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OPINION | COMMENTARY

## *The Growing Menace of the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran Axis*

The three powers have different goals, but each extracts advantage when others challenge the U.S.

By Arthur Herman

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A soldier releases a drone during a joint Russian-Chinese exercise in Russia, Sept. 13, 2018. PHOTO: SAVITSKY VADIM/ZUMA PRESS

Iran sabotages ships in the Persian Gulf and threatens to resume enrichment of uranium for its nuclear program. Russia dispatches troops to beleaguered dictator Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, while China sends logistical support. China resists a trade truce with the U.S. and seeks to drive a wedge between the U.S. and allies like Jordan and Saudi Arabia by selling them armed drones. Russia sends bombers and fighters into Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone. Iran, Russia and China all work tirelessly to keep Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in power.

In the aftermath of the Iran nuclear deal in August 2015, I warned of a Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis. Since then, these three authoritarian and revisionist powers have become bolder, more sophisticated and more global. Their effort to diminish and disrupt the influence of the U.S. and

its allies extends from Syria and the Strait of Hormuz to North Korea and Latin America, as well as Central Asia and even the South Pacific.

This axis is not a formal military alliance or even a coordinated conspiracy. The three powers have different goals in international affairs. China's is global hegemony; Iran's is to become a regional as well as a nuclear power; Russia is struggling to stay in the superpower game. China's primary focus is on gaining economic power. Russia's is on asserting its geopolitical clout. Iran's agenda is largely ideological—to be the guiding voice of a regional Shiite revolution and of radical Islam.

None are particularly eager to advance the others' ambitions. Iran conflicts with Russia and China on the promotion of radical Islam, and China and Russia have historically competed for influence in Central Asia. But each plans to exploit the others' challenge to the U.S. to extract advantage for itself.

Moscow, Beijing and Tehran do have interests in common. All three aim for an internet under strict state surveillance and control. All three use energy—Russia and Iran their supply of it, China its demand for it—to bend other countries to their will. China and Russia also use their growing market share of world arms sales—26.2% combined last year, compared with the U.S.'s 36%—to cultivate clients and tributary states and to draw allies like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey away from the U.S.

All three recognize that the U.S. is a crucial obstacle to their success. While they may not directly coordinate their actions, when one of them distracts the U.S., it creates an opportunity for the other two to gain ground.

Take North Korea, where Russia has taken over from China as host and patron for Kim Jong Un. Experts have noted that Pyongyang's most recent missile test bears an uncanny resemblance to an advanced Russian design. Or Syria, where Moscow's military support for the Assad regime has allowed Iran to arm clients like Hezbollah and Hamas. Or Venezuela, where Chinese and Iranian investments under the late Hugo Chávez are protected by Vladimir Putin's support for Mr. Maduro.

The Trump administration has been right to prioritize the threat from China, the most powerful of the three revisionist powers. But the U.S. needs a broader strategy. The first element is allies. From Europe to the Arabian Peninsula to East Asia, America's friends are waiting to hear that while the U.S. is more focused than ever about protecting its own national interests, it is also committed to international security—and to preventing the world from coming under the sway of the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis.

The second is advanced defense technologies, from drones and autonomous systems to artificial intelligence, quantum, cyber and space. The U.S. should collaborate with key partners, including Japan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, India and Israel, in building an “arsenal of democracies” that will unleash private-sector innovation to offset the new axis’ surging military resources. China, for example, is moving quickly to dominate the export market for large drones.

The third, and ultimately the most important, is continuing economic growth. Economic power determines geopolitical dominance. The power of capitalist free-market economies to outperform command economies should not be in doubt. The U.S. and its allies now have a national-security stake in making that growth sustained and global. For example, the U.S. can use its clout as the world’s leading exporter of oil and natural gas and innovator in energy technologies to support open markets and political systems and frustrate the designs of the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis.

At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing early this year, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats warned that “Moscow’s relationship with Beijing is closer than it has been in many decades.” Tehran is the junior partner in this club of revisionist autocracies. Together they seek to chip away at American might. If they succeed the result will be a darker and less free world system. The struggle between the U.S. and the new axis may not be decided on the battlefield, but the stakes could be just as high.

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