As result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the Biden administration delayed the release of the new National Security Strategy (NSS) until October 2022. At first glance, it is impossible to avoid noting that the entire NSS—which analysts have described as a disappointing document and “a laundry list of challenges, threats, and responses”—revolves around a rigid ingroup-outgroup logic: democracies versus autocracies, us against them. This is surprising, albeit not completely unexpected, given that the document plainly states that the United States is not seeking conflict or a new Cold War.

As international relations scholars have shown, in situations where intentions are unclear or uncertain, threat perception and interstate hostility are often the consequence of the perceived differences among countries, which are driven by ideological, racial or status concerns. Although social identity theory provides the micro-foundations for ingroup favouritism and outgroup discrimination based on cognitive limitations and motivations of self-esteem, the NSS’s approach requires a more specific examination of what is driving hostility.
To better grasp the contradictions of the NSS it is fruitful to frame the document with the logic of othering. The term ‘othering’ refers to a discursive process that builds a common denominator for collective identification of a certain group (i.e., the autocracies). This group is clearly different from the constructed ingroup (i.e., the democracies, led by the United States) and is presented as threatening and hostile.⁶

In the NSS, Russia and China stand out as the core members of the hostile outgroup. Although Russia rightly belongs to this realm as a result of the wars waged against Ukraine, Paul Heer suggests that China does not (yet). In support of his position, Heer highlights that the overestimation of China’s enmity towards the United States might lead to “recognize or acknowledge the areas of overlap between the American and Chinese objectives.”⁷ Another problem of the uncompromising distinction between a unified democratic world against the revisionist autocratic monolith lies in the lack of any explanations for the place of countries like Hungary, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey in this configuration. Apparently, these (and other) autocratic entities seem to be too strategically important to benefit from the Manichean division advanced in the NSS.

This is all reminiscent of a dangerous cold-war mentality. The kind of oversimplification outlined in the NSS informs additional pitfalls and contradictions throughout the document, suggesting that the motivation underpinning the antagonistic approach put forward in the NSS is fear.

**Russian President Vladimir Putin’s Imperialist Foreign Policy**

Page 25 offers a little noticed but very significant hint in this direction. Here, the NSS states that “over the past decade, the Russian government has chosen to pursue an imperialist foreign policy with the goal of overturning key elements of the international order [emphasis added].” Although this interpretation is, in the writer’s opinion, correct to explain Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008 and the double invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and again in 2022—a position shared by scholars like Emil Pain and Steve Hanson⁸—the fact that one of the most significant US national security policy documents employs this language is striking.

Both in the relevant literature and popular cultures worldwide, United States foreign policy is widely seen as imperialistic.⁹ Often times this characterization—for clear historical reasons—is not a flattering one. Since the nineteenth century, the category of “American imperialism” has been used to describe various manifestations of US foreign policy, including territorial annexations, wars, gunboat diplomacy, economic and political control over foreign territories, unequal treaties, regime change, support for non-democratic regimes, the

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exportation of democracy and, importantly, the so-called Liberal International Order (LIO) that was established after the Cold War. Beyond the intent to stigmatize Putin’s foreign policy—international stigma is indeed used to indicate deviant identities and behaviour—the question is: why employ a category so commonly used to underline the negative aspects of American foreign policy to describe contemporary Russian policy?

Psychological research suggests that stigma attribution is motivated by fear. Lerita Coleman argues that “people who stigmatize feel threatened and collectively feel that their position of social, economic, and political dominance will be dismantled by members of stigmatized groups.” Therefore, the use of the “imperialistic” label to stigmatize Putin’s foreign policy—by an actor that knows too well the contemporary meaning of such a descriptor—helps clarify the underlying tension that informs the NSS and its paradoxes.

Interpreting American foreign policy as informed by fear is far from being an ahistorical exercise. In an essay published this year, Andrew Preston argues that the “inordinate prevalence of fear that sits at the heart of the American worldview … provides the basis for thinking about U.S. foreign policy.” Fears can be warranted or not – this is not the point, according to Preston. Rather, he continues, fear of any nature or source contributes to the exaggeration of risk and increased insecurity. Its continuous presence has helped shape American foreign policy throughout its history. For instance, during the Cold War, fear enabled a zero-sum thinking encapsulated in the “circular logic of security-through-supremacy,” which in turn generated heightened threat perception and even more plausible, but unlikely, fears. According to Preston, the domino theory that informed American foreign policy in Southeast Asia during the Cold War offers a compelling outcome of this mechanism.

In today’s international context, a plausible fear among American policymakers might be represented by the implications that the success of Putin’s war and his foreign policy, combined with the supposed demise of the LIO (if such a liberal order ever existed) and the rise of China might bring about: an alliance or closer strategic alignment between Russia and China.

A New Sino-Soviet Alignment?

Russia and China are the countries cited most frequently in the NSS, which mentions how the United States see them as “increasingly aligned” (p. 23). The plausible fear of an alliance or closer strategic alignment between the two autocratic countries is what drives and makes sense of the ingroup-outgroup discrimination.

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11 Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma Management in International Relations: Transgressive Identities, Norms, and Order in International Society.' International Organization 68, no. 1 (January 2014): 143–76.
14 Preston, “The Fearful Giant”, 177.
between democracies and autocracies presented in the NSS. However, a closer look at the history of Sino-Soviet relations would explain why such an strategic alignment is still, at the moment, unlikely.

The conditions that favoured the demise of the Communist alliance emerged when its enmity towards the United States was most acute, in the early Cold War. The reasons for the Sino-Soviet split were mainly ideological and related to the domestic politics of each country: disagreements about economic development, de-Stalinization, and the conduct of international relations with regards to peaceful coexistence and the world revolution. Although today the two countries are not related by the same Marxist ideology, they share a common aversion to western democracies, with Russia openly attacking the Western liberal order. In addition, as pointed out by Joseph Torigian, the friendship between Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping is an anomaly in the history of the two countries given that previous leaders mistrusted or disrespected one another. These differences need to be taken into account because they provide insight into why current Sino-Russian relations might be more balanced and resistant to external pressures than they were in the past.

However, it is also important to note that the protracted Russian war against Ukraine has changed some of these considerations. As a result of the financial and economic sanctions imposed by the United States – in particular export controls on energy and semiconductor technology – Russia is increasingly more and more reliant on China’s economic support and the purchase of commodities and other exports, which between February and August have grown by almost 50%. As a result, China is set to become Russia’s main trading partner, and this is creating the conditions for Beijing to extract strategic, military, economic and financial advantages from Moscow. The implications of the reckless and brutal invasion of Ukraine will be more far reaching than anticipated at the beginning of the war; as of today, the two autocratic regimes have basically swapped their respective Cold War statuses, in which the Soviet Union enjoyed the military and economic upper-hand vis-à-vis an impoverished China, and where Beijing was often responsible for an adventurist and belligerent foreign policy. At the same time, this reversal of roles and the unbalanced nature of the current Sino-Russian alignment, in which Russia has turned into the minority partner, might be conducive to future tensions and mutual dissatisfactions, providing the basis for a future split, as happened during the Cold War. Crucially, in the early 1960s continuous American diplomatic engagement with the Soviet Union on the ban of nuclear tests drove a further wedge between the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and the USSR. American diplomatic efforts contributed to the deepening of the PRC-USSR rift and helped reveal it in broad daylight.

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Given the historical precedent and the growing influence of China over Russia, American diplomacy should exploit such an evolving but not unprecedented situation, rather than providing additional arguments for the consolidation of a strategic alignment around a shared anti-Western ideological justification.

**Conclusions: Rapprochement 2.0**

According to China analysts, rising international tensions might tempt Xi Jinping to isolate China from the outer world, in particular the Western world. This outcome should be avoided if the United States wants to engage Beijing in deterring more effectively Russia’s armed revisionism and in tackling global threats like climate change, as key members of the Biden administration have recently acknowledged. Resuming and pushing for high-level face-to-face bilateral meetings between American and Chinese delegations should become a top priority for American diplomats. Face-to-face diplomacy is not just ‘cheap talk’; instead, it provides a fundamental signaling mechanism that increases the likelihood of cooperation, even when the participants have strong incentives to distrust one another. More to the point, it should not be forgotten that the Sino-American ambassadorial talks held in the 1960s and early 1970s were instrumental to American diplomats in learning a viable “negotiation strategy with the Chinese, emphasizing the common areas, playing down the differences” and facilitating the achievement of rapprochement in 1972. From this perspective, should a Biden-Xi meeting at the G-20 in November 2022 not take place—the first in-person since Biden took office in January last year—that might not be good news.

In conclusion, instead of emphasising the inevitable differences between democracies and autocracies—which are not reconcilable in the short or the medium term, widen ideological distance, and fuel mutual distrust—a strategy of pursuing a ‘new’ type of rapprochement between the United States and China should be sought and implemented.

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