



## Countering Chinese and Russian Alliance Wedge Strategies

David Walsh, Andrew Taffer, and Dmitry Gorenburg

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## Abstract

This study examines China's and Russia's statecraft toward US allies and assesses the extent to which they weaken US alliances. Specifically, we examine six cases of Chinese and Russian strategies targeting US allies: Russia-Germany (2014–2018); Russia-Greece (2018–2019); Russia-Turkey (2016–2019); China-South Korea (2013–2017); China-Australia (2016–2021); and China-Philippines (2016–2021). Among our findings, we conclude that China and Russia frequently exhibit an initial preference for reward-based strategies but often resort to coercive and subversive approaches after rewards fail. We also find that China's and Russia's use of coercion and subversion generally have a poor record of “wedging” success. In some cases, they simply fail. In others, they backfire, such as by triggering balancing responses that strengthen rather than weaken opposing alliances. The study concludes with recommendations for exploiting opportunities and mitigating risks associated with competitor wedge strategies.

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Michael Kofman, Research Program Director  
Russia Studies Program  
Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs Division

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# Executive Summary

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The contest for allies and partners is among the most consequential domains of strategic competition. Because the US enjoys a worldwide network of alliances and partnerships, a key feature of this contest involves competitor efforts to weaken Washington's advantage. The international relations literature describes such efforts to weaken, dissolve, or prevent opposing alliances as *wedge strategies*. The purpose of this study is to shine a light on the nature of contemporary Chinese and Russian wedge strategies, inform policies to promote their failure, and contribute to a growing scholarly literature on the phenomenon of alliance wedge strategies more broadly.

Specifically, this study seeks answers to the following research questions: (1) What wedge strategy tendencies do China and Russia exhibit toward US alliances? (2) To what extent have these strategies succeeded, failed, or backfired on a given competitor? (3) What do the findings to the questions above reveal about which type of wedge strategy—carrot- or stick-based—is most likely to succeed? and (4) What conditions promote these outcomes?

To answer these questions, this study examines six cases of Chinese and Russian statecraft targeting US alliances:

1. Russia's failure to reinforce German neutrality during the Ukraine crisis (2014–2018)
2. Russia's failure to divide Greece and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) over (North) Macedonia's NATO membership (2018–2019)
3. Russia's success dividing Turkey and NATO through military sales (2016–2019)
4. China's failure to prevent South Korea's deployment of the US military's Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system (2013–2017)
5. China's failure to weaken the Australian-US alliance during Canberra's last two governments (2016–2021)
6. China's mixed record in weakening the Philippines-US alliance during the administration of President Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2021)

In addition to these six contemporary cases, this report also presents three historical wedge strategy cases: (1) Germany's failed attempt to divide the Entente Cordiale between Britain and France during the First Moroccan Crisis (1904–1906), (2) the People's Republic of China's (PRC's) failed attempt to prevent the US from concluding a mutual defense treaty with Taiwan during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–1955), and (3) the successful bid of the US to "flip" Egypt from a pro-Soviet proxy to an American partner in the 1970s. The combination of historical and contemporary cases positions us to contribute both to scholarly debates regarding the relative effectiveness of carrot-based (reward wedging) and stick-based

(coercive or subversive wedging) strategies and to policy discussions regarding how the US should counter competitor wedging efforts.

## Key findings

The table below provides an overview of our findings concerning the types of strategies we observe in each of our cases and the associated outcomes.

### Case study findings on divider approaches and wedging outcomes

	Case	Divider Approach to Target US Alliance	Wedging Outcome
Contemporary cases	Russia-Germany (2014–2018)	Reward → Subversion	Fail
	Russia-Greece (2018–2019)	Subversion	Fail
	Russia-Turkey (2016–2019)	Reward	Success
	China-South Korea (2013–2017)	Reward → Coercion	Mixed
	China-Australia (2016–2021)	Subversion → Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	China-Philippines (2016–2021)	Coercion/Reward (simultaneous)	Mixed
Historical cases	Germany-France (First Moroccan Crisis 1904–1906)	Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	China-Taiwan (First Taiwan Strait Crisis 1954–1955)	Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	US-Egypt (Egyptian realignment in 1970s)	Coercion → Reward	Success

Source: CNA.

This table points to several key findings. **First**, among our contemporary cases, China and Russia frequently exhibit an initial preference for carrot (i.e., reward-based) strategies. Despite this initial preference, however, they often resort to coercive and subversive strategies after their rewards fail to produce positive wedging outcomes.

**Second**, China’s and Russia’s coercive and subversive strategies have a poor record of accomplishment. In some cases, they simply fail. In others, Chinese and Russian strategies backfire, such as by triggering balancing responses that strengthen rather than weaken opposing alliances. This outcome is seen most clearly in the case of Australia, which, following years of PRC coercion and subversion, has drawn markedly closer to Washington, including reengaging with the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) and forming the Australia-United Kingdom-United States security partnership.

**Third**, our study provides evidence that reward-based wedge strategies are generally more effective than coercive or subversive strategies. **Fourth**, we demonstrate that the literature's concept of reward power, or a state's ability to credibly provide benefits to a target on that target's priority issue(s), serves as a critical determinant of wedging outcomes in these cases.

## Implications and recommendations

The finding that Beijing and Moscow frequently fail in their efforts to divide US alliances and occasionally strengthen rather than weaken them yields several implications and recommendations for US policy. They include the following:

**Exploit divider coercive and subversive wedging:** The risks that dividers undertake in executing stick-based wedge strategies present opportunities to exploit. As long as China and Russia tend toward stick-based strategies, the US should posture itself to capitalize on partner nation balancing impulses.

**Seize a potentially transient window of opportunity:** The Chinese and Russian governments adapt over time. If we can observe their poor record of wedging effectiveness, so can they. Washington should recognize the potentially transient nature of the current moment and pursue its more ambitious objectives vis-à-vis bilateral and multilateral relationships.

**Mitigate coercive and subversive wedging risks:** Washington can take steps to mitigate the effect of competitor stick-based wedging. Recommendations include the following: (1) work with allies to offset their vulnerabilities to external coercion; (2) monitor attempts to subvert partner nation governments and, as appropriate, expose them; and (3) promote democracy-building programs that deprive competitors of opportunities to subvert.

**Mitigate reward wedging risks:** Because reward wedging is generally most effective, the US should consider the following steps to mitigate its effects: (1) monitor for areas in which China and Russia are comparatively better positioned to credibly offer US allies rewards of high value, (2) consolidate alliance-deepening priorities now to raise the costs of an ally's defection later, and (3) deepen ties between US and partner nation institutions, such as security services, to hedge against the political variations of rotating leaders.

**Limit deeper Chinese-Russian alignment:** The findings of this report suggest that Washington's most effective wedge strategy option vis-à-vis China and Russia will likely *eventually* involve reward-based approaches toward either Beijing or Moscow. In the near term, however, geopolitical realities constrain Washington's room for accommodation. Washington may find guidance in its past approaches to the Sino-Soviet alliance during the Cold War, when it deployed relatively coercive policies toward both competitors until fissures in their relationship created reward wedging opportunities.

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# Introduction

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America's competitors seek to weaken US alliances and partnerships. President Joseph Biden affirmed as much when he warned the 2021 Munich Security Conference, "Putin seeks to weaken...the European project and our NATO Alliance."<sup>1</sup> Biden added at a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) summit several months later, "Russia and China are both seeking to drive a wedge in our transatlantic solidarity."<sup>2</sup> No less, a November 2020 State Department report contends that China "seeks to diminish U.S. influence by fostering a sense in the region's nations that China's dominance is inevitable. Prime targets include U.S. treaty-based allies—Japan, South Korea, Australia, Thailand, and the Philippines."<sup>3</sup> America's military leaders agree; in June 2021, the US Navy Chief of Naval Operations testified to Congress that "China and Russia are rapidly mobilizing their militaries, attempting to undermine our alliances."<sup>4</sup>

Competitor "wedge strategies" drive at the heart of a vital US national security advantage. Indeed, the Biden Administration's Interim National Security Strategic Guidance explicitly labels US alliances and partnerships as "America's greatest strategic asset."<sup>5</sup> The Donald Trump Administration's stated strategy similarly regarded America's vast network of alliances as "the backbone of global security."<sup>6</sup> Indeed, essentially every US administration in the post-World War II era has extolled the virtues of US alliances.<sup>7</sup> The reason for this consistent view is straightforward: at their core, alliances provide a means by which states gain and hold power over their competitors. As US national strategy embraces "strategic competition" with China

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph R. Biden, "Remarks by President Biden at the 2021 Virtual Munich Security Conference," (East Room, White House, Feb. 19, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/02/19/remarks-by-president-biden-at-the-2021-virtual-munich-security-conference/>.

<sup>2</sup> David M. Herszenhorn and Rym Momtaz, "NATO Leaders See Rising Threats from China, But Not Eye to Eye With Each Other," *Politico*, June 14, 2021, 2021, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-leaders-see-rising-threats-from-china-but-not-eye-to-eye-with-each-other/>.

<sup>3</sup> The Policy Planning Staff, *The Elements of the China Challenge*, U.S. Department of State, Nov. 2021, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/the-elements-of-the-china-challenge/index.html>.

<sup>4</sup> *Full Committee Hearing: Department of the Navy Fiscal Year 2022 Budget Request*, YouTube: U.S. House Armed Services Committee, June 15, 2021).

<sup>5</sup> Joseph R. Biden, *Interim National Security Guidance*, The White House, Mar. 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America: Sharpening the American Military's Competitive Edge*, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances*, (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990), 3.

and Russia, the contest for allies and partners is likely to emerge as among the most consequential domains of that competition.

As part of the contest for allies and partners, America's competitors can increase their relative power over the US in two ways: (1) adding to their list of friends or (2) subtracting from Washington's list of friends. The international relations literature describes the latter, which can include efforts to preclude, dissolve, or weaken opposing alliances, as *wedge strategies*.<sup>8</sup>

Wedge strategies have long been a feature of strategic competition. The ancient Chinese strategist Sun Tzu famously counsels "to attack [enemy] alliances." "When he is united, divide him," adds Sun Tzu, and "make [allies] mutually suspicious so that they drift apart."<sup>9</sup> Machiavelli later writes, "Whenever there are many powers united against another power...by using a little industry, he will be able to disunite the very many and to weaken the body that was mighty."<sup>10</sup>

It is good advice—successful wedge strategies can produce significant strategic outcomes. Take, for example, Great Britain's successful bid to prevent fascist Spain from aligning with Nazi Germany in World War II. Concerned by Hitler's march through Europe in 1940, London (in concert with Washington) offered cash-strapped Madrid a generous package of economic assistance in exchange for Spanish non-belligerence. In doing so, London likely prevented German forces from taking Gibraltar and controlling access to the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>11</sup> Consider, too, Washington's successful realignment of Egypt from a Soviet client to an American partner during the heart of the Cold War. Before and during the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Cairo sat firmly within the Soviet camp, providing Moscow with access to the region and fighting proxy wars against Israel that pitted Soviet against American arms. After the 1973 war, the US engineered Cairo's realignment through a combination of coercive and accommodating measures and thus gained geopolitical dominance of the region for the remainder of the Cold War.

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<sup>8</sup> Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (2011), accessed 11/15/2021, doi: 10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00036, [https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC\\_a\\_00036](https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00036).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Yasuhiro Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," *Security Studies* 22, no. 3 (2013): 502, doi: 10.1080/09636412.2013.816121, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09636412.2013.816121>.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Timothy W. Crawford, "Wedge Strategy, Balancing, and the Deviant Case of Spain, 1940-41," *Security Studies* 17 (2008): 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy W. Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, (New York, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 133. doi: 978-1501754715.

By the same token, an ill-advised or poorly executed wedge strategy can backfire. Before World War I, German attempts to break up the British-French Entente Cordiale through coercive tactics ultimately drove London and Paris closer together. In the 1950s, the fledgling People's Republic of China (PRC) sought to prevent Washington from extending a formal defense commitment to Taiwan by demonstrating its willingness to use military force. The logic of this approach was to threaten Washington with the risk of entrapment in another war in Asia. In the event, however, PRC aggression prompted the opposite reaction: US leaders feared the reputation costs of abandoning Taiwan and ultimately extended it the mutual defense treaty (MDT) that Beijing hoped to prevent.

Despite the geopolitical significance of wedge strategy outcomes, the scholarly literature on this phenomenon is relatively limited.<sup>12</sup> There is little consensus, for example, regarding when and under what conditions wedge strategies succeed. The academic literature tends to prioritize historical as opposed to contemporary casework. This prioritization is understandable given the clarity of hindsight and the relative accessibility of historical sources, but it leaves open many questions about the nature of the contemporary challenge US alliances face today. The purpose of this report is to address these gaps by applying the existing foundations of the wedge strategy literature to contemporary Chinese and Russian efforts to weaken US alliances, both to better understand them and to inform US policies to promote their failure.

## Research questions

The overarching goals of this report are to provide a systematic survey of contemporary Chinese and Russian wedge strategies, assess their effectiveness, and inform US strategies to counter and exploit them. To that end, the report seeks answers to the following research questions:

1. What wedge strategy tendencies do China and Russia exhibit toward US alliances?
2. To what extent have these strategies succeeded, failed, or backfired on a given competitor?
3. What do the findings to the questions above reveal about which type of wedge strategy—carrot- or stick-based—is most likely to succeed?
4. What conditions promote these outcomes?

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<sup>12</sup> Notable exceptions include: Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics."; Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics."

## Approach

To address these questions, we first conducted a literature review on alliance wedge strategies to identify key concepts and debates, especially concerning wedge strategy effectiveness. Concurrent with the literature review, we conducted original research on three historical cases to operationalize key concepts and to increase the available data against which to examine when wedge strategies succeed, fail, or backfire.

Next, we completed six contemporary cases involving China and Russia. These cases examine Chinese and Russian statecraft toward US alliances within specifically defined scope periods to assess discernable wedging outcomes. We also discuss in these cases the extent to which certain approaches may have produced negative outcomes, or “blowback,” on the states directing them.

After we collected our data and analyzed our cases, we convened two expert roundtables (one on China and one on Russia) composed of academic scholars and former US government officials to discuss our findings and policy prescriptions.

## Organization

This report is organized into three parts. The first part outlines key concepts and debates in the alliance wedge strategy literature and presents our own independent research to inform those debates by way of three short cases of historical wedge strategy episodes.

The second part examines six cases of contemporary Chinese and Russian efforts to weaken US alliances. This part opens with a discussion of our methodological approach to the study of contemporary wedge strategies and then presents three cases each involving Chinese and Russian approaches to US allies and alliances. The third part presents the analysis of our findings and a discussion of their implications for US policy.

# Part I: Key Concepts, Debates and Historical Cases

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## Key concepts and debates

Although the study of alliance wedge strategies is relatively nascent, several scholars have built a valuable foundation on which to draw. In his leading work on the topic, Timothy Crawford defines a wedge strategy as a “state’s attempt to prevent, break up, or weaken a threatening or blocking alliance.”<sup>13</sup> The state directing a wedge strategy in this formulation is termed a *divider*, and the object of its efforts is a *target*.

Crawford outlines two general types of wedge strategy approaches. The first involves accommodating or reward-based approaches in which a divider state “uses concessions and other inducements to lure a target away from other adversaries.”<sup>14</sup> In the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, Hitler successfully forestalled Moscow’s alignment with Britain and France by granting Stalin territorial concessions in Eastern Europe. These concessions enabled Hitler to concentrate military resources in Western Europe without fear of a two-front war.

The second approach involves confrontation or coercion, what Yasuhiro Izumikawa labels *coercive wedging*. Coercive wedging entails the sending of negative sanctions such as threats or punishments in the hope that “consistent toughness and intimidation will expose and exacerbate gaps in the adversaries’ strategic interests, increasingly strain their ability to cooperate, and precipitate defections.”<sup>15</sup> According to Izumikawa, the Dwight Eisenhower Administration’s 1953 decision to continue an economic embargo on the PRC led Beijing to request support from the Soviet Union at a time when Moscow was struggling to meet domestic demands, exacerbating frictions that later contributed to the Sino-Soviet rift.<sup>16</sup>

Although not typically a feature of the wedge strategy literature, we posit that subversion, or subversive wedging, constitutes a third and distinct approach to conducting wedge strategies. In a 2020 article on great power use of subversion, William C. Wohlforth defines the act of subversion as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> Crawford, “Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics,” 156.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Izumikawa, “To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics,” 533.

Subversion in international politics is statecraft designed to directly influence domestic politics in a target in a manner prejudicial to its foreign policy interests. It falls into two categories: weakening the target; and altering the target's policy from the path the target's government initially intends to follow.<sup>17</sup>

For our purposes, three elements of this definition deserve mention. First, subversion can involve “altering the target's policy” and thus can be used for wedging. Second, subversive wedging is distinct from both reward-based and coercive wedging. The distinguishing feature involves *where* the tool of statecraft takes place: rewards and coercion involve mechanisms of statecraft that operate external to a target, meaning that they aim to change the strategic environment outside of a target's borders to influence the target's cost-benefit calculations. Wohlforth explains, “Diplomacy, balancing, positive incentives (trade deals, market access, aid, etc.), deterrence, coercion, sanctions – all these operate by affecting the strategic environment the target state faces.”<sup>18</sup> Subversion, in contrast, takes place internally within a target: “What causes change in a target's behaviour...[are] changes induced domestically that would not have occurred or had consequential effects on the target's power or policy but for the intervener's agency.”<sup>19</sup> Third, although distinct from both reward-based and coercive wedging, subversive wedging does share coercive wedging's “prejudicial” intent. The tactics of subversion can involve reward-like bribes or coercive blackmail, to be sure, but in seeking to harm, weaken, or undermine a target, the act of subversion is more akin to coercion than to reward wedging, which by its very nature connotes providing a target with something that it wants or perceives to be beneficial. For this reason, we include both coercion and subversion in the broader category of “stick-based wedging” for the purpose of our analysis in the final section of the report.

In terms of objectives, dividers use carrot- and stick-based (coercion and subversion) wedge strategies in pursuit of a range of outcomes. At one end of the spectrum, a divider may seek to convince a target to switch sides between two competing alliance blocs. Such dramatic flip-flops are rare, however, and dividers can still increase their strategic position through more modest wedging outcomes, such as by inducing a target's neutrality, dividing an opposing alliance on one or more specific policy issues, or preventing the formation of a new partnership.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> William C Wohlforth, “Realism and Great Power Subversion,” *International Relations* 34, no. 4 (2020), doi: 10.1177/0047117820968858.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 461.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 462.

<sup>20</sup> Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, 17.



## Reward versus coercive wedging effectiveness

The relative effectiveness of reward versus coercive wedging remains a topic of debate in the literature. Crawford, for his part, argues that reward-based strategies are more likely to succeed than coercive ones, especially if they (1) seek relatively modest aims (e.g., inducing neutrality as opposed to realignment) and (2) attempt to reinforce a target's existing position rather than change its position one way or another.<sup>21</sup> The logic of this argument is intuitive. First, pursuing a strategy of relatively modest aims reduces a target's cost of compliance. It is less costly for a target to, say, stay neutral than it is to defect from an alliance. Second, it is easier to catch a fly with honey than with vinegar. Coercive wedging entails the risk of elevating a target's threat perception, a dynamic that could trigger a balancing response in which the opposing bloc binds closer together rather than farther apart. In this case, the divider's wedge strategy proves counterproductive.<sup>22</sup>

Izumikawa, however, "strongly challenges Crawford's assertion that reward wedging is more effective than coercive wedging," contending that "coercive wedging and reward wedging are equally viable forms of alliance statecraft."<sup>23</sup> In raising these arguments, Izumikawa highlights the lack of consensus on the relative efficacy of reward and coercive wedging. He also underscores the need for more research to "distinguish the conditions under which coercive and reward wedging strategies may work."<sup>24</sup> Among those conditions, Izumikawa's work illuminates the importance of the concept of *reward power*, or a divider's ability to reward a target, as a driver of wedge strategy outcomes.<sup>25</sup>

In the next section, we provide three historical cases to illustrate the concepts introduced in this literature review and to expand the empirical data against which to examine the relative effectiveness of competing wedge strategy approaches.

## Historical cases

In this section, we provide three cases of historical wedge strategy episodes. The purpose of these cases is twofold: (1) to operationalize the key concepts described in the literature review, including the ways in which wedge strategies can succeed, fail, or even backfire; and (2) to increase the available data against which to explore the relative effectiveness of carrot- and

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<sup>21</sup> Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," 157.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>23</sup> Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics," 529-530.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 501.

stick-based wedging, which we assess in the findings and implications section at the end of this report. Although these three cases will not in and of themselves produce a generalizable theory, they will inform discussion about wedge strategy effectiveness and, in conjunction with the contemporary cases we present in the next section, represent a significant contribution to the overall number of cases available in the scholarly literature.

We outline the following three historical episodes in this section: (1) Germany's failed attempt to divide France and the United Kingdom (UK) through coercive wedging during the First Moroccan Crisis (1904–1906), (2) the PRC's failed coercive wedging attempt to prevent a US-Taiwan MDT during the First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–1955), and (3) America's successful reward-based strategy to realign Egypt from Soviet client to American partner in the 1970s.

We selected these cases given their notable parallels to today's geopolitical context. In the First Moroccan Crisis, Germany represents a rising power seeking to overtake a status quo-oriented Great Britain. The First Taiwan Strait Crisis involves both a divider (the PRC) and a geopolitical issue (PRC designs on Taiwan) that remain salient today. Both episodes, moreover, highlight the ways in which coercive wedging can backfire on a divider. Egypt's realignment represents a rare and dramatic instance of alliance switching.

## Case 1: First Moroccan Crisis (1904–1906)

### Summary

The first historical case takes place during the First Moroccan Crisis of 1904–1906, when Germany attempted a coercive wedge strategy to divide Britain and France. We show below that German coercion initially paid off in the form of French compliance to German interests, but Berlin overplayed its hand and ultimately drove London and Paris closer together.

### Brief history

In April 1904, France and Britain concluded the Entente Cordiale, an agreement that codified French recognition of British interests in Egypt in exchange for British recognition of French interests in Morocco. Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II bristled at this agreement, viewing it as a vehicle for his European rivals to exclude and contain Berlin.<sup>26</sup> The Kaiser thus resolved to drive a wedge between France and Britain by challenging French claims in Morocco to show Paris that London would not come to its aid.

To signal his opposition to French claims, in March 1905, Kaiser Wilhelm made a surprise and dramatic appearance at the Moroccan port city of Tangier, where he spoke of his country's

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<sup>26</sup> Raymond J. Sontag, "German Foreign Policy, 1904-1906," *The American Historical Review* 33, no. 2 (1928): 285, doi: 10.2307/1837011, <https://dx.doi.org/10.2307/1837011>.

respect for Moroccan independence and asserted his expectation that Germany would receive the same trade and commercial benefits as other European powers. Berlin also argued internationally that France's conduct violated an 1881 international agreement recognizing Moroccan independence.<sup>27</sup>

The German strategy produced some initial success. The British were indeed reluctant to risk conflict with Germany over Morocco, and France, with little recourse, at first moved to reach an accommodation with Germany.<sup>28</sup> French prime minister Maurice Rouvier even dismissed foreign minister Theophile Delcasse for bungling diplomacy with Germany over the issue and assured Berlin that there would be no changes to the status quo in Morocco.<sup>29</sup> If the story ended there, German coercive wedging may well have recorded a win.

But the Germans pressed their luck. Berlin declined Prime Minister Rouvier's offer of bilateral negotiations to resolve the crisis and instead insisted on a multinational conference to recognize German interests. This move raised alarms in Britain, however, as did Berlin's efforts to strengthen ties with Russia during the same period. France, in the meantime, secured multinational support for its position through side payments to Britain, Russia, Italy, and Spain. The ensuing Algeciras conference in January 1906 ended in favor of the French position. As the scholar Richard Clark concludes, "The efforts of the German government to [overcome] German isolation were thus a resounding failure. The Anglo-French Entente was strengthened rather than weakened by the German challenge to France in Morocco."<sup>30</sup>

## Case 2: First Taiwan Strait Crisis (1954–1955)

### Summary

The second historical case involves the PRC's failed coercive wedge strategy vis-à-vis Taiwan and the US during the 1954–1955 Taiwan Strait Crisis. In fact, PRC coercive wedging did not merely fail to achieve its goal but, much like Germany's wedge strategy in the First Moroccan Crisis, it backfired on Beijing by pushing Washington and Taipei closer together. Whereas the PRC calculated that sustained military aggression against the Taiwanese would underscore the risk of entrapment to the US, Beijing's use of force in fact raised even greater fears in the Eisenhower Administration about Washington's reputation as a reliable security partner. As a

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.; "March 31: The First Moroccan Crisis," History.com, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/the-first-moroccan-crisis>.

<sup>28</sup> Sontag, "German Foreign Policy, 1904-1906," 289-290.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914*, (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2012), 157.

result, the US concluded an MDT with Taipei, a security guarantee that Taiwan had long sought and China had hoped to forestall.<sup>31</sup>

## Brief history

At the conclusion of the Chinese Civil War in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) consolidated power on the mainland, and the Nationalist (GMD) government led by Jiang Jieshi took refuge on the island of Taiwan. Although the US had protected Taiwan since 1950, Jiang wanted the American defense commitment formalized in an MDT, a pact that Beijing was determined to prevent and Washington was initially hesitant to support.

PRC leadership adopted a coercive wedge strategy to preclude the formation of a US-Taiwan MDT. At a July 1954 Politburo meeting, CCP Chairman Mao Zedong stated that the CCP needed to “think of some measures to destroy the possibility of the US and Taiwan signing a treaty.”<sup>32</sup> On September 3, 1954, the PRC began shelling the important GMD-held island of Jinmen in an effort to demonstrate its resolve on the issue and to illustrate to Washington the potential costs of defending Taiwan.<sup>33</sup>

PRC aggression toward Taiwan imposed a dilemma on the US. The Eisenhower Administration was reluctant to risk war with the PRC but eager to maintain the credibility of its security commitments in Asia. Ultimately, after the continuation of PRC aggression, the US offered Jiang Jieshi his longed-for MDT.

Still further, after yet another PRC campaign against the GMD-controlled Dachen Islands in January 1955—which the People’s Liberation Army’s chief of general staff acknowledged was for the purpose of probing “the scope of the so-called defense treaty”—Secretary of State John Foster Dulles expressed concern that US inaction would have “a bad effect on our prestige in the area.”<sup>34</sup> The administration subsequently lobbied Congress to pass the Formosa Resolution, authorizing the use of military force in various Taiwan-related contingencies, including the authority to attack the Chinese mainland.<sup>35</sup> In sum, although China’s coercive statecraft revealed that the US defense commitment to the GMD had limits, it failed to achieve its intended goal and on balance helped to strengthen ties between Washington and Taipei.

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<sup>31</sup> Robert Accinelli, *Crisis and Commitment: United States Foreign Policy Toward Taiwan, 1950-1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 152.

<sup>32</sup> M. Taylor Fravel, *Strong Borders, Secure Nation: Cooperation and Conflict in China's Territorial Disputes*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 237.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*; Iain D. Henry, “What Allies Want: Reconsidering Loyalty, Reliability, and Alliance Interdependence,” *International Security* 44, no. 4 (2020), doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00375](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00375).

<sup>35</sup> Robert Accinelli, “Eisenhower, Congress, and the 1954-55 Offshore Island Crisis,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 20, no. 2 (1990).

## Case 3: Egyptian realignment in the 1970s

### Summary

The third historical case involves the successful US bid to bring about Egyptian realignment away from the Soviet Union and toward the US in the 1970s. Here we show that the US successfully drove a wedge between Cairo and Moscow through the sequential application of coercive and reward-based measures toward Egypt. This strategy worked because the US possessed a relative reward power advantage over the Soviet Union in terms of its ability to facilitate Israel's return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt and provide sufficient economic assistance to meet Cairo's requirements.

### Brief history

Egypt entered the 1970s as a Soviet proxy but was nonetheless keen to enlist American support in pressuring the Israelis to return the Sinai Peninsula, which Israel conquered in the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. The Richard Nixon Administration, for its part, was of two minds about Cairo. On the one hand, national security advisor and later secretary of state Henry Kissinger recognized Egypt as being critical to his Middle East policy objectives. On the other hand, Kissinger writes that he "opposed, as a matter of principle, any concessions to Egypt so long as [its leadership] relied on anti-Western rhetoric buttressed by the presence of Soviet combat troops."<sup>36</sup> Washington thus declined Egyptian president Anwar Sadat's requests for support vis-à-vis Israel during the first few years of the 1970s. After the Egyptians (and Syrians) initiated the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and achieved notable early gains on the back of Soviet arms, the US provided critical military and diplomatic support to Israel as it turned the tide of war against the Arabs.

Only after the Israelis routed the Egyptians on the battlefield and Washington assured itself of Egypt's willingness to cooperate with Washington on acceptable terms did US policy toward Egypt transition to a more accommodating approach. Toward the end of the war, the Americans pressured Israel to spare the lives of a surrounded Egyptian Armed Forces division. After the war, Washington orchestrated Israel's withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula—Israel's first-ever withdrawal from occupied Arab territory—and provided Cairo with generous financial assistance. In doing so, the US achieved for Sadat through diplomacy what Moscow failed to achieve through military assistance. Egypt's subsequent signing of a US-mediated peace treaty with Israel, along with Cairo's acceptance of US economic and military assistance, consolidated its new position in the American camp. The US, in other words, succeeded in its wedge strategy by providing the Egyptians what the Soviets could not.

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<sup>36</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Years of Upheaval*, (New York, NY: Little Brown & Co., 1982), 201-202.

Indeed, another important finding from this historical episode is that third-party actors (in addition to dividers and targets) can play crucial if not decisive roles in wedge strategy outcomes. In this case, Egypt's preexisting allies the Soviet Union and Syria, who as we note above lacked the reward power to meet Sadat's priority interests, attempted throughout the 1970s to bind the Egyptians to their camp through threats and punishments, reinforcing Cairo's assessment that its future lay elsewhere. The Egyptians, in the end, chose American carrots over Soviet and Arab sticks.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> David Walsh, "Switching Sides: Foreign Policy Realignment in Egypt and Syria, 1970-2000," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, 2018).

## Part II: Contemporary Chinese and Russian Wedge Strategies

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Part II of this study presents six cases involving Chinese and Russian efforts to weaken US alliances. We first examine Russian approaches toward Germany (2014–2018), Greece (2018–2019), and Turkey (2016–2019). We then survey Chinese strategies toward South Korea (2013–2017), Australia (2016–2021), and the Philippines (2016–2021).

We selected these cases for two reasons. First, each target country is a US treaty ally. As mentioned in the introduction, US treaty allies form the foundation of the US position in Europe and Asia and, as such, constitute the most valuable type of targets for a divider to peel away from Washington. By focusing on the most consequential type of partner, we focus our study on the most consequential competitor wedging effort. Methodologically, this decision also allows us to control for variation in divider approaches and target responses that may be due to the existence of an MDT.

A second advantage of our case selection is the variation in relative “hardness” of each target. Australia is among the most stalwart of US treaty allies. It is a democracy that shares common political values as well as cultural and linguistic bonds with the US, and its geographic location makes it less vulnerable to Chinese military aggression than, say, Thailand or the Philippines. “If China can break Australia,” explains Lowy Institute senior fellow Richard McGregor, “then that’s a step to breaking U.S. power in Asia, and U.S. credibility globally.”<sup>38</sup> In contrast, US treaty ally Turkey represents relatively low-hanging fruit for Moscow given Ankara’s democratic backslide and a multitude of Turkish grievances against the US and its NATO allies in Europe.

Before proceeding, two methodological points associated with the study of contemporary wedge strategies deserve mention. First, contemporary wedge strategy episodes are by definition ongoing and therefore unclear in their state of play. Does China’s inability to prevent South Korea from deploying the US military’s Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missile defense system represent a failed coercive wedge strategy or a mere hiccup in what may later be viewed as a successful effort to pressure Seoul to limit more substantive US-South Korean security cooperation? Analysts of current affairs lack the historian’s privileged hindsight in identifying clear beginning, middle, and end points to such events. To address this concern, we begin each case by clearly articulating the bounds of the scope period under

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<sup>38</sup> Michael Schuman, “China Discovers the Limits of Its Power,” *The Atlantic*, July 28, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/07/china-australia-america/619544/>.

scrutiny, recognizing that reasonable arguments could be made for either longer or shorter time horizons in each case.

A second challenge involves determining the intent of Chinese or Russian statecraft. How does one know, for example, whether Russian arms sales to Turkey are designed to drive a wedge between Ankara and NATO rather than simply to make money? Or whether Chinese assertiveness toward Philippine interests in the South China Sea (SCS) is deliberately designed to exacerbate tensions between Manila and Washington rather than simply to advance Beijing's maritime and territorial interests? Definitive primary source evidence confirming Chinese or Russian intent is often difficult to obtain outside the halls of power in Beijing and Moscow. Nevertheless, the challenges posed by contemporary Chinese and Russian efforts to weaken US alliances demand attention.

To deal with this challenge, we posit the overarching assumption that China and Russia generally aim to weaken US alliances as part of their national strategies. This is hardly a stretch. Senior Chinese and Russian officials and authoritative policy documents make clear that Beijing and Moscow view US alliances to be inimical to their interests.<sup>39</sup> Biden Administration officials certainly share the assumption, and scholars have spilled considerable ink on the subject.<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, we label China and Russia as known dividers and examine their policies toward a given target within a specified time period. In other words, we assume a general intent to divide while remaining conservative in our judgments about the specific intent of individual Chinese and Russian policies. This assumption also guides our approach to determining whether the cases we examine qualify as wedging successes, failures, or blowback. In some cases, to be sure, intent is relatively clear and effectiveness can be assessed against explicit objectives, such as China's aim to prevent Seoul from deploying THAAD. Absent such

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<sup>39</sup> *Russian National Security Strategy, December 2015*, Russian Federation Presidential Edict 683, (Dec. 31, 2015), [https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/2015%20National%20Security%20Strategy%20ENG\\_0.pdf](https://www.russiamatters.org/sites/default/files/media/files/2015%20National%20Security%20Strategy%20ENG_0.pdf); Vladimir Putin, "Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy," (Munich, Germany, Feb. 10, 2007), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/transcripts/24034>; "The 4th Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA) Summit Held in Shanghai Xi Jinping Presides over the Summit and Delivers Important Speech, Advocating Common, Comprehensive, Cooperative and Sustainable Security in Asia for New Progress in Security Cooperation of Asia," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of People's Republic of China*, May 21, 2014, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/topics\\_665678/yzxhxzyrcshydsfht1162057.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/topics_665678/yzxhxzyrcshydsfht1162057.shtml).

<sup>40</sup> Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021); Mira Rapp-Hooper, *Shields of the Republic: The Triumph and Peril of America's Alliances*, (Boston, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020); Aaron L. Friedberg, "Competing with China," *Survival* 60, no. 3 (2018): 31, doi: 10.1080/00396338.2018.1470755, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2018.1470755>; Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*; Andrew D. Taffer, "Threat and opportunity: Chinese wedging in the Senkaku/Diaoyu dispute," *Asian Security* 16, no. 2 (2020), doi: 10.1080/14799855.2019.1567493, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14799855.2019.1567493>.



explicitness, however, we assess the effect of Chinese or Russian statecraft by evaluating its influence within a given time scope on a target's relationship with the US.

# Russia Fails to Reinforce German Neutrality in the Ukraine Crisis (2014–2018)

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This section examines Russian efforts to weaken Germany's alignment with the US, NATO, and Europe and induce relatively even-handed policies toward Moscow during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. The section begins by surveying "steady-state" Russian wedge strategies directed toward Berlin in the Putin era and then examines specific efforts to incentivize German neutrality during the Ukraine crisis.

Russian wedge strategies toward Germany are important to examine for several reasons. For one, Germany is a heavyweight in European decision-making and among the most influential members of the transatlantic NATO alliance. Berlin often plays a decisive role in whether, say, the European Union (EU) sanctions Moscow or NATO deploys rotational forces to the Baltics. As one former US ambassador to Germany explains, "As goes Germany, so goes Europe. As goes Europe, so goes American foreign policy."<sup>41</sup>

The German case also yields broader insights into Russian wedging. Berlin is so ingrained in the transatlantic alliance that Moscow's objectives and approaches toward Germany will illuminate Russian statecraft toward other staunch US allies. At the same time, idiosyncrasies in the Russian-German relationship, including historical interdependence and the presence of several German communities primed to sympathize with Russia (so-called *Russlandversteher*, or those who understand Russia), present Moscow with demographic pressure points that can also be found elsewhere.

The rest of this section is organized as follows. First, we begin with an overview of Russian-German relations and a survey of contemporary Russian approaches to limiting German alignment with the West. We then examine Russian wedge strategies toward Germany during the 2014 Ukraine crisis. We argue that Russia initially sought to encourage and maintain German distance from hardline Western positions by accommodating Berlin's desire for conflict resolution diplomacy. After Chancellor Angela Merkel concluded that President Vladimir Putin was not serious about diplomacy and was more committed to his military aims in Ukraine, however, she mobilized European opposition against him. The Kremlin then found little recourse but to shift the emphasis of its strategy to undermining Merkel's leadership and empowering alternative voices. We conclude that, although Russia might prefer to dislodge

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<sup>41</sup> *As Goes Germany, So Goes Europe, Says Former German Ambassador*: CNBC, (Apr. 27, 2018), TV Interview.

Berlin from its Western commitments by quietly courting individuals and businesses, Putin's instinct to use military force in Ukraine—itsself a wedge strategy intended to forestall Kiev's Western drift—came at the cost of uniting German political factions and Western nations against him.

## Background

Contemporary German leaders tend to approach Moscow with less fear than their Eastern European neighbors and with a greater motivation to cooperate than their allies to the West. Indeed, Germany's vast size and dynamic economy insulate Berlin from Russian aggression, whereas business interests, geographic proximity, and deep historical legacies incentivize a pragmatic bilateral relationship. In the 1970s, German chancellor Willy Brandt championed the policy of *Ostpolitik* (Eastern policy), also known as *Wandel durch Annäherung* (Change through Rapprochement), which sought détente with Moscow through political and economic cooperation. The legacy of *Ostpolitik* remains influential in the post-Cold War era.<sup>42</sup>

## Russian steady-state approaches toward Germany in the Putin era

Russian efforts to encourage daylight between Berlin and the West transcend any one period or crisis. Examples of Cold War wedging intrigue abound. In 1959, Soviet agents conspired to vandalize a West German synagogue to instigate copycat events that reportedly raised questions in the West about Bonn's fitness as a NATO ally.<sup>43</sup> In the early 1980s, Moscow launched what former German chancellor Helmut Kohl denounced as a "massive propaganda campaign of interference in West German affairs" in a failed attempt to prevent the deployment of US Pershing 2 missiles to West Germany.<sup>44</sup> The list goes on.

More recently, Putin's Russia has exhibited a general preference for influencing Berlin by promoting a positive vision of a unified Europe and discreetly courting German political and

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<sup>42</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, CSIS Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program, July 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/friends-these-assessing-russian-influence-germany>.

<sup>43</sup> Laura Daniels, "Russian Active Measures in Germany and the United States: Analog Lessons from the Cold War," *War on the Rocks*, Sept. 27, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/09/russian-active-measures-in-germany-and-the-united-states-analog-lessons-from-the-cold-war/>.

<sup>44</sup> James M. Markham, "First U.S. Pershing Missiles Delivered in West Germany," *New York Times*, Nov. 24, 1983, <https://www.nytimes.com/1983/11/24/world/first-us-pershing-missiles-delivered-in-west-germany.html>; Andrew S. Weiss, *Vladimir Putin's Political Meddling Revives Old KGB Tactics*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb. 17, 2017, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/02/17/vladimir-putin-s-political-meddling-revives-old-kgb-tactics-pub-68043>.

business elites, whether in support of specific policies such as sanctions relief or positive Russian-German relations more broadly.<sup>45</sup>

The former approach involves public advocacy for a “Euro-Atlantic” community in which Russia is a leading member to replace the status quo transatlantic alliance of which Moscow is a target. At the 2007 Munich Security Conference, Putin denounced the US-led unipolar order and NATO expansion as sources of instability, asserting that only the United Nations (UN) (in which Moscow happens to enjoy veto power) can legitimize the use of military force. For good measure, he reminded his German hosts that “the fall of the Berlin Wall was possible thanks to a historic [Russian] choice...in favor of democracy, freedom, openness and a sincere partnership with all the members of the big European family.” The speech stands out as a call for his European counterparts to abandon a world marked by “one center of authority” in favor of one with “a reasonable balance between the interests of all participants in the international dialogue.”<sup>46</sup>

Putin’s successor as Russian president from 2008 to 2012, Dmitri Medvedev, voiced similar arguments during his brief tenure. In a speech to German business leaders in 2008, Medvedev declared, “Atlanticism as a sole historical principle has already had its day.”<sup>47</sup> He later added the following:

The future world order is directly linked to the future Europe, the whole Euro-Atlantic region, and therefore the future of European civilization in its entirety. I am certain that we cannot resolve Europe’s problems until we achieve a sense of identity and an organic unity between all of its integral components, including the Russian Federation.

To these ends, Medvedev proposed a legally binding treaty for the “whole Euro-Atlantic area” drafted on the basis of “genuinely equal cooperation between Russia, the European Union and North America as three branches of European civilization.”<sup>48</sup>

The other major Russian method for influencing Berlin involves inducements to German leaders and entities to foster a cadre of sympathetic voices in decision-making circles. Moscow rewards German leaders with private business contracts, lucrative positions in Russian companies, and invitations to prestigious networks such as the German-Russian Forum in

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<sup>45</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Putin, “Speech and the Following Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy.”

<sup>47</sup> Dmitry Medvedev, “Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders,” (Berlin, Germany, June 5, 2008), [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/d\\_ru\\_20080617\\_04\\_/D\\_RU\\_20080617\\_04\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/d_ru_20080617_04_/D_RU_20080617_04_en.pdf); Angela Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, (New York, NY: Twelve, 2019), 100.

<sup>48</sup> Medvedev, “Speech at Meeting with German Political, Parliamentary and Civic Leaders.”

hopes of gaining relationships, access, and sympathetic views.<sup>49</sup> Perhaps the most prominent example of this approach involves former German chancellor Gerhard Schroeder (1998–2005), who Putin courted early in his tenure and today serves on the boards of several Russian energy companies. In the waning days of Schroeder’s tenure, Germany approved the controversial Nord Stream pipeline project in the Baltic Sea, which the US and many European countries oppose because it cuts out Eastern European transit states and would increase German dependence on Russian energy.<sup>50</sup>

According to scholar Jeffrey Mankoff, the Schroeder story is emblematic of a broader Russian strategy of “elite capture” that many in Germany’s political mainstream view as a Kremlin attempt “to weaken transatlantic solidarity, undermine the European Union (EU), and influence German domestic politics.”<sup>51</sup>

## Merkel, Putin, and the road to Ukraine

In November 2005, Angela Merkel succeeded Gerhard Schroeder as German chancellor. Merkel, who was raised in Soviet-occupied Eastern Germany and speaks fluent Russian, initially balanced her instinctive mistrust of Moscow with pragmatic efforts to improve bilateral ties. She appointed as her first foreign minister long-time Schroeder aide Frank-Walter Steinmeier, whose proposed policy of *Annäherung durch Verflechtung* (Rapprochement through Integration) harkened back to Willy Brandt’s *Ostpolitik*. In 2006, Germany deferred its leadership of the rotating G8 chair to Moscow to encourage Russia’s engagement. Putin visited Germany at least four times in 2006 and 2007, and in 2010, Merkel championed the Meseberg Process in hopes of developing an EU-Russian framework for addressing European security crises.<sup>52</sup>

Cracks in the relationship emerged around the turn of the decade. German leaders grew weary of the Kremlin’s failure to live up to its rhetoric on political and economic liberalization. Instead, Putin fostered a brand of conservative nationalism at home while cracking down on geopolitical challenges in former Soviet bloc countries such as Estonia and Georgia. Merkel reportedly felt personally betrayed by Putin’s 2011 announcement that he would reclaim the presidency as part of a prearranged power swap with Medvedev.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 2, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*.

<sup>51</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Stent, *Putin’s World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 98-99.

<sup>53</sup> Dmitri Trenin, *Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors*, Carnegie Moscow Center, June 2018, [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Article\\_Trenin\\_RG\\_2018\\_Eng.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Article_Trenin_RG_2018_Eng.pdf).

Putin, for his part, had always suspected Merkel's "Atlanticist tilt," according to Carnegie Moscow Center director Dmitri Trenin.<sup>54</sup> He also suspected growing Western designs on Russia's traditional sphere of influence. In 2008, NATO—in language reportedly fashioned by Merkel—publicly expressed its intention to incorporate Ukraine and Georgia.<sup>55</sup> Russia invaded Georgia later that year. The following year, at a summit attended by Merkel, the EU rolled out its Eastern Partnership program, proposing, as the BBC characterized it at the time, "to forge closer ties with countries that Russia still sees as part of its sphere of influence," including Ukraine.<sup>56</sup>

A tug-of-war over Ukraine ensued. In 2012, Brussels and Kiev initialed the text of an Association Agreement broadly designed to deepen Ukraine's political and economic integration into the EU.<sup>57</sup> Eager to draw Ukraine into his alternative Eurasian Economic Union, Putin successfully pressured Ukrainian president Viktor Yanukovich to step away from the agreement. Ukrainians took to the streets in response, and in February 2014, Yanukovich lost his grip on power and fled to Russia. According to Dmitri Trenin, Putin blamed Berlin for imposing the EU Association Agreement dilemma and for effecting the removal of Ukraine's pro-Russian leader.<sup>58</sup>

The events that followed are now well known. After Yanukovich fled Ukraine, pro-Russian militants and unidentified "little green men" seized key positions in the Crimean Peninsula. Putin annexed Crimea on March 18. Over the next several months, pro-Russian separatists fanned out across eastern Ukraine to seize territory and foment insurgency. Ukraine's formal alignment with the West was on hold, albeit at the cost of mobilizing German and indeed Western resolve against Moscow.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.; George Packer, "The Quiet German: the Astonishing Rise of Angela Merkel, the Most Powerful Woman in the World," *The New Yorker*, Dec. 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/12/01/quiet-german>.

<sup>55</sup> Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 130.

<sup>56</sup> Oana Lungescu, "EU reaches Out to Troubled East," *BBC*, May 7, 2009, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8035710.stm>; *Eastern Partnership*, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/european-neighbourhood-policy/eastern-partnership_en).

<sup>57</sup> *EU- Ukraine Association Agreement "Guide to the Association Agreement"*, 2012, [http://www.eas.europa.eu/archives/docs/images/top\\_stories/140912\\_eu-ukraine-associatin-agreement-quick\\_guide.pdf](http://www.eas.europa.eu/archives/docs/images/top_stories/140912_eu-ukraine-associatin-agreement-quick_guide.pdf).

<sup>58</sup> Trenin, *Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors*.

## Divider approach 1 and target initial response

That Germany would respond to events in Ukraine by mobilizing EU and NATO action against Russia was not predetermined at the onset of the crisis in 2014. In the early days especially, as the US and others advocated hardline positions against Moscow, Merkel's government advocated restraint for fear of renewing Cold War tensions.<sup>59</sup> Putin encouraged and preserved this restraint by indulging German pleas for diplomacy. As the violence in Ukraine escalated, however, Merkel hardened her position and played a leading role in organizing multinational opposition against Moscow. Lacking viable options to influence Merkel's government after that, the Kremlin fell back on familiar measures intended to undermine her leadership and empower alternative voices in the German body politic.

## Russia directs diplomatic inducements to Germany early in the Ukraine crisis

The Ukraine crisis imposed a difficult dilemma on Berlin. Russia's actions were unacceptable, but German business and energy interests, demographics, and geopolitical preferences to bind Moscow to Europe augured against an overly harsh response. Berlin thus walked a fine line in the early weeks and months of the crisis, consulting with Washington while toeing a softer line to preserve room for diplomacy. Speaking at a press conference alongside US Secretary of State John Kerry in late February, German foreign minister Steinmeier pleaded his case that "preventing [a civil war in Ukraine] ought also to be in the interest of Russia, and thus I appeal to Russia, I urge Russia, to also participate in the endeavors that will be undertaken now."<sup>60</sup>

Putin was happy to oblige and encouraged Berlin's moderation by meeting German calls for participation in various diplomatic initiatives. The Russian president reportedly maintained near-daily phone contact with Merkel in the early days of the crisis. In early March, on the same day Secretary Kerry went on the Sunday talk shows threatening sanctions against Moscow, Putin accepted a German proposal for a fact-finding mission and "contact group" in Ukraine.<sup>61</sup> He then reportedly instructed Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov to conduct implementation discussions with Steinmeier. In June, Putin met with his German, French, and Ukrainian

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<sup>59</sup> Noah Barkin, "Russia Ties Compound German Dilemma in Ukraine Crisis," *Reuters*, Mar. 3, 2014, 102, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-germany-idUSBREA2215120140303>; Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*.

<sup>60</sup> John Kerry, Secretary of State, "Remarks With German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier After Their Working Lunch," (Benjamin Franklin Room, Washington, DC, Feb. 27, 2014), <https://2009-2017.state.gov/secretary/remarks/2014/02/222657.htm>.

<sup>61</sup> "Putin Agrees to Ukraine 'Fact-Finding' Mission After Talk With Merkel," *DW*, Mar. 2, 2014, <https://www.dw.com/en/putin-agrees-to-ukraine-fact-finding-mission-after-talk-with-merkel/a-17468591>.

counterparts—his first meeting with the Ukrainian president since the start of the crisis—to initiate the multinational Normandy Format that would lead to the subsequent Minsk I and Minsk II ceasefire processes.

For a time, the strategy appeared to pay off. Merkel declined early US calls to sanction Moscow.<sup>62</sup> On March 2, 2014, Secretary of State Kerry threatened Moscow with visa bans, asset freezes, and trade restrictions, declaring, “every single one of [our G8 partners] are prepared to go to the hilt in order to isolate Russia....They are prepared to put sanctions in place.”<sup>63</sup> Merkel, however, feared that approach would jeopardize her diplomatic efforts.<sup>64</sup> Through a spokesperson, her government conveyed that it was “entirely focused on bringing about a political process.” Russian actions might be “unacceptable,” but it was “still not too late for peaceful resolution of the crisis.”<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, although Merkel agreed in early March to join the US and the other G7 partners in boycotting the June 2014 G8 Summit in Sochi, she resisted, at least initially, Western calls to jettison Moscow completely. “The format of the G8 is actually the only one in which we in the West can speak directly with Russia,” Foreign Minister Steinmeier said in a German public broadcast. “Should we really give up this unique format?”<sup>66</sup> (Germany would agree to the proposal several weeks later.)

In sum, Putin’s responsiveness to German calls for diplomacy in the early days of the Ukraine crisis reinforced German fence-straddling and almost certainly forestalled united opposition against him.

## Russian aggression in Ukraine hardens German resolve

Berlin’s patience had its limits, however. Moscow’s annexation of Crimea and subsequent support to pro-Russian militants in Eastern Ukraine were jarring to Merkel’s rules-based sensibilities. The July 2014 separatist downing of the Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 (MH17) airliner was the last straw. It was at that moment, the journalist George Packer reports, that “the idea of maintaining equidistance between Russia and the West on Ukraine vanished.”<sup>67</sup> Berlin’s threat perception had changed—fears of Russian military aggression on Germany’s

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<sup>62</sup> Barkin, “Russia Ties Compound German Dilemma in Ukraine Crisis.”

<sup>63</sup> “Face the Nation Transcripts March 2 2014: Kerry, Hagel,” *CBS*, Mar. 2, 2014, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/face-the-nation-transcripts-march-2-2014-kerry-hagel/>.

<sup>64</sup> Colum Lynch, “U.S. Increasingly Isolated On Russia Sanctions,” *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 4, 2014, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/03/04/u-s-increasingly-isolated-on-russia-sanctions/>.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> “Putin Agrees to Ukraine ‘Fact-Finding’ Mission After Talk With Merkel.”

<sup>67</sup> Packer, “The Quiet German: the Astonishing Rise of Angela Merkel, the Most Powerful Woman in the World.”



eastern flank replaced concern over renewed Cold War tensions as Germany's top security threat.<sup>68</sup>

Following the annexation of Crimea, Merkel united a previously divided EU caucus around an initial round of relatively limited sanctions against Putin and his inner circle. After MH17, the US and EU coordinated a much more painful set of measures, which the EU has since renewed every six months. NATO, meanwhile, suspended cooperation with Russia and expanded efforts to raise awareness about the nature of Russia's hybrid warfare threat.<sup>69</sup>

Perhaps most notably, Russia's campaign in Ukraine spurred a traditionally pacifist postwar Germany to approve new military deployments. At the September 2014 NATO Summit in Wales, NATO allies agreed to establish a Very High Readiness Joint Task Force (VJTF) capable of deploying to crises on short notice, "particularly at the periphery of NATO's territory."<sup>70</sup> In 2016, NATO approved the deployment of four multinational VJTF battalions to Poland and the Baltic states to be led by the US (in Poland), the UK (in Estonia), Canada (in Latvia), and Germany (in Lithuania).<sup>71</sup> "For Germany, sending troops to Lithuania remained a sensitive issue...given the legacy of World War Two," notes Angela Stent, "but these ghosts of the past were dwarfed by concerns about Russian aggression."<sup>72</sup>

## Divider approach 2 and wedging outcome

### Russian subversion fails to move Berlin

Moscow may prefer to influence Berlin by quietly courting mainstream political and business leaders, but the Ukraine crisis pushed many of the mainstream's *Russlandversteher* closer to Merkel's position. By July 2014, for example, key segments of the German business community

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<sup>68</sup> Ivan Gutterman, Wojtek Grojec, and RFE/RL's Current Time, "A Timeline of All Russia-Related Sanctions," *RFE/RL*, Sept. 19, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-sanctions-timeline/29477179.html>.

<sup>69</sup> Kaan Sahin, *Germany Confronts Russian Hybrid Warfare*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, July 26, 2017, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2017/07/26/germany-confronts-russian-hybrid-warfare-pub-72636>.

<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey A. Stacey, "Merkel's Military Revival," *Foreign Policy*, Mar. 28, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/03/28/merkels-military-revival/>; Press Release, Sept. 5, 2014, *Wales Summit Declaration*. [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_112964.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_112964.htm).

<sup>71</sup> Silver Tambur and Sten Hankewitz, "NATO Approves the Deployment of Four Battalions to the Baltics and Poland," *Estonian World*, July 8, 2016, <https://estonianworld.com/security/nato-approves-the-deployment-of-four-battalions-to-the-baltics-and-poland/>; "Hundreds of German Soldiers Prepare to Deploy to Baltics for NATO," *DW*, Jan. 19, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/hundreds-of-german-soldiers-prepare-to-deploy-to-baltics-for-nato/a-37201832>; George Allison, "Germany to Lead NATO High Readiness Force," *UK Defense Journal*, Jan. 30, 2019, <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/germany-to-lead-nato-high-readiness-force/>

<sup>72</sup> Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 135.

publicly endorsed sanctions on the grounds that the security threat trumped short-term economic interests.<sup>73</sup> A November 2014 public opinion poll found that 76 percent of Germans supported Merkel's growing criticisms of the Kremlin and that 58 percent—an increase from 52 percent the month prior—supported sanctions even if they harmed the German economy.<sup>74</sup> Deprived of other options, Putin shifted strategies from seeking to undermine Merkel's policies to undermining her leadership. The relationship between this subversion campaign and Putin's wedging goals was not lost on many. As Brookings senior fellow Constanze Stelzenmüller testified to the US Senate in 2017, "by striking at Europe and the United States at the same time, [Russian] interference appears to be geared towards undermining the effectiveness and cohesion of the Western alliance as such—and at the legitimacy of the West as a normative force upholding a global order based on universal rules rather than might alone."<sup>75</sup>

To operationalize this approach, Moscow fell back on old tricks. The Kremlin aimed its disinformation apparatus at German society. Germany is home to several communities ripe for Russian targeting, including ethnic Germans who immigrated from former Soviet areas, ethnic Russian immigrants, and residents of the formerly Soviet-controlled East Germany, many of whom feel excluded from mainstream German life.<sup>76</sup> Russian media target these and other groups by curating guests on Russian-backed German-language media and promoting themes critical of the US, the EU, and NATO. They amplify Kremlin-approved narratives there and in social media, exploiting German social and political cleavages.<sup>77</sup>

That is what happened in the so-called Lisa case in January 2016. After a Russian-German teenage girl went missing for 30 hours that month, Russian media promoted a fake news story that migrants had kidnapped and raped her. German police quickly determined that the teenager had actually spent the time with a friend, but that did not stop Russian media and senior government officials, including Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, from amplifying the story.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 4-5; Stent, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and with the Rest*, 102; "German Industry Lobby Supports Tougher Sanctions on Russia," *Reuters*, July 28, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/ukraine-crisis-sanctions-germany-idUSL6N0Q311D20140728>.

<sup>74</sup> "German Support for Sanctions on Russia Rise, Poll Finds," *Reuters*, Nov. 28, 2014, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-germany-sanctions-idUSKCN0JC18B20141128>.

<sup>75</sup> Constanze Stelzenmüller, "The Impact of Russian interference on Germany's 2017 Elections," (U.S. Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, June 28, 2017), <https://www.brookings.edu/testimonies/the-impact-of-russian-interference-on-germanys-2017-elections/>.

<sup>76</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 23-24.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*; Trenin, *Russia and Germany: From Estranged Partners to Good Neighbors*.

<sup>78</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 8.

In addition to providing disinformation, the Kremlin leaned into support for fringe political groups on the right and left. Most well-known is Russia's support to far right groups such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD, *Alternative für Deutschland*) party, which in 2019 called for Germany's "DExit" from the EU and whose leaders have called for ending Russia sanctions.<sup>79</sup> Russian-backed media in Germany regularly host AfD and other fringe party leaders who criticize Merkel and her close relationship with the US or promote other perspectives that align with Russian interests.<sup>80</sup> During the 2017 federal elections, Russian social media accounts and anonymous bots amplified AfD claims of election fraud.<sup>81</sup> The endgame of such "fringe targeting," explains Mankoff, is "fracturing a political center that is—even if supportive in the abstract of better relations with Moscow—committed on principle to Atlanticism and keeping up sanctions on Russia as long as the conflict in Ukraine remains unresolved."<sup>82</sup>

Last, the German government has also accused Russia of cyberattacks against Merkel's party, German executive branch agencies, and political targets in the Bundestag. In 2017, Germany's domestic intelligence chief, noting that Putin would prefer to replace Merkel as chancellor, blamed Moscow for a cyberattack on the Bundestag two years earlier that Berlin feared could be weaponized in later elections.<sup>83</sup> The Kremlin may not have intervened in German elections

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<sup>79</sup> Emily Schultheis, "The Far Right Wants to Gut the EU, Not Kill It," *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/05/far-right-politicians-euroskeptics-election-europe/588316/>; "Germany's far-Right AfD Lawmakers Visit Moscow," *DW*, Mar. 10, 2021, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-afd-lawmakers-visit-moscow/a-56829773>; Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Influence Operations in Germany and Their Effect*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, Feb. 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russian-influence-operations-germany-and-their-effect>; Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 14.

<sup>80</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Editorial Board, "The Kremlin Creeps into Germany," *Washington Post*, Sept. 25, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-kremlin-creeps-into-germany/2017/09/25/3d06277e-a227-11e7-b14f-f41773cd5a14\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-kremlin-creeps-into-germany/2017/09/25/3d06277e-a227-11e7-b14f-f41773cd5a14_story.html).

<sup>82</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*, 14; Der Spiegel Staff, "Documents Link AfD Parliamentarian to Moscow," *Der Spiegel*, Apr. 12, 2019, <https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/documents-link-afd-parliamentarian-to-moscow-a-1261509-amp.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Andrea Shalal, "Germany Challenges Russia Over Alleged Cyberattacks," *Reuters*, May 4, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-security-cyber-russia-idUSKBN1801CA>; "Germany's Heiko Maas Urges Russia to Change Its Ways," *DW*, Mar. 15, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-heiko-maas-urges-russia-to-change-its-ways/a-43397881>; "Merkel Ally Cites Thousands of Cyber Attacks from Russian IP Addresses," *Reuters*, Sept. 4, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-election-cyber/merkel-ally-cites-thousands-of-cyber-attacks-from-russian-ip-addresses-idUSKCN1BF1FA>

as brazenly as it did in US elections, but German intelligence was clearly convinced that it laid the groundwork and was only a “political decision” away.<sup>84</sup>

All told, Russian interference in Germany in the form of information operations, targeting of fringe political groups, and cyber intrusions largely failed to produce significant outcomes. Germany’s relatively high levels of social and political cohesion insulated the country from external efforts to exacerbate social cleavages. To a limited degree, moreover, these actions proved counterproductive because they have raised German awareness of Russian interference and disenchanted many. “As a result of the ‘Lisa case’ and the different Russian activities in the context of the Ukraine conflict,” writes Stefan Meister of the German Council on Foreign Relations, “we are seeing a shift in Germany from the dominance of the economy over politics to a dominance of politics over the economy. Russia has become a security risk.”<sup>85</sup>

## Summary and assessment

Russian wedge strategies in the years preceding and during the Ukraine crisis reveal at least three general approaches to weakening Berlin’s bonds with the West. In steady-state times before the crisis, we observe a general preference for inducing Germany’s relative even-handedness through public diplomacy and positive incentives to German business and political elites. Similarly, as violence in Ukraine spiked in 2014, Putin dangled the carrot of conflict resolution diplomacy to Berlin in the hopes of forestalling a convergence between German policy and the more confrontational positions of several of Germany’s Western allies. Finally, after it became clear that Russian and German interests in Ukraine would remain at loggerheads, the Kremlin resorted to domestic political interference to undermine Angela Merkel’s leadership. If Putin could not sway her, perhaps he could weaken or replace her.

To what extent were these strategies effective? Ultimately, Moscow failed to preserve or create significant distance between Berlin and its Western allies on the issue of Ukraine. Underscoring this fact are Germany’s sustained leadership of a NATO force in Lithuania and its consistent renewal of EU sanctions on Moscow. Russia’s subversive interference against Merkel’s leadership also failed to produce significant change in German policy. According to Stelzenmüller, “in many ways its meddling in European elections over the past year has produced the exact opposite of what was intended, it has produced stable, democratic, and

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<sup>84</sup> Editorial Board, “The Kremlin Creeps into Germany.”

<sup>85</sup> Stefan Meister, “The “Lisa case”: Germany as a target of Russian disinformation,” *NATO Review*, July 25, 2016, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/articles/2016/07/25/the-lisa-case-germany-as-a-target-of-russian-disinformation/index.html>.

non-populist governments that are pro-European Union and indeed pro-NATO, and pro-American.”<sup>86</sup>

That is not to say that Putin failed to create any daylight between Berlin and its allies. Russia’s diplomatic overtures in early 2014 appeared (at least initially) successful in convincing Merkel to chart her own course between Washington and Moscow. If one considers the counterfactual scenarios in which pro-Russian separatists do not down MH17 in July 2014 or in which Putin stops short of annexing Crimea, then Merkel may have been less motivated to rally European consensus. By virtue of his aggression in Ukraine—itsself a wedge strategy to preclude Kiev’s Westward slide—Putin clearly pushed Berlin closer to its Western allies rather than farther away.

The reason for these outcomes is found in German threat perception. At the beginning of the crisis, German leaders feared the return of Cold War–like tensions, and Putin, at least initially, gave Berlin hope that it might avoid such an outcome. Yet he ultimately proved unwilling to mitigate German concerns. His ability to incentivize German neutrality might have proved compelling if Merkel perceived it was backed by substance, but Russian actions on the battlefield belied most of the promises made at the negotiation table.

As for the failure of Russia’s subversive wedging, we note above that Germany benefits from comparatively high levels of resilience against Russian interference. Although a dedicated assessment of resilience to foreign meddling exceeds the scope of this study, Germany’s political cohesion and public trust in government, as well as its relatively stringent social media regulations and political finance laws, emerge as important factors. German leadership also made a point of publicly exposing Russian disinformation and cyberattacks.<sup>87</sup>

Taken together, German leadership viewed Russian coercion in Ukraine and Russian subversion in Germany as formidable threats deserving of a counterbalancing response.

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<sup>86</sup> Stelzenmüller, “The Impact of Russian interference on Germany’s 2017 Elections.”

<sup>87</sup> Mankoff, *With Friends Like These: Assessing Russian Influence in Germany*.

# Russia Fails to Divide Greece and NATO over (North) Macedonia (2018–2019)

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In this section, we examine Russia’s failed attempt to divide Greece and its NATO allies on the issue of (North) Macedonian membership in NATO. Specifically, the section focuses on Russian interference in the Greek political system to prevent support for the 2018 Prespa Agreement between Athens and Skopje, which paved the way for the latter to join NATO.

In 2018, Greece (a NATO ally) and the then self-titled Republic of Macedonia (a NATO aspirant) agreed to resolve a decades-long dispute that had prevented Skopje from joining NATO (and the EU). In so doing, the deal put Athens at the center of a geopolitical contest between the US and Russia—Washington had “strongly support[ed]” inviting Macedonia to join NATO for years while Moscow opposed NATO enlargement in the Balkan Peninsula.<sup>88</sup>

The section below presents this case as follows. In the first section, we provide brief historical background on both the Russia-Greece relationship and the 2018 Prespa Agreement. Next, we examine Russia’s failed subversive wedge campaign designed to prevent Macedonia from joining NATO by fomenting Greek (and Macedonian) opposition to the agreement. (For methodological reasons, we generally focus on Russian actions toward Greece as opposed to Macedonia because Greece is already a NATO ally.) We demonstrate in this section that Russian meddling in Greece succeeded only in angering a previously friendly government; it failed to prevent the expansion of NATO in southeastern Europe and has since been followed by increased military cooperation between the US and Greece.

## Background

Russia and Greece share a long history of affinity and cooperation, dating back at least as far as Russia’s conversion to Christianity by Greek priests in the 10th century. Russia continues to support a host of Orthodox monasteries in Greece and to leverage this connection for its

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<sup>88</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “Press Statement: Greece Ratifies Prespa Agreement,” (Washington, DC, Jan. 25, 2019), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/greece-ratifies-prespa-agreement/index.html>; George W. Bush, “President Bush Visits Bucharest, Romania, Discusses NATO,” (National Bank of Savings, Bucharest, Romania, Apr. 2, 2008), <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2008/04/20080402-2.html>; Paul Stronski and Annie Himes, *Russia’s Game in the Balkans*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Feb. 6, 2019, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/02/06/russia-s-game-in-balkans-pub-78235>.

political ends.<sup>89</sup> In the 20th century, the Communist Party of Greece's leading role in resisting Nazi occupation earned it sympathy among the Greek population.<sup>90</sup> The Soviet Union then supported Greek leftist parties throughout the Cold War. These factors, in combination with Greece's history of right-wing authoritarian rule for large periods of the 1960s and 1970s, resulted in a legacy of pro-Russian attitudes among large segments of the Greek population.<sup>91</sup>

In the post-Cold War era, Russia managed to gain influence on both sides of Greece's political spectrum. The Soviet legacy continued to appeal to leftist parties, whereas cultural and religious similarities facilitated ties with right-wing constituencies. Mass emigration of ethnic Greeks from the Soviet Union to Greece led to the establishment of a large Russophone population in Greece. Russia played up these connections, including through a visit by the Russian Orthodox Patriarch in 1992. Moscow was eager to build up relations with Greece because of shared views on the conflict in Yugoslavia and as a means of influencing NATO and the EU.<sup>92</sup>

More recently, in January 2015, Greek voters ushered into power the leftist Syriza party led by Alexis Tsipras. The new government presented Moscow with tangible opportunities. Soon after becoming prime minister, Tsipras objected to sanctions against Russia for its role in the Ukraine crisis.<sup>93</sup> Deputies in the European Parliament from the Greek governing coalition regularly voted against resolutions that condemned Moscow. They also refused to join other EU member states in expelling Russian diplomats in retaliation for the poisoning of former Russian double agent Sergei Skripal in the UK.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Max Seddon, "Putin and the Patriarchs: How Geopolitics Tore Apart the Orthodox Church," *Financial Times*, Aug. 21, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/a41ed014-c38b-11e9-a8e9-296ca66511c9>; Nick Kampouris, "Ambassador Maslov Highlights Russian Role in Greek Revolution of 1821," *Greek Reporter*, Jan. 9, 2021, <https://greekreporter.com/2021/01/09/ambassador-maslov-highlights-russian-role-in-greek-revolution-of-1821/>; Dimitar Bechev, *Rival Power: Russia in Southeast Europe*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 115-117.

<sup>90</sup> Amikam Nachmani, "Civil War and Foreign Intervention in Greece: 1946-49," *Journal of Contemporary History* 25, no. 4 (Oct. 1990), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/260759>.

<sup>91</sup> I Andreadis and Y Stavrakakis, "Dynamics of Polarization in the Greek Case," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 681, no. 1 (2019), doi: 10.1177/0002716218817723.

<sup>92</sup> Mark Leonard and Nicu Popescu, *A Power Audit of EU-Russia Relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations, Nov. 2007, 28-30, [https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR-02\\_A\\_POWER\\_AUDIT\\_OF\\_EU-RUSSIA\\_RELATIONS.pdf](https://ecfr.eu/wp-content/uploads/ECFR-02_A_POWER_AUDIT_OF_EU-RUSSIA_RELATIONS.pdf).

<sup>93</sup> Sam Jones, Kerin Hope, and Courtney Weaver, "Alarm Bells Ring Over Syriza's Russian Links," *Financial Times*, Jan. 29, 2015, <https://www.ft.com/content/a87747de-a713-11e4-b6bd-00144feab7de>.

<sup>94</sup> "Greece 'Orders Expulsion of Two Russian Diplomats'," *BBC*, July 11, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-44792714>.

At least part of the reason for the Tsipras government's friendliness toward Moscow was its desire for Russian financial assistance. As a candidate, Tsipras campaigned explicitly against the austerity measures that the EU required in exchange for financial bailouts as the global financial crisis pushed Athens to the brink of default. In April 2015, Tsipras visited Moscow to probe the possibility of a \$10 billion loan to facilitate Greece's departure from the Eurozone. Although such a loan would gravely damage the EU, Russian sources suggest that the Kremlin did not seriously consider the proposal because of its high price tag. As Paul Stronski reinforces, "Russia's financial constraints allowed it to offer only symbolic, not actual, alternatives."<sup>95</sup>

## What's in a name? The 2018 Prespa Agreement

In 2017, Macedonian leader Zoran Zaev formed a new government in Skopje pledging, among other things, to resolve a decades-old dispute with Greece over the name of his country and to improve ties with NATO and the EU. The dispute in question traces to the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991, when Greece objected to the name of the then newly independent Republic of Macedonia. Athens argued that Greece had the historical rights to the name "Macedonia" and objected to its new neighbor's use of it without any qualifier such as "Upper" or "Northern." For 28 years, successive Greek governments used their veto power in international institutions to prevent recognition of another country using the name. In so doing, Greece prevented Macedonia from beginning negotiations to join NATO. (In the interim, the international community used the unwieldy moniker "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" or FYROM.)

The election of new governments in Athens in 2015 and in Skopje in 2016 changed regional calculations. On June 17, 2018, the two states signed the Prespa Agreement; Macedonia would adopt the official name "Republic of North Macedonia" in exchange for Greece lifting its objection to its joining NATO and the EU, which the new government in Skopje keenly desired.<sup>96</sup>

Russia, however, opposed the agreement as part of its years-long region-wide effort to prevent Balkan countries from joining NATO and the EU.<sup>97</sup> Better to maintain regional

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<sup>95</sup> Paul Stronski, *A Difficult Balancing Act: Russia's Role in the Eastern Mediterranean*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 28, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/06/28/difficult-balancing-act-russia-role-in-eastern-mediterranean-pub-84847>.

<sup>96</sup> Henri Bohnet, Daniel Braun, and Anna Sophie Himmelreich, *Greece and North Macedonia on the Way Towards Normalisation*, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, July 12, 2021, <https://www.kas.de/en/country-reports/detail/-/content/greece-and-north-macedonia-on-the-way-towards-normalisation>.

<sup>97</sup> Aubrey Belford et al., *Leaked Documents Show Russian, Serbian Attempts to Meddle in Macedonia*, OCCRP, June 4, 2017, <https://www.occrp.org/en/spooksandspin/leaked-documents-show-russian-serbian-attempts-to-meddle-in-macedonia/>.



disputes as leverage to limit NATO and EU enlargement and frustrate US interests in Southeast Europe. Because the US had previously emphasized its support for inviting Macedonia to join NATO, Moscow likely also calculated that Greek rejection of the agreement would inject friction into the US-Greece bilateral relationship by pitting Greek policy squarely against US foreign policy interests.<sup>98</sup>

## Divider approach and wedging outcome

### Russian subversion targets Greek support for Prespa Agreement

Russia's bid to exploit its ties with members of the Greek government and economic elites to scuttle the Prespa Agreement represents a case of failed subversive wedging. To scuttle the agreement, the Kremlin resorted to so-called active measures such as fomenting protests, spreading online disinformation, and bribing officials to oppose it. The campaign failed. Greece (and Macedonia) discovered and exposed Russia's subversive activities and punished Moscow for them. Both governments then ratified the agreement, and North Macedonia is now a full member of the NATO alliance.

Speaking in Greece several days after the announcement of the Prespa Agreement, Russian ambassador to the EU Vladimir A. Chizhov reportedly threatened, "Sure, we will not shoot nuclear bombs...but there are errors that have consequences."<sup>99</sup> Those consequences involved illegal interference in Greek (and Macedonian) domestic affairs to undermine official and public support. Just two weeks after signing the Prespa Agreement, Greece would expel two Russian diplomats and deny entry to two more to punish Moscow for its illegal meddling.

Among the Greek government's charges are that Russia provided funding and assistance to its allies in Greek nationalist circles—already primed to oppose the deal—to foment protests against the agreement. (Russia has long been suspected of funding far-right parties in Greece.)<sup>100</sup> A Greek government investigation also found that Russian diplomats sought to bribe Greek officials and use local religious authorities to undermine ratification.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote," *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/09/us/politics/russia-macedonia-greece.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Costas Kantouris and Menelaos Hadjicostis, "Greece: Russians Expelled Over Cash-for-Protests Allegation," *AP News*, July 12, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/aaf032985e7341d3a7968f6ff6b95ce0>.

<sup>101</sup> George Tzogopoulos, *Greek-Russian Relations: A Potential to Mend Strained Ties*, Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy, Oct. 23, 2020.

Not incidentally, the Kremlin directed similar efforts in Macedonia. According to prime minister of Macedonia Zoran Zaev and several independent watchdog groups, “Greek businessmen” with ties to Moscow and “sympathetic to the Russian cause” paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to Macedonian leaders, nationalist groups, and so-called soccer hooligans to protest (and in the case of the soccer hooligans, commit acts of violence) before Macedonia’s referendum.<sup>102</sup> Moscow also reportedly carried out online disinformation campaigns through Facebook and other websites to urge Macedonian citizens not to vote in a related referendum.<sup>103</sup>

Although ascertaining the full extent of these activities is difficult, Greek (and Macedonian) officials leave little doubt in public statements as to their verdict that Moscow deployed subversive measures in their respective countries to prevent the expansion of NATO in southeastern Europe. For example, after the reciprocal expulsions of Greek diplomats by Russia and the cancellation of a visit by Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs put out a statement pointedly titled, “Putting National Interests First: Soberly and Firmly.” It reads as follows:

Russia presently appears to be unable to understand Greek foreign policy’s principled positions...It appears not to understand that Greece has its own interests and criteria in international politics.

The decision by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, unlike the Greek side’s decision, which was based on specific evidence of illegal and irregular activities of Russian officials and citizens within Greece, was not based on evidence. On the contrary, the Russian side’s decision is arbitrary, retaliatory and not based on any evidence.

We want to remind our Russian friends that no country in the world would tolerate attempts to a) bribe state officials, b) undermine its foreign policy, and c) interfere in its internal affairs.

Greece took measures only after documenting tangible incriminating evidence.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Nikos Konstandaras, “Athens and Moscow’s Stunning Falling-Out,” *New York Times*, July 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/23/opinion/athens-moscow-greece-russia-tensions.html>; J. Lester Feder, “Macedonia Suspects a Greek-Russian Billionaire Paid for Violent Protests to Prevent It from Joining NATO,” *Buzzfeed News*, July 16, 2018, [https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/macedonia-russia-nato.](https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/lesterfeder/macedonia-russia-nato;)

<sup>103</sup> “U.S. Spycraft and Stealthy Diplomacy Expose Russian Subversion in a Key Balkans Vote.”

<sup>104</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Putting National Interest First: Soberly and Firmly,” (Athens, Greece, Aug. 10, 2018), <https://www.mfa.gr/en/current-affairs/statements-speeches/putting-national-interest-first-soberly-and-firmly.html>.

In January 2019, the Greek parliament ratified the Prespa Agreement. The US was quick to applaud the decision, and one week later NATO formally welcomed North Macedonia into the Alliance.<sup>105</sup>

## Athens moves closer to Washington

Russia appears to have underestimated the importance of the Prespa Agreement for Tsipras, who reacted strongly to reports of Russian meddling in Greek internal affairs. Since these episodes—and in the wake of warming Russian-Turkish ties, as described elsewhere in this report—Greece has downgraded cooperation with Russia and moved to rebuild ties with major European powers and the US. Athens, for example, has taken observable steps to expand America’s military cooperation with Greece.<sup>106</sup> An initial agreement in 2019 increased US-Greece (and NATO) military cooperation at existing air bases in central Greece and a naval base at Alexandroupolis, near the northern Greek-Turkish border, and expanded the naval base at Souda Bay on the island of Crete.<sup>107</sup> An extension of the bilateral Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement, signed in October 2021, provides for yet additional US-Greece military cooperation on Greek territory.<sup>108</sup> Although we cannot assert a direct causal linkage between Russian meddling in Greece and Greece’s expanded cooperation with the US, it is notable that in the years since Russian efforts to scuttle the Prespa Agreement, Athens and Washington have expanded their military cooperation and NATO has expanded its influence in the Balkan Peninsula.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Pompeo, “Press Statement: Greece Ratifies Prespa Agreement.”

<sup>106</sup> Paul Antonopoulos, “Russia Wants Improved Relations but Greece Is Sending Mixed Messages,” *Greek City Times*, May 27, 2021, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2021/05/27/russia-wants-improved-relations-but-greece-is-sending-mixed-messages/>.

<sup>107</sup> “Greece Ratifies Major Military Expansion With US,” *Greek City Times*, Jan. 31, 2020, <https://greekcitytimes.com/2020/01/31/greece-ratifies-major-military-expansion-with-us/>.

<sup>108</sup> US State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, “U.S. Security Cooperation With Greece Fact Sheet,” Mar. 25, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-greece/>; US Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, “Signing of Protocol of Amendment to the Mutual Defense Cooperation Agreement with Greece,” Press Statement, Oct. 14, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/signing-of-protocol-of-amendment-to-the-mutual-defense-cooperation-agreement-with-greece/>; Vassilis Nedos, “US, Greece Boost Military Cooperation,” *Ekathimerini*, May 24, 2021, <https://www.ekathimerini.com/news/1161613/us-greece-boost-military-cooperation/>.

<sup>109</sup> Ellen Knickmeyer, “Greece, US Expand Defense Pact in Face of Turkey Tensions,” Oct. 14, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/wireStory/greece-us-expand-defense-pact-face-turkey-tensions-80587855>.

## Summary and assessment

Russia's attempt to prevent Greek ratification of the Prespa Agreement represents a clear case of subversive wedging. Faced with the prospect of NATO expansion in the Balkans, Moscow resorted to covert and illegal activities to undermine the agreement. When they first came to power in 2015, Syriza's pro-Russian leadership was genuinely interested in working with Russia to improve Greece's economic situation. Had Russia been willing or able to commit the necessary resources to bail out Greece, Moscow might have been able to exert more influence over Athens. As it was, when the time came to persuade Athens, Moscow had little in the way of positive inducements to provide and thus fell back on fomenting public protests, spreading online disinformation, and bribing Greek (and Macedonian) leaders to oppose the deal.

The strategy failed. Greece (and Macedonia) ratified the Prespa Agreement, and North Macedonia is now a NATO ally. Tsipras, who upon entering office in 2015 refused to join his European partners in expelling Russian diplomats following the assassination attempt of Sergei Skripal on British soil, took the notable step of responding to Russia's meddling in 2018 by doing just that—expelling two Russian diplomats. Athens has since expanded its military cooperation with the US. Indeed, compared to its foreign policy in 2015, Greece now enjoys closer ties to both Europe and the US and a notably cooler relationship with Russia.

# Russia Successfully Divides Turkey and NATO (2016–2019)

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This section examines Russia's successful efforts to induce divisions between Turkey and its NATO allies, most notably the US, between 2016 and 2019. In particular, the section focuses on Moscow's ability to obstruct US-Turkish military cooperation and impede NATO interoperability through the sale of the S-400 air defense system.

Russian statecraft toward Turkey is important to examine given Turkey's traditional role in protecting NATO's southern flank.<sup>110</sup> In the aftermath of Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and the ensuing conflicts with Ukraine, the Black Sea region has come to play an increasingly strategic role in NATO-Russian relations. Turkey's position on the Bosphorus Strait enables it to control access in and out of the Black Sea.<sup>111</sup> More broadly, because all NATO decisions require consensus, Moscow's ability to exploit anti-Western sentiments in Ankara provides potentially low-hanging fruit to influence the Alliance as a whole.<sup>112</sup>

The Turkish case also provides insights into certain Russian approaches to dividing its adversaries. We discuss, for example, the Kremlin's exploitation of tensions among NATO allies over domestic issues such as democracy and human rights. We also show Russia's ability to move quickly in pursuit of its strategic objectives. In this case, Russia moved over the span of about one year from punishing Turkey for downing a Russian warplane along the Turkish-Syrian border to selling Ankara an advanced anti-aircraft missile system. As Putin stated at a joint press conference with Recep Tayyip Erdogan in August 2016, "Life changes quickly."<sup>113</sup>

The section below is organized as follows. We begin with an overview of Russian-Turkish relations in the post-Cold War era, including a discussion of the political and economic factors

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<sup>110</sup> Antoine Got, "Turkey's Crisis With The West: How a New Low In Relations Risks Paralyzing Nato," *War on the Rocks*, Nov. 19, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/turkeys-crisis-with-the-west-how-a-new-low-in-relations-risks-paralyzing-nato/>.

<sup>111</sup> Peter Pry, "Expelling Turkey From NATO Would Create a Dangerous Foe," *The Hill*, Oct. 23, 2019, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/466747-expelling-turkey-from-nato-would-create-a-dangerous-foe>.

<sup>112</sup> NATO, "Consensus decision-making at NATO," Encyclopedia of NATO Topics, Oct. 2, 2020, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_49178.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_49178.htm).

<sup>113</sup> Olesya Astakhova and Nick Tattersall, "Putin and Erdogan Move Toward Repairing Ties Amid Tension with West," *Reuters*, Aug. 9, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia-turkey-idUSKCN10K19T>.

that incentivize cooperation despite stark differences on key geopolitical interests. We then examine Russia's success in creating divisions within NATO by selling Turkey the S-400 system. Indeed, the S-400 sale led directly to Washington ejecting Turkey from participating in the Fifth Generation F-35 fighter jet program, among other consequences. In this section, we argue that Russian inducements in the form of political and military support succeeded because they represented a credible offer of support on issues of high priority to Turkey that did not require Ankara to sever ties with NATO or otherwise realign its overall foreign policy orientation.

## Background

Russia and Turkey share a centuries-long history of imperial rivalry. Turkey's fear of the Soviet Union played a significant role in driving Ankara to join NATO in 1952. After the Cold War, however, the Russian threat dissipated, and the two countries embarked on a trajectory of political and economic cooperation. In the era of Putin and Erdogan, several factors continue to incentivize Russian-Turkish cooperation and thus provide Moscow with opportunities to wean Turkey from its NATO allies. Key among these are a common desire to keep the world safe for conservative, illiberal forms of government; shared economic and energy interests; and a mutual disapproval of US foreign policy, albeit to varying degrees.

### Domestic political factors encourage closer relations

Turkey's drift from democracy over the last two decades has been one of the key factors enabling Russia to exploit cleavages between Turkey and its Western allies. Although the initial victory of Erdogan's Justice and Development Party in 2002 resulted in economic reforms, an anticorruption drive, and the launch of EU membership negotiations, since 2011 the Turkish government has enacted various restrictions on protest and freedom of speech. This authoritarian backslide accelerated after a failed coup attempt in 2016, culminating in the closure of many independent press outlets and the arrest of political opponents and protest leaders.<sup>114</sup> These trends largely mirror a similar slide toward authoritarianism in Russia that began after mass protests against election falsification took place in the winter of 2011–2012 and accelerated rapidly after Putin's popularity began to decline in 2017.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> Zafer Yilmaz and Bryan S. Turner, "Turkey's Deepening Authoritarianism and the Fall of Electoral Democracy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 5 (2019), doi: 10.1080/13530194.2019.1642662, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2019.1642662>.

<sup>115</sup> David G. Lewis, *Russia's New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order*, (Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). doi: 10.3366/edinburgh/9781474454766.001.0001.

As Putin and Erdogan have drifted toward authoritarianism, the two leaders find common cause in their frustration at Western criticism. Putin frequently derides Western expressions of support for Russian protesters and pro-democracy activists as meddling in Russian domestic affairs.<sup>116</sup> Erdogan has expressed similar frustrations, especially in the aftermath of the 2013 Gezi Park protest movement that led to changes in the Turkish political system designed to ensure Erdogan's hold on power.<sup>117</sup> Turkey's leadership blamed the failed 2016 coup on the religious movement led by former Erdogan ally Fethullah Gülen and sought his extradition from the US, where he had been living since the late 1990s. The US government's refusal to extradite Gulen further soured the relationship.<sup>118</sup>

In addition to their shared drive to maintain power at the expense of democratic norms and institutions, the two leaders also champion conservative values in opposition to what they see as the excessive liberalism that has come to dominate the Western world. Both have strong ties to their countries' respective religious establishments and view their countries as bulwarks against the secular values that have come to dominate Europe and the US.<sup>119</sup> Both seek to enhance their popularity by appealing to their nations' imperial pasts, and both play up a masculine image as part of their political persona.<sup>120</sup> Putin recently praised Erdogan as a leader who "keeps his word like a real man."<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Steve Gutterman and Gleb Bryanski, "Putin Says U.S. Stoked Russian Protests," *Reuters*, Dec. 8, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-russia/putin-says-u-s-stoked-russian-protests-idUSTRE7B610S20111208>; "Russia Accuses US of Meddling in its Domestic Affairs as Thousands Arrested at Pro-Navalny Rallies," *SBS News*, Jan. 25, 2021, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/russia-accuses-us-of-meddling-in-its-domestic-affairs-as-thousands-arrested-at-pro-navalny-rallies/a4e0afa5-9f94-4db4-8fa8-e76b4d39ff68>.

<sup>117</sup> A series of protests that began due to opposition to plans to redevelop a popular park in Istanbul but turned into a much broader anti-Erdogan and pro-democracy drive over time. See: Özge Zihnioğlu, *The Legacy of the Gezi Protests in Turkey*, Carnegie Europe, Oct. 24, 2019, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/2019/10/24/legacy-of-gezi-protests-in-turkey-pub-80142>; Marc Pierini, *The International Fallout from the Gezi Crisis*, Carnegie Europe, June 21, 2013, <https://carnegieeurope.eu/strategieurope/52171>.

<sup>118</sup> "Turkey: US Failure to Hand Over Gulen Would 'Sacrifice Relations'," *VOA News*, Aug. 9, 2016, <https://www.voanews.com/a/turkey-us-failure-to-hand-over-gulen-would-sacrifice-relations/3456814.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Ishaan Tharoor, "How Russia's Putin and Turkey's Erdogan Were Made for Each Other," *The Washington Post*, Dec. 2, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/02/how-russias-putin-and-turkeys-erdogan-were-made-for-each-other/>.

<sup>120</sup> Valerie Sperling, *Sex, Politics, and Putin: Political Legitimacy in Russia*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2014); Zeynep Kurtulus Korkman and Salih Can Aciksoz, "Erdogan's Masculinity and the Language of the Gezi Resistance," *Jadaliyya*, June 22, 2013, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/28822>. See also: Betül Eksi and Elizabeth A. Wood, "Right-wing Populism as Gendered Performance: Janus-Faced Masculinity in the Leadership of Vladimir Putin and Recep T. Erdogan," *Theory and Society* 48, no. 5 (Nov. 2019), doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11186-019-09363-3>.

<sup>121</sup> Vladimir Putin, "Annual News Conference," (Moscow, Russian Federation, Dec. 17, 2020), <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/64671>.

## Economic and energy ties

Russia and Turkey's economic ties in the last two decades also provide incentives for bilateral cooperation. Russia has long been an important market for Turkish exports, especially textiles and agricultural products. Russia in turn has long been the leading contributor to Turkey's tourism industry.<sup>122</sup>

Energy plays the most significant role in bilateral economic relations. Turkey is a leading export market for Russian gas, and Russia, in turn, is Turkey's main gas supplier.<sup>123</sup> Russian firms are currently building Turkey's first nuclear power plant and completing the TurkStream gas pipeline, which will carry natural gas from Russia to Turkey via the Black Sea. At least some American leaders suspect TurkStream will increase Russian leverage over Turkish and European energy markets.<sup>124</sup> Although Turkey has taken some steps to reduce its dependence on Russian energy, the interconnectedness of Russian-Turkish energy provides another ongoing basis for bilateral cooperation.

## Friction with allies pushes Ankara toward Russia

At the same time as domestic politics and economic and energy interests were incentivizing Turkish cooperation with Moscow, tensions with Washington and other Western allies reinforced Ankara's movement in the same direction. By 2016, Turkey's displeasure with its Western allies ranged from long-simmering frictions, such as frustration with the slow pace of EU accession and resentment of Western lectures on democracy and human rights, to diverging approaches on critical national security issues. In Syria especially, Ankara fumed at US support to Kurdish fighters in the counter-ISIS campaign. Where Washington found in certain Kurdish groups a highly effective fighting force, Turkey saw the US government training and equipping a terrorist group with which it had a long and bloody history.

In August 2015, the US delivered another blow when it announced that it would withdraw Patriot air and missile defense units stationed in Turkey as part of a NATO mission to defend Turkey from the violence in Syria.<sup>125</sup> Turkey, which had requested the support following

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<sup>122</sup> Martin Russel, *Russia–Turkey Relations: A Fine Line Between Competition And Cooperation*, European Parliamentary Research Service, PE 679.090, Feb. 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679090/EPRS\\_BRI\(2021\)679090\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/679090/EPRS_BRI(2021)679090_EN.pdf).

<sup>123</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *Turkey's Energy Relations With Russia: How Should the West Respond?*, Middle East Institute, Mar. 10, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/turkeys-energy-relations-russia-how-should-west-respond>.

<sup>124</sup> Sarah E. Garding et al., *TurkStream: Russia's Southern Pipeline to Europe*, Congressional Research Service, May 6, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/IF11177.pdf>.

<sup>125</sup> U.S. Mission Turkey, Joint Statement from the Government of the Republic of Turkey and the Government of the United States, Subject: Press Release, Aug. 16, 2015, [https://tr.usembassy.gov/pr\\_160815/](https://tr.usembassy.gov/pr_160815/).



several deadly attacks from Syria in 2012, reportedly viewed the decision as yet another indication that Washington and NATO were insufficiently committed to its security.<sup>126</sup>

At the same time, Russia's 2015 intervention in Syria also caused problems for Turkey. Russia entered the conflict on the side of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, whom Ankara bitterly opposed, and quickly turned the tide in his favor. In this context—caught between two superpowers whose Syria policies Turkey viewed as a threat—in June 2016, Erdogan apologized for the November 2015 downing of a Russian warplane that Ankara claimed violated Turkish airspace. In so doing, Erdogan paved the way for rapprochement with Moscow just in time for Putin to seize on the next crisis in US-Turkish relations by coming to Erdogan's aid following a coup attempt just weeks later.<sup>127</sup>

## Divider approach and wedging outcome

### Russian inducements fracture Turkey-NATO bonds

The negotiation and completion of Russia's sale of the S-400 air defense systems to Turkey in 2017–2019 was both a consequence and the cause of deteriorating relations between Turkey and its NATO allies, especially the US. Although whether the initial impetus for the deal came from Russian or Turkish leadership is unclear, Russian leadership's unequivocal support to Erdogan following the July 2016 coup attempt in Ankara clearly prepared the environment that made the deal possible. This section begins with a discussion of Russian inducements toward Turkey beginning in 2016 and through the sale of the S-400. It then tracks US efforts to prevent the sale from being consummated and concurrent efforts by Russia to make sure the sale stayed on track. The discussion concludes with a review of the consequences of Turkey's decision to procure the S-400, as well as the limitations of subsequent divisions between Ankara and NATO.

### Putin gives Erdogan a “psychological boost”

In July 2016, factions within the Turkish Armed Forces attempted to seize control of the Turkish state. Although the coup attempt failed, it presented a serious threat to Erdogan's hold on power and exposed yet another breach in US-Turkey relations. Indeed, many in Turkey suspected Washington's hand, not least because Ankara blamed groups tied to Fethullah Gülen,

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<sup>126</sup> Jim Townsend and Rachel Ellehuus, “The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots,” *War on the Rocks*, July 22, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/07/the-tale-of-turkey-and-the-patriots/>; John Vandiver, “US to Withdraw Patriot Missile System From Turkey,” *Stars and Stripes*, Aug. 16, 2015, [https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle\\_east/us-to-withdraw-patriot-missile-system-from-turkey-1.363172](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/us-to-withdraw-patriot-missile-system-from-turkey-1.363172).

<sup>127</sup> Jeffrey Mankoff, *A Friend in Need? Russia and Turkey after the Coup*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 29, 2016, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/friend-need-russia-and-turkey-after-coup>.

a Muslim cleric and former Erdogan ally living in self-exile in the US. “Turkey may be a deeply polarized country,” wrote the *New York Times* soon after the incident, “but one thing Turks across all segments of society—Islamists, secular people, liberals, nationalists—seem to have come together on is that the United States was somehow wrapped up in the failed coup.”<sup>128</sup>

President Erdogan himself denounced the US and his Western allies for their lukewarm condemnation of the failed coup and criticisms of his subsequent crackdown. “The attitude of many countries and their officials over the coup attempt in Turkey is shameful in the name of democracy,” he proclaimed, adding, “any country and any leader who does not worry about the life of Turkish people and our democracy as much as they worry about the fate of coupists are not our friends.”<sup>129</sup> He blasted Washington for hosting Gülen, alleging, “The coup plotter is already in your country. You are nurturing him there.”<sup>130</sup> When the four-star general in charge of US Central Command suggested that the purge of top Turkish generals could negatively affect US-Turkish military cooperation, Erdogan accused him of “taking the side of coup plotters.”<sup>131</sup>

Russian leaders observed the deterioration in US-Turkey relations and jumped at the chance to lend Erdogan much-needed political support. “For Putin,” explain former senior Barack Obama Administration officials Jim Townsend and Rachel Ellehuus, “the coup gave him the opening he needed to befriend the friendless Erdogan and so peel Turkey away from the United States and NATO.”<sup>132</sup> Putin was one of the first leaders to condemn the coup attempt, calling Erdogan the day afterward to assert the “categorical impermissibility of anti-constitutional actions and violence in the life of a state.”<sup>133</sup> Erdogan described the phone call as “a psychological boost.”<sup>134</sup> Unlike Western leaders, Russian officials refrained from criticizing Turkey’s imposition of a state of emergency and wave of arrests.<sup>135</sup>

Meanwhile, Russian media sought to accentuate postcoup tensions by highlighting connections between coup leaders and the US government. For example, Russian media promoted a theory

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<sup>128</sup> “Turks Can Agree on One Thing: U.S. Was Behind Failed Coup,” *New York Times*, Aug. 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/03/world/europe/turkey-coup-erdogan-fethullah-gulen-united-states.html>.

<sup>129</sup> Tulay Karadeniz and Humeyra Pamuk, “Turkey’s Erdogan Slams West for Failure to Show Solidarity Over Coup Attempt,” *Reuters*, July 29, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-turkey-security-idUSKCN10912T>.

<sup>130</sup> “Erdogan Accuses Top Us General of 'Backing Putschists',” *The New Arab*, July 26, 2016, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/erdogan-accuses-top-us-general-backing-putschists>.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> Townsend and Ellehuus, “The Tale of Turkey and the Patriots.”

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in Mankoff, *A Friend in Need? Russia and Turkey after the Coup*.

<sup>134</sup> Astakhova and Tattersall, “Putin and Erdogan Move Toward Repairing Ties Amid Tension with West.”

<sup>135</sup> Mankoff, *A Friend in Need? Russia and Turkey after the Coup*.

that the US government had organized anti-Erdogan forces in the Turkish military, noting that “one of the centers of the coup plotters was at US military airbase at Incirlik.”<sup>136</sup> They also expressed satisfaction that pro-US commanders in the Turkish military were being systematically removed and that, as Mankoff characterizes, “a purged Turkish military stocked with Erdogan loyalists is unlikely to have the same visceral commitment to the trans-Atlantic alliance, or hostility to Russia.”<sup>137</sup>

### **Consummating the S-400 deal and US reactions**

In addition to providing Erdogan with political support at a tense and vulnerable time for the Turkish president, the Kremlin further capitalized on US-Turkish tensions by offering to sell Turkey its sophisticated S-400 missile defense system. Recall that Turkey had long sought missile defense support from its NATO allies. Ankara initiated a bidding process to purchase the Patriot system early in the Obama Administration but grew frustrated as negotiations dragged on and opened the process to other countries such as China and Russia. Turkey was again disappointed when Washington decided to redeploy US Patriot units from Turkey in August 2015.

Against this backdrop, Russia formally offered to sell the S-400 system to Turkey in July 2017. The deal proceeded quickly. In September, Erdogan announced his intent to acquire the system and confirmed that Turkey had transferred initial funds to Russia.

The US responded to these announcements with a combination of carrots and sticks. The Trump Administration issued “multiple offers to move Turkey to the front of the line to receive the U.S. Patriot air defense system,” a White House statement later confirmed.<sup>138</sup> Simultaneously, the US government warned that Turkey’s acquisition of the S-400 system would negatively affect Turkey’s interoperability with NATO would require Turkey’s removal from the F-35 program.<sup>139</sup> In July 2019, then US Army secretary and nominee for secretary of defense Mark Esper testified to Congress that he told his Turkish counterparts in no uncertain

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<sup>136</sup> Vladimir Mukhin, “Rebels in Turkey Also Aimed at Russia,” *Мятежники в Турции целились и в Россию, Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, July 18, 2016, [https://www.ng.ru/world/2016-07-18/5\\_turkey.html](https://www.ng.ru/world/2016-07-18/5_turkey.html).

<sup>137</sup> Mankoff, *A Friend in Need? Russia and Turkey after the Coup; Anti-Nato Purges in the Turkish Army*, *Katehon*, July 29, 2016, <https://katehon.com/ru/agenda/antinatovskie-chistki-v-tureckoy-armii>.

<sup>138</sup> The White House, “Statement by the Press Secretary,” July 17, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-64/>.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*; Amanda Macias, “US Cuts Turkey From F-35 Program After Russian Missile Deal,” *CNBC*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/17/us-cuts-turkey-from-f-35-program-after-russian-missile-deal.html>.

terms, “You can either have the S-400 or you can have the F-35. You cannot have both. Acquisition of the S-400 fundamentally undermines the capabilities of the F-35.”<sup>140</sup>

Russian officials, for their part, encouraged Turkey to persist, highlighting Russia’s general opposition to using unilateral sanctions for political pressure.<sup>141</sup> They had succeeded in imposing a tangible dilemma on the US-Turkish relationship.

Despite these pressures, Erdogan insisted that the agreement was a done deal. In December, only six months after the initial announcement, the two countries signed the final contract for the supply of two S-400 batteries at a total cost of \$2.5 billion.<sup>142</sup> For Moscow, the deal served as a low-risk opportunity to make money while poking Washington in the eye and imposing controversy among NATO allies.

Once Turkey accepted delivery of S-400 systems, the US announced that it would indeed expel Turkey from the F-35 fighter jet program. The US would no longer sell Turkey the 100 F-35s it had planned to acquire. Washington sent home Turkish pilots who were in the US training on the new platform.<sup>143</sup> In a July 2019 statement, the White House acknowledged Russia’s success in driving a wedge into the alliance:

Accepting the S-400 undermines the commitments all NATO Allies made to each other to move away from Russian systems. This will have detrimental impacts on Turkish interoperability with the Alliance...we will continue to cooperate with Turkey extensively, mindful of constraints due to the presence of the S-400 system in Turkey.<sup>144</sup>

After Turkey tested the system, the Trump Administration imposed limited sanctions on Turkish entities under the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act.<sup>145</sup>

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<sup>140</sup> “Turkey Cannot Have Both F-35 and Russia’s S-400: Trump Nominee,” *Reuters*, July 16, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-turkey-security-f35-idUSKCN1UB1WT>.

<sup>141</sup> Maria Zakharova, “Ministry of Foreign Affairs Briefing,” (Moscow, Russian Federation, Dec. 18, 2019), [https://www.mid.ru/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3961456](https://www.mid.ru/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3961456).

<sup>142</sup> “The Russian–Turkish rapprochement,” *Strategic Comments* 24, no. 2 (2018), doi: 10.1080/13567888.2018.1444431, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2018.1444431>.

<sup>143</sup> Valerie Insinna, “Turkey’s Removal from F-35 Program to Cause Hike in Engine Price,” *Defense News*, Apr. 23, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2021/04/23/turkeys-removal-from-f-35-program-to-cause-hike-in-engine-price/>; Robert Burns, “Pentagon Nominee Regrets Turkey’s ‘Drift’ from West,” *Reuters*, July 16, 2019, <https://apnews.com/042eaab547bc467eae568c1d5e4c9394>.

<sup>144</sup> “Statement by the [White House] Press Secretary, July 17, 2019.”

<sup>145</sup> Press Statement, *The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231*. <https://gr.usembassy.gov/the-united-states-sanctions-turkey-under-caatsa-231/>.

## Limitations of division

Despite Russia successfully injecting division into the US-Turkey relationship and NATO, the benefit of hindsight allows us to observe that the depths of those divisions remain relatively limited. Erdogan, for example, has sought to avoid additional US sanctions in response to the S-400 purchase and has toned down his anti-US rhetoric. Turkey also took a leadership role in NATO's recent Steadfast Defender 2021 exercise in the Black Sea region, which some experts interpreted as exercising measures to defend southeast Europe from a Russian attack.<sup>146</sup>

Turkey and Russia also remain at odds on several geopolitical priorities. Erdogan has strongly reiterated Turkey's support for Ukraine. After holding talks with Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky in April, the Turkish leader reaffirmed Ankara's refusal to recognize Russia's annexation of Crimea and signed a joint declaration expressing support for Ukraine's efforts to join NATO.<sup>147</sup> Erdogan appears to be using relations with Ukraine as a counterweight in Turkey's balancing act among the great powers and as leverage against Russia.

Russia and Turkey also continue to find themselves competing for influence in the Middle East and in the Caucasus. Turkey sided with the Arab Spring protesters whereas Russia supported status quo leaders. Russia tends to view Islamic organizations in the region with great suspicion whereas Turkey supports many of them.<sup>148</sup> Russia and Turkey have also found themselves on opposite sides in military conflicts in places such as Syria, Libya, and Karabakh.

## Summary and assessment

In the months following Erdogan's June 2016 apology for shooting down a Russian warplane the previous summer, Russian statecraft toward Turkey emphasized positive inducements to build influence in Ankara at the expense of the West. Putin was quick to provide firm and public support to his Turkish counterpart following the July 2016 coup attempt. Soon after, Moscow offered to fulfill Turkey's long-standing desire to acquire advanced air defense technology by selling the S-400 missile system. In both cases, Moscow provided Ankara with highly valued support that Turkey perceived its NATO allies to be withholding.

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<sup>146</sup> Dimitar Bechev, *What Erdogan's Tilt to the West Means for Russia-Turkey Relations*, RUSI, July 1, 2021, <https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/what-erdogans-tilt-west-means-russia-turkey-relations>.

<sup>147</sup> "Erdogan Refuses to Recognize Crimea as Russian and Supports Ukraine Joining NATO," *UAWire*, Apr. 11, 2021, <https://www.uawire.org/erdogan-refuses-to-recognize-crimea-as-russian-and-supports-ukraine-joining-nato>.

<sup>148</sup> Sultan Al Kanj, *Reviewing the Turkey-HTS Relationship*, Chatham House, May 2019, <https://syria.chathamhouse.org/research/reviewing-the-turkey-hts-relationship>.

By inducing Turkey to buy Russian weapons, Moscow successfully drove a tangible and significant wedge between Turkey and its NATO allies. The US followed through on its ultimatum to kick Turkey out of the F-35 program, and Washington sanctioned a NATO ally for the first time in the Alliance's history. NATO leadership, moreover, has been explicit in its concerns that Turkey's acquisition of the S-400 will inhibit the Alliance's interoperability.<sup>149</sup> This case thus represents one of the few clear-cut instances of wedging success in our report.

Why did competitor wedging succeed in this instance? We identify three key reasons in this case. First, Russia could credibly deliver on its offer of support. Second, Turkey placed a high value on that support. Putin's political backing following the attempt to overthrow Erdogan and the opportunity to acquire sophisticated air defense technology met critical needs. Indeed, Turkey's leaders perceived the US and other NATO allies as wanting in those departments. Last, although the US imposed serious penalties on Turkey for purchasing the S-400 system, the costs were nonetheless limited. Had Turkey perceived a higher price from Moscow or a higher cost from the US, the outcome may have been different.

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<sup>149</sup> Jens Stoltenberg, "NATO in a Competitive World," (Georgetown University, Oct. 5, 2021), May 2019.

# China Fails to Prevent THAAD Deployment to South Korea (2013–2017)

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This section examines China's efforts to weaken and impose limits on the US-South Korean alliance between 2013 and 2017. It begins by examining Chinese president Xi Jinping's courting of South Korean president Park Geun-hye after both leaders rose to power in 2013 and then homes in on Beijing's failed bid to dissuade Seoul from supporting the US deployment of the advanced THAAD system to South Korea. China viewed the introduction of THAAD capabilities so close to its borders as a threat to its strategic and security interests and was therefore explicit in its desire to stop it.

The significance of the US-South Korean alliance makes understanding China's wedge strategies toward Seoul especially important. South Korea hosts more than 28,000 US military personnel according to State Department figures and President Obama and President Biden have both characterized the alliance as the "linchpin" of Indo-Pacific security.<sup>150</sup> At the same time, China and South Korea share cultural and historical bonds, and Seoul has a record of deferential conduct toward Beijing.<sup>151</sup> In part for these reasons, Beijing may well view South Korea as "the weakest link in the US alliance network."<sup>152</sup>

The section below proceeds in four parts. First, we provide background on South Korea's relationships with both the US and China before President Park took office in 2013. Second, we survey China's initial efforts to strengthen ties with Park's administration primarily through reward-based inducements. Third, we examine the various stages of the THAAD crisis, outlining China's gradual ratcheting up of pressure on Seoul to stop the deployment. Fourth, we conclude that, although PRC coercion ultimately failed to keep THAAD off the

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<sup>150</sup> "U.S.-ROK Leaders' Joint Statement," (The White House, May 21, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/05/21/u-s-rok-leaders-joint-statement/>; Barack H. Obama, "Remarks Following a Meeting With President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea in Toronto, Canada," (Toronto, Canada, June 26, 2010), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/DCPD-201000547/html/DCPD-201000547.htm>; US State Department Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, "U.S. Security Cooperation with Korea Fact Sheet," Jan. 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-korea/>.

<sup>151</sup> Victor Cha, "Nuclear Weapons, Missile Defense, and Stability: A Case for Cautious Optimism," in *Asian Security Order*, ed. Muthiah Alagappa (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 458-496; David Kang, "Between Balancing and Bandwagoning: South Korea's Response to China," *Journal of East Asian Studies* 9 (2009).

<sup>152</sup> Jung H. Pak, *Trying to loosen the linchpin: China's approach to South Korea*, Brookings, July 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/trying-to-loosen-the-linchpin-chinas-approach-to-south-korea/>.

Korean Peninsula (and indeed alienated South Korean leaders and large segments of the public), Beijing's aggressive actions nevertheless succeeded in securing limited South Korean commitments regarding future security cooperation with Washington—and may well have succeeded more fully if not for North Korea's repeated provocations.

## Background

US-South Korean relations enjoyed a relative high point during the administration of South Korean president Lee Myung-bak (2008–2013).<sup>153</sup> In June 2009, President Lee and President Obama announced a “Joint Vision for the Alliance” that aimed to move the relationship into new areas of strategic cooperation on issues such as the North Korea challenge and the Korea-US Free Trade Agreement, among others. The alliance proved particularly strong following several North Korean attacks on South Korea in 2010, including the March sinking of the South Korean navy corvette ROKS *Cheonan*, which killed 43 sailors, and the November shelling of Yeonpyeong Island, which killed two South Korean marines and two civilians.<sup>154</sup> In the wake of these provocations, Washington demonstrated its commitment to Seoul through unilateral economic sanctions on Pyongyang, cabinet-level visits to the demilitarized zone between North and South Korea, and new high-end military exercises.<sup>155</sup> Indeed, the alliance was in such good condition at this time that President Obama went so far as to describe it as the “lynchpin of not only security for the Republic of Korea and the United States but also for the Pacific as a whole.”<sup>156</sup>

As Washington and Seoul drew closer under Lee, Chinese-South Korean relations worsened. Seoul chafed at Beijing's support for North Korea, its assertiveness in their maritime jurisdictional disputes in the Yellow Sea, and its human rights violations.<sup>157</sup> China, for its part, blamed Seoul for North Korea's 2010 attacks and disapproved of its expanding ties with Washington, including the growing prospect of enhanced trilateral security cooperation

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<sup>153</sup> Mark E. Manyin, Emma Chanlett-Avery, and Mary Beth Nikitin, *U.S.-South Korea Relations*, Congressional Research Service, July 8, 2011, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20110708\\_R41481\\_904e438549d625af76fd3a7951f4197f5eadd736.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20110708_R41481_904e438549d625af76fd3a7951f4197f5eadd736.pdf).

<sup>154</sup> “North Korea: ‘No Apology’ for S Korea Cheonan Sinking,” *BBC*, Mar. 24, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32013750>.

<sup>155</sup> Manyin, Chanlett-Avery, and Nikitin, *U.S.-South Korea Relations*.

<sup>156</sup> Obama, “Remarks Following a Meeting With President Lee Myung-bak of South Korea in Toronto, Canada.”

<sup>157</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, “China’s Post-Kim Jong Il Debate,” *Comparative Connections* 14, no. 1 (May 2012), <https://cc.pacforum.org/2012/05/chinas-post-kim-jong-il-debate/>; Ji-Young Lee, *The Geopolitics of South Korea-China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*, PE-A524-1, 2020, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PEA524-1.html>.



between the US, South Korea, and Japan.<sup>158</sup> In the wake of two June 2012 US-South Korean military exercises, the PRC Ministry of Defense lamented the “intentional” strengthening of alliances.<sup>159</sup>

## Divider approach 1 and target initial response

### Beijing courts a receptive Park administration

In February 2013, Park Geun-hye entered office as the new South Korean president. Both she and Xi Jinping, the recently installed general secretary of the CCP, “sent signals...that they wanted to repair relations.”<sup>160</sup> Beijing likely viewed Park to be more receptive than her predecessors toward Chinese interests. As a candidate, Park advocated for an “unprecedented ‘grand reconciliation’ between Korea, China, and Japan” and stated that South Korea’s ties with the US and China were “not premised on choosing one over the other.”<sup>161</sup>

In June 2013, Xi welcomed Park for an official state visit in Beijing where both leaders sought to improve ties and pledged to work together to address the North Korea issue. Beijing’s cooperative posture at this time was made more credible by its newfound willingness just a few weeks earlier to impose penalties on Pyongyang for its nuclear program.<sup>162</sup> During the visit, the two sides agreed to set up a diplomatic channel between Park’s national security advisor and the PRC’s state councilor for foreign affairs, a channel Beijing had previously reserved for only Washington and Moscow, and to hold twice-yearly dialogues at the vice foreign minister level.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Snyder and Byun, “China’s Post-Kim Jong Il Debate.”; Lee, *The Geopolitics of South Korea–China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*.

<sup>159</sup> Lee, *The Geopolitics of South Korea–China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*.

<sup>160</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, “Seeking Alignment on North Korean Policy,” *Comparative Connections* 15, no. 1 (May 2013), <https://cc.pacforum.org/2013/05/seeking-alignment-north-korean-policy/>.

<sup>161</sup> Park Geun-hye, “A Plan for Peace in North Asia,” *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 12, 2012, <https://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323894704578114310294100492.html>.

<sup>162</sup> “New Sanctions on North Korea Pass in Unified U.N. Vote,” *New York Times*, Mar. 8, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/08/world/asia/north-korea-warns-of-pre-emptive-nuclear-attack.html?pagewanted=all>; Lee, *The Geopolitics of South Korea–China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*.

<sup>163</sup> Lee, *The Geopolitics of South Korea–China Relations: Implications for U.S. Policy in the Indo-Pacific*; Jaeho Hwang, *The ROK’s China Policy Under Park Geun-Hye: A New Model of ROK-PRC Relations*, The Brookings Institution Center For East Asia Policy Studies, Aug. 2014, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/south-korea-china-policy-hwang-working-paper.pdf>.

By 2014, there could be little doubt that China was “aggressive[ly] wooing” South Korea.<sup>164</sup> Park and Xi met regularly, holding six summits within the first three years of the Park administration, and advanced what Council on Foreign Relations senior fellow Scott Snyder described as “steady improvements in strategic coordination.”<sup>165</sup> In July 2014—not long after Japan announced plans to reinterpret its traditionally pacifist constitution, an unpopular move in both South Korea and China—Xi became the first sitting head of state in the history of the PRC to visit South Korea before North Korea.<sup>166</sup> According to former South Korean national security advisor Chun Yung-woo, the visit was part a broader Chinese effort to “draw the Republic of Korea as far away as possible from Japan and the United States.”<sup>167</sup> Beijing reinforced this perception when it asked Seoul early that year to sign a statement “that included language calling for the end of blocs and alliances in Asia.”<sup>168</sup>

Between 2013 and 2015, Chinese-South Korean relations improved to such an extent that some analysts heralded a “shift in geopolitics.”<sup>169</sup> When in August 2015 Park stood alongside Xi and Russian president Putin overlooking Tiananmen Square to observe an elaborate military parade commemorating end of World War II, there was reportedly concern in Washington that Seoul was leaning too far toward China.<sup>170</sup>

President Obama, for his part, downplayed the concern. At an October 2015 US-South Korea summit, only a few months after Park’s public appearance next to Xi and Putin, Obama affirmed that he saw “no contradiction between the Republic of Korea having good relations with us, being a central part of our alliance and having good relations with China.”<sup>171</sup> Park expressed appreciation for the diplomatic space, stating, “President Obama affirmed that Korea-U.S. relations and Korea-China relations could be compatible, and supported Korea’s

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<sup>164</sup> Kim Jiyeon et al., *One Bed, Two Dreams: Assessing Xi Jinping’s Visit to Seoul*, The Asian Institute for Policy Studies, July 2014, <http://en.asaninst.org/contents/one-bed-two-dreams-assessing-xi-jinpings-visit-to-seoul/>.

<sup>165</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, “A Complex China-ROK Partnership,” *Comparative Connections* 17, no. 3 (Jan. 2016), <http://cc.pacforum.org/2016/01/complex-china-rok-partnership>; Lee Seong-hyon, “Why Xi Jinping Didn’t Answer Park’s Call?,” *The Korea Times*, Feb. 5, 2015, [http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/02/197\\_197434.html](http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/opinion/2016/02/197_197434.html).

<sup>166</sup> Jeremy Page and Alastair Gale, “China President’s Visit to South Korea Before North Seen as Telling,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 27, 2014, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-president-xi-to-visit-seoul-1403858327>.

<sup>167</sup> Jane Perlez, “Chinese President’s Visit to South Korea Is Seen as Way to Weaken U.S. Alliances,” *New York Times*, July 2, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/03/world/asia/chinas-president-to-visit-south-korea.html>.

<sup>168</sup> Michael Green, “Korea in the Middle,” *Korea JoongAng Daily*, June 10, 2014, <https://koreajoongangdaily.joins.com/2014/06/10/columns/Korea-in-the-middle/2990401.html>.

<sup>169</sup> Snyder and Byun, “A Complex China-ROK Partnership.”

<sup>170</sup> Pak, *Trying to loosen the linchpin: China’s approach to South Korea*.

<sup>171</sup> “Obama Sees No Contradiction in ROK Having Good Relations With Both US, China,” *Xinhua*, Oct. 17, 2015, [http://www.china.org.cn/wap/2015-10/17/content\\_36829348.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/wap/2015-10/17/content_36829348.htm).

policies toward China. We believe that this will play a positive role in insuring peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and throughout Northeast Asia.”<sup>172</sup>

## Divider approach 2 and wedging outcome

### The THAAD challenge

In June 2014, the commander of US Forces Korea, General Curtis Scaparrotti, publicly proposed that Washington deploy the advanced THAAD missile defense system to South Korea in response to North Korea’s nuclear and missile threat. China was quick to express its strong opposition to the deployment. In the section below, we trace Beijing’s evolution from pressuring South Korea to refuse the deployment to ultimately implementing a wave of painful economic and political measures aimed at compelling Seoul to reverse its decision.

### Initial PRC pressure gives Park pause

Although consistent in its opposition to THAAD, Beijing’s initial responses were relatively measured. In March 2015, China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA) issued a statement that THAAD “exceeds actual security needs, and will put renewed stress on the already fragile situation on the Korean peninsula.... We urge the relevant countries to be extra cautious, and think twice before acting.”<sup>173</sup> Liu Jianchao, an assistant foreign minister, confirmed discussing China’s concerns with his South Korean counterparts, stating, “We hope that China’s concerns and worries will be respected.”<sup>174</sup>

Eager not to offend Beijing, the Park Administration downplayed the issue. For the year and a half between June 2014 and January 2016, South Korean leaders were reluctant to discuss the issue publicly. In response to questions about the status of its deliberations, Seoul insisted that there had been no request from the US to deploy THAAD, no negotiation with the US about it, and no decision regarding its future deployment.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>172</sup> “Obama and South Korean Leader Emphasize Unity,” *New York Times*, Oct. 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/17/world/asia/park-geun-hye-washington-visit.html>.

<sup>173</sup> Jack Kim, “Between U.S. and China, South Korea in Bind Over Missile Defence,” *Reuters*, Mar. 17, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/uk-southkorea-usa-missiles-idUKKBN0MD0UR20150317>.

<sup>174</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “South Korea Tells China Not to Meddle in Decision Over Missile System,” *New York Times*, Mar. 17, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/18/world/asia/south-korea-tells-china-not-to-meddle-in-decision-over-missile-system.html>.

<sup>175</sup> Ho-Jin Lee, *Missile Defense and South Korea: President Park’s Strategic Ambiguity Is Warranted*, Brookings, Mar. 27, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/missile-defense-and-south-korea-president-parks-strategic-ambiguity-is-warranted/>.

That calculus changed in January 2016, when North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test.<sup>176</sup> The next day, President Park held talks with President Obama and Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe to plan a firm multilateral response. Beijing, however, declined Park's entreaties to support such a response. Xi reportedly even declined to speak with Park for several weeks, a notable contrast to his earlier gestures on the North Korea file.<sup>177</sup> There were simply limits to how far China would go to penalize North Korea.

In February 2016, South Korea announced it would formally discuss the deployment with Washington.<sup>178</sup> PRC pressure quickly mounted.<sup>179</sup> That month, China's ambassador to South Korea, Qiu Guohong, reportedly warned that all the progress made by Xi and Park in the preceding years "could be destroyed in an instant with a single problem," adding that the deployment would "create a vicious cycle of Cold War-style confrontations."<sup>180</sup> MOFA later emphasized its view that "the THAAD issue is not a technical one...[but rather] a strategic one related to peace and stability in Northeast Asia [that would go] far beyond the actual defense requirement of the Korean Peninsula and will cause a direct impact on China's strategic and security interests."<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Michael Safi Justin McCurry, "North Korea Claims Successful Hydrogen Bomb Test In 'Self-Defence Against US,'" *The Guardian*, Jan. 6, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/06/north-korean-nuclear-test-suspected-as-artificial-earthquake-detected>.

<sup>177</sup> Seong-hyon, "Why Xi Jinping Didn't Answer Park's Call?."

<sup>178</sup> "After Pyongyang's launch of the Kwangmyungsung long-range missile in January 2016, South Korea's Ministry of National Defense announced that Seoul was to discuss the deployment of THAAD in response to Commander Scaperotti's request." See: U.S. Mission Korea, "ROK-U.S. Alliance Agree to Formally Discuss Deployment of THAAD," (Yongsan Garrison, Seoul, Feb. 7, 2016), <https://kr.usembassy.gov/rok-u-s-alliance-agree-to-formally-discuss-deployment-of-thaad/>; Chung Jae Ho, *South Korea's Strategic Approach to China (or Lack of It)*, Korea Economic Institute of America - Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies, [http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/jukas\\_1.4\\_south\\_koreas\\_strategic\\_approach\\_to\\_china.pdf](http://keia.org/sites/default/files/publications/jukas_1.4_south_koreas_strategic_approach_to_china.pdf).

<sup>179</sup> "Wang Yi Talks about US's Plan to Deploy THAAD Missile Defense System in ROK," *Consulate-General of the People's Republic of China in Los Angeles*, Feb. 13, 2016, <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/ce/cgla/eng/topnews/t1340525.htm>; "THAAD Deployment to 'Undermine Global Stability,'" *Xinhua*, Feb. 25, 2016, [https://www.chinadailyasia.com/nation/2016-02/25/content\\_15389981.html](https://www.chinadailyasia.com/nation/2016-02/25/content_15389981.html).

<sup>180</sup> Shannon Tiezzi, "China Warns THAAD Deployment Could Destroy South Korea Ties 'in an Instant,'" *The Diplomat*, Feb. 25, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/02/china-warns-thaad-deployment-could-destroy-south-korea-ties-in-an-instant/>.

<sup>181</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, "New Sanctions, Old Dilemmas," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 1 (May 2016), <http://cc.pacforum.org/2016/05/new-sanctions-old-dilemmas/>.

## China turns up the heat

In July, President Park finally agreed to deploy the THAAD system.<sup>182</sup> This time, in addition to rhetorical objections, China responded by directing a robust and sustained campaign of political and economic coercion. China's foreign minister Wang Yi lamented that the decision "has undermined the foundations of trust between the two countries."<sup>183</sup> Beijing then suspended key diplomatic channels and all high-level defense talks with Seoul.<sup>184</sup>

China also levied economic penalties in the hopes of compelling Seoul to reverse course.<sup>185</sup> PRC's coercive measures included, but were not limited to, the following:

- The PRC's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television issued a ban on popular South Korean cultural exports such as "K-pop" and TV dramas.<sup>186</sup>
- China's National Tourism Administration discouraged Chinese tourism to South Korea.<sup>187</sup>
- Chinese consumers, encouraged by state-controlled newspapers, boycotted Korean cars and cosmetic products.<sup>188</sup>
- Beijing cut off subsidies to electric car producers whose vehicles contained South Korean batteries.<sup>189</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> "South Korea and U.S. Agree to Deploy Missile Defense System," *New York Times*, July 8, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/08/world/asia/south-korea-and-us-agree-to-deploy-missile-defense-system.html>.

<sup>183</sup> Scott A. Snyder, *China's Limited Retaliation Options Against the THAAD Deployment in South Korea*, Council on Foreign Relations, Aug. 8, 2016, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/chinas-limited-retaliation-options-against-thaad-deployment-south-korea>.

<sup>184</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, "Nuclear Test, Political Fallout, and Domestic Turmoil," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (Jan. 2017), <http://cc.pacforum.org/2017/01/nuclear-test-political-fallout-domestic-turmoil/>.

<sup>185</sup> In October 2017, the coercion campaigns stopped and China announced the relationship would reset on the "normal development track." See: Darren J. Lim and Victor Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*, The Asan Forum, Dec. 28, 2019, <http://www.theasanforum.org/chinese-economic-coercion-during-the-thaad-dispute/>.

<sup>186</sup> Ibid.; Ketian Vivian Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*, Brookings, Jan. 22, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/chinese-non-military-coercion-tactics-and-rationale/>.

<sup>187</sup> Lim and Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*; Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*.

<sup>188</sup> Lim and Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*; Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*.

<sup>189</sup> Lim and Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*; Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*.

- Korean exporters confronted “irregular holdups” when transferring products through Chinese customs.<sup>190</sup>

The PRC pointedly singled out The Lotte Group, the South Korean conglomerate that leased land to the South Korean government for the THAAD deployment, for especially harsh treatment. By April 2017, Beijing forced some 90 percent of Lotte Mart stores in China to close, frequently on the grounds of “fire safety violations.” The company would eventually sell off all its stores in China.<sup>191</sup>

Despite the economic pain, however, China’s use of coercion failed to compel Park to reverse her decision. In April 2017, US Forces Korea announced that the first of several THAAD batteries was operational on South Korean soil.<sup>192</sup>

### North Korea (re)enters the fray

In May 2017, South Koreans elected Moon Jae-in to replace Park following the latter’s ouster in a corruption scandal. The arrival of President Moon’s progressive government presented Beijing with a new opportunity to scuttle the THAAD deployment.<sup>193</sup> As a candidate, Moon expressed reservations about Park’s handling of the THAAD issue and pledged to review the decision.<sup>194</sup> Shortly after his election, Moon and Xi held a phone conversation in which they reached a “mutual consensus on repairing South Korea-China relations.”<sup>195</sup>

At the end of May, international news media revealed that the US and South Korean militaries were in the process of deploying four additional THAAD launchers to the peninsula. A spokesperson for China’s MOFA declared that Beijing was “gravely concerned” about the reports.<sup>196</sup> Moon, for his part, claimed to have been unaware of this development and

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<sup>190</sup> Lim and Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*; Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*.

<sup>191</sup> Lim and Ferguson, *Chinese Economic Coercion during the THAAD Dispute*; Zhang, *Chinese Non-Military Coercion—Tactics and Rationale*.

<sup>192</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “U.S. Antimissile System Goes Live in South Korea,” *New York Times*, May 2, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/02/world/asia/thaad-north-korea-missile-defense-us.html>.

<sup>193</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Ouster of South Korean President Could Return Liberals to Power,” *New York Times*, Mar. 10, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/10/world/asia/south-korea-liberals-impeachment.html>.

<sup>194</sup> Choe Sang-Hun, “Ouster of South Korean President.”

<sup>195</sup> Scott Snyder and See-Won Byun, “North Korea, THAAD Overshadow Beijing and Seoul’s 25th Anniversary,” *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 2 (Sept. 2017), <http://cc.pacforum.org/2017/09/north-korea-thaad-overshadow-beijing-seouls-25th-anniversary/>.

<sup>196</sup> “‘Shocked’ South Korea Leader Moon Orders Probe Into Extra U.S. THAAD Launchers,” *The Japan Times*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2017/05/30/asia-pacific/shocked-south-korea-leader-moon-orders-probe-extra-u-s-thaad-launchers/>; “THAAD Report Claim Causes China ‘Concern,’” *China Daily*, June 1, 2017, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-06/01/content\\_29569724.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-06/01/content_29569724.htm).

found it “very shocking.”<sup>197</sup> He immediately ordered a probe into why his office had not been notified and proceeded to halt the deployment of the additional launchers pending an “environmental assessment” that could take “well over a year” to complete.<sup>198</sup> For a moment, Beijing’s odds looked promising.

Yet China’s hopes of disrupting the deployment once again fell prey to North Korean provocations. In late July, North Korea successfully completed an intercontinental ballistic missile test launch into South Korean waters, its second such test that month and 17th of the year.<sup>199</sup> Several hours later, Moon convened an emergency meeting of the country’s national security council and decided to immediately deploy the four remaining launchers.<sup>200</sup>

## Denouement

By the end of October 2017, China and South Korea appeared to have put the THAAD dispute behind them, despite Seoul having moved forward with the full battery deployment. On October 31, their foreign ministries released coordinated statements in which they “agreed to put exchanges and cooperation in all areas back on a normal track as fast as possible.”<sup>201</sup> Notably, on the same day that Beijing and Seoul released these conciliatory statements, the PRC’s MOFA publicized several concessions that Seoul had apparently made to Beijing regarding future security cooperation with the US (and Japan).

In response to a question about Beijing’s rationale for moving past the THAAD issue, the MOFA spokesperson promptly stated the following:

We have noted that South Korea stated publicly that South Korea will not join the US anti-missile system, develop the South Korea-US-Japan security cooperation into a tripartite military alliance or make additional deployment of the THAAD system, and the current THAAD deployment in the South Korea will not undermine China’s strategic security interests. We hope that South Korea

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<sup>197</sup> Heekyong Yang and Ju-min Park, “‘Shocked’ South Korea Leader Orders Probe Into U.S. Thaad Additions,” *Reuters*, May 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-northkorea-missiles-south-thaad/shocked-south-korea-leader-orders-probe-into-u-s-thaad-additions-idUSKBN18Q0I3>.

<sup>198</sup> Christine Kim and David Brunnstrom, “South Korea Does Not Aim to Change U.S. Missile Defense Deal: Security Adviser,” *Reuters*, June 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-thaad-idUSKBN1900RQ>; Ju-min Park, “South Korea Says Anti-Missile Deployment on Hold Pending Environmental Review,” *Reuters*, June 7, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southkorea-usa-thaad-idUSKBN18Y22M>.

<sup>199</sup> “North Korea Conducts New Intercontinental Missile Test,” *BBC*, July 28, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-40757780>.

<sup>200</sup> Ho, *South Korea’s Strategic Approach to China (or Lack of It)*.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.; “China and South Korea Discuss Bilateral Relations and Associated Issues,” [zhonghan shuangfang jiu zhonghan guanxi deng jinxing goutong; 中韩双方就中韩关系等进行沟通], *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, Oct. 31, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw\\_673019/t1506044.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1506044.shtml).

will match word to deed and follow through on these remarks to properly handle the relevant issue.<sup>202</sup>

Indeed, the day prior, on October 30, South Korea's foreign minister Kang Kyung-wha made exactly these commitments during a State Affairs Audit meeting at the National Assembly, in what appeared at the time to be comments "out of the blue."<sup>203</sup> She stated that Seoul was not considering any additional THAAD deployments, would not join a trilateral alliance with the US and Japan, and would not join a regional US-led missile defense system.<sup>204</sup> The timing of these commitments suggests that they were likely central to China's willingness to repair bilateral ties with South Korea.

## Summary and assessment

This case study examined China's efforts to weaken and impose limits on the US-South Korean alliance from 2013 to 2017, during the early years of the Park Administration and later on the specific policy issue of preventing the THAAD deployment. Over this period, Beijing pursued its goals initially through political carrots and then, as the THAAD deployment appeared increasingly inevitable, through a significant package of diplomatic and economic sticks.

Indeed, China initially extended positive inducements to the relatively receptive Park. Chinese-South Korean relations improved markedly, and some in Washington reportedly grew concerned that Seoul was drifting too close. That Park resisted holding formal talks on THAAD for a year and a half after the US proposed it, and that Moon put a hold on the deployment upon coming into office, suggests that Beijing's measures helped to either produce or at the very least reinforce Seoul's hesitance toward the deployment.

Yet as North Korea continued to develop and test its missile capabilities, both Park and Moon decided to move forward with THAAD. Whereas Xi early in his tenure made a point—or at least a show—of pressuring Pyongyang, by 2016 he proved unwilling or unable to stay that course. Rather than work with Seoul on the North Korea challenge, Beijing resorted to a campaign of political and economic coercion to punish Seoul and compel it to reverse course.

These measures failed. Not only that, China's coercive wedging backfired to some degree by hardening South Korean public and elite attitudes toward Beijing. For example, a 2019 survey revealed that 14 percent of the South Korean public view China as a reliable partner—down

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<sup>202</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on October 31, 2017," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, Oct. 31, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1506230.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1506230.shtml).

<sup>203</sup> Ho, *South Korea's Strategic Approach to China (or Lack of It)*.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*



from 33 percent in 2016.<sup>205</sup> Meanwhile, popular views of the US-South Korea alliance have improved, albeit from an already high baseline: a 2017 poll conducted by the ASAN Institute indicated that 95 percent of South Koreans viewed the US alliance favorably, up from 94 percent in 2016 and 91 percent in 2011.<sup>206</sup> At the official level, in April 2017 South Korean lawmakers passed a resolution expressing “deep concern and regret” over China’s coercive measures, which they described as “a big stumbling block” in the country’s relationship with Beijing.<sup>207</sup> In 2019, Chun Yung-woo, the former national security advisor, remarked that PRC actions during the THAAD crisis demonstrated to South Koreans just “how harsh [the Chinese] can be in dealing with their small neighbors and how hollow their commitment to a peaceful rise actually turned out to be.... The romantic view of China is gone now.”

Despite these setbacks, PRC wedging toward South Korea was not an unalloyed failure. Both Park and Moon hesitated to move forward with THAAD; if North Korea had adopted a less menacing posture, Seoul may not have moved forward with the full battery deployment. China’s coercion also succeeded in extracting from Seoul the “Three No’s.” Although these commitments were not radical, they did set limits on the future parameters of US-South Korean security cooperation. That they were offered as a palliative to China after a nearly two-year period of coercion suggests that Chinese coercion was at least somewhat effective at driving a wedge between the US and South Korea.

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<sup>205</sup> Karl Friedhoff et al., *Cooperation and Hedging: Comparing US and South Korean Views of China*, Chicago Council on Global Affairs, Oct. 2019, <https://www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/cooperation-and-hedging-comparing-us-and-south-korean-views-china>.

<sup>206</sup> Kim Jiyeon, *South Korean Public Opinion*, The Asan Forum, Feb. 27, 2018, <http://www.theasanforum.org/south-korean-public-opinion/>.

<sup>207</sup> Kwanwoo Jun, “South Korea Talks Tougher on China Retaliation,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 4, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/south-korea-talks-tougher-on-china-retaliation-1491301100>.

# China Fails to Weaken the Australian-US Alliance (2016–2021)

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This section surveys China's efforts since 2016 to gain influence in Australia at the expense of Washington. The case focuses on two recent episodes in Sino-Australian relations. The first is China's subversion efforts to increase its influence in Australian politics and society, including at the expense of the US-Australian alliance. The second is the PRC's punitive response to Australia's call for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic, which triggered a rapid deterioration in the China-Australia relationship and coincided with a major deepening in the US-Australian alliance. Collectively, the section illustrates that Chinese statecraft has sensitized Canberra to the potential threat China poses and, far from weakening the bonds of alliance between the US and Australia, it has helped to strengthen them.

Australia is a major US ally in Asia, and its historical willingness to support US foreign and security policies meaningfully is unparalleled among US allies in Asia. Canberra has fought alongside the US in every major military action since World War I and has continued to rely on the alliance to serve as the foundation of its security since the end of the Cold War.<sup>208</sup> For its economic prosperity, however, Australia has turned increasingly to China over the past several decades. In 2007, China became Australia's largest trading partner, and the bilateral trade and investment relationship was instrumental in helping Australia weather the 2008–2009 Global Financial Crisis without experiencing a recession.<sup>209</sup> Indeed, the economic relationship with China helped to drive 30 consecutive years of uninterrupted economic growth, a streak that ended only in 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>210</sup> The importance of Australia's economic relationship with China has led some commentators to suggest that Canberra's economic interests are pulling it away from Washington.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Summary Document, 2021, *Australia-US Defence Relationship*. <https://usa.embassy.gov.au/defence-cooperation>.

<sup>209</sup> "Australia in First Recession for Nearly 30 Years," *BBC*, Sept. 2, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-53994318>; David Uren, "Shifting Sands of Diplomacy," *The Australian*, June 1, 2012, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/inquirer/shifting-sands-of-diplomacy/news-story/21f8e1dd533f88726a11e8f6e30d0cc7>.

<sup>210</sup> "Australia in First Recession for Nearly 30 Years."

<sup>211</sup> For example, Geoff Raby, a former Australian ambassador to China, has remarked, "Our interests are not identical to the U.S.... That doesn't mean we can't have a close, warm relationship with the United States. But we cannot join the U.S. in a policy premised on China being a strategic competitor." See: Neil Irwin, "Australia and the

Given Australia's role as a stout American ally and an anchor of American strategic interests in Asia, the alliance makes an obvious target. As veteran Australian journalist Paul Kelly has noted, "If the rise of China can compromise a rock-solid alliance with Australia, no other American alliance relationship in the Pacific can be considered safe from erosion."<sup>212</sup> Beijing has apparently eyed weakening the alliance. In 2005, Chen Yonglin, a former Chinese diplomat and PRC defector, reported that Beijing aspired to "turn Australia into a second France; that dares to say 'no' to America."<sup>213</sup> To this end, much of Beijing's effort to build influence in Australia relied on the use of coercion and subversion.

This section proceeds in four parts. First, we provide background on how Australia tried to manage its growing economic relationship with China while nevertheless maintaining—and indeed strengthening—its alliance with the US. Second, we survey the first episode, the emergence of, and Australia's reaction to, Chinese subversive influence in Australian politics and society. Third, we survey the second episode, the rapid deterioration of the China-Australia relationship following the Australian foreign minister's April 2020 suggestion for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 virus. Fourth, we assess and review China's conduct, concluding that Beijing's statecraft has been instrumental in helping to make the US-Australia alliance stronger today than at any point in the post-Cold War era.

## Background

Australian leaders have long debated how best to balance Canberra's security interests in the US alliance with its economic relationship with China. During Kevin Rudd's first term as prime minister (2007–2010), for example, his government criticized Beijing's human rights record and raised alarm about its military modernization. Rudd's successor, Julia Gillard (2010–2013), adopted what many viewed as a "less confrontational" approach.<sup>214</sup> Gillard rejected the notion of having to choose between Australia's security alliance with the US and its economic relationship with China. A 2013 Defense White Paper stated, "Australia

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U.S. Are Old Allies. China's Rise Changes the Equation," *New York Times*, May 11, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/11/upshot/australia-relationship-china-us-trade.html>; Hugh White, "Australia's China Problem Will Only Get Worse," *Nikkei Asia*, Nov. 20, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Australia-s-China-problem-will-only-get-worse>.

<sup>212</sup> Malcolm Cook, *Australia and U.S.-China Relations: Bandwagoned and Unbalancing*, Korea Economic Institute of America - Joint U.S.-Korea Academic Studies, [https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/australia\\_and\\_u.s.-china\\_relations.pdf](https://keia.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/australia_and_u.s.-china_relations.pdf).

<sup>213</sup> Li Mingjiang and Kalyan M. Kemburi, *China's Power and Asian Security* (London, UK: Routledge, 2015), 179.

<sup>214</sup> Alan Bloomfield, "To Balance or to Bandwagon? Adjusting to China's Rise During Australia's Rudd-Gillard Era," *The Pacific Review* 29, no. 2 (2016), doi: 10.1080/09512748.2015.1013497, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09512748.2015.1013497>.

welcomes China's rise ... China's continued economic growth has been a positive contributor to the econom[y] of Australia.... China's defence capabilities are growing and its military is modernising, as a natural and legitimate outcome of its economic growth."<sup>215</sup>

At the same time, however, Gillard nurtured the US alliance and worked to deepen it. She supported the Obama Administration's "pivot" to Asia.<sup>216</sup> In 2012, Australia began hosting US marines in the northern city of Darwin, marking the first major expansion in the US military's presence in the Asia-Pacific since the Vietnam War.<sup>217</sup> China opposed the move; PRC state media noted, "There is real worry in the Chinese society concerning Australia's acceptance of an increased US military presence" and warned that Australia "cannot play China for a fool" and "will be caught in the crossfire."<sup>218</sup>

Subsequent Australian leaders would similarly attempt to strike their own balance. In 2014, Prime Minister Tony Abbott (2013–2015) expressed notional support for the China-led Asia Infrastructure Investment Bank.<sup>219</sup> In 2015, Australia irritated President Obama when the PRC firm Landbridge won a 99-year lease to operate the port of Darwin just a few miles from where US marines were in rotation.<sup>220</sup> By the middle of the decade, multiple Australian governments had demonstrated their willingness, albeit to varying degrees, to expand ties with both Washington and Beijing while managing the frustration of one or the other along the way.

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<sup>215</sup> Bloomfield, "To Balance or to Bandwagon?."

<sup>216</sup> Barack H. Obama and Julia Gillard, "Remarks by President Obama and Prime Minister Gillard of Australia in Joint Press Conference," (Parliament House, Canberra, Australia, Nov. 16, 2011), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/16/remarks-president-obama-and-prime-minister-gillard-australia-joint-press>.

<sup>217</sup> Jackie Calmes, "A U.S. Marine Base for Australia Irritates China," *New York Times*, Nov. 17, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/17/world/asia/obama-and-gillard-expand-us-australia-military-ties.html>.

<sup>218</sup> "Australia Could Be Caught in Sino-US crossfire," *Global Times*, Nov. 16, 2011, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/684097.shtml>.

<sup>219</sup> "Tony Abbott Offers Lukewarm Support to China-Backed Asia Bank," *BBC*, Nov. 11, 2014, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-29998778>.

<sup>220</sup> Phillip Coorey and Laura Tingle, "'Let Us Know Next Time': How Obama Chided Turnbull Over Darwin Port Sale," *Financial Review*, Nove. 18, 2015, <https://www.afr.com/politics/let-us-know-next-time-how-obama-chided-turnbull-over-darwin-port-sale-20151118-gl1qkg>.

# Divider approach 1 and target initial response

## PRC subversion and coercion

In 2016 and 2017, Australians got wind of several scandals and revelations regarding PRC interference in Australian politics, including efforts to gain influence over policies that would put distance between Canberra and Washington. After Australia responded to this threat by passing anti-interference legislation and building other defenses, China penalized Canberra in their political and economic relationship. Over this time, the view in Australia that China poses a potential threat became increasingly prevalent, and the US-Australia alliance was deepened.

## China's subversion

In 2016, an Australian investigation into Chinese interference “revealed that the CCP was routinely targeting high levels of government with a view to exercising direct influence over policy-making.”<sup>221</sup> Below we highlight a few such instances of PRC subversion and coercion that demonstrate how the PRC sought to gain influence over Australian policy, including policies that could have put distance between Canberra and Washington.

One of the scandals centered on Australian Labor senator Sam Dastyari, who, deviating from his party's position on the issue, echoed standard PRC talking points in public remarks on SCS policy disputes.<sup>222</sup> Standing next to Huang Xiangmo, a prominent political donor who was also president of the Australian Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China, a CCP-linked group that seeks to influence public opinion and government policies in foreign countries, Dastyari stated: “The Chinese integrity of its borders is a matter for China....The role that Australia should be playing as a friend is to know...where it is and isn't our place to be involved.”<sup>223</sup> Dastyari's comments appear to have been intended to salvage an AUD 400,000 donation that Huang canceled after the Australian Labor Party's defense spokesperson publicly stated that the country should conduct freedom of navigations

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<sup>221</sup> Andrew O'Neil, *An Australian Perspective*, The Asan Forum, July 2, 2018, <https://theasanforum.org/australian-perspective/>.

<sup>222</sup> Quentin McDermott, “Sam Dastyari Defended China's Policy in South China Sea in Defiance of Labor Policy, Secret Recording Reveals,” *ABC*, Nov. 29, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-11-29/sam-dastyari-secret-south-china-sea-recordings/9198044?nw=0&r=HtmlFragment>.

<sup>223</sup> See, for example, “The Greater Pacific,” Da Yang Zhou; 大洋洲, *China Council for the Promotion of Peaceful National Reunification Zhongguo Heping Tongyi Cujin Hui*; 中国和平统一促进会 (2019), <https://web.archive.org/web/20160310234452/http://www.zhongguotongcuhui.org.cn/hnwtch/dyz/>; Zheng Zhang, “What Is the CCPNR and the UFWD?,” *Vision Times*, 2017, <https://www.visiontimes.com.au/pdf/22.pdf>; John Dotson, “The United Front Work Department in Action Abroad: A Profile of The Council for the Promotion of the Peaceful Reunification of China,” *China Brief* 18, no. 2 (Feb. 13, 2018). McDermott, “Sam Dastyari Defended China's Policy in the South China Sea in Defiance of Labor Policy, Secret Recording Reveals.”

operations in the SCS.<sup>224</sup> After these and other allegations emerged in 2017, Dastyari resigned from the senate.<sup>225</sup>

Another revelation in 2017 involved Meng Jianzhu, who was then a member of the CCP's Politburo and head of the Party's Commission on Political and Legal Affairs.<sup>226</sup> In March 2017, after the Australian Senate declined to support an extradition treaty with China, Meng reportedly lobbied the Labor Party to support the agreement in a closed-door meeting in Sydney. According to leaked accounts of the conversation, Meng told his Australian interlocutors it would be "a shame if Chinese government representatives had to tell the Chinese community in Australia that Labor did not support the relationship between Australia and China."<sup>227</sup>

In December 2017, a critical parliamentary election was held in Bennelong, an area of Sydney home to a large number of Chinese Australians.<sup>228</sup> The election had the potential to determine the fate of the government of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (2015–2018), which at that time had just a one-vote majority in the lower house and had begun to advocate the passage of legislation to counter foreign interference.<sup>229</sup> Australian media revealed that there were pronounced efforts by CCP-linked actors to encourage Chinese Australians to

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<sup>224</sup> Gabrielle Chan, "Sam Dastyari Contradicted South China Sea Policy a Day After Chinese Donor's Alleged Threat," *The Guardian*, June 5, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/jun/05/sam-dastyari-contradicted-south-china-sea-policy-a-day-after-chinese-donors-alleged-threat>.

<sup>225</sup> Amy Remeikis, "Sam Dastyari Quits as Labor Senator Over China Connections," *The Guardian*, Dec. 11, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/12/sam-dastyari-quits-labor-senator-china-connections>.

<sup>226</sup> "Meng Jianzhu Meets Italian Justice Minister in Beijing," *Xinhua*, Sept. 26, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/26/c\\_136638107.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-09/26/c_136638107.htm).

<sup>227</sup> Primrose Riordan, "Beijing's Veiled Threat to Shorten," *The Australian*, Dec. 5, 2017.

<sup>228</sup> Anne Davies and Naaman Zhou, "Bennelong's Heart: The Diverse District That's Key to Winning Byelection," *The Guardian*, Dec. 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/14/bennelongs-heart-vibrant-diverse-and-key-to-winning-byelection>.

<sup>229</sup> Katharine Murphy, "Relief for Liberals as Bennelong byelection Win Saves Turnbull's Majority," *The Guardian*, Dec. 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/16/bennelong-byelection-win-john-alexander-malcolm-turnbull-kristina-keneally>.

support the opposition Labor Party.<sup>230</sup> A mysterious letter, for example, was circulated to voters in Bennelong, which stated the following:

In our eyes, the current Liberal Coalition party is very different from before — it's now an extreme right wing ruling party....They are against China, against Asian migrants, against Chinese international students in broad daylight and under the table....They are pushing the Australia and China relationship to the edge of distrust....All of this hurts the interest of Chinese Australians, and they are not in line with the interests of Australia.<sup>231</sup>

According to Fairfax media, the letter was shared by the Australian Council for the Promotion of Peaceful Reunification of China, although the organization denied it. The Labor Party lost the election, and the Turnbull government was able to move forward with its anti-interference efforts.

Canberra viewed these and other “domestic interference” scandals with great concern. In December 2017, Prime Minister Turnbull stated, “foreign powers are making unprecedented and increasingly sophisticated attempts to influence the political process, both here and abroad.”<sup>232</sup> By 2018, mainstream Australian discourse held that the CCP “is seeking to exert unprecedented influence to achieve instrumental political outcomes, the overriding one being compliance with China’s worldview.”<sup>233</sup>

## Australia responds and China retaliates

The Turnbull government moved promptly to insulate itself from this unwelcome influence, and the prime minister himself declared in Mandarin, “The Australian people stand up,” channeling Mao Zedong’s reputed assertion of Chinese sovereignty in 1949.<sup>234</sup> In June 2018, Canberra passed anti-interference legislation, which Turnbull described as the “most

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<sup>230</sup> Alex Joske, “Bennelong Byelection: The Influential Network Targeting the Turnbull Government in Bennelong,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec. 15, 2017, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/bennelong-byelection-the-influential-network-targeting-the-turnbull-government-in-bennelong-20171215-h0581u.html>.

<sup>231</sup> Henry Belot, “Mysterious Letter Shows Influence of Chinese Community in Crucial Bennelong By-Election,” *ABC*, Dec. 13, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-14/bennelong-by-election-mysterious-letter-chinese-community/9258696>.

<sup>232</sup> Henry Belot, “Malcolm Turnbull Announces Biggest Overhaul of Espionage, Intelligence Laws in Decades,” *ABC*, Dec. 4, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-05/turnbull-announces-foreign-interference-laws/9227514>.

<sup>233</sup> O’Neil, *An Australian Perspective*.

<sup>234</sup> Tom Phillips Christopher Knaus, “Turnbull Says Australia Will ‘Stand Up’ To China as Foreign Influence Row Heats Up,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/09/china-says-turnbulls-remarks-have-poisoned-the-atmosphere-of-relations>.

significant reforms to Australia's foreign interference laws in decades."<sup>235</sup> In November 2018, Canberra passed another measure restricting the ability of foreign individuals and entities to donate to Australian political campaigns.<sup>236</sup>

Increasingly sensitized to the threat posed by the PRC, Canberra moved to insulate itself in other areas, too, including those that had been flagged previously as presenting potential security threats. In 2018, Australia passed legislation subjecting foreign investors in critical infrastructure—to include the Darwin port—to enhanced scrutiny to ensure that foreign owners do not exert improper influence.<sup>237</sup> It also banned the Chinese telecom giants Huawei and ZTE from working on Australia's 5G network, citing the risk posed by entities "subject to extrajudicial directions from a foreign government."<sup>238</sup>

China reacted strongly to Australia's accusations of interference and subsequent countermeasures. In December 2017, the foreign ministry's spokesperson stated, "Such remarks simply cater to the irresponsible reports by some Australian media that are without principle and full of bias against China."<sup>239</sup> The same month, *The People's Daily*, the CCP's official mouthpiece, accused Australia of racism: "This type of hysterical paranoia," it wrote, "had racist undertones, and is a stain on Australia's image as a multicultural society."<sup>240</sup>

Following the passage of the counter-interference legislation, China responded by putting diplomatic relations with Australia in a "deep freeze," with the PRC ambassador accusing Canberra of making "systematic, irresponsible, negative remarks and comments regarding

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<sup>235</sup> "Malcolm Turnbull Announces New Laws to Crack Down on Foreign Interference," *ABC*, Dec. 4, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-05/malcolm-turnbull-announces-new-laws-to-crack-down/9228072?nw=0>.

<sup>236</sup> "Australian Law Targets Foreign Interference. China Is Not Pleased.," *New York Times*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/28/world/australia/australia-security-laws-foreign-interference.html>.

<sup>237</sup> *Security of Critical Infrastructure Act 2018*, (July 11, 2018), <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/about-us/our-portfolios/national-security/security-coordination/security-of-critical-infrastructure-act-2018>; Critical Infrastructure Centre, Coverage of the Security of Critical Infrastructure Act 2018, Subject, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/nat-security/files/cic-factsheet-coverage-of-security-of-critical-infrastructure-act-2018.pdf>.

<sup>238</sup> Arjun Kharpal, "Huawei and ZTE Banned From Selling 5G Equipment to Australia," *CNBC*, Aug. 23, 2018, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/08/23/huawei-and-zte-banned-from-selling-5g-equipment-to-australia.html>.

<sup>239</sup> Caitlyn Gribbin, "Malcolm Turnbull Declares He Will 'Stand Up' for Australia In Response to China's Criticism," *ABC*, Dec. 8, 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-09/malcolm-turnbull-says-he-will-stand-up-for-australia/9243274>.

<sup>240</sup> "China Accuses Australian Media of Racism and Paranoia," *DW*, Dec. 11, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/china-accuses-australian-media-of-racism-and-paranoia/a-41736615>.



China.”<sup>241</sup> As Iain Henry, a lecturer at the Australian National University, writes, “as 2018 progressed the deep freeze in Sino-Australian relations grew more problematic. Ministerial visits to China were delayed until their inevitable cancellation, and when Australia's trade minister was able to secure a rare visa approval, he did not meet with his Chinese counterpart.”<sup>242</sup> Turnbull acknowledged the difficulties in 2018: “There has been a degree of tension in the relationship which has arisen because of criticism in China of our foreign interference laws, but it is very important that the Australian government ensures only Australians are influencing our political processes.”<sup>243</sup>

In addition to political sanctions, China hit Australia with economic and other penalties. For example, in June 2018, Australian wine was held up at Chinese ports.<sup>244</sup> In 2019, Australian coal, one of the country's largest exports to China, similarly had difficulty passing through PRC port terminals.<sup>245</sup> In 2019, PRC actors hacked the Australian parliament's website, and the Chinese ambassador to Australia laid blame for bilateral tensions squarely at Canberra's feet.<sup>246</sup>

## US-Australia alliance deepens

As the China-Australia relationship strained between 2017 and 2019, the US-Australia alliance strengthened. The Turnbull government was eager to keep the Trump Administration engaged in the Indo-Pacific and sought to accommodate the administration's desire

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<sup>241</sup> Charli Shield, “Have China-Australia Ties Reached a New Low?,” *DW*, Apr. 20, 2018, <https://www.dw.com/en/have-china-australia-ties-reached-a-new-low/a-43471015>.

<sup>242</sup> Iain D. Henry, “Adapt or Atrophy? The Australia-U.S. Alliance in an Age of Power Transition,” *Contemporary Politics* 26, no. 4 (2020), doi: 10.1080/13569775.2020.1777043, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569775.2020.1777043>.

<sup>243</sup> Ben Westcott, “Australia Admits ‘Tension’ With Beijing Over New Anti-Influence Laws,” *CNN*, Apr. 13, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/12/asia/australia-china-tensions-intl/index.html>.

<sup>244</sup> “Australian Wine Shipments Held up at Chinese Ports Amid Political Tensions: Report,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, June 15, 2018, <https://www.smh.com.au/business/the-economy/australian-wine-shipments-held-up-at-chinese-ports-amid-political-tensions-report-20180615-p4zloj.html>.

<sup>245</sup> Olivia Ralph, “China Restricts Australian Coal Imports at its Ports in a Bid to Boost Domestic Market,” *ABC*, Feb. 17, 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/rural/2019-02-18/china-restricts-australian-coal-imports-to-boost-own-market/10812098>.

<sup>246</sup> Colin Packham, “Australia Must Respect China if Relations Are to Improve: Chinese Envoy,” *Reuters*, Dec. 18, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-australia/australia-must-respect-china-if-relations-are-to-improve-chinese-envoy-idUSKBN1YN065>; Colin Packham, “Exclusive: Australia Concluded China Was Behind Hack on Parliament, Political Parties – Sources,” *Reuters*, Sept. 15, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-australia-china-cyber-exclusive-idUSKBN1W00VF>.

to have allies to spend more on defense.<sup>247</sup> In June 2017, Turnbull emphasized that “we understand President Trump's request that those who benefit from the peace America secures do more militarily and financially to contribute.”<sup>248</sup> In 2017, the US Congress passed a law enabling Australia (and the UK) to join its National Defense Technology Base.<sup>249</sup> Also in 2017, Australia supported reestablishing the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad) after the US secretary of state endorsed that idea earlier in the year.<sup>250</sup> This support was a change for Canberra, as Australian leaders declined to pursue the Quad concept in its earlier incarnation in 2007.<sup>251</sup> Australia also strongly endorsed the Trump Administration's vision for a “free and open Indo-Pacific,” a concept that some US allies were hesitant to embrace.<sup>252</sup>

In 2019, both Washington and Canberra criticized Chinese actions in the SCS and China's reported efforts to establish a military base in Cambodia. They called on Beijing to join a trilateral arms control effort to replace the now-defunct Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—a proposition that Beijing has flatly rejected.<sup>253</sup> The deepening of the alliance was driven by an increased perception of threat in Canberra stemming from both the PRC's interference in Australia's politics and society and its aggressive conduct across the Indo-Pacific. As Andrew O'Neil, a professor at Australia's Griffith University, wrote, “Evidence of interference by Beijing in Australia's domestic system and China's assertive military build-

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<sup>247</sup> Katharine Murphy, “Julie Bishop Asks Trump Administration to Increase Engagement in Indo-Pacific,” *The Guardian*, Mar. 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/mar/14/julie-bishop-asks-trump-administration-to-increase-engagement-in-indo-pacific>.

<sup>248</sup> Malcolm Turnbull, “Keynote Address at the 16th IISS Asia Security Summit, Shangri-La Dialogue,” (June 3, 2017), <https://www.malcolmturnbull.com.au/media/keynote-address-at-the-16th-iiss-asia-security-summit-shangri-la-dialogue>.

<sup>249</sup> Heidi M. Peters, *Defense Primer: The National Technology and Industrial Base*, Congressional Research Service, Feb. 3, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11311.pdf>.

<sup>250</sup> Ankit Panda, “US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/us-japan-india-and-australia-hold-working-level-quadrilateral-meeting-on-regional-cooperation/>. Note that it was Australia that declined to move forward with the Quad under the leadership of PM Kevin Rudd in 2008. See: Indrani Bagchi, “Australia To Pull Out of 'Quad' That Excludes China,” *Times of India*, Feb. 6, 2008, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Australia-to-pull-out-of-quad-that-excludes-China/articleshow/2760109.cms>

<sup>251</sup> *Nelson Meets With China Over Military Relationship*: ABC Radio PM, July 9, 2007), Radio.

<sup>252</sup> Andrew Yeo, *South Korea and the Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 20, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/south-korea-and-free-and-open-indo-pacific-strategy>.

<sup>253</sup> US Department of Defense, Press Release, Aug. 4, 2019, *Joint Statement: Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2019*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/1925222/joint-statement-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2019/>.

up in the South China Sea have triggered unprecedented levels of concern among Australian policy makers.”<sup>254</sup>

## Divider approach 2 and wedging outcome

If the Chinese-Australian relationship was on a downward trend before the COVID-19 pandemic, the global outbreak made it much worse. After the Australian foreign minister publicly called for an international inquiry into the origins of COVID-19, China promptly responded with economic and political coercion, sending the relationship to its lowest point in decades. Between 2020 and 2021, while Australia stood ready to improve ties with China, it stood firm on pursuing the COVID-19 investigation and moved to significantly expand its alliance with the US.

### The Australian inquiry and the Chinese sticks

In April 2021, the Australian foreign minister Marise Payne publicly introduced the idea of forming an international inquiry to examine the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Trump Administration quickly endorsed the initiative.<sup>255</sup> Canberra’s call for the inquiry triggered a dramatic and rapid deterioration in relations with China. Beijing attacked the proposal, and PRC officials in Australia again resorted to economic threats. In a late-April newspaper interview, Cheng Jingye, China’s ambassador in Canberra, suggested that the Chinese people were “dismayed” with the Australian proposal and that “maybe the ordinary people will say ‘Why should we drink Australian wine? Eat Australian beef?’”<sup>256</sup> He further suggested that Chinese tourists might have “second thoughts” about vacationing in Australia and that Chinese “parents...would also think...whether this is the best place to send their kids.”<sup>257</sup>

Soon Beijing imposed a raft of economic penalties, including an 80 percent tariff on Australian barley exports to China, a 100 to 200 percent tariff on Australian wine, and a halt of meat

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<sup>254</sup> O’Neil, *An Australian Perspective*.

<sup>255</sup> Brett Worthington, “Marise Payne Calls for Global Inquiry Into China’s Handling of the Coronavirus Outbreak,” *ABC*, Apr. 19, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-04-19/payne-calls-for-inquiry-china-handling-of-coronavirus-covid-19/12162968>; “US Backs Australia’s Call for Virus Inquiry,” *The Australian*, Apr. 30, 2020, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/world/coronavirus-australia-us-secretary-of-state-mike-pompeo-backs-scott-morrison-call-for-virus-inquiry/news-story/e0cd85503b9757ed3f310a1259108f83>.

<sup>256</sup> “China’s Blatant Commercial Attack,” *Financial Review*, Aug. 19, 2020, <https://www.afr.com/chanticleer/china-s-blatant-commercial-attack-20200818-p55mw0>.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*

imports from a number of producers.<sup>258</sup> The PRC's foreign ministry also discouraged Chinese tourists from visiting Australia, citing a heightened risk of racist attack.<sup>259</sup> The PRC had previously employed trade barriers as a coercive tactic targeting Canberra, but these measures were "unprecedented in...[their] scale and commercial impact."<sup>260</sup>

Beijing also appears to have placed the political relationship in an even deeper freeze than before, cutting off bilateral communication at the ministerial level.<sup>261</sup> The Australian commerce and agricultural ministers, for example, sought for weeks to speak with their Chinese counterparts to discuss the impending Chinese tariffs on Australian exports, and both were denied the opportunity.<sup>262</sup> An official from the Chinese embassy in Canberra has said that "the problem is all caused by the Australian side." He explained, "China is trying to send a message that Australia should change the mentality of how you look at China and its development and whether it's an opportunity or a threat – that is the issue."<sup>263</sup> In November, the PRC embassy released a list of 14 grievances that Beijing harbored against Canberra, and a Chinese embassy official suggested that the bilateral relationship would not improve until Australia began taking remedial actions to accommodate PRC interests.<sup>264</sup>

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<sup>258</sup> "The Deterioration of Australia–China Relations," *Strategic Comments* 26, no. 3 (June 2020), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13567888.2020.1783863>; "China slaps Up to 200% Tariffs on Australian Wine," *BBC*, Nov. 27, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-55097100>; Brett Worthington, "Chinese Officials Refuse to Call Australia Back as Coronavirus Trade Tensions Bubble Over," *ABC*, May 16, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-17/coronavirus-china-investigation-trade-barley-beef-covid-19/12256896>.

<sup>259</sup> "Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Hua Chunying's Regular Press Conference on June 8, 2020," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, June 8, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1787042.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1787042.shtml).

<sup>260</sup> "The Deterioration of Australia–China Relations."

<sup>261</sup> Daniel Hurst, "China to Australia: Stop Treating Us as a Threat or We Won't Pick Up the Phone," *The Guardian*, Nov. 20, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/nov/21/china-to-australia-stop-treating-us-as-a-threat-or-we-wont-pick-up-the-phone>.

<sup>262</sup> Bill Birtles, "China Denies Australian Minister's Request to Talk About Barley Amid Coronavirus Investigation Tension," *ABC*, May 17, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-18/coronavirus-trade-troubles-david-littleproud-china-call/12258274>; Worthington, "Chinese Officials Refuse to Call Australia Back as Coronavirus Trade Tensions Bubble Over."

<sup>263</sup> Hurst, "China to Australia: Stop Treating Us as a Threat or We Won't Pick Up the Phone."

<sup>264</sup> Jason Scott, "Australia PM Defiant After China Airs 14 Grievances," *Bloomberg*, Nov. 18, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-19/morrison-defiant-after-china-air-14-grievances-with-australia>.

## Historic deepening in US-Australia alliance

The deterioration in Sino-Australian ties has coincided with a deepening of the US-Australia alliance. In summer 2020, the Australian Department of Defence released a Strategic Update stating, “Australia’s strategic environment has deteriorated more rapidly than anticipated.”<sup>265</sup> The document offered thinly veiled criticism of China, noting that “some countries will continue to pursue their strategic interests through a combination of coercive activities, including espionage, interference, and economic levers.”<sup>266</sup> It further committed to significant new defense spending and pledged to further “deepen the Alliance” with the US.<sup>267</sup>

US officials, for their part, have been vocal in their condemnation of PRC conduct vis-à-vis Australia. In 2020, US secretary of state Mike Pompeo condemned the CCP for threatening “Australia with economic retribution for the simple act of asking for an independent inquiry into the origins of the virus. It’s not right. We stand with Australia.”<sup>268</sup> The Biden Administration has gone further, linking the status of Sino-American ties to China’s conduct toward Australia. In 2021, Kurt Campbell, the White House coordinator for Indo-Pacific affairs, remarked that the US “is not prepared to improve relations in a bilateral and separate context at the same time that a close and dear ally is being subjected to a form of economic coercion.”<sup>269</sup> Washington, he said, is “not going to leave Australia alone on the field.”<sup>270</sup>

Between 2020 and 2021, the US-Australia alliance deepened and expanded significantly. At the 2020 and 2021 Australia-US Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN), the two sides agreed to a slew of new initiatives. In 2020, the ministers agreed to reestablish a bilateral Force Posture Working Group to “advance force-posture cooperation in the Indo-Pacific to promote a secure and stable region and deter coercive acts and the use of force.”<sup>271</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Australian Government Department of Defense, July 1, 2020, *2020 Defence Strategic Update*. <https://www.defence.gov.au/strategicupdate-2020/>.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid. This is what Townsend called “the most ambitious expansion of its regional security posture in more than 70 years.” See: *Asia-Pacific Regional Security Assessment 2021*. International Institute for Strategic Studies, June 2021), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/asia-pacific-regional-security-assessment-2021>.

<sup>268</sup> Michael R. Pompeo, “Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at a Press Availability,” (Press Briefing Room, Washington, DC, May 20, 2020), <https://2017-2021.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-a-press-availability-6/index.html>.

<sup>269</sup> Michael Schuman, “China Discovers the Limits of Its Power,” *The Atlantic*, July 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/07/china-australia-america/619544/>.

<sup>270</sup> Ibid.

<sup>271</sup> US Department of Defense, Press Statement, July 28, 2020, *Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2020*. <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2290911/joint-statement-on-australia-us-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2020/>.

In 2021, the Working Group specified that its focus will be improving “air cooperation through the rotational deployment of U.S. aircraft of all types in Australia,” “maritime cooperation by increasing logistics and sustainment capabilities of U.S.” vessels, and “land cooperation by conducting more complex and more integrated exercises.”<sup>272</sup> At the 2021 AUSMIN, the allies also signed a Statement of Intent on Strategic Capabilities Cooperation and Implementation, “which will further strengthen capability outcomes, [and] deepen our Alliance.”<sup>273</sup> The two sides further noted that bilateral cooperation “in hypersonic weapons and electromagnetic warfare” has progressed, that they recently “finalized bilateral strategies on industrial base collaboration,” and that the US committed to aid Australia’s effort to establish a Guided Weapons and Explosive Ordnance Enterprise.<sup>274</sup>

In a major announcement in September 2021, the US and Australia, along with the UK, formed a new security partnership, called AUKUS, the first major objective of which is to facilitate Australia’s development of a nuclear-powered submarine force.<sup>275</sup> In addition to the undersea domain, the trilateral partnership will also deepen trilateral cooperation in the cyber, artificial intelligence, and quantum technology domains.<sup>276</sup> Prime Minister Scott Morrison (2018–present) described the initiative as “a forever partnership that that will enable Australia to protect our national security interests.”<sup>277</sup> He went on to characterize the AUKUS agreement as “the single greatest” Australian national security initiative “since the [Australia, New Zealand, United States] alliance itself.”<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> US Department of Defense, Press Statement, Sept. 16, 2021, *Joint Statement on Australia-U.S. Ministerial Consultations (AUSMIN) 2021*. <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-australia-u-s-ministerial-consultations-ausmin-2021/>.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

<sup>275</sup> The White House, “Remarks by President Biden, Prime Minister Morrison of Australia, and Prime Minister Johnson of the United Kingdom Announcing the Creation of AUKUS,” (East Room, The White House, Sept. 15, 2021), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/09/15/remarks-by-president-biden-prime-minister-morrison-of-australia-and-prime-minister-johnson-of-the-united-kingdom-announcing-the-creation-of-aukus/>.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Scott Morrison, “AUKUS Alliance a 'Forever Partnership',” (Canberra, Australia, Sept. 15, 2021), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jpOoL2M3Kbg>.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

## Summary and assessment

Chinese statecraft over the last few years has succeeded in alienating Australians, heightening Canberra's sense of threat, and deepening the US-Australia alliance. As former prime minister Turnbull remarked in 2021, Beijing's effort to "make us more compliant" has "completely backfired." The experience, he stated, "has demonstrated to China that they can pull all these levers and it doesn't actually work."<sup>279</sup>

This section has surveyed two important episodes in the Sino-Australian relationship since 2016: (1) China's subversion efforts to increase its influence in Australian politics, and its coercive response once Canberra took remedial action, and (2) China's coercive response to Australia's call for an international inquiry into the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. In both cases, once Australia adopted policies unfavorable to China, the latter responded not by seeking to assuage Canberra's concerns or reassure it of its benign intent but by resorting to coercion and adopting a conspicuously aggrieved disposition.

In combination with China's growing assertiveness across the region, Beijing's use of coercion targeting Australia heightened Canberra's perception of threat and contributed to a major deepening in the US-Australian alliance. The perceived threat posed by China no doubt informed Prime Minister Morrison's September 2021 declaration that "the relatively benign security environment that Australia has enjoyed for many decades in our region is behind us."<sup>280</sup> To address this challenge, Australia and the US have significantly expanded their bilateral defense cooperation."<sup>281</sup> According to Sam Roggeveen of the Lowy Institute in Sydney, the AUKUS agreement demonstrates that Australian leaders have "staked their future on the alliance."<sup>282</sup>

Indeed, Australia has elected to deepen the alliance with the US despite the large and important economic relationship it has with China.<sup>283</sup> And although Australian foreign minister Payne remarked in July 2020 that Canberra has no intention of harming its relationship with China, in the same breath she stated, "nor do we intend to do things that are contrary to

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<sup>279</sup> "Fraying Relations With China Are About to Hit Australian Economy," *Bloomberg*, Sept. 2, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-09-02/fraying-relations-with-china-are-about-to-hit-australian-economy>.

<sup>280</sup> "AUKUS Alliance a 'Forever Partnership'."

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>282</sup> Richard McGregor, "China Down Under: Beijing's Gains and Setback in Australia and New Zealand," *China Leadership Monitor* (June 2019), <https://www.prcleader.org/mcgregor>.

<sup>283</sup> Irwin, "Australia and the U.S. Are Old Allies. China's Rise Changes the Equation."

our interests.”<sup>284</sup> This remark suggests that whatever leverage China acquired as a result of its economic relationship with Australia has been limited, if not undermined, by Beijing’s own statecraft.

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<sup>284</sup> David Brunnstrom and Daphne Psalidakis, “Australia tells U.S. It Has No Intention of Injuring Important China Ties,” *Reuters*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-australia-pompeo/australia-tells-u-s-it-has-no-intention-of-injuring-important-china-ties-idUSKCN24T2MP>.



# China's Mixed Record vis-à-vis the Philippines-US Alliance (2016–2021)

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This section examines China's efforts to exploit frictions in the US-Philippines alliance during the administration of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte (2016–2021). Indeed, Duterte entered office on an explicit platform of separating from Washington. His early visceral stance against the US thus provided China with a window of opportunity to dramatically weaken a US alliance in Southeast Asia.

This case is especially interesting because the scenario at hand—one in which a divider appears to be pushing on an open door (versus convincing a target to do something it may not want to do)—is a distinct type of challenge facing US alliances elsewhere. In places such as Turkey or Hungary, US competitors may find themselves stumbling into conditions favorable to weakening US alliances. Therefore, policy-makers must understand how America's competitors may respond to such opportunities.

This case has two sections. First, we provide background information on Manila's relations with the US and China in the years before Duterte's rise to power. We also include an overview of the unambiguous ways in which Duterte signaled his desire to reorient Philippine foreign policy away from Washington and toward Beijing. Second, we examine Chinese policy toward Manila during the period of interest. On the one hand, the PRC was eager to capitalize on Duterte's opening and extended Manila a basket of political and economic inducements, pledging in particular to help the new president with his declared priorities concerning economic and infrastructure development. On the other hand, Beijing maintained an assertive posture in Philippine-claimed areas of the SCS throughout much of Duterte's tenure. We also discuss in this section China's surprisingly persistent coercive conduct following Manila's February 2020 decision to initiate a 180-day review period for terminating its Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) with the US. Overall, we argue that although China's efforts to capitalize on Duterte's opening resulted in substantive albeit limited gains, Chinese coercion toward Philippine interests in the SCS during this period may have cost Beijing an extraordinary opportunity to meaningfully weaken the US-Philippines alliance.

## Background

Although the Philippines is the oldest US treaty ally in Asia, bilateral strains in the post-Cold War era have made the alliance an appealing target for the PRC. In the early 2000s, Beijing enjoyed what it characterized as a “golden era” with Manila.<sup>285</sup> The two countries succeeded in compartmentalizing their principal points of friction—territorial and maritime disputes in the SCS—while expanding economic cooperation.

During the administration of Philippine president Benigno Aquino III (2010–2016), however, Sino-Philippine relations deteriorated as disputes in the SCS flared. China seized control of the disputed Scarborough Shoal in 2012 and began large-scale land reclamation in the SCS soon afterward, transforming the small features it occupies (which are also claimed by the Philippines, Vietnam, and Taiwan) into large militarized islands.<sup>286</sup> To defend its claims, in 2013 Manila initiated a compulsory arbitration case per Annex VII of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, an act that drove bilateral relations with China to their lowest point in decades.<sup>287</sup> By the end of Aquino’s term, Manila’s concerns about Beijing had grown so acute that the Philippine president publicly compared the PRC to Nazi Germany.<sup>288</sup>

As PRC-Philippine relations worsened under Aquino, the US-Philippine alliance deepened. In 2011, the allies began to hold a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue involving the US secretaries of state and defense.<sup>289</sup> Washington provided Manila with much-needed arms, and in 2014 the allies concluded the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA), which authorized US forces to upgrade and access five Philippine bases, including one in Palawan Province just astride the

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<sup>285</sup> Mingjiang and Kemburi, *China’s Power and Asian Security* 179.

<sup>286</sup> Ketian Zhang, “Cautious Bully: Reputation, Resolve, and Beijing’s Use of Coercion in the South China Sea,” *International Security* 44, no. 1 (2019), doi: [https://doi.org/10.1162/isec\\_a\\_00354](https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00354).

<sup>287</sup> *The South China Sea Arbitration (The Republic of Philippines v. The People’s Republic of China)*, Case No. 2013-19 (Permanent Court of Arbitration. <https://pca-cpa.org/en/cases/7/>).

<sup>288</sup> Kiyoshi Takenaka, “Philippine’s Aquino Revives Comparison Between China and Nazi Germany,” *Reuters*, June 3, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-japan-philippines/philippines-aquino-revives-comparison-between-china-and-nazi-germany-idUSKBN00J00Y20150603>.

<sup>289</sup> Office of the Spokesperson, Press Release, Apr. 30, 2012, *Joint Statement of the United States-Philippines Ministerial Dialogue*. <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/04/188977.htm>; *Signing of the Manila Declaration on Board the USS Fitzgerald in Manila Bay, Manila, Philippines*, Nov. 16, 2011, <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2011/11/177226.htm>.

disputed Spratly Islands.<sup>290</sup> The US and Philippine militaries also held increasingly large military exercises, some involving amphibious operations in or near the SCS.<sup>291</sup>

## Duterte gives Washington the cold shoulder

The rise of Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte changed the triangular dynamic between Manila, Washington, and Beijing. Duterte entered office openly skeptical of the US. “America would never die for us,” he complained during his campaign, later adding as president-elect, “We have this pact with the West but I want everybody to know that we will be charting a course of our own.... It will not be dependent on America.”<sup>292</sup>

Unsurprisingly, US-Philippine relations quickly deteriorated upon Duterte’s arrival. In September 2016, President Obama expressed concern over Duterte’s war on drugs, which has allegedly involved widespread extrajudicial violence.<sup>293</sup> Duterte responded by referring to Obama with an expletive, causing the US president to cancel a planned meeting with him.<sup>294</sup> Later that month, Duterte said he wanted US troops to leave Mindanao, a restive island where they had long advised Philippine counterinsurgency operations.<sup>295</sup> He announced that the country would no longer conduct “war games” with the US at least in part because of China’s

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<sup>290</sup> Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *The U.S.-Philippine Alliance in a Year of Transition: Challenges and Opportunities*, Brookings, July 2016, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Paper-5.pdf>; Renato Cruz De Castro, *Future Challenges in the US-Philippines Alliance*, East-West Center, Number 168, June 26, 2012 <https://www.eastwestcenter.org/sites/default/files/private/apb168.pdf>; Press Statement, Apr. 29, 2014, *Document: Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the Philippines and the United States*. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2014/04/29/document-enhanced-defense-cooperation-agreement/>.

<sup>291</sup> Greitens, *The U.S.-Philippine Alliance in a Year of Transition: Challenges and Opportunities*.

<sup>292</sup> Karen Lema Neil Jerome Morales, “Philippines Says May Benefit From Any Pivot to Asia by Biden Administration,” *Reuters*, Jan. 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-china-idUSKBN29Y03Y>; Neil Jerome Morales, “Philippines President-Elect Says Won’t Rely on United States,” *Reuters*, May 16, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics/philippines-president-elect-says-wont-rely-on-united-states-idUSKCN0YM1EZ>.

<sup>293</sup> Barack H. Obama, “Press Conference by President Obama after G20 Summit,” (J.W. Marriott Hotel Hangzhou, Hangzhou, China, Sept. 05, 2016), <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/09/05/press-conference-president-obama-after-g20-summit>.

<sup>294</sup> “Obama Calls Off Meeting With Philippine Leader After ‘Whore’ Jibe,” *BBC*, Sept. 6, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-37281821>.

<sup>295</sup> John Bacon, “Duterte Wants U.S. Troops out of Southern Philippines,” *USA TODAY*, Sept. 12, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2016/09/12/duterte-wants-us-troops-out-southern-philippines/90261684/>.

opposition.<sup>296</sup> Duterte ordered his defense secretary to obtain military equipment from China and Russia and announced that Manila would “open alliances” with these nations.<sup>297</sup>

Throughout early 2017, moreover, Duterte watered down plans to implement provisions of the EDCA that Manila had signed with Washington in 2014. The EDCA allows for the US to “preposition and store defense equipment, supplies, and material” at the agreed locations and for the “bunkering of vessels, temporary maintenance of vehicles, vessels, and aircraft; [and] temporary accommodation of personnel.”<sup>298</sup> Upon entering office, however, Duterte took steps seemingly intended to nullify or obstruct the agreement. In January 2017, Duterte held a press conference in which he “serv[ed] notice” to the US military not to violate terms of the agreement. In March, the Philippines unexpectedly and without explanation canceled plans for EDCA-related construction at the Antonio Bautista Air Base.<sup>299</sup>

Determining what exactly drove Duterte’s push to alter Philippine foreign relations is difficult. Some analysts trace his skepticism of the US to his upbringing—members of his family reportedly believe Washington “was guilty of crimes during its invasion and colonization of the Philippines during the first half of the 20th century.”<sup>300</sup> Others cite his frustration that the US had not defended the Philippines against Chinese aggression in the SCS during the Aquino Administration. Perhaps, however, he simply played up his anti-Americanism to solicit Chinese support for his “Build, Build, Build” development agenda; at one point, Duterte indicated that if Beijing would “build [for us] a train [going to] Batangas, for the six years that I’ll be president, I’ll shut up [on the South China Sea disputes].”<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>296</sup> Julie M. Aurelio, “2016 PH-US War Games Will Be the Last – Duterte,” *Inquirer.net*, Sept. 28, 2016, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/145669/2016-ph-us-war-games-will-be-the-last-duterte#ixzz4LZJD2Ywr>.

<sup>297</sup> “Philippines’ Duterte Wants to ‘Open Alliances’ With Russia, China,” *Reuters*, Sept. 26, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-politics-duterte/philippines-duterte-wants-to-open-alliances-with-russia-china-idUSKCN11W17T>; Trefor Moss, “Duterte Signals Shift in U.S.-Philippine Military Alliance,” *Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 13, 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/duterte-signals-shift-in-u-s-philippine-military-alliance-1473774873>.

<sup>298</sup> *Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the Philippines and the United States*, 2014.

<sup>299</sup> Gregory Poling and Conor Cronin, “The Dangers of Allowing U.S.-Philippine Defense Cooperation to Languish,” *War on the Rocks*, May 17, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/the-dangers-of-allowing-u-s-philippine-defense-cooperation-to-languish/>.

<sup>300</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “Why the Philippines’ Rodrigo Duterte Hates America,” *The Diplomat*, Nov. 1, 2016, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/why-the-philippines-rodrigo-duterte-hates-america/>.

<sup>301</sup> As a candidate, Duterte remarked, “What I need from China is help to develop my country.” See: Richard Heydarian, “Little Sign of Duterte’s Promised ‘Separation’ From the US as China-Philippines Relations Crumble,” *South China Morning Post*, Apr. 23, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/comment/opinion/article/3130407/little-sign-dutertes-promised-separation-us-china-philippines>; “Duterte Willing to Back Down on Sea Dispute With China,” *ABS-CBN News*, Apr. 11, 2016, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/halalan2016/nation/04/11/16/duterte-willing-to-back-down-on-sea-dispute-with-china>.

Whatever the reason, Duterte appeared to hasten Manila's realignment toward China during an October 2016 visit to Beijing, where he announced a "separation with the United States." Observers characterized Duterte's foreign policy as a "180-degree turn" and "a shocking reversal for America's carefully constructed alliance system in the Pacific."<sup>302</sup>

## Divider approach and wedging outcome

### Beijing's simultaneous use of carrots and sticks toward Duterte

China moved quickly to capitalize on the prospect of a US treaty ally eager to "separate" from Washington. Beijing promptly revived warm political ties with Manila and offered Duterte a range of political and economic inducements, promising to increase investment, provide favorable loans, and lower trade barriers. China also offered increased cooperation in the SCS, albeit in limited areas and while maintaining an overall assertive posture regarding long-standing territorial and maritime disputes.

### Political and economic inducements

Duterte's October 2016 trip to Beijing marked the first state visit by a Philippine head of state to China since 2011.<sup>303</sup> PRC president Xi Jinping called the engagement "an opportunity to push China-Philippines relations back on a friendly footing and fully improve things."<sup>304</sup> Xi provided Duterte with unusually wide access to the CCP's senior leaders, and the two sides declared their intent to pursue a "strategic and cooperative relationship."<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Gideon Rachman, *Easternization: Asia's Rise and America's Decline From Obama to Trump and Beyond*, (New York, NY: Other Press, 2017), 114; Renato Cruz De Castro, "Explaining the Duterte Administration's Appeasement Policy on China: The Power of Fear," *Asian Affairs: An American Review* 45, no. 3-4 (2018), doi: 10.1080/00927678.2019.1589664.

<sup>303</sup> Nectar Gan, "The Who, What, When, Where And Why of Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's Trip to China," *South China Morning Post*, Oct. 18, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/2028862/who-what-when-where-and-why-philippine-president>.

<sup>304</sup> Ben Blanchard, "Duterte Aligns Philippines with China, Says U.S. Has Lost," *Reuters*, Oct. 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSKCN12K0AS>; "Rodrigo Duterte and Xi Jinping Agree to Reopen South China Sea Talks," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/21/world/asia/rodrigo-duterte-philippines-china-xi-jinping.html>.

<sup>305</sup> "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, Oct. 21, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/zcfg\\_1/t1407682.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/zcfg_1/t1407682.htm).

A major vector of China's Philippine strategy at this stage was to provide Duterte with the economic assistance that he desired and that China was well positioned to provide.<sup>306</sup> Of the 13 bilateral agreements signed during Duterte's October 2016 visit, at least 9 concerned exploring ways to increase bilateral trade and investment.<sup>307</sup> Also during the trip, China extended \$24 billion in aid and investment commitments and lifted a ban of Philippine fruit exporters.<sup>308</sup> Two months later, Beijing offered Manila \$14 million in light arms and speedboats and an additional \$500 million in long-term soft loans for further military equipment.<sup>309</sup>

In addition to economic carrots, Duterte and Xi agreed to resume a slew of intergovernmental consultation mechanisms that China had suspended during the Aquino Administration. These included Foreign Ministry Consultations, Annual Defense Security Talks, the Joint Commission on Economic and Trade Cooperation, and the Joint Committee on Science and Technology.<sup>310</sup> Notably, Beijing also expressed its support for the "Philippine government's efforts in drug control," the issue that had strained Manila's ties with Washington.<sup>311</sup>

In 2018, Xi became the first visit Chinese sitting head of state to visit the Philippines in 11 years. In Manila, the two sides inked 29 more agreements, including cooperative accords on several infrastructure projects and agreements on industrial parks, agricultural issues, and

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<sup>306</sup> Duterte was relatively straightforward with respect to what he wanted from China: consistent with his campaign message, he sought China's assistance in helping to advance the country's economic development. In one 2016 speech, he stated, "Now, with the plans to development, we are really short of the cash flow.... So I borrow. So I come here and say, I am not asking for free but if I could — China would find in his heart to help us in our needs, then we will remember you for all time." See Rodrigo Roa Duterte, "Speech of President Rodrigo Roa Duterte during the Philippines-China Trade and Investment Forum," (Great Hall of the People, Beijing, China, October 20 2016, 2916), <https://pcoo.gov.ph/oct-20-2016-speech-of-president-rodrigo-roa-duterte-during-the-philippines-china-trade-and-investment-forum/>.

<sup>307</sup> "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines."

<sup>308</sup> Karen Lema, "Philippines Looks to China Ffor Farms 'Windfall' When Fruit Ban Ends," *Reuters*, Oct. 9, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-agriculture/philippines-looks-to-china-for-farms-windfall-when-fruit-ban-ends-idUSKCN1290PV>; Andreo Calonzo and Cecilia Yap, "China Visit Helps Duterte Reap Funding Deals Worth \$24 Billion," *Bloomberg*, Oct. 21, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-10-21/china-visit-helps-duterte-reap-funding-deals-worth-24-billion>.

<sup>309</sup> "China Offers \$14 Million Arms Package to the Philippines: Manila's Defense Minister," *Reuters*, Dec. 20, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-arms-idUSKBN1490HN>; Robert G. Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, "Beijing Presses Its Advantages," *Comparative Connections* 18, no. 3 (Jan. 2017), <https://cc.pacforum.org/2017/01/beijing-presses-advantages/>.

<sup>310</sup> "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines."

<sup>311</sup> "Xi Jinping Holds Talks with President Rodrigo Duterte of the Philippines Both Sides Agree to Jointly Push China-Philippines Strategic and Cooperative Relations Dedicated to Peace and Development for Healthy and Stable Development," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, Oct. 20, 2016, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/zxxx\\_662805/t1408117.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1408117.shtml).

humanitarian assistance.<sup>312</sup> Manila signed an agreement to participate in China's global Belt and Road Initiative, and Xi notably once again expressed support for Duterte's antidrug campaign.<sup>313</sup>

### **Accommodation and coercion in the SCS**

While China provided Duterte economic and political support, Chinese conduct toward Philippine interests in the SCS proved simultaneously cooperative and coercive. This dualistic approach was a central feature of Chinese policy—and a somewhat puzzling one given the unique wedging opportunity that Duterte was presented. Although we cannot prove the counterfactual, Beijing's refusal to curb its aggressive posture in the SCS may well have limited its ability to exacerbate frictions in the US-Philippines alliance.

### **Limited cooperation in the SCS**

Below is a non-exhaustive list of cooperative measures Beijing adopted vis-à-vis the Philippines in the SCS during the Duterte Administration. Many of these measures represent long-standing PRC policy positions, to be sure, and none qualifies as a dramatic concession. Nonetheless, China likely designed these measures to help alleviate and compartmentalize its offshore tensions with Manila—the most significant source of bilateral friction in their relationship. These measures included the following:

- Shortly after Duterte's October 2016 visit to Beijing, the Chinese Coast Guard (CCG) began allowing Philippine fishermen to operate in the waters around the Scarborough Shoal.<sup>314</sup> The CCG had periodically barred them from doing so since 2012.<sup>315</sup>
- In 2016, Beijing and Manila agreed to establish a bilateral consultation mechanism on the SCS "to find ways forward to strengthen mutual trust and confidence."<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>312</sup> Dharel Placido, "LIST: Philippines, China Sign 29 Deals in Xi Jinping Visit," *ABS-CBN*, Nov. 20, 2018, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/11/20/18/list-philippines-china-sign-29-deals-in-xi-jinping-visit>.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid.; Darryl John Esguerra, "READ: PH-China MOU on Belt and Road Initiative," *Inquirer.net*, Nov. 27, 2018, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/171728/read-ph-china-mou-on-belt-and-road-initiative>.

<sup>314</sup> *Updated: Imagery Suggests Philippine Fishermen Still Not Entering Scarborough Shoal*, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Oct. 27, 2016, <https://amti.csis.org/china-scarborough-fishing/>.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

<sup>316</sup> "Joint Statement of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of the Philippines.," "Joint Press Release for the First Meeting of the China-Philippines Bilateral Consultation Mechanisms on the South China Sea," *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, May 19, 2017, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw\\_1/t1463538.htm](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/nanhai/eng/wjbxw_1/t1463538.htm).

- In 2016, China and the Philippines agreed to establish a Joint Coast Guard Committee on Maritime Cooperation.<sup>317</sup> In January 2020, the CCG—China’s proverbial tip of the spear in the SCS—paid a weeklong visit to Manila for combined exercises with Philippine counterparts.<sup>318</sup>
- In early 2017, senior Chinese officials began to express optimism about soon concluding a long-awaited SCS Code of Conduct with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.<sup>319</sup>
- Throughout the Duterte Administration, and especially in 2019 and 2020, China sought to reach an agreement with the Philippines to jointly explore for oil and gas in the SCS.<sup>320</sup>

### **Simultaneous coercion in the SCS**

Alongside the cooperative measures highlighted above, China maintained a decidedly assertive posture toward the Philippines (and other rival claimants) in the SCS, primarily by continuing to expand and militarize its occupied features. Additional coercive measures targeting the Philippines included the following:

- In May 2017, Xi told Duterte that China would go to war with the Philippines if Manila moved ahead with oil drilling in disputed areas of the SCS.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> “China, Philippines Confirm Twice-Yearly Bilateral Consultation Mechanism on South China Sea,” *Xinhua*, May 19, 2017, [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/19/c\\_136299206.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2017-05/19/c_136299206.htm).

<sup>318</sup> JC Gotinga, “China Coast Guard Ship Arrives in Manila for ‘Friendly Visit,’” *Rappler*, Jan. 13, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/china-coast-guard-ship-arrives-manila-friendly-visit-january-13-2020>.

<sup>319</sup> Robert G. Sutter and Chin-Hao Huang, “China Consolidates Control and Advances Influence,” *Comparative Connections* 19, no. 1 (May 2017), <https://cc.pacforum.org/2017/05/china-consolidates-control-advances-influence/>.

<sup>320</sup> Helen Regan, “Duterte Says Xi Jinping Offered Him an Oil and Gas Deal to Ignore South China Sea Ruling,” *CNN*, Sept. 12, 2019, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/12/asia/duterte-xi-south-china-sea-deal-intl-hnk/index.html>; Martin Petty, “Philippines’ Duterte Says Xi Offering Gas Deal if Arbitration Case Ignored,” *Reuters*, Sept. 10, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-china-southchinasea/philippines-duterte-says-xi-offering-gas-deal-if-arbitration-case-ignored-idUSKCN1VW070>; “China’s Xi Sees Bigger Role for Joint Energy Exploration With Philippines,” *Reuters*, Aug. 29, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-philippines/chinas-xi-sees-bigger-role-for-joint-energy-exploration-with-philippines-idUSKCN1VK00M>.

<sup>321</sup> “We intend to drill oil there, if it’s yours, well, that’s your view, but my view is, I can drill the oil, if there is some inside the bowels of the earth, because it is ours,” Duterte said he told Xi. “His response to me, ‘we’re friends, we don’t want to quarrel with you, we want to maintain the presence of warm relationship, but if you force the issue, we’ll go to war,’ Duterte said.” See: Rodel Rodis, “Why China Will Declare War if PH Drills for Oil,” *Inquirer.net*, June 8, 2017, <https://usa.inquirer.net/4314/china-will-declare-war-ph-drills-oil>.



- In August 2017, Chinese military and civilian vessels deployed to Thitu Island in apparent protest of Philippine construction on the islet.<sup>322</sup>
- In May 2018, a Chinese helicopter buzzed a boat carrying supplies to the Philippines outpost on the Second Thomas Shoal, triggering a formal diplomatic complaint from Manila.<sup>323</sup>
- Between January and April 2019, several hundred Chinese vessels swarmed a Philippines-occupied feature in the SCS.<sup>324</sup> The Philippines foreign minister described Chinese action as a “clear violation of Philippine sovereignty,” and Duterte threatened to dispatch Filipino forces on “suicide missions” unless the PRC vessels dispersed.<sup>325</sup>
- In June 2019, a Chinese fishing trawler rammed a Philippine fishing boat anchored near Reed Bank, causing the latter to capsize. The Chinese vessel then fled the scene, leaving 22 Filipino fishers in the water.<sup>326</sup>

In response to these provocations, the Philippine bureaucracy continued to protest PRC actions and Duterte himself occasionally threatened military retaliation, but the Philippine president did not allow China’s assertiveness to derail his efforts at rapprochement.<sup>327</sup> To the contrary, Duterte suspended planned construction on a sand bar adjacent to a Philippine-occupied island in the SCS, said that Manila owed China “a debt of gratitude,” and insisted that “the

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<sup>322</sup> *Confirming the Chinese Flotilla Near Thitu Island*, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Aug. 17, 2017, <https://amti.csis.org/confirming-chinese-flotilla-near-thitu-island/>.

<sup>323</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Says It Protests China ‘Harassment’ of Navy Boat,” *AP News*, May 30, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/575ca64f275f42f3bbb6ed3ded9821fa>.

<sup>324</sup> Niharika Mandhana, “China’s Fishing Militia Swarms Philippine Island, Seeking Edge in Sea Dispute,” *Wall Street Journal*, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/chinas-fishing-militia-swarms-philippine-island-seeking-edge-in-sea-dispute-11554391301>; Richard Heydarian, “China’s Maritime Aggression Should Strengthen US-Philippine Alliance,” *Nikkei Asia*, July 11, 2019, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/China-s-maritime-aggression-should-strengthen-US-Philippine-alliance>.

<sup>325</sup> “South China Sea: Duterte Warns Beijing of ‘Suicide Missions’ to Protect Disputed Island,” *The Guardian*, Apr. 4, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/apr/05/south-china-sea-duterte-warns-china-of-suicide-missions-to-protect-disputed-island>.

<sup>326</sup> Raul Dancel, “Chinese Vessel Sinks Philippine Fishing Boat in Contested Waters; Manila Seeks Probe,” *The Straits Times*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/chinese-vessel-sinks-filipino-fishing-boat-in-contested-waters-manila-seeks-probe>.

<sup>327</sup> Manuel Mogato, “Philippines’ Duterte Orders Occupation of Isles in Disputed South China Sea,” *Reuters*, Apr. 6, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-southchinasea-philippines/philippines-duterte-orders-occupation-of-isles-in-disputed-south-china-sea-idUSKBN1780NR>; “South China Sea: Duterte Warns Beijing of ‘Suicide Missions’ to Protect Disputed Island.”

South China Sea is better left untouched [because] nobody can afford to go to war.”<sup>328</sup> In April 2018, Duterte said that he “loved” Chinese president Xi and needed China “more than anybody else.”<sup>329</sup>

### **Washington’s management of an unpredictable ally**

Faced with Duterte’s declared intention of realigning toward China, US officials sought to hold the relationship together and avoid antagonizing the new Philippine president. The Obama Administration played down Duterte’s comments about separation. President Trump, for his part, spoke with Duterte on the phone and on the sidelines of summit meetings. In 2017, Trump invited the Philippine president to the White House where he offered his support for Manila’s controversial drug war.<sup>330</sup> The two leaders issued several joint statements that underscored the continued centrality of the alliance and portrayed Duterte as committed to its maintenance.<sup>331</sup>

Also during the Trump Administration, the US and the Philippines continued to hold high-level military and diplomatic talks, including their Bilateral Strategic Dialogue.<sup>332</sup> The US continued to deliver new military assets to Philippine forces and to conduct combined exercises with them.<sup>333</sup> Some experts credit the Philippine military’s support for the US alliance as a key factor in limiting Duterte’s proposed separation.

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<sup>328</sup> “We are friends of China, we owe them a debt of gratitude,” he said, noting that the Chinese government had helped the Philippines by supplying arms to fight militants in Marawi, on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao. See: “Philippines Halts Work in South China Sea, in Bid to Appease Beijing,” *New York Times*, Nov. 8, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/world/asia/philippines-south-china-sea.html>; Patricia Ann V. Roxas, “Duterte: South China Sea dispute Is ‘Better Left Untouched’,” *Inquirer.net*, Nov. 12, 2017, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/161911/duterte-south-china-sea-dispute-china-vietnam-asean-taiwan>.

<sup>329</sup> Ben Westcott, “Beijing Should ‘Temper’ Its Behavior In The South China Sea, Duterte Says,” *CNN*, Aug. 15, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/15/asia/duterte-china-south-china-sea-intl/index.html>.

<sup>330</sup> Mark Landler, “Trump Invites Rodrigo Duterte to the White House,” *New York Times*, Apr. 30, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/30/us/politics/trump-invites-rodrigo-duterte-to-the-white-house.html>; The White House, “President Donald J. Trump’s Trip to the Philippines,” Nov. 14, 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20171214233438/https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-trip-philippines/>.

<sup>331</sup> Press Release, Nov. 13, 2017, *Joint Statement between the United States of America and the Republic of the Philippines*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20171219141330/https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-statement-united-states-america-republic-philippines/>.

<sup>332</sup> U.S. Embassy Manila, *8th Philippines-United States Bilateral Strategic Dialogue (BSD) Joint Statement*, Press Release, July 17, 2019, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/8th-philippines-united-states-bilateral-strategic-dialogue-bsd-joint-statement/>.

<sup>333</sup> Prashanth Parameswaran, “US Gives Philippines 2 New Military Surveillance Aircraft Amid Rising Terror Threat,” *The Diplomat*, Aug. 1, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/08/us-gives-philippines-2-new-military->

Despite US efforts to improve the state of the alliance, by the end of 2018 the fate of the US-Philippine MDT itself seemed to be in jeopardy. In December 2018, Philippine defense secretary Delfin Lorenzana initiated a review of the 1951 MDT, with a view toward assessing whether the agreement “is still relevant to our national interest.”<sup>334</sup> Lorenzana allowed that the goal of the review would be to “maintain it [the MDT], strengthen it, or scrap it.”<sup>335</sup>

Senior US officials publicly supported Manila’s review effort. US defense secretary Mark Esper remarked, “It’s always good to look at these things from time to time, to review, and to clarify and strengthen it based on changes in the environment and the world situation.”<sup>336</sup> Simultaneously, Washington sought to reassure Manila of its commitments.<sup>337</sup> In February 2019, for example, Pompeo publicly stated that the MDT would cover conflicts in the SCS, one of Manila’s main concerns.<sup>338</sup> In November 2019, the US defense secretary reaffirmed that the MDT “applies to the entire Pacific region, including the South China Sea.”<sup>339</sup>

## Whither the Visiting Forces Agreement?

Notwithstanding Washington’s efforts to stabilize the alliance, in February 2020, the Duterte Administration notified the US embassy in Manila that it would begin the termination process for the VFA with the US. The VFA is a critical bilateral agreement that provides a legal basis on

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surveillance-aircraft-amid-rising-terror-threat/; Press Release, Apr. 20, 2018, *Balikatan 34-2018*.  
<https://www.pacom.mil/Media/News/News-Article-View/Article/1500010/balikatan-34-2018/>; “U.S., Philippines scale Back Next Month’s Military Drills, No More ‘War Games,’” *Reuters*, Apr. 24, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-usa-defence-idUSKBN17Q120>; Poling and Cronin, “The Dangers of Allowing U.S.-Philippine Defense Cooperation to Languish.”

<sup>334</sup> Jelly Musico, “Lorenzana orders Review Of 67-Year-Old US-PH Military Pact,” *Philippine News Agency*, Dec. 28, 2018, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1057639>.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.; JC Gotinga, “U.S. Defense Chief Favors Review of 1951 Treaty With Philippines,” *Rappler*, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/mark-esper-favors-review-mutual-defense-treaty-philippines-united-states>.

<sup>336</sup> Frances Mangosing, “US defense Chief Esper Agrees It’s Time to Take Another Look at Defense Pact With PH,” *Inquirer.net*, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/182144/us-defense-chief-esper-agrees-its-time-to-take-another-look-at-defense-pact-with-ph>.

<sup>337</sup> Eimor Santos, “PH, US in ‘Low-Level Discussion’ on Reviewing Mutual Defense Treaty,” *CNN Philippines*, Nov. 19, 2019, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2019/11/19/delfin-lorenzana-mark-esper-mutual-defense-treaty.html>.

<sup>338</sup> “Pompeo Promises Intervention Iif Philippines is Attacked in South China Sea Amid Rising Chinese Militarization,” *The Washington Post*, Feb. 28, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pompeo-promises-intervention-if-philippines-is-attacked-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-chinese-militarization/2019/02/28/5288768a-3b53-11e9-b10b-f05a22e75865\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/pompeo-promises-intervention-if-philippines-is-attacked-in-south-china-sea-amid-rising-chinese-militarization/2019/02/28/5288768a-3b53-11e9-b10b-f05a22e75865_story.html); Eimor Santos, “DND Eyes Review of Mutual Defense Treaty with U.S.,” *CNN Philippines*, Dec. 20, 2018, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2018/12/20/Philippines-U.S.-Mutual-Defense-Treaty-South-China-Sea-dispute.html>.

<sup>339</sup> Gotinga, “U.S. Defense Chief Favors Review of 1951 Treaty With Philippines.”

which US forces operate in the country.<sup>340</sup> Although the VFA is distinct from the MDT, several Filipino leaders have remarked that without the VFA the MDT would be “useless.”<sup>341</sup> The US defense secretary made clear that the decision would negatively affect the US in its competition with China: “As we try and bolster our presence and compete with them [China] in this era of great power competition, I think it’s a move in the wrong direction for the longstanding relationship we’ve had with the Philippines for their strategic location, the ties between our peoples, our countries.”<sup>342</sup> Before this element of the alliance was formally dismantled, however, a 180-day notification period needed to pass.<sup>343</sup>

Following Manila’s announcement, the PRC’s Foreign Ministry issued a supportive statement, and Beijing continued to extend economic aid to the Philippines, including COVID-19-related assistance.<sup>344</sup> More surprisingly, however, China continued to behave aggressively in the SCS *during* Manila’s 180-day notification period. In mid-February 2020, a PRC naval vessel pointed a weapons control radar at a Philippine navy ship, prompting a formal diplomatic protest from Manila.<sup>345</sup> In March, Beijing established two “research stations” on Chinese-occupied (and

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<sup>340</sup> Jim Gomez, “Philippines Notifies US of Intent to End Major Security Pact,” *AP News*, Feb. 11, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/manila-philippines-us-news-ap-top-news-mark-esper-969de0066e93fbc26a4e258b7b7eca1d>.

<sup>341</sup> Richard Heydarian, *The Day After VFA: Saving The Philippine-U.S. Alliance*, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Apr. 23, 2020, <https://amti.csis.org/the-day-after-vfa-saving-the-philippine-u-s-alliance/>; Jose Cielito Reganit, “Senators say VFA Termination Makes MDT ‘Useless,’” *Philippine News Agency* (Feb. 11, 2020), <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1093576>.

<sup>342</sup> Dzirhan Mahadzir, “U.S. Warns China Will Gain Edge if the Philippines Ends Visiting Forces Agreement,” *USNI News*, Feb. 12, 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/02/12/u-s-warns-china-will-gain-edge-if-the-philippines-ends-visiting-forces-agreement>; Coconuts Manila, “VFA Termination ‘Move in the Wrong Direction’ Says U.S. Defense Secretary Esper,” *Yahoo Sport*, Feb. 12, 2020, <https://au.sports.yahoo.com/vfa-termination-move-wrong-direction-044753622.html>.

<sup>343</sup> Statement, Feb. 10, 1998, *Agreement Between the Government of the Republic of the Philippines and the Government of the United States of America Regarding the Treatment of United States Armed Forces Visiting the Philippines, February 10, 1998*. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1998/02/10/agreement-between-the-government-of-the-republic-of-the-philippines-and-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america-regarding-the-treatment-of-united-states-armed-forces-visiting-the-philippines-f/>.

<sup>344</sup> “Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Geng Shuang’s Daily Briefing Online on February 18, 2020,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China*, Feb. 18, 2020, [https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa\\_eng/xwfw\\_665399/s2510\\_665401/2511\\_665403/t1746298.shtml](https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xwfw_665399/s2510_665401/2511_665403/t1746298.shtml); “Ambassador Huang Turned Over China Aid to Foreign Secretary Locsin to Help Fight COVID-19,” *Embassy of the People’s Republic of China in the Republic of the Philippines*, Mar. 31, 2020, <https://www.mfa.gov.cn/ce/ceph//eng/sgdt/t1759607.htm>; “China-Backed AIIB Approves \$750 Million Loan for Philippines’ Covid-19 Response,” *Reuters*, May 28, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-aiib-philippines/china-backed-aiib-approves-750-million-loan-for-philippines-covid-19-response-idUSKBN2350B8>.

<sup>345</sup> “Philippines Protests China’s Sea Claim, Weapon Pointing,” *VOA News*, Apr. 22, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/philippines-protests-chinas-sea-claim-weapon-pointing>.

Philippine-claimed) islets in the SCS. In April, China announced the establishment of two new administrative districts in the SCS and gave official names to some 80 (mostly submerged) geographic features, again prompting official protest.<sup>346</sup> Although China's assertiveness in this regard was a continuation of prior behavior during the Duterte Administration, this behavior is also somewhat puzzling given that Manila still had time to reverse its VFA decision.

Meanwhile, US diplomats focused on salvaging the agreement.<sup>347</sup> The US ambassador to the Philippines acknowledged that Washington was trying to achieve an "improved" or "polished" VFA.<sup>348</sup> In April, amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the US embassy in Manila delivered medical supplies and other aid, continued to conduct bilateral and public diplomacy initiatives, and sought to project optimism regarding the bilateral relationship.<sup>349</sup> These efforts bore fruit. On June 1, 2020, Manila suspended the abrogation process.<sup>350</sup> In a terse note, the Philippine foreign secretary stated only that the decision was made "in light of political and other developments in the region."<sup>351</sup> The Philippine ambassador to the US later added that developments in the SCS contributed to the suspension, citing "heightened superpower tensions."<sup>352</sup>

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<sup>346</sup> Riyaz ul Khaliq, "Philippines Protests China's New Maritime Moves," *Anadolu Agency*, Apr. 30, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/philippines-protests-china-s-new-maritime-moves/1824427>; Frances Mangosing, "China Launches New Facilities in West PH Sea Just As World's Eyes Fixed on COVID-19," *Inquirer.net*, Mar. 23, 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/186253/china-launches-new-facilities-in-west-ph-sea-just-as-worlds-eyes-fixed-on-covid-19>.

<sup>347</sup> Cliff Venzon, "Philippine and US Diplomats Search Ways to Save Military Ties," *Nikkei Asia*, Feb. 28, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/International-relations/Philippine-and-US-diplomats-search-ways-to-save-military-ties>.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> Press Release, Mar. 6, 2020, *U.S. Embassy and PDEA Team Up for Drug Abuse Prevention Campaign*, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/us-embassy-and-pdea-team-up-for-drug-abuse-prevention-campaign/>; Press Statement, *More than 120 Filipinos Join Education USA's Second Annual Media Summit*, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/more-than-120-filipinos-join-educationusas-second-annual-media-summit/>; U.S. Embassy Manila, U.S. Donates COVID-19 Relief Supplies, Subject: Press Release, <https://ph.usembassy.gov/us-donates-covid-19-relief-supplies/>; Sung Y. Kim, "Our Enduring Partnership: Working Together to Defeat COVID-19," (Manila, Philippines, May 4, 2020), <https://ph.usembassy.gov/our-enduring-partnership-working-together-to-defeat-covid-19/>.

<sup>350</sup> Teddy Jr. Locsin, "Twitter," June 2, 2020, <https://twitter.com/teddyboylocsin/status/1267786798731628545>.

<sup>351</sup> Teddy Jr. Locsin, "Twitter," Feb. 11, 2020, <https://twitter.com/teddyboylocsin/status/1227094975634006016?lang=en>.

<sup>352</sup> Teodoro L. Jr Locsin, "Statement: on the Suspension of the Pending Termination of the PH-US Visiting Forces Agreement," (June 3, 2020), <https://www.dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/statements-and-advisoriestupdate/26892-statement-on-the-suspension-of-the-pending-termination-of-the-ph-us-visiting-forces-agreement>; Darryl John Esguerra, "PH envoy to US: Covid-19, South China Sea 'Developments,' Reasons Not to End Vfa," *Inquirer.net*, June 3, 2020, <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/188113/ph-envoy-to-us-covid-19-south-china-sea-developments-reasons-not-to-end-vfa>.

Over the next year and a half, as PRC assertiveness in the SCS continued to roil relations with the Philippines, Manila suspended the termination process twice more.<sup>353</sup> Finally, in July 2021, the Philippines fully restored the agreement, ending the extended period of uncertainty over its fate and placing the alliance on a surer footing.<sup>354</sup>

## Summary and assessment

Chinese statecraft toward the Philippines during the Duterte Administration involved a mix of inducements and coercive measures. Presented with a new Philippine leader eager for “separation” with Washington, Beijing directed ample economic carrots to further Duterte’s domestic development agenda. The PRC also offered several conciliatory gestures to calm Sino-Philippine tensions in the SCS. Perhaps surprisingly, however, Beijing maintained its overall coercive posture toward key Philippine interests in the SCS throughout the period in question, including, curiously, during Manila’s 180-day VFA termination review period.

The wedging outcomes associated with China’s mixed carrot-and-stick approach toward Duterte are, perhaps unsurprisingly, a mixed bag. The US-Philippine alliance is surely weaker than it was at the end of the Aquino Administration. Duterte regularly expresses his displeasure with the presence of US forces in the Philippines and has limited implementation of the EDCA.<sup>355</sup> He frequently undermines the US position supporting the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s 2016 ruling in favor of Manila and against Beijing in the SCS when he disparages the ruling as “just a piece of paper” that he “will throw...in a waste basket.”<sup>356</sup> PRC aid and investment may indeed have reinforced Duterte’s hostility toward Washington, but it is difficult to parse attribution between his preexisting anti-American instincts and Chinese statecraft.<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Steven Lee Myers and Jason Gutierrez, “With Swarms of Ships, Beijing Tightens Its Grip on South China Sea,” *New York Times*, Apr. 3, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/03/world/asia/swarms-ships-south-china-sea.html>.

<sup>354</sup> Brad Lendon Sophie Jeong, “Philippines Renews Key Military Agreement with the United States,” *CNN*, July 30, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/07/30/asia/philippines-us-visiting-forces-agreement-intl-hnk-ml/index.html>.

<sup>355</sup> Even after reinstating the VFA, Duterte remarked, “We do not like it because we want to remain neutral...but the exigency of the moment requires their [US troops] presence here, [and] I am okay with that.” Neil Jerome Morales, “Philippines Says May Benefit From Any Pivot to Asia by Biden Administration.”

<sup>356</sup> “Duterte Says PH Arbitral Win Vs. China 'Just' a Piece of Paper, Trash to Be Thrown Away,” *CNN Philippines*, May 6, 2021, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/5/6/Duterte-PH-arbitral-win-vs.-China-a-piece-of-paper.html>.

<sup>357</sup> “Duterte’s Pivot to China Yet to Deliver Promised Billions,” *Bloomberg*, July 4, 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-07-04/duterte-s-pivot-to-china-yet-to-deliver-promised-billions-in-infrastructure>.

Notwithstanding China's modest wedging gains, perhaps the more notable observation from this period is Beijing's failure to more significantly exploit the opportunity Duterte presented. Manila's February 2020 decision to initiate the VFA termination process presented Beijing with a unique opportunity to dismantle a critical component of the US-Philippines alliance. Manila's decision to reverse course on VFA termination may be the result of several factors, notably including a Philippine military and public that generally supports the US alliance, but senior Philippine officials have also been clear that China's aggressive behavior in the SCS during the review period contributed to the decision.

Why did China persist in pressuring Manila during this window of opportunity? Beijing may not have believed that Manila was serious about terminating the VFA. Maybe past coercive behavior that had gone unpunished convinced Beijing that it would not pay a price. Alternatively, China may simply have prioritized its other interests in the SCS over wedging objectives vis-à-vis the Philippines. Whatever the answer, it is puzzling that the PRC declined to moderate its conduct toward Philippine interests in the SCS for a relatively short period of time immediately following the announcement. Had it done so, the state of the US-Philippines alliance may well be worse than it is now.

## Part III: Findings, Implications and Recommendations

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Part III of this study has two main sections. In the first section, we present our findings regarding the types of Chinese and Russian strategies we observe in our cases, their effectiveness, and the principal determinants of these outcomes. In the second section, we discuss the implications of these findings for US policy and the scholarly literature on alliance wedge strategies.

Overall, the findings in this report present a relatively good news story: for all the hype about Russian and Chinese “gray zone” tactics slowly boiling the US like the proverbial frog in a pot, we show that Moscow and Beijing generally have a poor record of accomplishment in weakening US alliances. Moreover, although their tendencies for heavy-handed approaches toward US alliances are not risk-free, they do present opportunities for the US to exploit.

### Research findings

#### Key trends in competitor approaches

Our first research question concerns Chinese and Russian tendencies in their efforts to weaken US alliances. Table 1 below depicts our findings regarding the types of strategies we observe in each of our cases and the overall outcomes associated with each case. This table points to several notable trends in contemporary competitor approaches.



**Table 1. Case study findings on divider approaches and wedging outcomes**

	<b>Case</b>	<b>Divider Approach to Target US Alliance</b>	<b>Wedging Outcome</b>
<b>Contemporary cases</b>	Russia-Germany (2014–2018)	Reward → Subversion	Fail
	Russia-Greece (2018–2019)	Subversion	Fail
	Russia-Turkey (2016–2019)	Reward	Success
	China-South Korea (2013–2017)	Reward → Coercion	Mixed
	China-Australia (2016–2021)	Subversion → Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	China-Philippines (2016–2021)	Coercion/Reward (simultaneous)	Mixed
<b>Historical cases</b>	Germany-France (First Moroccan Crisis 1904–1906)	Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	China-Taiwan (First Taiwan Strait Crisis 1954–1955)	Coercion	Fail (+Blowback)
	USA-Egypt (Egyptian realignment in 1970s)	Coercion → Reward	Success

Source: CNA.

First, the dividers in these cases generally evince an initial preference for reward-based approaches. Of our six contemporary cases, we observe that the divider initially approaches a target with reward-based strategies in four instances (Russia-Germany, Russia-Turkey, China-South Korea, China-Philippines). In two of those (Russia-Germany and China-South Korea), the divider shifts toward stick-based strategies only after certain triggering events expose the limits of its will or ability to accommodate a given target.<sup>358</sup> In the case of the Philippines, moreover, although we code China’s strategic approach to Manila as a simultaneous combination of carrots and sticks, the case study makes clear that China welcomed Duterte with open arms and substantive inducements, albeit while continuing to assert itself at Manila’s expense in the SCS. In other words, our findings reinforce

<sup>358</sup> In the case of Germany, for example, Russia increased its subversive measures against Angela Merkel’s government only after events from March through July 2014 led her to conclude that Putin was not serious about a diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine crisis. In the case of South Korea, China adopted increasingly harsh measures to dissuade Seoul from approving the US military deployment of THAAD in South Korea only after repeated North Korean missile tests exposed Beijing’s limited ability to mitigate that threat.

the notion that all things being equal, dividers generally prefer to catch flies with honey rather than with vinegar.

But things are not always equal. Indeed, the second key takeaway from Table 1 above is that our contemporary dividers have tended to resort to stick-based strategies (coercion and subversion) despite whatever initial instinct for accommodation they might have. In our six contemporary cases, China and Russia ultimately deployed stick-based approaches against all but one target (Russia-Turkey). For China, Beijing deployed stick-based approaches in each of our three cases. Even in the Philippines, where one might expect China to have tempered its coercive practices considering Duterte's stated desire to separate from Washington, Beijing continued to coerce Manila in the SCS. For Russia, we observe stick-based approaches in two of our three cases. Of note, in the cases we examine, Russia's stick-based strategies tend to favor subversive methods whereas China appears more inclined toward coercion.

## Wedge strategy effectiveness

In this section, we address our second and third research questions concerning wedge strategy effectiveness. We begin by outlining China and Russia's poor record of accomplishment deploying largely coercive and subversive approaches toward US allies. We then incorporate the historical cases into our analysis to expand our data and better contribute to the scholarly debate concerning the relative effectiveness of reward versus coercive wedging. We provide evidence supporting the argument that reward-based strategies are generally most effective.

### China's and Russia's poor record of accomplishment

The contemporary case data we examine depict a poor record of accomplishment for China and Russia. Table 1 points to a record of mostly failure and in some instances blowback, although we do observe occasional limited gains. Among our six contemporary cases, only one qualifies as a clear success (Russia-Turkey). Three stand out as clear failures (Russia-Germany, Russia-Greece, China-Australia). In the two cases involving mixed outcomes, the divider either mostly fails (China-South Korea) or achieves far less than what might have been expected (China-Philippines).

China's and Russia's limited success in these cases illuminates the relative ineffectiveness of stick-based wedge strategies. Indeed, of our six contemporary cases, the divider leverages stick-based strategies in five cases (Russia-Germany, Russia-Greece, China-South Korea, China-Australia, China-Philippines). The divider ultimately fails in three of those five instances (Russia-Germany, Russia-Greece, China-Australia). China enjoys an at-best mixed outcome in the case of South Korea, where Beijing failed to prevent the THAAD deployment but nonetheless secured a verbal commitment from Seoul to limit certain dimensions of future security cooperation with the US. Similarly, although we code the Philippines case a mixed

outcome because China secured some modest wedging gains, it is difficult not to wonder what potential gains Beijing left on the table by continuing to act aggressively in the SCS for much of Duterte's tenure, including during the formal 180-day VFA termination period.

In addition to failures, we also identify instances in which a divider's stick-based strategy incurs costs and leads to counterproductive outcomes. The prospect of blowback is notably greater in stick-based wedging, in which applying pressure on a target state risks antagonizing elite and popular opinion or, in more dramatic instances, provoking balancing responses that strengthen rather than weaken an opposing alliance.<sup>359</sup> We track, for example, how Russia's subversive activities in Germany following the Ukraine crisis hardened German views toward Moscow and similarly how Chinese coercion toward South Korea during the THAAD episode harmed Beijing's reputation in that country. We also highlight instances in which divider conduct inadvertently and counterproductively strengthens an opposing alliance both in the historical cases of the First Moroccan Crisis and First Taiwan Strait Crisis and in the contemporary case of Australia. (In Table 1, we code as blowback only instances in which a divider inadvertently provokes a balancing response.)

Australia stands out as the clearest example of blowback among our contemporary cases. In 2015, the relationship between China and Australia appeared generally strong, particularly in the economic domain. After years of subversive and coercive PRC statecraft, however, the relationship between Beijing and Canberra deteriorated to "the lowest ebb since diplomatic relations were established in 1972."<sup>360</sup> Australia's alliance with Washington meanwhile has deepened, as evidenced by the strengthening of the Quad and the recent announcement of the AUKUS security partnership. Stephen Walt puts it as follows:

Although what's going on here is to some degree purely structural...in other respects, Beijing has no one to blame but itself. Until recently, Australian opinion was ambivalent about the implications of China's rise: Business leaders hoped to preserve lucrative commercial ties, and prominent strategists warned that opposing the growth of Chinese power was not in Australia's interest. But China's increasingly belligerent conduct—especially its unwarranted decision to impose a punishing trade embargo in response to an Australian proposal for an independent international inquiry into the origins of the coronavirus—has triggered a steady hardening of Australian attitudes.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>359</sup> Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics."

<sup>360</sup> Shaimaa Khalil, "How Australia-China Relations Have Hit 'Lowest Ebb in Decades'," *BBC*, Oct. 11, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-54458638>.

<sup>361</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "The AUKUS Dominoes Are Just Starting to Fall," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 18, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/18/aukus-australia-united-states-submarines-china-really-means/>.

And that may not be the end of it. As Michael Schuman notes, “China’s tussle with Australia could have long-term consequences for its economic ties to other countries.” To the extent that these consequences materialize, it suggests a divider’s use of coercion risks second-order blowback in third-party states that may fear becoming the targets of similar measures in the future.<sup>362</sup>

Despite this poor track record, we do observe some instances in which coercive wedging generates limited gains. In the South Korea case, China’s heavy-handed response was able to generate wedging effects in the form of President Moon’s “Three No’s” circumscribing future security cooperation with the US (and Japan). We also recall from our historical case on the First Taiwan Strait Crisis that although China’s coercive conduct largely deepened the US relationship with Taiwan, it also contributed to Eisenhower’s unwillingness to defend certain offshore islands.

### **Reward wedging’s relative effectiveness**

As discussed earlier in this report, scholarly opinion is divided on the relative effectiveness of reward versus coercive wedging. Our study provides strong evidence that rewards are more effective.

Among our nine total cases, two involve dividers that ultimately emphasize reward wedging (Russia-Turkey, US-Egypt). Those two cases are our only instances in which a divider secures an unequivocal wedging success. In the contemporary case of Turkey, Russia successfully drives a wedge between Ankara and NATO by providing Turkey’s leadership with highly valued political support and military sales. In the historical case involving Egypt, Washington initially balked at Cairo’s requests for support but ultimately produced Israel’s withdrawal from the Sinai Peninsula—Israel’s first-ever withdrawal from occupied Arab territory—and lavished Cairo with generous financial aid. In each of our other cases involving rewards, we demonstrate that the divider either abandons that approach in favor of coercion or subversion (Russia-Germany, China-South Korea) or dilutes its effectiveness with the simultaneous application of coercion (China-Philippines).

Yet note that in those cases in which a divider initially deploys rewards, we indeed observe initial or interim successes. In Germany, Putin’s diplomatic overtures to Angela Merkel early in the Ukraine crisis initially succeeded in preserving daylight between Berlin and Washington regarding how aggressively to confront the Kremlin. In South Korea, we show that Xi’s early diplomatic courting of President Park likely played a factor in her year-and-a-half-long

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<sup>362</sup> Schuman, “China Discovers the Limits of Its Power.”

hesitation to move forward with THAAD. Why Russia and China switched from reward- to stick-based approaches, and why those approaches proved less effective than reward wedging, is the subject of our next section.

## Understanding outcomes: the explanatory power of reward power

What conditions promote the success or failure of *reward-based* wedge strategies? The answer to this question comes down to a divider's "reward power," or its ability to credibly provide benefits to a target on that target's priority issue(s).<sup>363</sup> Recall from our earlier section on key concepts and debates that the theoretical literature emphasizes the role of reward power as a driver of wedging outcomes. Crawford, for his part, is explicit in this assessment: "Reward power is what determines outcomes."<sup>364</sup> This section underscores the extent to which our findings reinforce this conclusion.

To demonstrate the extent to which reward power accounts for the outcomes in our cases, we plot each case involving reward-based wedge strategies on the two-by-two chart in Table 2 below. The left-hand side of the chart is separated by whether a divider enjoys relatively high or low reward power vis-à-vis its target, and the top of the chart is separated by whether the divider succeeded or failed in securing wedging gains. If reward power holds explanatory value, we would expect to see a correlation between high reward power and successful wedging outcomes.

First, although we have already detailed the evidence for our determinations of high and low reward power in the case study sections, below we provide a summary of divider reward power in each of our cases involving reward-based approaches:

- **In the historical case of US-Egypt**, the US has high reward power because, by virtue of its close relationship with Israel, it was uniquely positioned to facilitate the latter's return of the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt. Washington was also able to provide Cairo significant economic assistance.
- **In the contemporary case of Russia-Turkey**, Russia has high reward power because it credibly offered to sell Turkey a high-end air defense system that would meet Ankara's long-standing desire for that capability. As an authoritarian government unoffended by Turkey's democratic backsliding under Erdogan, the Kremlin was also relatively well positioned to provide the Turkish president with political support in the wake of the failed 2016 coup attempt.

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<sup>363</sup> Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics."

<sup>364</sup> Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, 176.

- **In the contemporary case of Russia-Germany,** Russia has low reward power because, although Moscow may have been capable of producing a diplomatic resolution to the Ukraine crisis that Germany’s Angela Merkel desired, Putin ultimately proved unwilling do so.
- **In the contemporary case of China-South Korea,** China has low reward power because, regardless of his true influence over Pyongyang, Xi ultimately proved either unwilling or unable to work with South Korea to Seoul’s satisfaction to mitigate the North Korean threat.
- **In the contemporary case of China-Philippines,** China has medium reward power because it directed desired economic rewards toward Manila but was either unable or unwilling to refrain from challenging Philippine interests in the SCS, to say nothing of accommodating Manila there.

Table 2. Reward power and wedge strategy outcomes

	Success	Failure
High reward power	US-Egypt (1970s)  Russia-Turkey (2016–2019)	
Low reward power	China-Philippines (2016–2021)	Russia-Germany (2014–2018)  China-South Korea (2013–2017)

Source: CNA.

Table 2 does in fact show a correlation between high reward power and successful wedge strategy outcomes, reinforcing the proposition that reward power is a critical determinant of *reward wedging* outcomes. It also, not incidentally, supports Yasuhiro Izumikawa’s explanation in the theoretical literature as to why states choose coercive wedge strategies over reward-based strategies.<sup>365</sup> Izumikawa argues, and our findings in both the Germany and

<sup>365</sup> Izumikawa, “To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics.”

South Korea cases affirm, that dividers are more likely to adopt coercive wedge strategies when they lack the reward power to weaken an opposing alliance through inducements. In Germany, the Kremlin transitioned to a strategy of subversion only after Merkel began organizing European opposition to Putin, having concluded in the spring and summer of 2014 that he was not a credible partner. In South Korea, Beijing increased its pressure against Seoul only after earlier attempts at diplomacy failed to prevent the THAAD deployment.

Finally, what factors explain the largely poor record of coercive and subversive strategies examined in this study? Because coercion and subversion direct pressure against a target state, they risk antagonizing target state leadership and populations or raising target state perceptions of threat. Because states generally form alliances in response to perceived threats, stick-based wedge strategies can work at cross purposes with wedging goals by strengthening rather than weakening an opposing alliance. In our cases, for example, we observe (1) stick-based wedging alienating target governments or populations in Germany, Greece, South Korea, Australia, and the Philippines, and (2) China's subversive and coercive statecraft toward Australia provoking a clear and counterproductive (from China's point of view) balancing response in which Canberra drew closer to the US.

The stark failure of China's and Russia's coercive and subversive statecraft across our cases leads to several implications regarding how US policy should view this "challenge."

## Implications and recommendations

### Opportunities to exploit competitor stick-based wedging

America's national security leaders are correct to express concern that China and Russia seek to divide US alliances. Fortunately, our research suggests that Beijing and Moscow frequently fail in their efforts to do so—and occasionally strengthen rather than weaken America's "greatest strategic asset." This failure is in large part because China's and Russia's regular use of coercive and subversive strategies has alienated otherwise sympathetic or ambivalent populations, heightened allied state perceptions of threat, and provoked balancing responses.

That is not to say that Washington can afford to be complacent. In fact, the risks that dividers undertake in executing coercive and subversive wedge strategies present opportunities to exploit. As long as China and Russia tend toward coercive and subversive statecraft that others find threatening, the US must posture itself to capitalize on current and prospective partner nation balancing impulses to bind closer with Washington. By doing so, the US can turn the challenge of China's and Russia's gray zone activities into an opportunity.

## A window of opportunity

Assuming that China's and Russia's missteps will continue indefinitely is imprudent. Their governments are learning organizations capable of adapting over time. If we can observe their poor record of wedging effectiveness, so can they.

Europe's widespread opposition to Putin's February 2022 invasion of Ukraine lays bare the strategic costs that dividers prone to coercive wedge strategies risk. Countries that for decades have carefully balanced ties between Washington and Moscow have found themselves compelled to effectively take sides against the latter. Even before that, the counterproductive outcomes associated with China's aggressive statecraft were also widely noted in public discourse, and Beijing, too, finds itself increasingly isolated on the global stage.<sup>366</sup> Russia's and China's current record of coercion thus presents a potentially passing window of opportunity to bind closer to our allies and partners and to bind them closer to one another. Washington should recognize the potentially transient nature of the current moment and, with urgency, capitalize on the present opportunity to deepen its alliances in bold and novel ways.

In Europe, the US finds its NATO allies expanding their commitments to the Alliance and on the precipice of adding highly capable new members. In Asia, too, there are many ambitious visions Washington can consider. Former deputy assistant secretary of defense Elbridge Colby argues in favor of a "fully integrated, completely reliable multilateral alliance...such as an Asian NATO."<sup>367</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper outlines a vast "reform agenda" for bringing US alliances into the 21st century "on entirely new terms."<sup>368</sup> Michael Green and Evan Medeiros write that "in the Indo-Pacific today, good [diplomacy] will simply not be enough" and call for a "bold and farsighted strategy" of cooperation with allies and partners in a range of

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<sup>366</sup> Steven Lee Myers and Chris Buckley, "Xi Hasn't Left China in 21 Months. Covid May Be Only Part of the Reason.," *New York Times*, Oct. 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/30/world/asia/china-xi-jinping-g20.html>; Peter Martin, "Why China Is Alienating the World," *Foreign Affairs*, Oct. 6, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-10-06/why-china-alienating-world>; Fareed Zakaria, "China Has Been Bungling Its Post-Coronavirus Foreign Policy," *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/china-has-been-bungling-its-post-coronavirus-foreign-policy/2020/06/25/5beac38c-b71b-11ea-a8da-693df3d7674a\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/china-has-been-bungling-its-post-coronavirus-foreign-policy/2020/06/25/5beac38c-b71b-11ea-a8da-693df3d7674a_story.html); Michael Schuman, "How Xi Jinping Blew It," *The Atlantic*, Nov. 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2020/11/chinas-missed-opportunity/617136/>; Lily Kuo, "Why Is Xi Jinping Pitting China Against the World?," *The Guardian*, July 23, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jul/23/chinas-actions-are-a-reflection-of-confidence-and-xi-jinpings-iron-grip>; Alice Su, "Beijing Responds to U.S. Alliances With 'Wolf Warrior' Defiance. Will It Backfire?," *LA Times*, Apr. 26, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-04-26/china-us-alliances-wolf-warrior-nationalism>; Mark Beeson, "China's Charmless Offensive," *The Interpreter*, June 29, 2020, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/china-s-charmless-offensive>; Walt, "The AUKUS Dominoes Are Just Starting to Fall."

<sup>367</sup> Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict*, 44.

<sup>368</sup> Mira Rapp-Hooper, "Saving America's Alliances," *Foreign Affairs*, Mar./Apr. 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-02-10/saving-americas-alliances>.



economic, development, and security sectors.<sup>369</sup> This study on alliance wedge strategies is not designed to identify the optimal north star for US alliances; it does, however, underscore that the time is ripe for Washington to pursue the more ambitious of its security, economic, and political objectives.

Some, to be sure, may caution against leaning too far forward vis-à-vis allies and partners. After the announcement of AUKUS, several analysts raised concerns about alienating Southeast Asian nations fearful of getting caught in the middle of the US-China rivalry. The Biden Administration should avoid “a self-defeating, militarized concept of great power that pushes other potential partners away in bullheaded pursuit of agreement on one issue” read one *New York Times* essay critical of the agreement.<sup>370</sup> We acknowledge this risk and agree that Washington must take Southeast Asian nations’ concerns seriously and, when appropriate, accommodate their sensitivities. Washington should not, however, allow those concerns to thwart policies with the potential to position US alliances more competitively over the long term. The costs of not advancing US alliances with those states that are most likely to provide support in a major crisis or contingency far exceed the gains from tiptoeing around the sensitivities of those that are not.

Another potential concern is the prospect that US alliance building will exacerbate the US-China security dilemma and push Beijing closer to Russia and other potential allies (e.g., Iran), much like the spiral of alliance building in Europe in the decade or so before World War I. Brookings fellow Patricia M. Kim notes, for instance, that Chinese commentary “on the significant deepening of Sino-Russian ties in recent years often points to growing ‘encirclement’ by the West as the primary driver of this development and emphasizes the need for Beijing and Moscow to work jointly to push back on U.S.-led coalitions.”<sup>371</sup> Kim thus cautions the Biden Administration to “consider how its successes in rallying friends could impact Beijing’s threat perceptions and unwittingly spur the creation of a rival Chinese-led alliance network.”<sup>372</sup>

Although we do not dispute this dynamic, the security dilemma with China is already pronounced, and the marginal effect of strengthening US alliances is unlikely to lead Beijing in

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<sup>369</sup> Michael Green and Evan Medeiros, “Can America Restore Its Credibility in Asia?,” *Foreign Affairs*, Feb. 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-02-15/can-america-restore-its-credibility-asia>.

<sup>370</sup> Adam Mount, “Biden, You Should Be Aware That Your Submarine Deal Has Costs,” *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/30/opinion/aucus-china-us-australia-competition.html>. See also: Audrye Wong, “China’s Self-Defeating Economic Statecraft,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-04-20/how-not-win-allies-and-influence-geopolitics>.

<sup>371</sup> Patricia M. Kim, “China’s Search for Allies,” *Foreign Affairs*, Nov. 15, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2021-11-15/chinas-search-allies>.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*

directions it would not otherwise go. Furthermore, adopting a more cautious approach toward alliance deepening is unlikely to reassure Beijing. For much of the last 30 years, Chinese officials and state-affiliated analysts have almost uniformly characterized US China policy as some variant of containment, despite US declarations to the contrary.<sup>373</sup> Forgoing the opportunity to deepen US alliances will have little, if any, effect on altering PRC perceptions or alleviating the security dilemma.

Nevertheless, China and Russia drawing closer together is cause for concern. The US should consider its options to limit and weaken their alignment.<sup>374</sup> The findings of this report suggest that Washington's most effective option will likely *eventually* involve reward-based approaches toward either Beijing or Moscow. To be sure, Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine leaves little room for US carrots toward Moscow for the foreseeable future. Given the current state of US-China relations, and because the US government has designated China its "pacing challenge," there too Washington may find limited opportunities for near-term accommodation.<sup>375</sup> Washington may, however, find guidance in its past approaches to the Sino-Soviet alliance during the Cold War, when it deployed relatively coercive policies toward both competitors until fissures in their relationship created reward wedging opportunities.<sup>376</sup>

## Opportunities to mitigate competitor coercive and subversive wedging risks

Just as China's and Russia's statecraft toward US alliances presents opportunity to exploit, so too does it call for defensive measures to counter and mitigate associated risks. After all, despite stick-based wedging's limited record of accomplishment, we still observe some gains, such as China's ability to secure South Korean president Moon's "Three No's" regarding future

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<sup>373</sup> Michael Pillsbury, *China Debates the Future Security Environment* (Honolulu, HI: University Press of the Pacific, 2000), 3-59; Avery Goldstein, *Rising to the Challenge: China's Grand Strategy and International Security*, (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005); Rush Doshi, *The Long Game: China's Grand Strategy to Displace American Order*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2021); Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011).

<sup>374</sup> See Timothy W. Crawford, "How to Distance Russia from China," *The Washington Quarterly* 44, no. 3 (Sept. 2021 (Online)), doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970903>; Sergey Radchenko, "Driving a Wedge Between China and Russia Won't Work," *War on the Rocks*, Aug. 24, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/08/driving-a-wedge-between-china-and-russia-wont-work/>; Charles A. Kupchan, "The Right Way to Split China and Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, Aug. 4, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-08-04/right-way-split-china-and-russia>; Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, 192.

<sup>375</sup> David Vergun, "China Remains 'Pacing Challenge' for U.S., Pentagon Press Secretary Says," *DOD News*, Nov. 16, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2845661/china-remains-pacing-challenge-for-us-pentagon-press-secretary-says/>.

<sup>376</sup> Izumikawa, "To Coerce or Reward? Theorizing Wedge Strategies in Alliance Politics."

security cooperation with the US (and Japan). China's demonstration of its ability to impose significant economic pain on South Korea could conceivably also deter Seoul (and others) from future areas of cooperation with Washington. Meanwhile, it is conceivable that subversive wedging may work more frequently than we can readily observe. For these reasons, Washington should consider the following measures to defend against the effect of competitor coercive and subversive wedge strategies:

- **Offset ally vulnerability to divider coercion:** The US should work with its allies and partners to help them offset their risks to external coercion by reducing their vulnerabilities to economic, political, and military pressure.
- **Expose divider subversion:** The US and its allies can mitigate the risk of divider subversion by monitoring and, as appropriate, exposing it. In our sections on Germany, Greece, and Australia, revelations about Russian and Chinese meddling led governments that might otherwise be reluctant to penalize Moscow and Beijing to do just that. Washington and its allies can also expand multinational cooperation on combined capabilities to counter this wide-ranging threat.
- **Strengthen democracy and civil society abroad:** This report shows that America's allies are relatively hard targets for would-be dividers. One reason for this is that most US allies possess strong democracies, which deprives competitors of several tools discussed in this report. Nondemocratic states are subject to US criticism and in some cases penalties, presenting Beijing and Moscow with opportunities to provide illiberal leaders with political support. The scholar Audrye Wong adds that illiberalism also presents opportunities for subversion. "Particularly in countries teetering on the brink of authoritarianism," writes Wong, "carrots that buy off corrupt elites could not only help [China] maintain [its] hold on power but also do long-term damage to political institutions."<sup>377</sup> Similarly, Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor note that the "corruption that Moscow weaponizes to subvert democratic institutions" is "a major source of Moscow's influence abroad."<sup>378</sup> Recalling from our cases German, Greek, and Australian resistance to Russian and Chinese meddling, this research reinforces the strategic case—in addition to the moral and values-based arguments—for US promotion of democracy-building programs that strengthen resilience, transparency, accountability, and civil society overseas.

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<sup>377</sup> Wong, "China's Self-Defeating Economic Statecraft."

<sup>378</sup> Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, Nov./Dec. 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-10-19/myth-russian-decline>.

## Opportunities to mitigate competitor reward wedging risks

We argue in this report that reward-based wedging is typically a divider's best option. To mitigate the risks of competitor reward wedge strategies against US alliances, the US should consider the following steps:

- **Monitor for competitor reward wedging opportunities:** The US should monitor for areas in which China and Russia can credibly offer US allies rewards of high value, especially areas in which Washington is not poised to provide relevant concessions itself. The US may not be able to control every outcome, but the earlier it identifies such opportunities, the more decision space it can buy to develop tailored responses.
- **Deepen relationships now to raise costs of defection later:** The logic of reward wedging provides yet another reason for the US to consolidate binding priorities sooner rather than later, while China and Russia continue to provoke balancing responses. It is easier for a divider to induce a target state to avoid taking a certain action (e.g., remaining neutral) than to undo a commitment (e.g., defecting from an alliance).<sup>379</sup>
- **Cultivate and maintain institutional ties:** Ally state domestic institutions can serve as powerful restraints on political leaders tempted by divider inducements. In the case of the Philippines, for example, we observe that Duterte's enthusiasm for separation from Washington was at least partially dampened by the Philippine military's strong preference for its US relationships.<sup>380</sup> Professional ties between security institutions remain a powerful means by which Washington can hedge against the political whims of rotating leaders.

## A final word

Just as the US understands its alliances and partnerships provide a geopolitical competitive advantage, so too do Washington's rivals. These relationships therefore present ripe targets for competitors to attack, weaken, and divide. To counter this challenge, the US must understand how its competitors deploy wedge strategies and what conditions promote wedging success, failure, and blowback. This study aims to provide an initial assessment of Chinese and Russian wedge strategies, inform policy discussions to counter them, and advance the scholarly understanding of this phenomenon more broadly.

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<sup>379</sup> Crawford, *The Power to Divide: Wedge Strategies in Great Power Competition*, 206.

<sup>380</sup> Michael J. Green and Gregory B. Poling, "The U.S. Alliance with the Philippines," *CSIS Commentary*, Dec. 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-alliance-philippines>.

As always, more research will help. One logical extension of our research is to examine competitor wedge strategies targeting US partnerships to assess potential differences in divider approaches, target responses, and wedging outcomes that may be due to the existence of an MDT. Given this study's finding about competitor tendencies toward coercive wedging, we also recommend dedicated research into the conditions under which coercive wedging in particular produces wedging gains.

As US national strategy continues to emphasize geopolitical competition with China and Russia, America's alliances and partnerships will only grow in strategic importance. US policy-makers should thus expect Beijing and Moscow to prioritize efforts to prevent and dilute these relationships. By understanding the ways in which they tend to do so, and the conditions that promote their success and failure, Washington can better steel itself to defend its greatest strategic asset.

# Abbreviations

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AfD	<i>Alternative für Deutschland</i> (Alternative for Germany)
AUKUS	Australia-United Kingdom-United States
AUSMIN	Australia-US Ministerial Consultations
CCG	Chinese Coast Guard
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
EDCA	Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement
EU	European Union
GMD	Guomindang (or Chinese Nationalist Party)
MDT	Mutual Defense Treaty
MOFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs (China)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PRC	People's Republic of China
SCS	South China Sea
THAAD	Terminal High Altitude Area Defense
UN	United Nations
VFA	Visiting Forces Agreement
VJTF	Very High Readiness Joint Task Force

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