down on coal reliance is part of a greater strategy to combat the looming public health crises caused by pollution. Air quality in major cities has been an important social issue in China for many years, with over one million deaths linked to the toxic smog. Financial repercussions include an ailing population unable to work, increased funding allocation for medical treatments and transitioning industrial hubs away from coal burning. Supporting climate change policies like the Paris agreement and pursuing the recommended changes allow China to emerge as the leader in the field of renewable technology, export the products, and create jobs in growing green industries. Only the United States is acting contrary to its best interests. Trump backed out of the Paris Climate Accord in as part of his pledge to put American coal miners back to work. However, the long-term financial repercussions of not investing in positive climate change policies far outweigh the creation of slightly over one thousand jobs. Global warming has been clearly linked to an increase in costly natural

157 Schwarz, Sam. “Donald Trump Said in July He Had Created 45,000 Coal Jobs This Year. The Real Number Is 1,200.” Newsweek, 19 Dec. 2017.
disasters. Additionally, major American cities, including Miami and New York City, face the impending threat of rising sea levels.\textsuperscript{158}

The United States absence from the Paris Climate Accord provides China and Russia with a competitive edge. Several states and private citizens are publically at odds with the Trump administration, undermining Trump's foreign policy. In the aftermath of Trump's announcement, a bipartisan coalition of fifteen states formed to continue the United States involvement in the Paris Climate Accord. Member states of the U.S. Climate Alliance represent 36\% of the population and one-third of U.S. GDP. Private individuals have also spoken out against Trump’s decision to abandon the international agreement. Former Mayor of New York City Michael Bloomberg pledged $15 million to independently fund the United States Climate Action Plan. The United States will also miss out on the opportunity to be at the forefront of emerging industries, including solar power and wind power. The Advanced Energy Perspective predicts the United States will miss out on a projected $1.4 trillion in global business opportunities.\textsuperscript{159} With legislators seeking to replace the Trump administration as the United States authority on the agreement, and private citizens offering to finance the United States role in the project, withdrawal from the agreement has a lesser impact on the global climate change movement, and a greater influence on Trump’s status as a leader.


\textsuperscript{159} “Advanced Energy Is a $1.1 Trillion Global Industry; Grew Twice as Fast as the World Economy in 2013.” \textit{Advanced Energy Economy}, 19 Feb. 2014.
The United States can no longer present itself as a leader in clean energy. The Paris Agreement, and future conversations, will dictate global policy on climate change. By not having a representative at these meetings the United States will be shut out of how these decisions are made. Global leaders almost unanimously condemned the Trump administration’s decision. Chinese Premier Li Keqiang called fighting climate change an “international responsibility”, and vowed to stay true to China’s commitment. President Xi declared China as having taken a “driving seat in international cooperation to respond to climate change” while criticizing nations that “retreat into self-isolation.” A statement from the office of President Putin called Trump’s decision a large complication to the agreement’s implementation. In the United States absence, China has taken on a more significant role in leading the climate change movement. Just one day after the United States decision to withdraw, China and the European Union announced a new alliance to reduce global carbon emissions. In a joint statement, leaders announced that they are “determined to lead the energy transition” and that “now is the time to further strengthen these ties to keep the wheels turning for ambitious global climate action.”

Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Accord under the notion that he was elected to “represent the citizens of Pittsburgh, not

160 “China Vows to Stick to Paris Climate Deal.” CBS News, CBS Interactive, 1 June 2017.
Exiting from this agreement not only further isolates the United States from the international community, but also harms American citizens in the long run. The 2015 UNFCCC was a landmark moment when the world stood together and agreed that climate change is real and poses an imminent threat to all. By leaving this agreement the Trump administration is signaling its blatant self-interest, and its unreliability as a partner in international issues. Ultimately, the Paris Climate Accords marks yet another arena in which the United States is being left behind by the international community.

Chapter Four: Foreign Policies

North Korea:

In October 2017, former CIA Director John Brennan called the prospects of military conflict on the Korean peninsula “greater than they have been in decades... a 1-in-4 or 1-in-5 chance.”\(^{165}\) While tension on the Korean peninsula is a constant crisis, it reached new levels of urgency during the first year of the Trump presidency. In 2017 North Korea tested its missile capabilities sixteen times, and detonated what they claimed was an H-bomb in its sixth nuclear test.\(^{166}\) In the previous decade, North Korea conducted twelve missile tests, making the events of 2017 an exponential increase. The fact that North Korea’s nuclear test was its sixth is especially significant, as India and Pakistan both conducted six tests before officially being considered nuclear powers.\(^{167}\) Although there is little doubt that North Korea is in fact now a nation with nuclear capabilities, reaching this internationally recognized threshold is significant. North Korea’s increased aggression comes as the United States, under new leadership, drastically shifts its policy towards the Kim regime. As indicated by heated Twitter exchanges, military escalation, and economic sanctions, the Trump administration called into question the United States standing as a global power equipped to deal with such an important, and delicate, diplomatic issue. The escalation of tension between the United States


and North Korea also provided an opportunity for China and Russia to strengthen their relationship.

The Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) has been entangled in conflict since its inception in 1948. The official Korean Armistice Agreement brought an end to the combat phase of the Korean War, but did not include a formal peace treaty. As such, the war is technically ongoing. The unresolved nature of the Korean War is further complicated by the roles played by the United States, the Soviet Union, and China during the conflict. With the Chinese and the Soviet Union supporting the Kim regime in the North and the Americans helping the South, the Korean War was the first proxy war of the greater Cold War. The establishment of the Korean Demilitarized Zone at the 38th parallel served as a compromise to end the fighting, but the armistice was intended to be a temporary action, not a permanent solution. This allowed for the dynamic on the Korean peninsula to progress to the current day situation with the Korean War formally unresolved. The unresolved nature of this conflict ensured that the situation on the Korean Peninsula continued to be a point of contention between the United States, the Chinese and the Russians.

In the aftermath of the Korean War, the Kim regime isolated North Korea from the rest of the international community. For the past seventy years, North Korea has been a hermit country that garnered international attention for outlandish propaganda and horrific human rights abuses. Although the North Korean Constitution defines the country as a "socialist State which is
independent, self-sufficient and self-reliant in defense”¹⁶⁸, it is a defacto totalitarian dictatorship with the role of Supreme Leader passed down (father-to-son), and an elaborate cult of personality surrounding three generations of leaders. North Korea is widely considered the most serious perpetrator of human rights violations in the world. In the mid-1990s, North Korea suffered a massive famine. The Kim regime referred to those four years as the “Arduous March” and banned the use of the words ‘famine’ and ‘hunger’.¹⁶⁹ While the North Korean government maintains a maximum resulting death toll of 235,000 people, independent analysis estimates anywhere from 240,000 to 420,000 people died directly from the famine, with two to three million people dead from starvation and hunger-related illnesses.¹⁷⁰ The beginning of the famine is linked to the collapsed of the Soviet Union, upon which North Korea was dependent for its aid. However, the North Korean government prolonged the famine with a failed public distribution system, which prioritized the citizens in Pyongyang and those deemed loyal to the state.¹⁷¹ Even today, the Kim regime reportedly operates re-education and prisons camps for citizens seen as enemies of the state. Although specific details regarding the extent of these camps are difficult to obtain, testimony of former prisoners, defectors, and human rights workers place the total anywhere from 150,000 to 200,000 prisoners, circa 2012.¹⁷² The same sources have also reported that prisoners are subjected to conditions akin

¹⁷¹ “How Did the North Korean Famine Happen?” Wilson Center, 7 July 2011.
to slave labor, malnutrition, torture, and human experimentation. While most of the international community refuses to conduct business or entertain official diplomatic relations with the Kim regime, a handful of nations are willing to do so. These countries, the most influential of which is China, act as a bridge between the global community and the reclusive North.

Aside from an atrocious human rights record, North Korea remains an international crisis because of the regimes’ desire to become a nuclear power. A strong nuclear program acts as a form of self-defense, for the country and the Kim regime. The potential for a nuclear response ought to give pause to any country contemplating military action against North Korea. Furthermore, Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Libya’s Muammar Gaddafi both gave up their nuclear programs, and shortly thereafter fell from power and were killed. A strong nuclear program is essential for maintaining the status quo.

The exact timeline of North Korea’s development of nuclear capabilities is unknown, but can be broadly divided into six categories. The program entered its current stage under the leadership of Kim Jong Un. North Korea’s nuclear program is clearly established as both a military threat and a strategic political weapon. After seizing power in 2011, Kim prioritized military development such that North Korea now has an established nuclear program and a clear nuclear strategy. Pyongyang views the nuclear program as essential to ensure the survival of the Kim regime, going so far as to enshrine its right to possess nuclear weapons in its Constitution. As North Korea’s nuclear capabilities

continue to advance, the urgency for the international community to find some kind of resolution also increases.

How to handle the North Korean situation is a question that every global leader struggles to answer, simply because there has yet to be a successful solution. The United States, Russia, and China have all pursued various policies toward the Kim regime with varied (but limited) results. The Trump administration has embarked upon a more aggressive strategy. In the past, North Korean aggression has been met with international condemnation and, depending on the severity of the offense, UN Security Council imposed sanctions. Few leaders before Trump have been as directly confrontational with Kim. Trump's method of dealing with North Korean aggression has not only altered the tone of the United States, but also established China and Russia as the responsible international partners in peace.

Past American presidents have tried a number of tactics to resolve the situation, ranging from negotiations to sanctions. Under the 1994 Agreed Framework, President Clinton negotiated the cessation of North Korea's nuclear power plants in exchange for oil as an energy alternative.\textsuperscript{174} Congress's failure to follow through in reducing sanctions made the United States look divided and weak, and North Korea quickly restarted its nuclear program. President Bush sought to strike a more aggressive tone. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush declared North Korea a member of the “axis of evil”, alongside Iraq and Iran. His administration sought regime change, prioritizing denuclearization

before discussions. In response, Kim Jong-il withdrew from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, tested its first nuclear bomb, and was discovered exporting weapons technology to Syria.\textsuperscript{175} After seeing his predecessors fail by using both incentives and threats, President Obama pursued a strategy of neither. His policy of ‘strategic patience’ called for economic sanctions and increased isolation, under the supposition that the United States could simply wait out the Kim regime. During Obama’s eight-year tenure North Korea’s nuclear program grew significantly, including four nuclear tests and twelve missile launches.\textsuperscript{176}

The Trump administration has yet to announce an official strategy for dealing for North Korea’s nuclear program, nor have they clearly articulated a position on the Kim regime. When asked about North Korea’s successful missile launch in April 2017, Trump called Kim a “smart cookie” for his ability to come to power at a young age, and indicated a willingness to meet.\textsuperscript{177} Yet four months later Trump threatened “fire and fury” against North Korea, stating the U.S. military is “locked and loaded.”\textsuperscript{178} In response Kim retorted that the U.S. will “regret threats”, while threatening military action against Guam. Over the next two months, North Korea tested an H-bomb and launched multiple intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM) over Northern Japan, while publically

\textsuperscript{178} Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump). “Military solutions are now fully in place, locked and loaded, should North Korea act unwisely. Hopefully Kim Jong Un will find another path!” 11 August 2017, 4:29 am
referring to Trump as a “mentally deranged U.S. dotard.” In the aftermath of DPRK’s nuclear tests, Trump signed an executive order toughening sanctions on firms doing business with North Korea. After tweeting three days later that North Korea, “won’t be around much longer”, the North Korean foreign minister called doing so “equivalent to declaring war.” The Trump administration’s position on North Korea is particularly difficult to discern because of a lack of consistency between officials. When Secretary of State Rex Tillerson publically announced a willingness to talk with North Korea at anytime, Trump responded that “he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man.” It is difficult to say if Tillerson’s split from the Trump’s position, and Trump’s rebuke, are signs of true dissent between the White House and the State Department, or part of a greater strategy. Tillerson could be floating the idea of negotiations as a trial balloon, with Trump’s tweets acting as a ruse. Alternatively, the State Department could be pursuing their own foreign policy objectives. Both are equally probable scenarios. While past Presidents’ attempts to denuclearize North Korea have been unsuccessful, Trump’s approach has so far yielded no results while embarrassing the United States, and escalating global fear of a nuclear war. Trump and Kim exchanged retorts over Twitter and North Korean official state media, while China and Russia promoted their joint proposal for a solution.

180 Trump, Donald (@realDonaldTrump). “I told Rex Tillerson, our wonderful Secretary of State, that he is wasting his time trying to negotiate with Little Rocket Man...” 1 October 2017, 7:30am
China and Russia both oppose the Trump administration’s rhetoric of a ‘bloody nose strike’ on North Korea’s nuclear facilities. Instead, Moscow and Beijing support the use of diplomatic pressure to encourage Kim Jong-Un to pursue more peaceful foreign policies. Fears of a United States military strike on North Korea are grounded in both Russia and China’s interest in a stable Korean peninsula. Aside from the threat of nuclear war on their shared border, China and Russia want to prevent the collapse of the Kim regime. Both nations fear that regime collapse would lead to a United States military presence on the border of a unified Korea, uncertainty regarding the North Korean nuclear program, and a massive refugee crisis.

In a 2016 speech, President Xi noted that “The world is so large and there are so many problems. The international community expects to hear China’s voice... China cannot be absent.”\(^{181}\) In the past, China’s close relationship with North Korea had led international leaders to expect China to control North Korea. Yet North Korea more often than not refused to accede to China’s wishes. Under President Xi, Sino-North Korean relations have reached a new low. China rejected North Korea’s application to be a founding member of the Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank, strengthened UN surveillance of North Korean adherence to sanctions, and imposed their own economic sanctions.\(^{182}\) As of January 2018, President Xi and Supreme Leader Kim had never met, and there

\(^{181}\) Terrill, Ross. Great Power Leader Xi Jinping: International Perspectives on China’s Leader. CN Times Books Inc., 2016. p.190
has yet to be a China-North Korea summit meeting on any level.\textsuperscript{183} Instead, President Xi turned towards South Korea through increased bilateral relations and trilateral communication with South Korea and the United States. While public opinion polls show Chinese citizens supporting the CCP moving further away from Pyongyang, relations began inching closer in the past year.\textsuperscript{184}

Over the course of 2017, China’s cooperation with the U.S. and the UNSC wavered after a year of confusing messages from the United States. After starting the year strong by announcing a ban on coal imports from North Korea, China later blocked a UNSC resolution sanctioning North Korea for its nuclear test and faced accusations of violating sanctions by sending oil to North Korea.\textsuperscript{185} This shift in position comes as the United States promoted contradictory messages on China’s role in controlling North Korea. Trump initially campaigned on the notion that China doesn’t “like to tell us but they have total control -- just about, of North Korea. They can solve the problem of North Korea if they wanted to, but they taunt us.”\textsuperscript{186} One year later, after meeting with President Xi in Beijing, Trump applauded China’s efforts for breaking off economic relations with Pyongyang and spoke of backing down from a trade war in exchange for cooperation on North Korea. However, three months later, Trump accused China of shipping oil to North Korea, saying that “if they don’t help us with North


\textsuperscript{184} “为什么朝鲜的核试验遭受最大的损失？”搜狐评论，2016年9月10日.


Korea, then I do what I’ve always wanted to do.” For China to work with the UNSC in enforcing sanctions, it is important for China to feel like the United States is a reliable partner. Trump’s position on North Korea has been anything but consistent. China’s basic position on maintaining stability in North Korea has not changed, and worrisome conversations between Trump and Kim have put contingency plans into action. In December 2017, the New York Times reported that China had begun constructing refugee camps on the border with North Korea. The same month, China and Russia held joint military drills aimed at countering North Korean aggression, as well as any United States and regional action in the case of war. Additionally, a Chinese newspaper from Jilin Province, which borders North Korea, went viral after publishing advice on what to do in case of a nuclear explosion. Political debate surrounding China’s position on North Korea also became uncharacteristically open. Newspapers and academic journals began publishing articles questioning the official party line. A willingness to entertain multiple perspectives could reflect indecision on behalf of the leadership. The Communist Party’s willingness to relax censorship regulations surrounding the North Korea situation may also indicate a inclination to entertain new strategies. China is positioning itself as less of a friend towards North Korea and more of a leader in global security crises.

Russia also fears the collapse of the Kim regime and advocates for a political solution for the denuclearization of North Korea. Shortly after taking power, Putin and Kim Jong-il signed the Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborly Relations and Cooperation, under which a plan for promoting trade, cultural relations, and cooperation in the fight against terrorism and international crime is outlined. Putin visited Pyongyang to sign the declaration in 2000, with Kim Jong-il traveling to Moscow the following year. Diplomatic relations between the two countries progressed until North Korea’s 2009 nuclear test. Fearing a nuclear North Korea could lead to a nuclear war (that would directly threatened the Russian Far East), Russia joined the international community in condemning the test and imposing sanctions. In 2010, the Kremlin issued a presidential decree intensifying UNSC sanctions and banning purchase of weapons and relevant materials from DPRK by government offices, banks and organizations. Despite supporting UN measures against their nuclear program, Russia continued with bilateral relations and state visits. An agreement for more cultural and scientific exchanges was signed in 2010. In 2014, Russia wrote off ninety percent of North Korea’s $11 billion debt, with the remaining $1 billion going towards Russian humanitarian aid in North Korea. Formal relations were halted after the September 2016 nuclear test, but Russia held out the longest of all other developed nations. The Kremlin’s position on North

195 “Russia Writes off 90 Percent of North Korea Debt, Eyes Gas Pipeline.” Reuters, Thomson Reuters, 19 Apr. 2014.
Korea has not really changed in response the shifting strategies of the United States and China. Russia still advocates for a political solution and containing aggression through diplomatic means instead of force. In the past year, Russia has sought to position itself as the natural facilitator of that conversation. Russia continued to protect North Korea on the UN Security Council, blocking an April 2017 condemnation of a missile launch and September 2017 sanctions after the nuclear test.196 Furthermore, Russia continued to export oil to North Korea in violation of UN sanctions.197 On the escalation of tension between North Korea and the United States, the Kremlin released a statement calling on all parties involved to exercise restraint, without going into any detail regarding the two missiles North Korea fired over Japan earlier in the week.198 China reiterated this claim, saying “Russia plays a pivotal role in maintaining global peace and stability as well as promoting peaceful solutions to hotspot issues in the region... China is willing to strengthen its cooperation and coordination with Russia to jointly preserve peace and stability in the region and around the world.”199

At the end of the most heated year of the North Korean crisis in recent memory, Russia and China emerged as strong leaders with a peaceful alternative to Trump’s reckless Twitter provocation. United in their desire to prevent regime change and a massive refugee crisis, China and Russia proposed to

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resume six-party talks. Although the six-party talks have been intermittently ongoing since 2003, the newest iteration is unique, as it has been called the 5+1 (North Korea, China, Russia, Japan and South Korea, plus the United States) talks.\(^\text{200}\) Russia has already announced its willingness to act as a mediator between the United States and North Korea, declaring its “readiness to clear the way for de-escalation is obvious.”\(^\text{201}\) After one year of the Trump administration, China wavered on sanctions without a reliable ally in the United States, and Russia stepped up to fill the role of negotiator while both promoting a stable and peaceful alternative to the United States threats. While China and Russia presented peaceful and realistic options, Trump did neither.

It is far too early to say if any of these policies will be effective in their main goal of denuclearizing North Korea. However, the different strategies have an immediate effect on the United States-Russia-China trilateral relationship. The United States approach of tough talk and increased pressure via economic sanctions brought the fear of nuclear war to a new high. Trump’s year of Twitter threats had little success in intimidating Kim into negotiations, instead serving as a reason for the international community to question the United States legitimacy as a competent partner in international security. The United States left the position of chief negotiator open for China and Russia to fill. Their proposed 5+1 peace talks position the United States as the outlier to the multinational negotiation. Additionally, Sino-Russian cooperation on the Korean


peninsula has greater implications than just North Korea. The two countries are both looking to better relations with South Korea and are united in their opposition to the United States deploying THAAD, an anti-ballistic missile defense system, to South Korea. If the United States continues to be undependable in foreign policy matters, Seoul may be forced to look elsewhere for allies. The actions of the Trump administration weakened the United States reputation as a reliable partner. It’s unclear whether the conflicting messages on China’s role in controlling North Korea and divisions between the White House and State Department regarding policy are part of a grand strategy, or simply the results of a President with no foreign policy experience and a flawed understanding of the situation. Within the past year the North Korean crisis appears to have brought China and Russia closer together with the United States as the odd man out.

**South China Sea**

In 1997, the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists listed the major geopolitical flashpoints that will play a role in twenty-first century. The Bulletin published that “considerably more dangerous internationally than Hong Kong or Tibet is the problem of the South China Sea” and called for an increase defense budgets of nations in the forgotten area.\(^2\) Despite the recognition of the seriousness of this issue over twenty years ago, the situation in the South China Sea took a backseat to other global crises in 2017. During the fist year of the Trump administration, the South China Sea became a forgotten flashpoint. This critical

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area was mentioned once in Trump’s 2017 National Security Strategy and the Department of Defense’s corresponding National Defense Strategy without any further analysis. Ignoring the situation in the South China Sea most favors the outcomes desired by the Chinese government. China has made significant progress in controlling the region due to a relatively weak United States and an apathetic Russia.

The South China Sea has been a point of contention since the beginning of the Cold War. The Chinese Ministry of Internal Affairs published a map of the islands in the South China Sea in 1947, clearly marking them as belonging to China. These markings have since been referred to as the Nine-Dash Line and are a representation of China’s historical claim to the entire territory. Other South East Asian countries dispute China’s claim to the land, and water, in the South China Sea. Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam have all publically claimed sovereignty over parts of the South China Sea. Taiwan asserts its sovereignty over the entire area as part of their claim to being the legitimate government of China. The South China Sea has financial, strategic, and nationalist importance. According to the United States Energy Information Administration, the South China Sea contains over eleven billion dollars worth of oil, 190 trillion cubic feet of natural gas, and some of the world’s most prolific fishing reserves. Over half of the world’s annual merchant fleet travels through the South China Sea, along with half of the global liquefied natural gas

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trade and one-third global crude oil shipping. Complete control of these waterways and shipping routes would place any country at a massive economic advantage relative to its neighbors. From a military perspective, the location of the South China Sea is geographically strategic. The ability to patrol these waters, and set up military installations on the islands, would enhance any nations intelligence gathering abilities and provide forward military bases for any future conflict in the region. The Scarborough Shoal, the Spratly Islands, the Natuna Islands, and the Paracel Islands are all disputed territory. Multiple skirmishes have occurred as various countries assert their claim over the South China Sea. In 1974, a conflict over the Paracel Islands between China and the Vietnam left seventy-one dead. In 1988, the Spratley Islands were the location of a naval clash between China and Vietnam that killed seventy Vietnamese sailors. There have also been numerous minor clashes involving fishing boats. The ability to assert control over a territory where previous disputes remain unsettled could be seen as a nationalist victory. These small conflicts continued during the twenty-first century as China escalated its militarization of the region. China's continued creation of man-made islands, military bases, and oil drilling stations led the Philippines to formally took action. In 2013, the Philippines initiated an arbitration procedure against China's maritime claims in the South China Sea with the United Nations International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea at The Hague (UNCLOS). In July 2016, the UNCLOS court rejected China's nine-
dash line, and ruled that, “China had violated the Philippines’ sovereign rights in its exclusive economic zone” and had broken international law by causing “irreparable harm” to the region’s environment.\textsuperscript{207} China refused to participate in the arbitration, and refused to acknowledge the tribunal’s ruling. President Xi declared China’s “territorial sovereignty and marine rights in the seas would not be affected by the ruling,” while stating that China is still committed to resolving disputes with their neighbors.\textsuperscript{208} Since the ruling, China has deployed their navy to the region, and built infrastructure on the islands.

During the Obama administration, the South China Sea was a global flashpoint of growing concern. President Obama’s “pivot to Asia” strategy sought to counter China’s rising power by strengthening relations with neighboring Southeast Asian countries. In particular, Vietnam and the Philippines looked towards the United States for support. With regular naval operations in the region demonstrating American military support, increased economic trade and diplomatic visits, the United States worked to assure allies of American intentions in the region. Since the 2016 election, the issues in the South China Sea have taken a backseat, which has allowed China to proceed unchallenged.

In 2017, China continued to build and militarize in defiance of the UNCLOS ruling with few consequences. In his speech to the National People’s Congress, President Xi described China’s infrastructure efforts in the South China


Although China’s actions over the past year were not as blatant as earlier construction projects, these smaller steps are no less important. The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, a division of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, tracked and documented the progress of Chinese construction. China expanded military bases, constructed radar and sensor installations, and hardened shelters for missiles. The Fiery Cross Reef, which had been expanded to cover twenty-seven acres, now has underground structures, hardened shelters, and construction hangers alongside the previously built runway. It is believed to be a communication platform. The Subi Reef, which has been expanded to twenty-four acres, now houses a high frequency “elephant cage” antenna that is used to transmit signals intelligence. In addition to these construction projects, China also bolstered its naval presence in the region. Chinese naval ships, Coast Guard vessels, and fishing boats have docked and refueled on the islands. China also exerts sovereignty over the territory using soft power. In July 2017, China announced the creation of state-run cruises through the South China Sea. Tens of thousands of Chinese citizens have participated in these ‘patriotic vacations’, which include

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210 Luce, Dan De. “With Trump Focused on North Korea, Beijing Sails Ahead in South China Sea.” *Foreign Policy,* Foreign Policy, 16 Nov. 2017.


212 ibid

213 Luce, Dan De. “With Trump Focused on North Korea, Beijing Sails Ahead in South China Sea.” *Foreign Policy,* Foreign Policy, 16 Nov. 2017.
docking at the disputed Paracel Islands. Other South East Asian nations have had little success in combatting this Chinese expansionism. Vietnam and the Philippines began 2017 with strong language condemning China’s actions in the South China Sea, but folded to Chinese pressure. In April, Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte called for the country’s military to be deployed to the South China Sea. One day later, a Philippine government spokesperson walked back his statements. By November, Duterte complied with an official Chinese complaint to stop construction on disputed territory. Vietnam has also reversed its positions in the wake of a stronger China. In August, the Vietnamese government indefinitely suspended a gas-drilling project that had been approved for the South China Sea. The changing Vietnamese and Philippine positions come as a response to a more confident and assertive China and uncertainty about American support.

The Trump administration has not presented a clear strategy for the South China Sea. Prior to the inauguration, soon-to-be Secretary of State Rex Tillerson put China on notice. He told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that “first, the island building stops and, second, your access to those islands is not going to be allowed.” However, two weeks later, Secretary of Defense Jim

218 Hayton, Bill. “Is Tillerson Willing to Go to War over the South China Sea?” *Foreign Policy*, Foreign Policy, 13 Jan. 2017.
Mattis publically stated that he does not believe a greater military presence in the region is necessary.\textsuperscript{219} With the State and Defense Department’s projecting conflicting narratives, the White House did not clarify its position, nor put forward a strategy of its own. After calling President Obama’s policy of defending international waters weak and ineffective on the campaign trail, Trump blocked the U.S. Navy from conducting Freedom of Navigation Operations for the first six months of his administration.\textsuperscript{220} Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPS) are a principle of international law that protects ships, including military vessels, flying the flag of a sovereign state from suffering interference from another state while in international waters.\textsuperscript{221} During the Obama administration, FONOPS were routinely conducted in the South China Sea approximately twice a year since 2015. These operations consisted of United States military vessels sailing through the South China Sea, while staying twelve nautical miles from any Chinese-claimed islands. Trump reversed his position in his second six months in office, ordering five FONOPS in the South China Sea. The May 2017 operation was particularly aggressive. It violated the (unspoken) twelve nautical mile rule when United States military vessels sailed six miles from the Mischief Reef.\textsuperscript{222} The Trump administration’s presence in the South China Sea has not included financial means or diplomatic options, but has only been enforced through

projections of American military strength. The United States military posture in the South China Sea waned as American naval power looked particularly weak in the Asia Pacific region in 2017. The Navy reported six accidents in East Asia that resulted in American fatalities. While no official causes have been released, the incidents are widely viewed to be a result of human error due to inadequate maintenance in the face of increased operational deployments. These incidents damaged American prestige, and limited the ability to project a credible military deterrence to the world.

Trump further confused world leaders in November 2017. In a joint statement with the President of Vietnam, Trump stated, “If I can help mediate or arbitrate, please let me know...I’m a very good mediator and arbitrator.” The United States has no official strategy for handling Chinese aggression, and has not been able to project military strength to successfully modify Chinese behavior. This perceived weakness by the United States has resulted in other nations in the region submitting to Chinese pressure and allowed China to advance its agenda.

Russia has not traditionally viewed the South China Sea as an area of strategic importance. It lacks a significant military presence in the South China Sea. After withdrawing from the Cam Ranh Bay in Vietnam in the early 2000s,

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the Russian navy has done little more than port calls in the area.225 Prior to the Philippines lawsuit at the Hague, Moscow was impartial on the issue of maritime disputes. In April 2016, Foreign Minister Lavrov reiterated Russia’s position as “determined by the wish... to see disputes resolved directly between countries... without any interference from third parties or any attempt to internationalize these disputes.”226 This statement’s anti-international stance was a rebuke of international forums such as ASEAN, the East Asia Summits, and the Asia-Europe Meetings, and a warning to the United States not to get involved. After the UNCLOS ruling, Russia issued a statement in support of the Chinese decision to ignore the tribunal. Russia chose to use this issue to strengthen its relationship with China. President Putin said, “We stand in solidarity and support of China’s position on this issue – not to recognize the decision of this court.”227 Russia’s primary concern in regards to the South China Sea is the tension it creates between China and Vietnam, two significant trading partners of Russia. Russia and Vietnam have a close relationship, dating back to the Soviet Union’s support of North Vietnam. Vietnam depends on Russia for most of its military equipment. Additionally, Vietnam is a major customer for Russian natural resources, having negotiated $3 billion energy deals.228229 Despite a historically strong relationship with Vietnam, Moscow has recently turned more decisively towards Beijing.

Although not an alliance, which conveys potential military repercussions, the strengthening of the Sino-Russian friendship is manifested by increased joint military drills. Beginning in 2005, Russia and China conducted ‘peace missions’ in conjunction with the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) every other year. These military training sessions cover multiple scenarios in different locations every year, with the only constant being Russian and Chinese participation. In 2012, the peace missions began to occur annually, accompanied by separate Chinese and Russian bilateral naval drills. The 2016 bilateral naval exercises took place only three months after the UNCLOS ruling, and were held in the South China Sea. This was a clear message to the United States and the international community.

The situation in the South China Sea lacked the expected international attention in 2017 given the significant developments during 2016. Other global crises, most notably North Korea, commanded the attention of regional analysts, military officials and political administrations. The South China Sea’s relative obscurity benefits Beijing. While the world is distracted by more emergent situations, China continues to take small and methodical steps to solidify its control over the region. The confidence China displayed in the South China Sea in the past year is not unfounded. The United States Pacific Fleet appeared weaker than ever, Russian support has increased, and most significantly China faced virtually no consequences for its actions. Under past administrations the United States would have likely countered China’s growing influence in the region. After leaving the Trans-Pacific Partnership, and failing to present a clear strategy to
replace President Obama’s ‘pivot to Asia’, the United States is loosing the support of ASEAN nations. The Philippines and Vietnam, which had previously taken strong positions against Beijing’s claims, are now strengthening relations with China. Although neither country is revoking their claim to territory in the South China Sea, feelings of abandonment by the United States leaves these smaller countries with few options. While China’s influence in the region grows and the role of the United States remains uncertain, Russian support for China has become clearer. Beijing’s focus on expanding the sovereignty opportunities in the South China Sea is also in Moscow’s best interest. Perpetually wary of China’s rising power, Russia prefers if China focuses its military budget and attention on an area where Russia has no strong interest. In the first year of the Trump administration, the South China Sea became the ‘forgotten flashpoint.’ While the situation may not have heated up enough to warrant the attention of Washington, it has certainly not been forgotten by Beijing.

Ukraine & Syria:

The situations in Syria and Ukraine are longstanding regional crises that have captured global attention, in which the United States, China and Russia all have a vested interest in the outcome. Syria escalated into a civil war and Ukraine devolved into an invasion by a third party and separatist independence movements. Both situations began with mass protests against corrupt leadership, and intensified after international intervention. The United States, Russia and China used similar approaches to handle both situations. The United States condemned Syrian President Assad and Russian President Putin for
violating Western democratic values but support stopped short of military assistance for rebel forces. Russia defended its national interests through military intervention. Moscow’s opposition to what the Kremlin perceives to be American-led regime change is a cornerstone of Russian foreign policy. After the successful ousting of dictators and strongman leaders during the Color Revolutions and Arab Spring, the Kremlin remains wary of the United States attempting to instigate a revolution in Russia. China remained officially neutral in both conflicts pursuant to its non-interference policy but advanced future economic plans. As a core principle of peaceful coexistence, China vowed to not interfere in the internal affairs of other sovereign nations. With the international spotlight on American and Russian involvement, China took less overt steps to ensure a favorable outcome. Neither situation reached a turning point in 2017. Under a new administration, the United States took a different approach to Syria and Ukraine, whereas Russia and China maintained their original positions.

_Ukraine_

The Euromaidan demonstrations of November 2013 were sparked by Ukranian President Yanukovych’s decision to abandon the signing of an association agreement with the European Union. Instead, Yanukovych pursued a closer relationship with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union. This decision


习近平. “习近平在和平共处五项原则发表 60 周年纪念大会上的讲话（全文）.” 中国人民共和国驻丹麦王国大使馆, 29 June 2014.
had greater implications of the government leaning towards a Russian sphere of influence rather than the European Union and the United States. Protests in the Ukrainian capital quickly turned into a full-blown revolution. The protests turned violent after government security forces fired on the crowds, with a disputed death toll ranging from one hundred seventy to seven hundred and eighty casualties.\textsuperscript{231} President Yanukovych’s government was overthrown and he, and many officials, sought refuge in Russia. In February 2014, a new government was created, headed by Petro Poroshenko. Poroshenko was previously known as an influential Ukrainian confectionary oligarch. He has long supported Ukraine’s pro-Europe movement and was a key contingent of the 2004 Orange Revolution.\textsuperscript{232} The events in Kiev were quickly followed by Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of war in the Donbass. President Putin condemned the civil unrest in Kiev’s Maidan Square, calling it “more like a pogrom than a revolution.”\textsuperscript{233} Seven days after Yanukovych was removed from power, Russia annexed the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. On February 27, 2014, armed pro-Russian protestors took control of the Crimean parliament building and Council of Ministers building, and raised Russian flags above both. The government in Crimea was quickly dissolved. Sergei Aksyonov, a member of Russian United (a political party linked to Putin’s United Russia), was elected Prime Minister of the Republic of Crimea.\textsuperscript{234} One day later, after Aksyonov called upon Russia for

\textsuperscript{232} Karatnycky, Adrian. “Ukraine’s Orange Revolution.” \textit{Foreign Affairs}, 15 Sept. 2015.
assistance, Putin formally requested permission from the Federation Council to use “the armed forces of the Russian Federation on the territory of Ukraine until the normalization of the socio-political situation in the that country.” Permission was given and, in just twenty-four days, Russia invaded and conquered Crimea. A March 2014 referendum officially reintegrated Crimea into Russia but was dismissed by the Western world as illegitimate. After essentially conquering Crimea, Russia began to support separatist movements in the Eastern Ukranian regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. Following the February uprisings, conflicts emerged between the Ukranian government the Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics. The two regions, commonly referred to as the Donbass region, announced their intention to seek independence from Ukraine. The conflict escalated into a full-blown war between Ukraine and the separatists, which remains ongoing. While there have been many attempts at ceasefires, sporadic fighting continues. The war is considered a ‘frozen conflict’, still officially a warzone but with little progress being made on either end.

The situation in Ukraine, for various strategic, political, economic and ideological reasons, is of great importance to Russia, the United States and China. For Russia control over Crimea provides access to the warm-water port of Sevastopol on the Black Sea, a geostrategic interest that is integral to Russian foreign policy. From a political perspective, Russia’s actions in Crimea act as a test of the international response to aggression in Eastern Europe. Following the annexation, Russia was expelled from the G-8 and was served with sanctions

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from the United States and European Union. This response was intended to warn the Kremlin of the costs Russia should expect to incur for future actions acts of aggression. Additionally, the annexation sent a strong message to other nations on Russia’s border about the consequences of embracing the European Union and NATO. Perhaps the most compelling reason for Russia’s annexation of Crimea is that many Russians view Crimea as rightfully part of Russia. Crimea was part of the Russian empire for almost two hundred years, until it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954. Currently over 65% of Crimea’s residents identify as ethnic Russians and speak Russian.236

The United States interest in Ukraine is to enforce established international norms and to counter Russian influence in the region. After World War II the United States led the international community in establishing rules to prevent global conflict. Russian disregard of other nations sovereign borders threatens the stability of that international principle. American involvement is also important as a sign of loyalty to other nations potentially threatened by Russian aggression and funding of separatist groups. Supporting the democratic uprising in Kiev and condemning the annexation of Crimea reassure Eastern European nations potentially leaning towards a Western sphere of influence that fear Russian aggression.

China has both short-term and long-term economic interests in Ukraine. In the immediate aftermath of Russia’s annexation of Crimea, United States and European Union enforced sanctions that targeted Russia’s state finances, energy

and weapons sectors, as well as many of the elite thought to be part of Putin’s inner circle.\textsuperscript{237} As a result, Moscow has turned closer towards Beijing. The sanctions limit Russia’s ability to export energy resources to Europe and import food.\textsuperscript{238} China has filled much of that gap, and is now Russia’s largest trading partner. China’s agricultural industry is also heavily invested in Ukraine. In 2013, Ukraine reportedly agreed to lease China three million hectares of farmland over the next fifty years.\textsuperscript{239} Upon the completion of this transaction Ukraine would become China’s largest overseas farming center, making the land a significant investment to protect. In the long run, Ukraine is a key part of China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Ukraine’s location, specifically its proximity to the European Union, makes it a desirable place for a major transit hub into Europe.\textsuperscript{240} Additionally, having a significant Belt and Road presence in Ukraine could be advantageous to China if relations with Russia were to worsen. Although by no means a preferred, or inexpensive path, China would have the ability to establish a route of the Silk Road that connects Kazakhstan to Ukraine via Georgia, the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea.

Whether for economic, ideological or strategic reasons, the events in Ukraine have impacted Russia, China and the United States, reinforcing some of the relationships and straining others. The Maidan revolution successfully ousted the Yanukovych government and, as of 2015, Crimea has been integrated

\textsuperscript{237} Executive Order. No. 13660, 2014.
\textsuperscript{238} Tiezzi, Shannon. “China, Russia Try to Brave Economic Headwinds.” The Diplomat, The Diplomat, 18 Dec. 2015.
back into Russia. The war in the Donbass region remains the only disputed issue. China, Russia and the United States all sought to further their goals in the region in 2017, but only the United States changed strategy.

Despite escalating violence and an increased death toll in 2017, the conflict in the Donbass region hasn’t significantly change. Russia has denied aiding separatist factions, but Ukrainian soldiers on the ground insist they can tell the difference. One interview soldier noted that “they fight in different ways. The separatists are unorganized... but Russian units move in a coordinated, disciplined way. And Russian artillery is much more accurate.”

It is therefore difficult to say whether Russian support, of both manpower and weapons, has increased in the past year. However, as the United Nations reports higher death tolls every quarter and with the United States increases its support for Ukraine, it is reasonable to believe that Russian military involvement has increasing accordingly. There has also been an increased in suspected political assassinations of Putin critics in Ukraine. In March the suspicious death of a former Russian lawmaker aligned with an explosion at an Ukrainian ammunition depot, an occurrence President Poroshenko called “no accident.” In September a Chechen couple, both known as Putin critics and volunteer soldiers in the war in Eastern Ukraine, was targeted for the second time.

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These incidents are indicative of a more subtle version of Russian aggression in Ukraine. The Kremlin sent a strong message to Kiev, that Russia can still operate in Ukraine. The most significant change to the situation was the United States announcement that it would sell defensive weapons to Ukraine, a surprisingly strong position after a year of indecision.

The Trump administrations position on Ukraine changed considerably during his first year in office. At a July 2016 campaign rally, Trump said “the people of Crimea, from what I’ve heard, would rather be with Russia than where they were.”244 This statement, along with his failure to provide a clear strategy for handling Russian aggression and his frequent compliments of Putin’s leadership, indicated a Trump administration that favored Moscow over Kiev. After two months in office Trump continually referred to the separatist armies in Eastern Ukraine as uncontrolled forces, despite a widespread consensus that they receive assistance from Russia.245 However, Trump seemed to reverse his opinion in June 2017. The Treasury Department announced additional sanctions on over thirty Russian individuals and organizations responsible for the annexation of Crimea.246 Later in the month Trump addressed the Kremlin during a speech in Warsaw, urging Russia to "join the community of responsible nations" and "stop destabilizing Ukraine."247 Trump’s new pro-Ukraine position was strengthened by the December 2017 announcement that the United States

would provide Kiev with defensive weapons. The weapons package, which received uncharacteristic support from both the State Department and Defense Department, is expected to contain anti-tank weapons and launchers. An additional $41.5 million deal was approved that allowed American arms manufacture to sell weapons to Ukraine.

It is unclear if these actions are in response to any specific Russian action in Ukraine, or a part of a larger strategy. The Kremlin quickly denounced the Trump administration’s decision, saying that Washington has “crossed the line.” As of January 2018 there have been no retaliatory actions, but it may simply be too soon to tell. It is difficult to say whether this was a reversal of opinion or part of a longer strategy because no official strategy was ever outlined by the Trump administration. The Trump administration’s military support for Ukraine is a radical departure from President Obama’s strategy, and from Trump’s earlier statements. While the conflict in Ukraine remained fairly constant for most of 2017, American escalation has the potential to make 2018 a more active year.

While the United States and Russia escalated their military presence in the region, China remained neutral and laid the groundwork for future economic endeavors. In December 2017 Chinese Vice Premier Ma Kai visited Kiev to discuss infrastructure developments for the Belt and Road Initiative. The discussed projects include a $500 million loan from a Chinese trading firm to create affordable housing, the creation of a $400 million railway in Kiev, and a

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solar energy farm to be built near Chernobyl. While Vice Premier Kai was in Ukraine, the China Harbor Engineering Company announced the completion of a $38 million dredging project in the Ukrainian port of Yuzhny. In the past year China also moved to strengthen bilateral relations with Ukraine outside of the Belt and Road Initiative. Trade between China and Ukraine has increased by 14.5% in 2017, reaching over $5.6 billion. Ukraine surpassed the United States as China’s top supplier of corn, and China became Ukraine’s top purchaser of military equipment. Beijing remained neutral during the Ukrainian Revolution and the annexation of Crimea, and continued to observe their policy of non-interference in relation to the fighting in the Donbass region. China is benefitting from the situation in Ukraine without giving anything in return.

**Syria**

The protests of the Arab Spring spread to Syria in March 2011. Demonstrations broke out in Dara’a after the government arrested and tortured school children that had written pro-democracy revolutionary slogans on the walls of their school. The situation escalated when security forces fired on the crowds and triggered nationwide protests. By July 2011 hundreds of thousands of Syrians had taken to the streets to protest government corruption, the use of force on civilians, and general dissatisfaction with the Assad regime. The protestors organized themselves into opposition forces and began to fight back, sending Syria spiraling into a civil war. Sectarian divides in the opposition only...
served to complicate the situation. Assad’s regime is mostly composed of the Shia Alawite minority whereas the majority of the country is Sunni. The general opposition movement is composed of multiple factions, split by political parties and ethnic divisions. Further obscuring the situation is the presence of the Islamic State (ISIL) and Kurdish independence fighters. The situation received greater global attention after it was reported in August 2013 that the nerve agent sarin had been used on a civilian population. This attack violated the ‘red line’ President Obama had enunciated one year earlier, that the use of chemical weapons would warrant American military involvement. While most of the international community condemned the use of chemical weapons, Russia vetoed the UN Security Council resolution intended to punish the Assad regime for their actions, and China abstained from the vote. Faced with the prospect of American military intervention, Assad agreed to give up his chemical weapons arsenal. In accordance with UNSC Resolution 2118, the Syrian government surrendered its chemical weapons program in October 2013. However, there have since been numerous alleged violations, including multiple chlorine attacks in 2014 and 2016. Another point of escalation in the war came in September 2015, when Russian support of the Assad regime shifted from military advisors and humanitarian aid to direct military involvement. Citing a fear of Islamic extremism spreading into the Caucasus, Putin approved the deployment of military forces. At first Russia’s role in Syria consisted of airstrikes, but reports

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of Russian private contractors on the ground indicate an increase in Moscow’s involvement.\textsuperscript{254} Russian assistance turned the tide of the war, and pro-Assad forces regained control of large parts of the country. As of January 2018, opposition forces only control small pockets in northern Syria by Idlib and in southern Syria near Ghouta.\textsuperscript{255} (See Figure 6) Both locations are currently under siege by Assad's security forces. The government’s success in these areas would mean the end of the opposition and completion of the war.

Russia, the United States and China all have a strong interest in the outcome of the Syrian crisis. Russia not only has cultural and economic ties to Syria, but also supports the Assad regime for ideological and strategic purposes. The strength of the Russia-Syria relationship dates back to the Kremlin’s economic and military support of the Assad family beginning in 1971. Through the fall of the Soviet Union and the transfer of the Syrian Presidency from father to son, Russia remained Syria’s biggest trading partner. As of 2016, Russia accounted for almost one-quarter of Syrian imports, and the majority of pre-Arab Spring tourism.\textsuperscript{256} In 2017, bilateral trade between the two nations increased 42% to reach over $191 billion.\textsuperscript{257} Syria’s exports have significantly decreased since the start of the civil war, but continue to export spice seeds, calcium phosphates, and fruit.\textsuperscript{258} Russia’s support for Assad is also motivated by economic strategy. In 2009 President Assad refused to sign a proposed

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\textsuperscript{258} “Syria.” \textit{OEC - Syria (SYR) Exports, Imports, and Trade Partners}, The Observatory of Economic Complexity.
\end{footnotes}
agreement with Qatar to run a oil pipeline through Northern Syria, citing a desire to “protect the interest of [his] Russian ally.” Instead, Syria entered into negotiations with Iran, a Russian ally, to create a similar pipeline. The continuation of the Assad regime, ensures similar protection of Russian economic interests. Additionally, over decades of cultural exchanges and migration, Syria amassed a large Russian diaspora. Over twenty thousand Russians, mostly women, live in Syria and have created a very human form of soft power. Many high level officials either went to university in the former Soviet Union or have Russian wives and bilingual children. From a military perspective, Syria’s warm-water ports are desirable to Russia. Warm water ports have always had an influence in Russian foreign policy decisions. Many of the nation’s ports are in the north, and are ice-locked for a significant part of the year. The Syrian port of Tartus is one of few warm-water ports that the Russian navy has access to, and grants a strategic significance to the Russian Mediterranean fleet. Finally, Russian President Putin has made no secret of his disdain for what he believes is American involvement in the Arab Spring and Color Revolutions. In his 2015 Presidential Address, Putin discussed the threat of terrorism in the MENA region in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. He addressed the causes of civil unrest, stating “We all know why that happened.

We know who decided to oust the unwanted regimes and brutally impose their own rules.”

The United States has both a moral obligation and a practical rational for its involvement in Syria. American opposition to the situation is based on principle. Historic enemies of the United States, including Iran, Hezbollah and Russia, support the Assad regime. As the undisputed global superpower, many believe the United States had a duty to do more than just condemn humanitarian crises after they occur, but to intervene to prevent them. Atrocities against civilians, especially those that involve chemical weapons, violate the rules of international society. The United States is also has a strategic desire to prevent the formation of a ‘Shiite Crescent’ in the Middle East. The Iranian-controlled connection of land through Iraq and Syria to Lebanon rivals the Saudi-led Sunni powers. A stronger Iran poses a clear threat to the both the United States and Israel. While the Syrian Civil War does not pose an imminent national security threat to the United States nor impact economic development or military strategy, it remains important to the United States on principle. As Russian involvement increases, so does the necessity for the United States to counter.

Chinese interest in the Syrian crisis is both financial and ideological. Most of Syria has been destroyed after seven years of war. Eventually, the country will need to be rebuilt. China has already begun to lay the groundwork to win those contracts. During a government hosted “Trade Fair on Syrian Reconstruction

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261 Putin, Vladimir. “Presidential Address to the Federal Assembly.” President of Russia, 3 Dec. 2015.
Projects”, a Chinese group announced plans to invest $2 billion into rebuilding Syria.\(^{263}\) Syria is also in a prime location to be an influential part of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative. The ports of Tartus and Latakia are potential launching pads into the Mediterranean and towards Europe. Additionally, an estimated two thousand members of the Turkestan Islamic Party (TIP) reportedly traveled to Syria to fight alongside the Islamic State. The goal of TIP, which has been linked to Al-Qaeda and ISIL, is the creation of an independent East Turkestan in place of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region.\(^{264}\) The revelation of Chinese citizens fighting alongside Jihadists in Syria exacerbated Beijing’s fears of the domestic spread of Islamic extremism. Similar to Russia, the Chinese Communist Party also remains wary of the threat of American led regime change. After enduring, and quickly suppressing, an uprising in 2013 connected to the Arab Spring protests, China saw the United States as partially culpable for is domestic instability and intensified its support for leaders facing similar threats.

In 2017 the Syrian government took back large sections of Central and Eastern Syria, cornering opposition forces in increasingly small pockets. The death toll reached an estimated 470,000 casualties as the Civil War continued into its seventh year.\(^{265}\) As Russian support of the Assad regime continued, American involvement significantly increased. Initially following a December 2016 ceasefire the Russian Defense Ministry announced its intention to reduce


force deployment in Syria, by first sending the naval fleet in the Mediterranean back to Russia.\textsuperscript{266} However, two weeks later Russia signed a long-term agreement to increase its military presence in Syria, specifically securing the rights for the port in Tartus and an air base near Latakia for the next forty-nine years.\textsuperscript{267} Russia continued its campaign of military assistance and airstrikes, with the Defense Ministry reporting a total of 28,000 combat maneuvers and 90,000 strikes since 2015.\textsuperscript{268} Russian involvement in Syria culminated in a December 2017 visit from President Putin. During a speech at Khmeimim air base, Putin declared victory in Moscow’s intervention in the Syrian War.\textsuperscript{269} Once again, despite public calls for de-escalation of military forces, there has been no sign of follow through. Frequent calls for military reduction with no actual troop reduction, an increased logistical presence and greater use of airstrike capability all indicate a larger Russian involvement in Syria in 2017, and going forward.

Early in the Trump presidency, it looked as if Trump was taking a more favorable position towards the Assad regime. Trump broke with the earlier precedent of the United States commitment to the removal of Assad from powerful. In a post-election interview, Trump stated that “my attitude was you’re fighting Syria, Syria is fighting ISIS, and you have to get rid of ISIS.”\textsuperscript{270} To

some, this indicated a potential willingness to align with the Syrian government to fight terrorism. This position was reinforced by U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations’ Nikki Haley’s announcement that “our priority is no longer to sit and focus on getting Assad out” and Secretary of State Tillerson’s statement that Assad’s long-term status “will be decided by the Syrian people.”271 The Trump administration’s position drastically shifted in April after reports of civilian deaths due to a chemical attack. After publically condemning Assad, Trump ordered an airstrike on the Syrian government airbase that housed the warplanes used in the chemical attack. After ordering the strike, Trump told reporters that “my attitude towards Syria and Assad has changed very much.”272 This strike marked the United States first direct military action taken in the Syrian conflict. Two months later, the United States once again used force to shoot down a Syrian government aircraft, the first time such action was taken since 1999.273 Trump’s positions on Syria, both of the role of the Assad regime and the use of military force, significantly changed over the past year, putting the future of American involvement up in the air.

Over the past year China increased bilateral relations with Syria while maintaining a neutral stance on all issues relating to the ongoing civil war. In February, China joined Russia in vetoing a UNSC resolution condemning the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons under the premise that the factual

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foundation of the resolution is disputed.\textsuperscript{274} For all the past resolutions dealing with the Syrian conflict, China has alternated between vetoing alongside Russia and abstaining, using the veto as a more clear sign of support. Less than one month later, Assad described Sino-Syrian relations as “on the rise” because China “was a real friend that could be relied upon.”\textsuperscript{275} Chinese and Syrian bilateral relations have remained relatively positive throughout the ongoing conflict. While maintaining a non-interference position with regards to the military conflict, China inserted itself into the peace process and attended negotiations in Russia. In the same March interview Assad referenced a role for China in rebuilding Syria, specifically noting the residential sector, infrastructure and industrial projects as ripe for Chinese investment.\textsuperscript{276} While not neutral in the conflict, China managed to position itself as an international power distant enough from the situation to take on the role of negotiator. At the same time, China is laying the foundation for future economic ventures in a post-conflict Syria.

\textit{Analysis}

In 2017 the crises in Ukraine and Syria continued to devolve. Russia maintained its status quo position on both issues, which appears to be working out fairly well. The Syrian government forces, with Russian assistance, are increasingly close to winning the war, thus providing Russia with a stable ally in

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{276} ibid
\end{itemize}
the Middle East and reaffirming its position as an influential power in the region. In Ukraine, Crimea has been reincorporated into Russia. The Kremlin still denies any involvement with separatist groups in the Donbass region but is believed to be continuing with military assistance and logistical support. In response to a stronger American position, Russia strengthened its rhetoric on the issue, warning the United States against militarizing the situation.

The biggest change to both situations was the role of the United States. Under Trump American participation increased, with weapons sales to Ukraine and direct military involvement in Syria. While the change in the United States previous position, and Trump’s earlier personal opinion, in Syria is clearly linked to the Syrian government’s use of chemical weapons, the escalation in Ukraine not as easily connected to a specific event. The cause of this development does not necessarily have to do with the situation on the ground in Ukraine. As one piece of the larger geopolitical chessboard, increased military support for Ukraine may be in response to Russian aggression, or a message to Russia, for another reason entirely. Additionally, the looming investigation into Russia’s involvement in the 2016 presidential election cannot be forgotten. Every American intelligence agency is in agreement that the Kremlin is responsible for a cyber campaign designed to sway the election in favor of Trump. While the investigation into the extent to which the Trump campaign was aware of this agenda is ongoing, and therefore not all the facts are available yet, the issue has lingered over the first year of the Trump administration. It therefore must be considered when discussing any issues that relate to Russian-American
relations. It cannot be ruled out that American actions taken in Syria and Ukraine, which undoubtedly impact Russia, were done in response to, or as a distraction from, the investigation.

The biggest winner in the Syria and Ukraine conflicts is China. Due to its non-interference policy, China has not gotten bogged down in military logistics or domestic opposition to costly involvement. In the short-term, the non-interference policy allows China, despite minimal involvement, to benefit from both situations. Syria and Ukraine are both important locations for China’s Belt and Road Initiative. Through increased bilateral relations and economic support, Beijing is setting itself up as a friend to both countries that has not been compromised by the current conflicts. In the long-term, the success of the non-interference policy is a little more uncertain. A key characteristic of a global superpower is its willingness to intervene in international affairs to protect international order and prevent humanitarian issues. It is unclear if China can be considered a superpower if Beijing isn’t willing to get involved in major international issues.

Ultimately, the crises in Syria and Ukraine both serve to complicate the Russian-American relations and strengthen the Sino-Russian relationship. China and Russia are currently on the same side fighting, to different degrees, against Western imposed international norms. On a strategic level, conflict in Europe and the Middle East is beneficial to the Sino-Russian friendship. With the Russian military occupied in Syrian and Ukraine and China’s military efforts focused on the South China Sea, the potentially provocative area of Central Asia
remains on the backburner. The United States increased presence in both areas complicates both situations but in neither area does an increased American involvement in any way turn the Chinese and Russians against each other. Additionally, with no official strategy and a revolving door of senior staff, the Trump administration’s endgame in Syria and Ukraine is unclear. The true test of the Sino-Russian relationship with regards to Syria and Ukraine will be in the coming decades when interests have the potential to overlap. China has long-term plans in Syria and Ukraine, and has invested large sums of money and political capital into both countries. Since the Belt and Road Initiative is still in its infancy, it is difficult to pinpoint exact future points of controversy. However, Russia has strong economic and strategic ties to Syria, and even stronger cultural ties to Ukraine. A greater Chinese presence in two places currently thought to be under the Russian sphere of influence has the potential to become contentious.
Conclusion

This paper attempts to answer the following question: to what degree have the policies and strategies of the Trump administration impacted the Sino-Russian-American trilateral. At this point, it should be clear there has been a significant impact, one that has not worked in favor of the United States. The first chapter provided biographical information on the three men currently in charge, which is important to understand in order to assess their leadership style. The second chapter gave a baseline view of the trilateral dynamic before Trump was elected. During previous American presidencies, the Sino-Russian bilateral relationship was stronger than either country’s individual relationship with the United States. However, American international standing as a global superpower was formidable enough to balance the trilateral. During the first year of the Trump administration, the Sino-Russian relationship continued to improve whereas American influence waned. The data on Presidential visits supports this analysis. President Xi and President Putin continued building on a trend of increased visits, meeting with each other a record-breaking six times. In contrast, Trump is the first president of the twenty-first century to not visit Russia or China during his first year in office.

The third chapter analyzed major developments in economic policies. Trump’s decision to withdraw from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and the Paris Climate Accord further isolated the United States and presented opportunities for Sino-Russian cooperation on an international level. The other eleven nations of the Trans-Pacific Partnership once looked towards the United States for
economic support and assistance in countering an increasingly aggressive China. Abandoning the deal weakened American influence in South East Asia and made it easier for China to extend its sphere of influence. Similarly, the Paris Climate Accord was another area of international cooperation where the United States is selectively isolated. Although officially still part of the accord, Trump’s assertion of his desire to leave created strong doubts as to American commitment. Every country in the world signed on to combat climate change except the United States, the greatest historic emitter of fossil fuels.277 The Belt and Road Initiative is still in its early stages, making it difficult to evaluate the long-term implications on bilateral relations. Based on its current progress, the Belt and Road Initiative has led to the development of multiple infrastructure and energy projects between China and Russia. While these projects could be viewed as China positioning itself to have the ability to go around Russia, the Belt and Road Initiative clearly showcases China’s ability to use its economic strength to exert influence in the region.

The fourth chapter discussed significant developments in foreign policy. Increased U.S. hostilities with North Korea commanded global attention. While in the past the Kremlin has treated North Korea as China’s problem, this year saw increased Russian involvement, with Putin announcing his intentions to act as a global mediator. Russia and China’s approach, calling for peaceful negotiations and long-term strategies for denuclearization, presented a calm and

rational alternative to Trump’s erratic and militaristic approach. In the South China Sea, China operated uncontested. Military construction increased in defiance of the UN Tribunal’s ruling. Countries that once worked with the United States to counter Chinese aggression became increasingly close to Beijing. It is in the best interest of Russia for China to focus on the South China Sea, an area where Moscow has few interests. China’s increased efforts in its own sphere of meant less involvement by China in the traditionally Russian sphere of influence. In both the Syria and Ukraine conflicts, international norms established in the post World War II American-led era were repeatedly violated, with the use of chemical weapons on civilians and the disregarding of national sovereignty via annexation. Russia and China both supported the encroachment upon those principles, to different degrees. The United States took greater steps towards combatting Russian involvement in both areas with new economic sanctions and limited military action. It remains unclear whether these steps are part of a greater policy or isolated events unrelated to a larger strategy. While Russia and the United States increased military engagement and hostilities, China laid the groundwork for future economic endeavors.

Through the departure from multinational agreements, abandonment of containment strategies, and lack of diplomatic interactions Trump’s policies are increasingly isolating the United States from the international community. Doing so has allowed for the creation of a power vacuum. While the ascension of a new superpower is unlikely, the United States weakened international standing significantly shifted the power dynamics of the Russia-China-United States
trilateral. For the first time, the Russia-China bilateral may be more globally influential than the United States.

**Future Thoughts**

The previously mentioned events are not by any means the only issues that have an impact on the Russia-China-U.S. trilateral relationship. As the triangle involves three of the most powerful countries in the world, almost all major geostrategic problems in some way, shape or form impact the dynamics of this trilateral. The goal of this paper was to focus on the actions that had the most significant impact in 2017 and events that directly impact greater foreign policy strategies. The United States withdrawal from the Paris Climate Accords and the Trans-Pacific Partnership, as well as increased tensions with North Korea, all created new challenges for the Trump administration. China’s Belt and Road Initiative and South China Sea development, are ongoing issues that must be considered when discussing Chinese foreign policy. Similarly, Russian involvement in Syria and Ukraine are an essential pieces of the puzzle when looking at any greater Russian geostrategic strategy.

There have been a number of important updates since the completion of Trump’s first year in office that cannot be left out. Most notably, all three countries experienced significant leadership adaptations. After Xi Jinping began his second term in office without appointing a successor, which is traditionally done at the completion of the first five-year mark, the Chinese Communist Party voted to abolish presidential term limits. Only two out of three thousand
delegates opposed the motion. This amendment to the Chinese Constitution, along with the enshrinement of Xi Jinping's political doctrine laid the groundwork for an indefinite Xi presidency. The successful system of leadership turnover was one of the key differences between the Chinese Communist Party, and the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. China’s system allowed the leader to select his successor, oversee an orderly transition and minimizes the likelihood of a coup. The group of retired Chinese leaders thus became a resource for the current generation to consult. The Chinese leadership had been conscientious of age in selecting a successor. From Deng Xiaoping to Xi Jinping, the average age when entering office had remained relatively consistent. Power had previously passed down to the younger generation within the party.

While China took clear steps towards increasing authoritarianism, Putin consolidated his leadership over Russia. After winning the March 2018 election with 76.6% of the vote and a 67% voter turnout, Putin ensured the continuation of his leadership until 2024. At that point, Putin will once again run up against constitutional term limits. It is unclear whether he will amend the constitution and seek a fifth term, transition the power of the Presidency to the office of the Prime Minister and support a puppet candidate (as he has done in the past), or give up leadership all together. It is too soon to say if Russia is entering a post-Putin era, or what a post-Putin era would even look like.

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While Putin and Xi consolidated their respective leadership, the Trump administration struggled to keep advisors and staff around for even one year. In the first year in office, the Trump administration had an unprecedented 34% turnover rate. Three months into 2018, the National Security Advisor, FBI Deputy Director, White House Deputy Chief of Staff, Secretary of State, Director of Economic Council, and Communications Director all either resigned or were fired. This pattern makes it difficult to predict the trajectory of any White House objectives. With new individuals in positions of power, it is unclear who is advising Trump, and the extent to which that advice is considered.

It is important to clarify that the China-Russia-United States trilateral is not necessarily composed of three equal bilateral relations. Long-term economic interests and competition between China and the United States may outweigh the potential of geostrategic conflicts. Similarly, Russia may not have as much power in the trilateral as China and the United States. This dynamic can be seen in the important issues of the year, and Russia’s consistent push to remain relevant in the situations. What is increasingly clear is that Russia and China are playing a long game with geopolitical strategy while the United States acts increasingly short sighted.

It is difficult to make predictions regarding the remainder of Trump’s first term when an ongoing investigation by a special prosecutor puts the entirety of the Trump administration in a perpetual state of uncertainty. However, under

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the assumption that Trump remains in office until January 2021, the
continuation of isolationist policies threaten to further erode the United States
international standing. Looking towards the future, the next administration will
have to contend with a newly empowered China-Russia dynamic that spent the
past four years building a strong foundation. Presidents Putin and Xi will have
been working together for eight years, with at least another three years
guaranteed. Regardless of the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election, it is
not a promising dynamic for any U.S. president. In 2014, Douglas Schoen and
Melik Kaylan (two prominent political analysts) categorized Sino-Russian-
American relations as “we are in a new Cold War, and we are the only ones not
fighting.”282 This new Cold War is still ongoing, and we are still not fighting.

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282 Schoen, Douglas E, and Melik Kaylan. The Russia-China Axis: The New Cold War and America’s
Appendix:

Figure 1 – Presidential Travel Data

Figure 2 – Bilateral Meetings Data
Figure 3 – UNSC Veto Data

Figure 4 – UNSC Abstention Data
Figure 5 – Countries Involved in the Belt and Road Initiative

283 Chin, Helen, and W. He. "The Belt and Road Initiative: 65 Countries and Beyond." Hong Kong: Fung Business Intelligence Center (2016).
Figure 6 – Syrian Civil War Map

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