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# Networks and Competitive Advantage in a Contested World

Jennifer Kavanagh



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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace  
Publications Department  
1779 Massachusetts Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
P: + 1 202 483 7600  
F: + 1 202 483 1840  
[CarnegieEndowment.org](http://CarnegieEndowment.org)

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## Summary

In an increasingly multipolar world and amid challenges from China, Russia, and elsewhere, the United States faces a complex set of foreign policy demands and the real risk of becoming overextended. Networks—of states, businesses, and individuals—offer policymakers a way to prioritize and reduce global commitments while advancing core U.S. interests. Leveraging the right networks in the right ways can extend U.S. influence, support the economic and physical security of Americans, and compete with adversaries at sustainable cost. Today’s policymakers understand the power of networks but need more guidance on how to build and employ them as tools of competition in a contested world rather than a world of open borders and markets.

Influence networks—networks primed to spread and amplify U.S. power, enhance U.S. competitiveness, and protect national interests—have three characteristics.

- They are **attraction networks**, organized around places and issues where countries and corporations are already interacting, meeting common needs with customized resources. China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), for instance, is organized around a shared need for infrastructure across the Global South and embeds Chinese influence by tailoring agreements to each partner’s local conditions. The United States has used attraction effectively in the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program, but most U.S. foreign investment has been centralized and top-down.

- They are **gated networks** with clear criteria for entry, access, and exit. Gates capture network power and direct it toward specific goals. The European Union (EU) has used gated economic markets to build significant regulatory power and geopolitical relevance. The United States has tended toward universalism but employs gates in some security networks, like the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and is turning toward gates in economic networks with friendshoring initiatives in some industries.
- Finally, they are **distributed networks** that have robust ties between members throughout the network, allowing influence to flow quickly along more pathways and facilitating collective action. The United States has often relied on less resilient hub-and-spoke networks to retain control. U.S. Indo-Pacific security alliances are hub-and-spoke, while NATO is more distributed, enabling more rapid, coordinated responses and wider spread of U.S. influence.

Networks with these characteristics can help policymakers tackle their hardest problems. For example, better use of influence networks can support U.S. efforts to prioritize and fully resource the more significant challenge posed by China by pushing forward changes that advance European security autonomy and by building and mobilizing needed, distributed networks in the Indo-Pacific theater. Influence networks can inform U.S. strategies for building ties to hedging states that offer access to key resources or strategic locations—for example, by focusing on shared local needs of potential partners and U.S. comparative advantages and by creating distributed business or civil society partnerships. Finally, influence networks provide ways to approach the Russia-China relationship that support U.S. security and economic interests, including avoiding the isolation of either.

These examples begin to illustrate how influence networks can improve U.S. strategies toward foreign policy challenges by offering policymakers a way to prioritize commitments, capitalize on U.S. strengths, and avoid overextension that harms U.S. interests. Additional exploration and application of these networks will investigate these and other foreign policy challenges in more depth.



## Network Power and Power Politics

The United States today faces an increasingly multipolar world and a complex set of challenges. From threats posed by Russia, China, Iran, and others to global climate change and economic instability, U.S. policymakers have their hands full. But the biggest threat to U.S. interests may not be these external demands but rather the real and rising risk of overextension. A United States that is overburdened with commitments everywhere may find itself unable to respond effectively anywhere. The United States urgently needs to prioritize its commitments and find ways to protect its core interests—ensuring the physical and economic security of Americans—that are sustainable, advance U.S. competitiveness without escalation, and acknowledge the existence of limits on U.S. power.

Networks—of states, businesses, and individuals—offer policymakers a path forward. Networks are at the center of any discussion about power and how it works because building ties and streaming goods, technology, people, and ideas across them creates power.<sup>1</sup> As the world grows more contested, states that can build, harness, and employ networks as competitive tools will have decisive advantages. Leveraging the right networks in the right ways, for example, can facilitate burden-sharing, extend U.S. influence with reduced investment, and allow the United States to outperform competitors.<sup>2</sup> The right networks can improve the U.S. defense strategy and help policymakers confront the China-Russia partnership. But not all networks will be equally effective at achieving these ends. Simply building connections or signing agreements will be insufficient to activate the layers of networks the United States needs to compete.

Today's policymakers are familiar with the power and importance of networks, but their ability to organize and use networks strategically as levers of statecraft to tackle current challenges is less advanced than their facility with military or economic tools. In part, this is because much of the existing guidance on the use of networks as statecraft was written for a world of increasing globalization, open borders, and expanding international cooperation.<sup>3</sup> This is not the world that we live in, however. Instead, today's policymakers need networks that are organized for a contested world in which the United States and its rivals are vying for scarce resources, economic advantage, and the right to set the rules of the road. Specifically, policymakers need to be able to create and direct influence networks—that is, networks primed to spread and amplify U.S. power, advance U.S. competitiveness, and protect national interests.

Influence networks most relevant to today's foreign policy challenges have three characteristics.

### **They Must Be Attraction Networks**

The most powerful networks in today's world will form around existing centers of gravity, in regions and around issues and sets of resources where relevant countries, businesses, and individuals are already congregating or moving. Apple, for example, succeeded by placing this concept of attraction at the center of its operations. Rather than offering prepackaged products, the company's platform offers curated content—songs, movies, books, podcasts—that reflects how consumers want to interact with media and allows them to build customized playlists and libraries.<sup>4</sup> In the book *The Power of Pull*, the authors describe this shift from a world oriented around “push,” in which individuals, businesses, and countries work to fit within institutions, to one organized around “pull,” in which institutions form around the needs and activities of customers, states, or companies, offering personalized resources.<sup>5</sup>

For U.S. policymakers this means that an “if we build it, they will come” approach to building networks isn't enough. Instead, policymakers will need to identify existing centers of gravity and create networks around these focal points with resources adapted to meet local needs and norms.

Attraction becomes the source of power for these networks. Building attraction isn't easy. It is not always obvious where centers of gravity in the international system lie or what kinds of resources countries or corporations might want. U.S. foreign policy, oriented for decades around the protection of U.S. primacy, has not been adept at identifying focal points where other states are meeting or moving. Furthermore, relevant attraction networks may be partly organic, based on existing relationships but needing activation. U.S. policymakers will need to align and mobilize existing political, economic, and military partnerships and build new ties where required.

China tackled this in the BRI when it recognized that many countries lacked sufficient high-quality infrastructure—a common need—but then crafted localized, partner-driven arrangements with each potential member. The BRI was imagined as a set of physical and digital infrastructure projects—railways, ports, highways, and telecommunications architecture—stretching across East Asia, the Middle East, and Africa aimed at serving China’s domestic economic needs and filling the Global South’s infrastructure gap.<sup>6</sup> This infrastructure gap thus served as the BRI’s center of gravity. By stepping into this center of gravity, Beijing has been able to spread Chinese influence globally, creating layers of trade networks, business and political relationships, and shared technology.<sup>7</sup>

In building out the BRI and in its related investment projects, China has developed, over time, an approach based on attraction that works through local economic and political partnerships (existing and new) and adapts to local customs in recipient countries.<sup>8</sup> This gives recipients considerable leverage and agency but also speeds the spread of Chinese influence by embedding it in local banks, labor markets, and communication platforms. Participant countries play a role in proposing specific projects for BRI investment, which are then carried out by a mix of local and Chinese workers.<sup>9</sup> Recipients also often drive the terms of BRI investments and the ways projects are implemented. This is true not only of projects officially under the BRI brand but also of closely related investments that have become part of political and economic networks catalyzed by the BRI. In response to local interests, for example, Chinese firms in Central Asia are increasingly investing in industrial development projects, working with local firms and entrepreneurs to build new trade networks and export markets.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Chinese tech companies have won the trust of consumers in Indonesia by employing locally focused strategies such as offering vocational training programs.<sup>11</sup>

There are limits to China’s ability to harness the potential network power created by the BRI, however.

First, while the BRI has unifying geopolitical elements and strategic objectives, these have evolved only as it matured. The resulting decentralized nature of the initiative has given Chinese companies a high degree of independence, and they do not always follow Beijing’s wishes. This has led to project delays and quality issues that have turned some recipients against the BRI.<sup>12</sup> Corruption and environmental issues have also been widespread.<sup>13</sup> Second, limited connections between recipients make the BRI more a collection of bilateral ties than a cohesive network mobilized toward clearly defined and specific goals.

Finally, most BRI investment has been extended without conditions on the quality of loans or borrower solvency. This has led to high levels of recipient debt and defaults that have caused more delays and project terminations.<sup>14</sup> Critics have labeled China’s strategy as coercive “debt trap diplomacy.”<sup>15</sup> Others point to local agency and the involvement of local firms and banks as evidence that this is not the case.<sup>16</sup> Beijing has learned from its mistakes, however, shifting toward smaller projects in technology and industrial development.<sup>17</sup> Despite its problems, China has benefited from the BRI and continues to use attraction networks to spread Chinese influence.

The United States has also had success with attraction networks, but it has used this approach inconsistently. The Marshall Plan, used to rebuild Europe after World War II, for example, relied on attraction to embed U.S. influence—economic, technical, and cultural—and project U.S. power. Like the BRI, the Marshall Plan responded to Western European countries' need for infrastructure and industrial development and adopted a bottom-up process based on attraction to select and implement projects. This process used local representatives to identify needs and local corporations and workers to execute projects.<sup>18</sup> The Marshall Plan spurred the development of business partnerships and trade networks that spanned the Atlantic and crossed European borders. The United States also connected technical advisers with European economists and managers to adapt U.S. labor practices to improve European productivity.<sup>19</sup>

Using attraction to build a sphere of U.S. influence in Western Europe involved hard choices, namely excluding countries in Eastern Europe who were not oriented around the same centers of gravity. The result was stronger but narrower U.S.-led political and economic networks that were a valuable comparative advantage when it came to competing with the USSR.<sup>20</sup> Despite this success with attraction as a tool for effective, development-focused investing, the United States has not used attraction all that often in more recent efforts in Africa or Latin America.<sup>21</sup>

The United States has also used attraction networks in the security domain, for example as part of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program. Historically, U.S. arms sales have not been effective ways to build or project influence. But the F-35 program is not an average arms deal. First, the F-35 program was organized around a clear center of gravity: deep existing military cooperation between the United States and the network's core members, who were also close U.S. security partners, and their common interest in interoperability and technology-sharing. Second, the development and production of the aircraft has been shared across member states and customized to domestic needs and capabilities. Each of the eight original F-35 program members made substantial investments starting from the research and development phase. Their level of investment determined their access to U.S. technology and their involvement in manufacturing. Having contributed the most after the United States (the principal client), the United Kingdom is the only Tier 1 member and has the deepest access to the secrets of the F-35 and the biggest say in design considerations. As the senior Tier 2 member, Italy has its own facility for updates and maintenance and a greater involvement in defense production than other members, features that helped overcome domestic political resistance. Other partners also have tailored arrangements.<sup>22</sup>

This customized approach leveraged attraction to build layers of industrial, technological, and military ties that have had three benefits: they are embedded in the local defense and economic infrastructure of participating countries, act as conduits for U.S. influence, and are costly to break.<sup>23</sup> Turkey's experience when it was forced out of the network for buying Russian air defense systems underscores the extent of these costs.<sup>24</sup> Leaving the network means loss of access to technology, possible exclusion from coalition security initiatives, and domestic economic damage.

The F-35 program has its critics: it is highly costly and has been riddled with delays.<sup>25</sup> But it has been used effectively to spread U.S. influence and build network power in both direct and more subtle ways. For example, the United States has been able to prevent all partners (except South Korea) from working with China's Huawei and has used participation in the F-35 program to keep Israel from selling advanced UAVs and other military equipment to China.<sup>26</sup> The tightly interwoven set of networks would also pay dividends in the event of a joint contingency campaign by creating more easily mobilized defense industrial ties and greater interoperability.

## They Must Be Gated Networks

America's attraction networks thus build power by identifying a common need and drawing members in with customized benefits. Unfortunately, a bottom-up approach shaped by sometimes diverging local needs can risk incoherence. The BRI, for example, suffers from this problem. Because it is made up of bilateral arrangements based on local conditions and interests, BRI members lack common commitments and share only weak ties. This may not prevent the spread of Chinese influence, but it hampers collective action. So how can states build networks that rely on attraction and also create network power that can be harnessed? The answer to this challenge lies in the principle of gatekeeping, the ability to control network entry and exit.

Gatekeeping is central to building network power in a contested world. In the book *The Seventh Sense*, the author argues that "today, no position is more important, formidable, influential, or profitable than that of the gatekeeper."<sup>27</sup> Gatekeepers can capture network power by deciding who does and does not have access to the network, how the network operates, and what benefits the network provides.<sup>28</sup> Gated networks are more secure, efficient, and cohesive. They are also better at spreading influence and capturing usable network power. Networks that are too open will be hard to direct in meaningful ways or are easily undermined by rivals.<sup>29</sup>

The United States has tended toward open, universal networks as the best way to advance U.S. interests. But gated spaces are increasingly common in today's world. Growing regionalism and overlapping data governance regimes emerging from places like India and South Korea are examples of this trend.<sup>30</sup> This makes the ability to build effective gated networks that much more important and the disadvantages of open networks that much greater. While U.S. attraction networks provide leverage to partners in shaping the form and function of the network, gatekeeping is a responsibility the United States will often want to retain and closely guard to maximize its ability to use networks as competitive tools.

In simplest terms, a gate is anything that regulates entry and exit to the network or that sets binding rules for membership. That can be, for example, standards, technical requirements, or investments. For the F-35 program, gates to entry included required financial contributions and restrictions on technology-sharing. Marshall Plan recipients had to commit to

remove trade barriers and limit use of investment dollars to approved projects. Entrance into NATO is based on a set of political and economic conditions, as well as securing the approval of existing members. To be most effective at harnessing network power, gates should be clearly defined and consistently enforced.

Regulating network exit is just as important as controlling entry because when exit is unrestricted, it becomes harder to capture and leverage network power.<sup>31</sup> There are several ways to limit network exit. First, attraction networks that become embedded in the political, economic, or defense infrastructure of network partners can effectively serve as gates to exit. A related approach is to provide in-network benefits that are essential and hard to replicate, binding partners to the network. The F-35 program combines these two strategies. Co-production creates deep ties between partners and establishes military-to-military, economic, and technology partnerships that are difficult to unwind. Furthermore, the benefits provided by the F-35 program are largely inelastic. The F-35 is the most advanced system of its kind and the security partnership with the United States is equally irreplaceable for partners.<sup>32</sup> A different approach to controlling exit is to build network standards that are unique and incompatible with other possible networks.<sup>33</sup> The BRI uses this approach. Along with influence, the BRI spreads Chinese technology, standards, and credit systems. Once these become widespread, switching to other providers may be too costly.

The EU's economic networks—encompassing EU members and all the businesses and consumers active in its markets—are a good example of how gatekeeping generates power and spreads influence. In fact, the regulatory network power the EU has accumulated through gatekeeping (sometimes called “the Brussels Effect”) is a central element of its geopolitical power.<sup>34</sup> To trade in the EU's lucrative market, corporations around the world must meet the EU's standards, which are higher than those used elsewhere and which serve as gates to entry. Because most firms prefer to have only one version of their product, the EU's standards set the global benchmark in a range of sectors, advancing EU interests.<sup>35</sup> The EU has been most successful in building network power in consumer markets that are least responsive to regulatory changes.<sup>36</sup> The EU's General Data Protection Regulation, for example, applies to any company processing data of EU persons, regardless of where this processing occurs. To sell agricultural products to EU buyers, all companies, regardless of location, must meet EU requirements. In this case, then, it is the standard that creates the gate to entry and the target's inelasticity that creates the gate to exit.<sup>37</sup>

The principles of gatekeeping also apply to networks that operate at the subnational level but on the global stage, such as cross-border corporate partnerships and supply chains. The term “friendshoring” describes an effort to build, incentivize, or strengthen business-to-business networks in sectors deemed essential, such as semiconductors and telecommunications.<sup>38</sup> While globalization advocates push for open economic networks organized around market efficiency, proponents of friendshoring seek to concentrate and protect supply chains, imports, and export markets across a set of friendly countries through corporate ties and research and development joint ventures. Access to the resulting networks is limited, or

gated, with export/import, investment, and technology-sharing restrictions.<sup>39</sup> The proposed Chip 4 alliance is one example. It aims to set up a friendshored network with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, in which the four countries would coordinate on the development and production of semiconductors and final export would be restricted.<sup>40</sup>

But while gated networks at this subnational level can build considerable network power (especially when formed around highly desired products) and be valuable in competition with adversaries, the approach does come with risks and limits. First, countries vary in their ability to control the decisions of businesses, banks, cities, and other subnational actors. The U.S. government can create incentives to drive the behavior of corporate actors and has certain regulatory powers, such as the ability to review foreign investments for security risks.<sup>41</sup> But subnational actors have leverage and autonomy even on the global stage. Second, gates that are drawn too narrowly may trigger resistance that derails the network entirely. Samsung, a South Korean firm, has pushed back on the Chip 4 proposal, fearing the loss of its main customer, China.<sup>42</sup> Gates that are drawn narrowly can also place undesired limits on the spread of influence. The Chip 4 alliance would constrain certain types of U.S. influence to a small circle of partners. Expanding to include Southeast Asian partners might provide more opportunities.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the benefits of networks that are too restrictive may have limited lifespans. Those left outside are often able to develop alternatives.

## **They Must Be Distributed Networks**

Finally, the most effective and efficient influence networks will be distributed in shape, with ties connecting countries, militaries, or corporations within the network to each other in a mesh-like pattern. Rather than relying on distributed networks, however, the United States has tended toward those with a hub-and-spoke shape that place the United States in the middle surrounded by a set of bilateral ties. This approach centralizes control and limits constraints on U.S. autonomy.<sup>44</sup> For example, when organizing the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), a transnational effort to interdict trafficking of materials related to weapons of mass destruction, the United States intentionally restricted membership and made itself the central coordinating player to safeguard its own freedom of action. But this comes with trade-offs: the United States is also required to shoulder the costs of negotiating supporting agreements and building teams of law enforcement, customs agents, and intelligence professionals for each enforcement action. While the PSI network has been successful in meeting its objectives in some cases, a more distributed approach might have been more effective at spreading U.S.-backed nonproliferation principles at a lower cost, because ties between partners would facilitate burden-sharing and offer more pathways for the spread of U.S. influence.<sup>45</sup> Other U.S. networks limited by their hub-and-spoke shape include U.S. security alliances in the Indo-Pacific, which involve bilateral ties with countries (such as South Korea, Japan, and Australia) that have fewer connections between them, and programs that rely on centralized U.S. agencies acting as the hub between donors and recipients to stream investment to regions like Africa.

With their greater number of ties between members, distributed networks are more resilient in the face of a range of different threats, easier to mobilize toward collective action, and better at amplifying U.S. influence with fewer costs.<sup>46</sup> They also provide the United States flexibility in how it chooses to harness and use network power, as a catalyst and connector or more directly as leader or mobilizer. The F-35 program, for example, is unique among arms deals because it does build distributed relationships between network members, spreading manufacturing and production across borders. These ties provide more pathways for the spread of U.S. influence and would be essential during joint operations. The NATO alliance has also developed a distributed structure with military, political, technology, and economic ties between NATO members that support coordinated responses. The response to the war in Ukraine has underscored both the benefits of NATO's distributed relationships and their limits. In the wake of Russia's invasion, distributed ties facilitated a rapid collective response and an unprecedented flow of arms into Ukraine that was supported by trades between NATO members. However, to keep the process from stalling, the United States has had to serve as a go-between of sorts, brokering between NATO partners.<sup>47</sup>

Influence networks made up of subnational actors can also take on distributed shapes. For example, distributed networks of U.S. and global research universities have been an important vehicle for generating U.S. power and innovation leadership on the world stage.<sup>48</sup> These networks connect universities, researchers, students, information, and funding across borders without a true central hub. The U.S. government can increase or harness the network power created by these connections—with funding, incentives for collaboration, or immigration policies—but its involvement is as a facilitator and connector, not as the logistical center.

For policymakers, the biggest challenge with distributed networks is successfully building distributed ties between members, but this is essential for creating the pathways that speed the spread of influence and support collective action. Investment in these distributed ties should in many cases be prioritized over investment in U.S. bilateral relationships. Though some connections may exist between partners, often significant U.S. effort will be required to identify complementarities and overcome historical tensions or lack of familiarity. For example, efforts to build more multilateral relationships around security issues in the Indo-Pacific face distrust and fear of provoking China. Still, U.S. policymakers have options.

One approach for this specific case would be to jump-start the formation of distributed security ties by addressing the shared interest across the region in improved defense capabilities, investing in cross-border defense industrial base ties, and supporting exports from regional arms sellers like South Korea and India.<sup>49</sup> Notably, the Marshall Plan used a similar approach in the economic domain, providing funds to support imports by Europe from elsewhere in Europe to build distributed ties between war-scarred European countries.<sup>50</sup> A second approach would be to start multilateral security engagement with a small set of partners focused on a narrow goal and then add relevant partners over time, gradually creating a more inclusive architecture.<sup>51</sup>



# Influence Networks as Competitive Advantage: A Research Agenda

Networks that prioritize these three characteristics—attraction, gatekeeping, and distribution—will be most valuable in advancing competition with rivals to protect core U.S. interests. There are some tensions between the three principles, and policymakers may need to make trade-offs, like the BRI's greater emphasis on attraction and limited focus on distributed ties. Furthermore, leveraging network power will require balance between uncovering and activating existing military, economic, or political partnerships and building or shaping new relationships.

This section considers how an approach to foreign policy centered around influence networks can inform three current policy challenges. The observations only scratch the surface of the questions posed but illustrate the framework's value and a path for future research.

## How Can the U.S. Defense Strategy Be Strengthened?

The best defense strategy will be one that protects core U.S. interests—namely ensuring the physical and economic security of Americans—at a sustainable cost. This includes preventing attacks on the homeland and protecting access to key economic resources, supply chains, and transit routes. With limited resources to allocate to national defense, policymakers will need to prioritize investments toward the most severe and immediate challenges in these areas. The U.S. government has correctly identified China as the greatest threat to U.S. interests as defined here, but it has yet to fully realign its defense strategy to adequately resource the requirements of the Indo-Pacific theater. Instead, at least 100,000 U.S. forces are now deployed in Europe; President Joe Biden's administration has committed to supply Ukraine with arms and aid indefinitely; and there has been limited change to U.S. posture in the Middle East.

One way that policymakers can reduce the U.S. defense burden and shift resources toward the Indo-Pacific theater without sacrificing core interests is to organize and mobilize networks that facilitate burden-sharing and extend U.S. reach in key areas. For example, in some regions, like Europe and the Middle East, coalitions and local partnerships can be built to manage regional security issues with the United States in a supporting role. Where threats are greater, like in Asia, the U.S. role would be more central, but regional networks would still be active. Attraction, gatekeeping, and distribution would guide policymakers in each case.

In Europe, the effective use of influence networks could support a reduction of U.S. presence and commitment and a shift to a bolstered European-led security infrastructure. First, there is already a natural center of gravity around NATO and EU security ties. Security relationships between European countries need to be strengthened, however. To reinforce distributed ties between European partners, the United States should strongly incentivize more extensive cross-border defense industrial base cooperation, to include production and sale of weapons within Europe and greater harmonization of capabilities and systems to reduce redundancy. Expansion of European-led joint training exercises to more EU partners and types of scenarios would also be desirable.<sup>52</sup> To overcome European resistance, the United States could make its own military assistance conditional on progress toward these goals. Second, an effective European security infrastructure would need stronger network gatekeeping—for example, strict enforcement of spending targets and force commitments. The U.S. role would shift from that of a central hub and force provider to that of a supplier and trainer. The network approach would mean reduced control and possibly arms revenue for the United States, but it would free up resources for domestic investment and the Indo-Pacific theater.

A network approach to the Indo-Pacific would have the United States in a more central role but would still leverage regional connections, including ad hoc coalitions and multilateral partnerships, to augment U.S. capabilities and extend the reach of U.S. military, economic, and technological power in the region. Given current resistance to security-focused multilateralism in the Indo-Pacific, seeking out and strengthening ties between partners within existing centers of gravity (such as maritime security or freedom of navigation) and around common interests and needs will be more important than trying to create new partnerships in sensitive areas (such as technology standards) or investing heavily in U.S. bilateral relationships.<sup>53</sup> A key role for the United States will be knitting together networks formed around diverse focal points into a cohesive architecture relying on common members and interests while retaining flexibility. To build distributed ties, the United States should leverage partners like Australia and France to take the lead with countries where U.S. relationships are weaker, like the Pacific Islands nations and parts of Southeast Asia. But building too many narrow trilateral or quadrilateral groups may interfere with the formation of region-wide distributed ties.

Second, resilient security networks in the Indo-Pacific region would focus on local issues with resources tailored to meet partner needs. This would mean emphasizing partner priorities in regional investments and dialing back the use of the China-Taiwan issue as the organizing principle for the region, since it does not resonate widely. The risks of pushing an anti-China agenda too hard are illustrated by resistance to the Chip 4 alliance, where the heavy anti-China narrative has alienated potential partners.<sup>54</sup> Even with a local focus, the United States can invest in networks that advance military readiness in ways relevant to U.S. regional security objectives, such as deterring Chinese military aggression. Many countries in the region are interested in building their defense capabilities, for instance. Networks based around cross-border co-production of U.S. weapons (as in the F-35 program) and support for arms sales from regional suppliers would be one place to start. Joint training

led by partners (rather than by the United States) or joint freedom of navigation operations could also advance interoperability with reduced U.S. involvement. Finally, while wider networks are needed, more partners are not always better. Requiring significant defense sector investment and specific operational planning by partners for access to U.S. security assistance could help attract the right partners.

Similar influence network approaches to the Middle East, cyberspace, and elsewhere and network-focused strategies for sectors like technology and industrial base resilience can further prioritize U.S. defense investments and work toward a more targeted defense strategy.

## **How Should the United States Work With Hedging States Across Regions?**

A second challenge facing policymakers today is how to build the political, economic, and military connections needed to advance U.S. interests and influence globally despite the strong aversion in many countries to getting stuck between the United States and China or Russia. The United States does not need networks everywhere, but relationships with many states that are currently unaligned or hedging, in Africa and South Asia for instance, could provide significant advantages for U.S. economic and security interests in the form of access to natural resources, markets, strategic locations, or inputs to innovation. The principles of attraction, gatekeeping, and distribution offer insights into networks that might work in these cases. First, the most effective networks will form where these countries and their businesses, scientists, and other stakeholders are already interacting and around their shared needs, not necessarily around U.S. priorities. The U.S. approach should build networks where these local needs match U.S. comparative advantages. In Africa, this would mean building networks around centers of gravity such as advanced pharmaceuticals, higher education, and human capital development, instead of physical infrastructure, which has been a main focus of the Biden administration.<sup>55</sup>

Second, when organizing networks in these areas, policymakers should emphasize creation of distributed ties between new and potential partners more than bilateral, U.S.-focused relationships. This might involve supporting business, city-to-city, and civil society partnerships across the Global South. The subnational focus may defuse concerns about working directly with the United States, even as these networks support the spread of U.S. influence. A focus on distributed ties can also distinguish the United States from China and Russia without explicit comparisons.

Third, the United States should avoid relying heavily on the “global democracy” frame in appeals to the Global South or using institutions like the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund as central vehicles for building ties with unaligned states. Most hedging states do not see these institutions as particularly representative of their needs, and U.S. appeals to democratic values do not resonate.<sup>56</sup> Letting these states set their own agenda for collaboration with the United States may be more effective, or policymakers could turn to principles (like freedom of navigation or sustainability) that may have more

relevance. Gatekeeping will ultimately be required to capture and direct network power created by these new networks, but conditionality tied to democracy or trade liberalization can alienate hedging partners. A focus on gates to exit may make sense—for example, providing customized and inelastic benefits that make exit costly, as the EU has done with its economic markets.

## **How Should the United States Approach the Russia-China Partnership?**

A final question considers strategies for dealing with the growing Russia-China partnership and the economic and security challenge it poses to the United States. Most experts agree that the relationship is based on shared resistance to a Western-backed world order, but there is disagreement over the best response and the viability of wedge strategies to drive the two apart.<sup>57</sup>

An approach based on influence networks offers two recommendations. First, because network ties serve as conduits of influence, policymakers should avoid cutting all connections with Russia or China. Maintaining networks that include Russia or China will not turn either into a democracy, but it can shape behavior in ways advantageous to the United States. For instance, despite fears that China would use its Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) to advance its political and economic aims, its diverse membership and the inclusion of U.S. allies as members helped push the AIIB toward transparency and standards used by other Western-led development banks.<sup>58</sup>

At present, building new ties to Russia is likely not possible, and high levels of tension between China and the United States create challenges here as well. Focusing efforts at the subnational level may be a good starting place. Business-to-business ties already form a center of gravity between the United States and China. U.S. policymakers should support existing business relationships and encourage investment with only narrow national security carveouts. A parallel approach could advance research partnerships, if not in STEM, then in the social sciences. City-to-city connections around climate, urban planning, or education could be a third pathway. Gates to entry and exit can strengthen these networks, but they do not need to be restrictive. For business partnerships, matched investment or shared technical standards are options.

An approach to the China-Russia relationship will also need strategies for working with their close partners, such as Belarus, Cambodia, Laos, and states in Central Asia, to prevent the formation of blocs that might limit U.S. access to economic or security resources. Regions of possible friction between Russia and China, like Central Asia, may offer opportunities. The recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit underscored the growing agency of Central Asian states and their willingness to push back on Russia and China.<sup>59</sup> Expanding U.S. and EU activities in this region could stress-test the China-Russia partnership not by creating a wedge but by offering Central Asian states like Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan more

options.<sup>60</sup> In establishing new relationships, the United States should invest in building distributed ties across the region and addressing shared, unmet local needs, rather than relying on the China-Russia frame or narrow U.S. priorities.

## Next Steps

These examples begin to illustrate how influence networks can improve U.S. strategies toward foreign policy challenges by offering policymakers a way to prioritize commitments, extend the reach of U.S. influence at reduced cost, and avoid overextension that harms U.S. interests. But there is more to be done. Future exploration and application of these networks will offer more complete answers the questions posed here and more extensive guidance for policymakers.



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## About the Author

**Jennifer Kavanagh** is a senior fellow in the American Statecraft Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.





## Notes

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