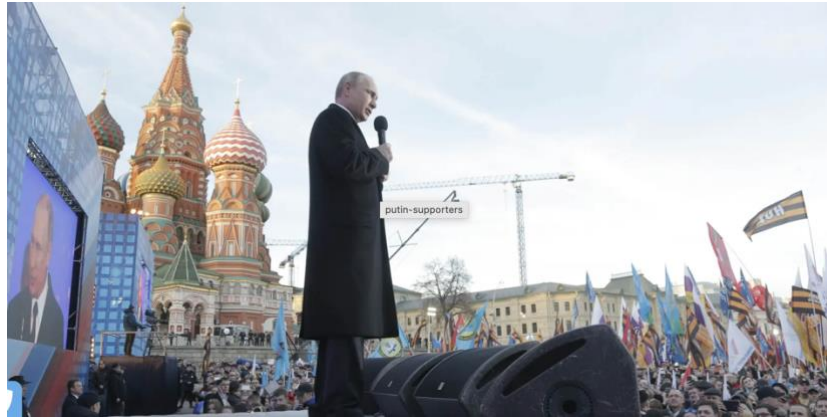


Dealing with Russia & China



In all our *Keeping Channels Open* discussions, the need to coordinate strategies towards these two major powers were singled out as priorities for the transatlantic alliance in the coming years.

Here are a selection of insights and recommendations:

“The first thing needed is **unity** because in their different ways, Russia and China pose a massive challenge to how Democrats and supporters of a liberal order think about the world. The key question is what we can do that goes beyond the normal sets of sanctions, which were carefully structured to avoid damaging the economic interests of Western countries like UK, Germany and France.”

“The challenge posed by China is very different to Russia - China wants to show that its whole system is providing better for its citizens whereas Putin just wants to protect his own power and interests and those of his cliques. We need unity and creativity to deal with both. China is a much bigger problem than Russia, but we can't deal with China without getting Russia off our backs.”

“Russia is overwhelmingly the short-term threat. It poses the greatest risks of carrying out rogue behaviour in the immediate term, particularly in Europe, whereas China is the longer-term systemic threat, and ultimately a bigger one.”

“It is important to pursue the green deal and environmental investment around the world as an anchor for Europe, US and UK to work together, and come up with innovation that will compete with China.”

“Ten years ago, the Chinese and Russians believed that underlying all our words there was real power and that we were prepared to use that power. But we've lost that. The failure to enforce the red line crossed by the Syrian Government in its 2013 chemical weapons attacks marked a real turning point in the effectiveness of our foreign policy. So how do we recreate that deterrent effect in today's world? We need to pick a crisis and draw a line and enforce that line, so demonstrating to others that there are still powers in the world that care about enforcing international law.”

China: Strategic Insights



The focus of recent global summits demonstrate that China is now a huge issue facing the Western Alliance, and for the first time, the country featured in the ambitious NATO 2030 agenda as a systemic challenge to Western security. A recent ***Keeping Channels Open*** session focused on how Western countries need to engage with China through a policy of cooperating where possible, competing where needed and confronting where necessary.

Here are a range of comments from our diplomatic and expert participants.

“The rise of China constitutes the world’s most significant geopolitical issue by a very big margin, and an area of great sensitivity and potential discord.”

“A key question facing Western allies, as well as Japan and South Korea is, what place do we see for China in the global commons in the 21st century? We cannot write China out of the script either economically or politically, but there are so many issues we disagree on. How do we find that right blend? We need a conversation at the highest level in order that we approach China with an overall strategy and not just issue by issue such as on the Uighurs, Hong Kong or technology.”

One participant suggested China’s disregard for global norms was based on the perception that the rules-based international system was shaped by the Americans and British after World War II to serve their own interests. China was keen to subvert aspects of this system which it sees as threatening the

legitimacy of its regime and regional interests, even though its own rise has been in large part thanks to global trade rules.

Beijing also spotted an opportunity for more leverage in **Afghanistan** as the US military and its allies withdrew. Chinese interests include [stopping Uighur fighters from Xinjiang](#) finding sanctuary there, a desire to keep India in check and a keenness to further exploit Afghanistan's mineral wealth including copper deposits. The Taliban has shown eagerness to work with China.

The US Approach

Within the Biden administration, a range of views exist on China which boil down to a series of trade-offs based on how the broader US-China trade and investment relationships intersect with democracy and national security interests.

“How far should we prioritise and pursue punitive action over the treatment of the Uighurs, Hong Kong and other human rights violations? How far should we disentangle our supply chains, whether out of concerns for privacy and data, or for human rights, national security, biotechnology or pharmaceutical concerns? That's just the tip of the iceberg in terms of transatlantic China policy.”

“Credit to the Biden administration for already starting to corral a range of liberal democracies on China, with a clear message: engage in a dialogue with China by all means, but also get them to understand there are rules in this world.”

Forging a Common Platform

The future will likely lead to increased decoupling of China from the West, posing challenges for both sides. “We cannot isolate from each other without consequences and costs both ways. The challenge is how do we manage that divergence and ensure we avoid confrontation as discussions go on?”

It was noted that the US, Europe and Indo-Pacific allies had agreed a “basic platform of an approach” that would revolve around issues like copyright, climate change and arms reduction, despite some differing policies.

Others felt alignment would not be easy.

“There are [27 different positions on China within Europe](#), ranging from full membership of the Belt and Road Initiative to total rejection of Chinese co-operation. This has enabled Chinese diplomats to drive a truck through EU cohesion, dividing up liberal democracies through the use of economic power, with an example being [Italy's decision](#) to sign up to the Belt and Road initiative in 2019.”

“Donald Trump had started off with a good personal relationship with Xi Jinping, but this disintegrated as he introduced a series of sanctions against Beijing, maintained by Biden.”

“The UK enjoyed closer relations with China under Cameron's premiership, and while this era has come to an end, there remains ambiguity - the UK Government recently agreed to sell [the UK's largest semiconductor factory](#) to China, to the astonishment of the White House.”



Recommended Approaches

- The starting point must be an acknowledgment that China is a “systemic rival” while avoiding labelling China an adversary.
- Approach the relationship with caution, acknowledging huge economic benefits but recognising significant challenges. The Alliance must be clear that while it is happy to trade with and invest in China and cooperate on transnational challenges, there are **limits** and allies must uphold the rules based international system.
- We must be clear and firm about areas of disagreement and stand up for our values where challenged. Adopt a sophisticated approach on trade and investment while being clear that China’s military modernisation and assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific pose an increasing risk.
- The Alliance should develop policy objectives, address standards in a detailed way and commit the money and resources required.
- The Alliance should underpin and support democracy in countries like India and Indonesia, which will be important to containing China.

“We need to acquire more **Western capability and knowledge of Chinese history, culture, politics**, including the workings of the CCP and its ideology – this is true of our foreign ministries, but also business leaders, civil societies, UK universities...”

“The democratic world needs to **do much more collectively on science and technology** since ‘[Made in China 2025](#)’ is a published document. It’s not a secret - China’s aim is global leadership and market dominance in all the key 21st century technologies by 2049 such as synthetic biology, autonomous vehicles and zero carbon technologies. We need to make investments and overcome our public’s aversion to new technologies.”

“The Russians are going to be eaten alive by the Chinese - they just can’t see it. They have no way of standing up to China either in competitiveness or technology. The US, UK and Europe could really set out an agenda here on innovation, particularly in new technology, the green deal and the climate.”

“The challenge to the West is for us to **get our collective act together**. And that means some really difficult conversations about the extent to which America, UK and EU go for autonomy in guarding our own supply chains and key industries, and the extent to which we pool and share knowledge and intellectual property.”

“Western powers, particularly the US and EU, must hammer out agreements on global regulatory standards. If we’re not careful, we’ll find that those standards are being set in a way that they’re done to us rather than by us with a role in shaping them.”

“The EU and others need to up their game on capabilities with regards to China– this could include expansion of US, EU, UK intelligence and information-sharing.”

“NATO has had some success in coordinating transatlantic efforts to contain Chinese influence in Europe. A key question is whether NATO can project some kind of Western democratic power and security structure in the Indo-Pacific to contain threats, in the same way that it has built up with regards to Russia in Western Europe.”

“More should be done to bring the Indo-Pacific democracies into discussions and forums.”

Russia: Strategic Insights



Framing the Problem



Participants agreed that Russia continues to threaten Europe and undermine US democracy, flexing its muscles in the military field and exploiting all ways to cause aggravation and undermine its neighbours. One US speaker considered Russia to be more dangerous than China despite being weaker.

“The Chinese have a calculated way of doing things that make sense, while Putin is completely untrustworthy and unpredictable. It is easy to make bad judgments when dealing with Russia. Putin is smart and knows how to exacerbate the weak points of the Alliance. Care must be taken to avoid this.”

“Russia poses a very different threat compared to China, because it poses this hybrid information threat and it is not focused on protecting a whole system – only a corrupt kleptocratic clique centred around Vladimir Putin, who is obsessed about staying in power.”

“The Russians want to be a player in every domain in a negative way to get our attention, so Putin can keep himself and his cronies in power. This is not an ideological struggle like the Cold War.”

“Russia benefits because there are any number of useful idiots dotted around Europe who are always willing to give the Russians the benefit of the doubt.”

Alignment on Russia

Unity over Russia will be difficult for the transatlantic allies because of economic issues and differing interests. Even within the EU, there is disagreement: “Germany thinks about Russia very differently to the UK and US so one of the catastrophes of Brexit was that the US lost its strongest ally on Russia. Poland, for all its anti-democratic nature, holds similar views to the US on Russia. And the Baltic states, which all border Russia, take a stronger approach than a lot of other Member States.”

It was noted that a new post-Merkel administration might unblock things and enable Germany to take a harder stance.

As Biden said, **‘time will tell’** whether a reinvigorated Western approach will deliver more effective deterrence against Russian interference, threats to Ukrainian and Georgian sovereignty, and domestic crackdowns on the opposition. Meanwhile, constructive cooperation on disarmament, nuclear non-proliferation, Iran and climate change should still be attempted.

Recommendations



“The way to deal with Russia is through having **very clear rules of engagement** - we should be clear on consequences if Russians keep sending hit squads round Europe, helping Lukashenko, attacking Ukraine. We need to help the Czechs, Bulgarians, when there is interference, and everyone is watching how we collectively handle Belarus.”

“The Russians only understand one thing - how many divisions do you have? So Biden can say anything he wants but the next time there's a cyber-attack, we'd better act with strength because Putin is not going to care what we say unless we actually do something about it. I don't want to start World War 3 but I think we have to speak with action.”

“Liberal democracies are now in a better position to understand Putin's motives than when the Ukraine crisis broke in 2013-14. But there is still naivety in some European capitals.”

“Russia doesn't want Ukraine to succeed, nor the UK outside EU, nor EU itself, and they certainly don't want Biden to succeed in Building Back Better at home either - because they want to show that their clique is providing more for their citizens than democracies.”

“Biden wants to stabilize the relationship with Russia and make it predictable - but Putin is already predictable in his negative actions - he will take every chance to clobber Ukraine, assassinate rivals, help Lukashenko suppress opposition, drag someone off a plane...this is what makes it so difficult for us. So we need to be matched up in unity, which we have failed to do since the Skirpal poisoning in Salisbury in 2018.”



“From NATO’s perspective, Russia continues to be a classical, conventional and nuclear threat as well as a hybrid threat since it has been massing firepower on the border with Ukraine, grabbing territory in Crimea and so on. NATO should consider beefing up the presence of conventional forces in Europe and Black Sea region, and review its posture in the Arctic.”

“We need to sort out our capabilities and contingency planning in response to information warfare.”

“More NATO-EU collaboration on cyber defence is needed, along with an overhaul of tactics and playbooks on dealing with all the domains of Russian hybrid warfare to increase our resilience.”

