There is an emerging axis of authoritarian states led by China, Russia and Iran. Others such as North Korea and Syria depend on largesse and protection given to them by Beijing, Moscow and Tehran.

Before Vladimir Putin’s ill-considered war against Ukraine, the leaders of the former states portrayed the US and its allies as complacent, chaotic and divided.

Perhaps there is some truth to the accusations levelled against the liberal democracies. But in underestimating Russian fragilities, Putin has probably accelerated the decline of the Russian Federation as we know it. Iran is mired in persistent social and economic turmoil. Our focus shifts to China. It is the most powerful within that axis even if there are serious questions regarding its longer-term economic vigour.

How has Putin’s miscalculation changed things for China and the rest of the world? Putin’s recklessness has created new opportunities for Beijing to extend its leadership and leverage over its partners of convenience such as Russia. But China must negotiate new and serious hazards for which it is poorly prepared.

Axis in all but name

Some are uncomfortable framing the new geopolitics as a contest between democratic and authoritarian nations. While many one-party states coexist peacefully with liberal democracies, it is also true the most serious and deadly challenges to the democracies are revisionist and militaristic authoritarian nations such as the five mentioned earlier: China, Russia, Iran, North Korea and Syria. In a world of different strategic blocs, political values and institutional priorities, all these nations are seeking to challenge or revise key elements of our preferred order through force, coercion or subterfuge. This makes them our rival, and in some contexts the enemy.

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One may object that these nations do not always act in unison and often have disparate and even inconsistent objectives. But the truest friends are those that assist one another in times of genuine difficulty. For example, China and Russia consistently use their veto in the UN Security Council to protect the other states from condemnation or sanctions. These two countries have come to the rescue when sanctions were subsequently imposed on North Korea, Iran and Syria. Although themselves recognised as legitimate nuclear powers, Russia and China shield and indirectly enable the illegal nuclear ambitions of Pyongyang and Tehran.
Russia and China shield and indirectly enable the illegal nuclear ambitions of Pyongyang and Tehran, writes John Lee. Picture: AFP

Additionally, Russia turned a blind eye to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad using chemical weapons against his own people and intervened militarily to prop up Assad’s regime when he was close to losing power in the previous decade. And now that Russia is on its knees, China, Iran and North Korea are giving Putin military or economic assistance to keep the Russian regime afloat and to sustain the offensive against Ukraine.

The friendly arrangement between them goes beyond helping each other survive in the face of a supposedly hostile democratic global order. Despite their differences, all share the common goal of undermining and weakening American power and influence.

They scheme to create division between the US and its allies. Chinese actions to achieve this are well known and attempts to do this are frequently explored in these pages. It is one reason Beijing detests any arrangement such as the AUKUS security pact or the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue that promotes unity between the US and its allies.

Similarly, these other authoritarian states support Russia’s desire to reclaim eastern European territories, or at least authority lost after the collapse of the Soviet Union. They tacitly support Tehran’s use of proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and
Hamas in Gaza to extinguish democratic institutions and dilute Western influence in the Middle East.

Indeed, Iran has become the model par excellence when it comes to the insidious use of proxies to create disruption and cause chaos in other territories.

Enter China, first among equals

China has become the most powerful and important convening member of the group of advancing and coercive authoritarian states. It is an axis because it is intended that these countries will form the core of a loose but growing authoritarian network working to undermine liberal democratic interests throughout the world. These authoritarian regimes seek every opportunity to attack not only Western geostrategic interests but also the institutions, practices and norms promoted by liberal democracies.

The axis is evolving. Putin may not admit it, but Russian weakness will entrench it as a junior partner, including in traditional Russian spheres of influence such as Central Asia. Russian decline will have implications for states such as India and Vietnam that traditionally rely on Moscow as their primary supplier of weapons. As these two countries are regional rivals of China, it is likely Beijing will lean on Moscow to cease supplying India and Vietnam with advanced military equipment.
In the Middle East, Iran increasingly is relying on China to circumvent sanctions and find markets for its energy exports. In return, China will use Iran as a gateway to increase its presence in the Persian Gulf and enhance Chinese influence from the Middle East to South Asia, including at Russia’s expense.

More generally, China is uniquely and powerfully placed within the axis. It is the only member that interacts extensively with the West and other advanced economies. It is too big and important to be treated as a pariah which is a benefit no longer afforded to Russia – at least while Putin is in power. China is both a fully industrialised and developing economy, meaning it can negotiate with the Western democracies from a position of strength while sitting at the table as first among equals with the so-called Global South developing nations.

As the only complete authoritarian power – militarily, economically, technologically, and in global and regional institutions – China can offer a complete package consisting of economic largesse and opportunity, military co-operation and support, and institutional co-ordination and protection, including through entities such as the UN or regional bodies such as the Shanghai Co-operation Organisation.

Problems for Xi Jinping

Even so, China’s great moment may not be all that it seems. When Chinese leader Xi Jinping declared his “no limits” friendship with Putin two weeks before the invasion of Ukraine, he presumably did so believing Russia was well on its way to intimidating the West into submission. Having met Putin more than 40 times since 2013, Xi has no choice but to reaffirm the partnership with Moscow despite Putin’s woes, which he did when they met in March.

But new problems and dilemmas for China are manifold. Xi bet that Russia would be powerful enough to coerce Europe but not so strong that it could challenge China for leadership of the group. He didn’t foresee the disaster in Ukraine, the fragility of Russian hard power and its descent into pariah status, the reinvigoration and expansion of NATO, or the hardening of collective resolve by liberal democracies to beat back the authoritarian advance in different parts of the world.

Putin losing power would be a disaster for Xi. But Beijing now needs to walk a narrow and precarious path. On the one hand, it must give Russia enough assistance to ensure the latter doesn’t suffer decisive military defeat and regime collapse. A prolonged stalemate suits China as it absorbs the attention of the West.
On the other hand, China cannot help Russia so much that it will force the West to levy more serious sanctions and other punitive measures against the Chinese economy.

In this context, China seeks a managed economic decoupling from the democracies, but on its own timing and terms. For the moment, it is still heavily reliant on Western finance and payments systems, and technology and know-how from advanced economies. Its lumbering and overcapitalised state-owned enterprises need continued access to markets in North America and Europe if they are to grow their revenues without China undertaking significant domestic economic reforms. Changing the state-led political economy would harm Xi’s hold on power.

In short, China is not yet powerful enough or readily prepared to be treated as an enemy by the West. Picture: AFP

For similar reasons, Iran is useful in so far as it excels at creating problems for the US. But Xi must avoid striding the world stage as the leader of a band of troublemakers, which is why Beijing is also courting Saudi Arabia – Iran’s rival. Not so long ago, Xi was content to be seen in the same light as Putin: bold and decisive when making strategic assessments but playing a longer game with a stronger hand than his Russian friend. He now needs to stand apart from his authoritarian peers while propping up their regimes and establishing leverage over them.
Ukraine has not diminished Xi’s ambition, but he has dialled back the hubris. The Chinese leader is not interested in so-called guardrails to stabilise things as he wants to compete without inhibition or pre-agreed rules. But he knows the liberal democracies are far from a spent force, have become more united and in important ways remain better placed than any axis of authoritarian powers. That may encourage Chinese caution and buy us precious time. This is one more reason to be glad that Ukraine stood firm.