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Forecasting the Future of the Axis of Upheaval

The View from Moscow

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CNAS



New
Rules

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LOOKING FORWARD,
RUSSIA'S PARTNERSHIPS WITH
CHINA, NORTH KOREA, AND IRAN
WILL REMAIN CENTRAL TO
THE KREMLIN'S BROADER
STRATEGIC OUTLOOK.

Executive Summary

THIS REPORT ASSESSES THE FUTURE of the “axis of upheaval”—the deepening relationships among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—from Moscow’s perspective. The Kremlin views these ties as a flexible system of opportunistic cooperation designed to weaken U.S. power, expand Russia’s room for maneuvering, and strengthen its position in a more competitive international order. At the core of Russia’s approach is a belief that the world is shifting away from rules toward power—what Russian leaders increasingly see as a “might makes right” environment. In that context, partnerships with capable, like-minded states help Russia offset its vulnerabilities, blunt sanctions and external pressure, access critical technologies, and strengthen Moscow’s ability to compete with and challenge the United States across multiple theaters.

A key question for policymakers now is how far Russia would be willing to go to support its partners, including in crisis. This report argues that Russia’s support is likely to remain pragmatic and calibrated. In crises, Moscow is likely to provide its partners with political backing, economic support, intelligence sharing, technology transfers, and limited military assistance—particularly in areas such as drone warfare and regime security—while avoiding direct conflict with the United States. Russia’s support to Iran during Operation Epic Fury illustrates this model: operationally meaningful, but carefully bounded.

Russia would probably do more to support China and North Korea in a crisis than it did for Iran. The scope of that support will depend on several factors, but above all, the trajectory and outcome of the war in Ukraine. As long as Moscow believes it must preserve resources for the possibility of renewed conflict with Ukraine—or for potential opportunistic military action against Europe—it will remain more cautious about committing significant capabilities elsewhere. Russia’s willingness to provide broader support will also depend on the pace of its military reconstitution, including the degree to which sanctions and export controls constrain its defense industrial base, and partner requests—especially from China, which would likely seek to tightly manage escalation and outside involvement in a Taiwan contingency. In these cases, Russia is unlikely to remain on the sidelines, instead seeking opportunities to impose costs on the United States and reinforce alignment where it can do so at manageable risk.

Russia’s incentives to invest in its strategic partnerships will persist beyond the war in Ukraine. Moscow will continue to rely on these relationships to rebuild its military, mitigate sanctions, and strengthen its position in what it sees as a long-term competition with the United States. For U.S. and allied policymakers, the challenge is not a formal alliance but an adaptive network that increases uncertainty, prolongs conflicts through external support, and may embolden adversaries.

Introduction

DURING OPERATION EPIC FURY, Russia moved beyond rhetorical backing to provide Iran with tangible, battlefield-relevant support. Moscow signaled political support for Iran’s new supreme leader, reportedly shared intelligence and drone tactics drawn from its war in Ukraine, and supplied upgraded drone systems—including variants derived from the technology Tehran once provided to Russia—that enabled Iranian strikes against U.S. targets.¹ Yet these steps remained carefully calibrated. Even as Russia materially enhanced Iran’s ability to fight, it avoided direct participation in the conflict, stopping short of actions that would risk a direct confrontation with the United States. Compared to the June 2025 conflict—when Russia and China largely remained on the sidelines—this marked a step-change in the depth of support, even as clear limits persist.

Russia’s behavior reveals a defining feature of the “axis of upheaval,” or the tightening set of relationships between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea: cooperation that is real and increasingly consequential, but ultimately bounded by each member’s own priorities, risk tolerance, and desire to avoid direct conflict with the United States.² This mix of expanding support and clear restraint raises fundamental questions about the nature of that alignment and the role of self-interest in shaping it. What challenges does the alignment of these powers pose to policymakers and U.S. warfighters when their mutual support consists primarily of enabling capabilities but not “boots on the ground” (although North Korea took that step for Russia amid the war in Ukraine)? How far might these countries be willing to go to support one another, especially in moments of acute crisis and conflict? To what extent is this constellation of countries strategically significant and worthy of policymaker attention?

This report addresses these questions by looking at the axis of upheaval from Russia’s point of view. The Kremlin has been the critical catalyst of the deepening cooperation with China, North Korea, and Iran, so understanding its aims and motivations provides critical insight into the likely trajectory of this axis and the challenges that it poses to the United States and its allies.

The report argues that, from Moscow’s perspective, its partnerships with China, North Korea, and Iran will remain significant and valuable. Russia’s support to Iran illustrates the flexibility of its ties with its strategic partners. Even amid the demands of the war in Ukraine, Moscow selectively expanded its support to Tehran as opportunities arose, calibrating its actions to advance its interests while managing risk. The Ukraine war has strained Russian military and economic resources and, just as importantly, consumed the Kremlin’s tolerance for additional risk. Russian

President Vladimir Putin is reluctant to take actions in support of partners that could jeopardize Russia’s primary war effort in Ukraine. Yet rather than backing away entirely, Moscow pursues an opportunistic approach—one that allows Moscow to impose costs on the United States, reinforce alignment with partners, and preserve room for maneuver in its broader confrontation with Washington, including over Ukraine.

Looking forward, Russia’s partnerships with China, North Korea, and Iran will remain central to the Kremlin’s broader strategic outlook. If anything, the recent U.S. actions targeting Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and the killing of Iran’s supreme leader reinforce Putin’s long-standing view that Washington acts unilaterally and topples leaders it views as hostile.³ In Moscow’s view, these events confirm that the international system is increasingly governed not by rules but by power—where strength determines outcomes and weaker states

are vulnerable to coercion or regime change. For Moscow, its relationships with China, Iran, and North Korea, therefore, are not peripheral—they are central to ensuring that Russia remains influential on the global stage. By deepening military, economic, and technological cooperation with these partners, Moscow

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seeks to build resilience and strengthen Russia’s position in a world that the Kremlin increasingly believes will reward the strong and punish the weak.

While the war in Ukraine continues, Moscow will likely look for opportunities to sustain and leverage these relationships wherever possible. The conflict with Iran provides Moscow with another opportunity to raise costs for the United States, and the longer tensions in the Middle East persist, the more willing Russia may become to provide support that helps Tehran prolong the instability and/or tie down U.S. resources in the region. The eventual end of the war in Ukraine is also unlikely to diminish Russia’s motivation for cooperation. The Kremlin believes it is less vulnerable to U.S. pressure when it operates alongside capable partners and will ensure it has resources to support its partners in future contests with the United States—particularly in scenarios involving China.

The first section of the report articulates Russia’s foreign policy objectives and the role that its strategic partnerships play in advancing those aims. The second and third sections identify the key drivers and limits of Russian support for its partners. The fourth section seeks to forecast how far Russia would be willing to go to support Iran in the current conflict, and how much Russia would do for China and North Korea in a crisis once the war in Ukraine is over.

Strategic Partnerships Advance Moscow's Aims

THE KREMLIN VIEWS RELATIONSHIPS with China, Iran, and North Korea through the lens of its enduring self-conception as a great power and its dissatisfaction with the post-Cold War international order. Putin and the elite around him have long viewed the global system that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union as one that marginalized Russia and entrenched U.S. dominance. Putin has repeatedly argued that the U.S.-led system fails to reflect the real balance of power in the world and has called for a more multipolar system that provides checks on U.S. action and influence.⁴ Even as the United States takes actions that alter the global status quo in ways that the Kremlin may perceive as helpful in advancing its interests, the Kremlin remains wary of unconstrained U.S. action. By deepening ties with states that also oppose U.S. unilateralism and prefer to undermine U.S. power and influence, Moscow strengthens its hand in contesting Washington and advancing its interests. Because Moscow views its relationship with the United States as fundamentally zero-sum, its partnerships with China, Iran, and North Korea are valuable insofar as their efforts to degrade U.S. power are seen as directly enhancing Russia's own.

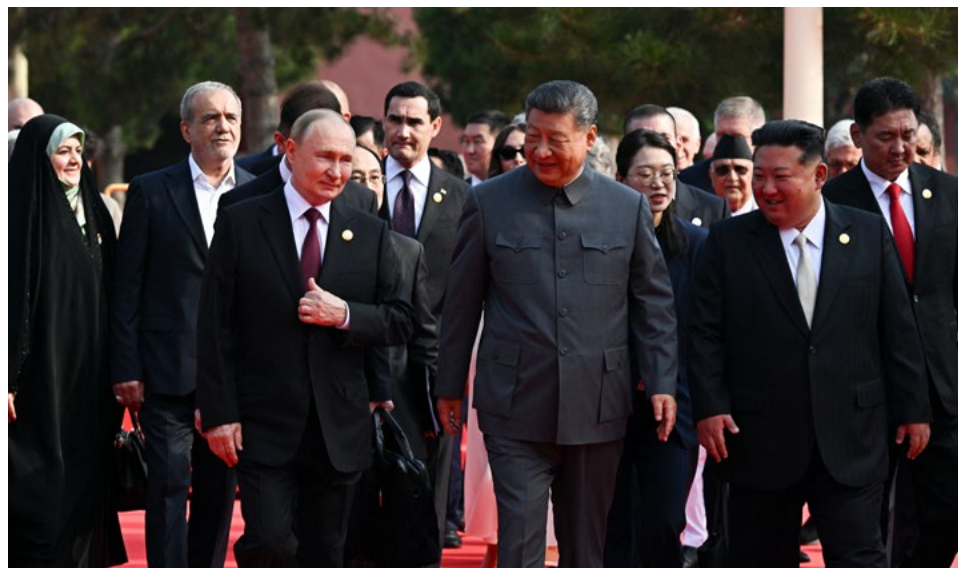
Russia pursues a broad array of international partnerships to advance these aims. Beyond its relationships in the former Soviet space, Russia also cultivates ties across the Global South to expand its diplomatic reach. Many of these partners—such as India, Brazil, South Africa, and Vietnam—share Moscow's interest in a more multipolar international system but generally seek to hedge among major powers and avoid picking sides. China, Iran, and North Korea occupy a different category. Unlike most of Russia's partners, Putin likely views these states as

willing to assume some geopolitical risk in confronting Western pressure, creating a deeper form of strategic alignment. The close personal ties that Putin enjoys with Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un further distinguish this set of relationships.

Russia has traditionally avoided alliance commitments that could constrain Moscow's freedom of action. Instead, the Kremlin has tended to pursue diverse and flexible partnerships that provide utility to Russia while preserving its ability to maneuver among different power centers. From Moscow's perspective, maintaining flexibility in these relationships is pragmatic: Moscow aims to construct a fluid and adaptable network that enables it to leverage ambiguity and plausible deniability—a system designed for maximum effect with minimum accountability.⁵

Within this network, Russia's relationships with China, Iran, and North Korea vary considerably in depth and importance. China is by far Russia's most consequential partner. The Kremlin identifies with China as a fellow nuclear-armed great power and depends on Beijing to underwrite Russia's economy.⁶ At the same time, Russia's relationship with North Korea has undergone perhaps the most dramatic transformation since the start of the war in Ukraine, evolving from a relatively limited partnership into an ally that has put boots on the ground in the war in Ukraine and shares a formal mutual defense commitment. Iran, for its part, remains an important but more circumscribed partner. Neither Iran nor Russia sought to include a mutual defense clause in their January 2025 Comprehensive Strategic Partnership agreement, reflecting a mutual caution about binding security commitments.⁷ In sum, Russia's relationships with China, Iran, and North Korea are differentiated in form, but unified by a common strategic purpose: to expand Moscow's room for maneuver, while contesting U.S. power and influence.

Russia's President Vladimir Putin walks with China's General Secretary Xi Jinping and North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un before a military parade in Beijing's Tiananmen Square on September 3, 2025. During this visit Putin spoke with both Kim Jong Un and Xi Jinping about the war in Ukraine, using the visit to strengthen their support for Russia's actions in Ukraine. (Sergey Bobylev/AFP/Getty Images)



Drivers of Cooperation

ALTHOUGH MOSCOW DOES NOT FRAME its relationships with China, Iran, and North Korea as an “axis,” the Kremlin nonetheless invests in these relationships because they serve as a strategic amplifier—separate partnerships that, together, magnify Moscow’s ability to counter what it perceives as U.S. hegemony and to undermine or erode U.S. power. These relationships strengthen the Putin regime, sustain its war-fighting machine, heighten its international image and influence, expand its economic and technological opportunities, provide diplomatic backing, and help blunt the impact of sanctions. Cooperation with China is particularly valuable, giving Moscow access to technologies and expertise related to digital surveillance and internet control that strengthen domestic political management.

Battlefield Sustainment and Recapitalization

The most significant factor animating Russia’s cooperation with the axis countries is its need to sustain its ongoing war in Ukraine—and position Moscow to continue its confrontation with the United States and Europe once the war ends. Since 2022, China, Iran, and North Korea have helped Russia mitigate and offset the detrimental effects of sanctions; supplied armaments, munitions, technical expertise, and military personnel; and enabled Russian defense industrial capacity.⁸ Trade flows also provide Russia with critical capital. The trust built between Russia and these partners has deepened each bilateral relationship.

Russia’s incentives to cooperate with these partners will persist beyond the war in Ukraine. Restoring Russia’s ability to project force beyond its borders will remain a core strategic priority for the Kremlin, both to reassert Russia’s status as a global power and to ensure it is positioned to exploit opportunities to expand its influence—particularly in Europe—when they arise. After the fighting in Ukraine subsides, Moscow will seek to rebuild and modernize its military as rapidly as possible, and will look to China, Iran, and North Korea to accelerate that process. Moscow will continue to view these partnerships as especially valuable if Western sanctions and export controls on sensitive technologies remain in place.

Overstretching the United States

From Moscow’s perspective, its relationships with and among China, Iran, and North Korea function as a geopolitical pressure multiplier that forces the United States to divide its attention, resources, and military posture across multiple theaters. Russian leaders see clear advantages when its partners challenge Washington in Europe, the Indo-Pacific, and the Middle East, creating difficult tradeoffs in force deployments, security assistance, and defense production. The current war with Iran,

for example, is straining U.S. munitions inventories and defense industrial capacity and will impact security assistance inventory levels available for NATO’s Prioritised Ukraine Requirements List (PURL) initiative.

More broadly, concerns in Washington about managing simultaneous challenges from Russia, China, and other adversaries, have intensified debates about strategic prioritization and U.S. force posture. These pressures have reinforced calls within the Trump administration to reduce the long-term U.S. military presence in Europe to free up resources for higher priority

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theaters.⁹ For Moscow, the value of the axis lies less in formal alliance structures than in the cumulative effect of parallel pressures that strain U.S. attention and complicate deterrence planning. Russia does not require integrated command structures with its partners to benefit—simultaneous challenges that force Washington to divide its focus create greater freedom of action for the Kremlin.

Reducing Isolation and Signaling Strength

Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea is especially valuable in helping Russia blunt the impact of Western sanctions while also demonstrating that efforts to isolate the country have failed. Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin overtook Iran in becoming the most sanctioned country in the world and has—out of necessity—worked to expand economic and financial ties with partners willing to operate outside Western-controlled systems.¹⁰ As close neighbors with several shared borders, Russia can trade with each of these partners outside Western regulatory oversight. Also facing sanctions, Iran and North Korea are regular users of alternative payments systems that facilitate prohibited transactions and erode U.S. and Western efforts to punish and isolate Russia. If or when sanctions pressure against Russia eases, Moscow will almost certainly continue to pursue the creation of an alternative payments system to “sanction proof” its economy for the future and to erode the United States’ strength as a global financial center.

Beyond these material benefits, the partnerships carry political value. Cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea

allows Moscow to signal that it retains importance, despite Western pressure. Russian officials also recognize that countries in Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia that are hedging between Washington and Moscow are more likely to view Russia as an attractive partner when it maintains close relations with other states that can resist Western pressure. Domestically, these relationships reinforce the Kremlin's narrative that Russia holds prominence on the international stage.

Bargaining Chips

Russia probably also views its axis partnerships as instruments of leverage vis-à-vis the United States. For example, Moscow can leverage its relationships with Pyongyang and Tehran to offer Washington assistance in managing North Korean and Iranian behavior to rein in a spiraling crisis. This would apply to China to a lesser extent. In this way, Russia seeks international recognition and prestige—and an opportunity to extract concessions in return for its cooperation or restraint. The logic is transactional: Axis cooperation creates problems the United States must manage, and Russia positions itself as indispensable to their resolution. Even if the strategy is not always successful (the United States rebuffed the Kremlin's offer to help mediate negotiations between the United States and Iran in June 2025 and again during Operation Epic Fury), it is an approach that Moscow is likely to continue to pursue.¹¹

Limits—or Manageable Considerations?

WHILE RUSSIA HAS BENEFITED MATERIALLY from its ties to China, Iran, and North Korea, there are some areas of cooperation and sharing that Moscow chooses not to pursue. The limits differ with each partner and across different domains. They reflect Russia's hubris regarding its own capabilities and a desire to retain an edge or upper hand in the relationship. And despite the very real ways that China, Iran, and North Korea have contributed to Russia's ability to prosecute the war in Ukraine and withstand Western pressure, Moscow holds a level of distrust and suspicion toward each of the partners.

Caution Around Defense and Intelligence Sharing

Moscow has been careful to protect its most sophisticated capabilities and its most exquisite intelligence from its axis partners. This is particularly the case with China and could reflect Moscow's desire to offset its economic dependence on China by preserving its advantages in areas where Beijing is eager for Russian cooperation. China, for example, wants to secure its position as a player in the Arctic, despite not being an

Russian Concerns About Becoming a Junior Partner

Russia's deepening partnership with China has generated sustained debate within the Russian elite over the risks of excessive dependence on Beijing. Some Russian strategists warn that growing asymmetries—particularly in economic weight and technological capacity—could, over time, leave Moscow vulnerable to Chinese leverage and erode its strategic autonomy.

In practice, however, Russian behavior since the invasion of Ukraine suggests that these concerns are secondary to more immediate geopolitical imperatives. The Kremlin appears willing to tolerate greater dependence on China as the price of managing confrontation with the West. From this perspective, closer alignment with Beijing is not a strategic concession but a necessary adaptation to external pressure—one that helps sustain Russia's economy, mitigate sanctions, and reinforce its position in a broader contest with the United States and its allies. Moreover, there is little evidence that fears of junior partner status are meaningfully constraining Russian policy. Rather than limiting cooperation, these concerns are outweighed by the perceived benefits of the relationship. Russian leaders likely calculate that any growing asymmetries can be managed over time—and, if necessary, rebalanced once the war in Ukraine concludes and Moscow regains greater strategic flexibility.

Arctic nation, and looks to Moscow to parlay its access. Beijing also wants to incorporate Moscow's advanced military capabilities into its own forces. While Moscow has conducted joint maritime patrols with China in the Arctic and gradually allowed Beijing increased access to the Northern Sea route, Moscow has done so reluctantly and would probably prefer to limit China's role in the region. Moscow has also been selective about which defense technologies it shares. Russia has provided China with advanced weapons—S-400 air defenses and Su-35 fighters—but almost certainly has stopped short of sharing its most sensitive systems or source codes, partly due to concern that China could copy Russian technology and undermine Russia's defense exports and comparative technical advantage.¹²

Maintaining Its Diverse Partnerships

Russia's approach to its interactions with its axis partners is shaped by its intent to preserve relationships with other nations, such as the United States, the Gulf states, Japan, and South Korea. This balancing imperative acts as a constraint, shaping both the scope and visibility of the support Russia is willing to provide. Even as Moscow deepens cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea, it remains attentive to the risk that more overt support could jeopardize these other ties. As a result, Russia often tempers its engagement—refraining from outspoken backing or limiting assistance to more discreet

forms, such as training and intelligence sharing. With Iran, Moscow has been mindful of its relations with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other Gulf states. It is similarly attuned to the risk that its stronger support for Beijing's ambitions in the Indo-Pacific could undermine ties with other regional partners, and that deeper alignment with Pyongyang could damage relations with Seoul, which the Kremlin would likely prefer to repair after the war in Ukraine ends. In these ways, Russia's aim to preserve a broader network of relationships serves as a meaningful constraint on how far it is willing to go in supporting its axis partners.

How Far Would Russia Go?

RUSSIA'S MEASURED RESPONSE TO IRAN amid Operation Epic Fury and the 12 days of U.S. and Israeli strikes in June 2025 has raised questions about how far Russia is willing to go to support its partners. Moscow's similarly muted response to the U.S. toppling of Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela in January 2026 has reinforced the view of Russia as a weak actor that lacks the capability or influence to protect its closest partners when they face existential threats. This section examines the critical question: How far would Russia go to provide support to its partners in a crisis? This section starts with a look at Russian support for Iran amid Operation Epic Fury and considers how Russian support for Iran could evolve moving forward. Next, building on the assumption that the war in Ukraine has concluded, this section considers what Russia would be willing to do for China in the event of a protracted U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan and for North Korea in the event of escalating tensions on the Korean Peninsula.

The Russia-Iran Relationship in Conflict

Moscow materially enabled Iran's war effort by providing diplomatic backing, humanitarian assistance, intelligence and targeting support, and defense and security cooperation. Russia's assistance reflects the alignment of Moscow's and Tehran's goals: survival of the Iranian regime and prolonging conflict to impose economic and reputational costs on the United States. Moscow also sees benefits from the conflict for its own purposes, including the distraction of Europe and the United States from the war in Ukraine; the decrease in U.S. military stocks, making the United States less willing and able to provide missiles or air defense systems for Ukraine; and the increase in crude oil prices which will help alleviate Moscow's budget crunch. Where possible, Moscow will also look to showcase itself as a potential mediator, allowing it to elevate its international importance and shape outcomes in its own interests. Moscow will continue to support Tehran as long as these goals and benefits remain in place.¹³

Rhetoric and the diplomatic circuit. Moscow has provided Iran with consistent diplomatic support, to include publicly criticizing U.S. and Israeli attacks, promoting diplomacy and negotiations, and leveraging the UN Security Council to condemn U.S. actions as violating Iranian sovereignty and international law.¹⁴ Putin held several calls with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, hosted Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi in St. Petersburg, publicly issued condolences upon the death of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and congratulations on the selection of Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei.¹⁵ Russia's diplomatic messaging has been in line with rhetoric coming out of Tehran and Beijing, focused on peace and negotiations and critical of the U.S. and Israeli attacks on Iran.¹⁶ At the same time, Moscow sought to balance Russia's equities with Iran against its aim to avoid provoking the Trump administration into tightening pressure on Russia in Ukraine.¹⁷

Intelligence, advice, and drones. According to Western press reporting, Russia provided Iran with intelligence support, targeting data, and satellite imagery, all enabling functions that fit Russia's preference for low profile, deniable support for a partner. These forms of support are the most operationally significant contribution Moscow made to Iran's war effort. Russian intelligence assistance helped Iran target U.S. assets throughout the Gulf region with greater accuracy, sophistication, and efficacy, even in the face of dwindling stocks of missiles and drones.¹⁸ Moscow also almost certainly shared operational feedback, engineering iteration, and battlefield learning with the Iranian military, particularly on the Shahed drone system, indicating real-time defense cooperation between the two countries during an active conflict.¹⁹ The Shahed system has been combat tested in Ukraine, and has been modified by Russia in the development of the Russian-produced Geran drone system.²⁰ If reports are true that Moscow readied a shipment of upgraded drones—with more sophisticated capabilities in terms of air-defense evasion and payload size—this would indicate Russia's willingness to supply lethal assistance to Iran.

Assistance with internal security. Moscow also likely assisted the regime with equipment and measures to enhance internal security as Tehran sought to reestablish control in the wake of the death of numerous government and military leaders. Russia's provision of humanitarian assistance—including food and medical supplies—is an additional symbolic measure meant to bolster the legitimacy of the reconstituted regime and underscore Russia's solidarity with it. This support is in line with the help Russia provided to the regime over the past year, as Tehran sought to manage and suppress waves of mass protests. Russia provided Iran with antiriot equipment, armored vehicles, surveillance technology, intelligence, and training, enabling Tehran to monitor and control the population and maintain regime security.²¹

Prolonging tensions in the Middle East . . . and their benefits.

Moscow's support to Tehran enhanced the Iranian regime's ability to sustain conflict and its hold over the country. This approach was calibrated to preserve the Russia-Iran relationship, prolong the war, drain Western resources, and keep energy prices high—all outcomes favorable to Moscow.

In the case that the current ceasefire and agreement endures, Moscow will continue to see benefit in having a partner in Tehran that is likely to continue a shadow war with the United States and tie U.S. resources down in the Middle East. Russian support may shift to intelligence and strategy guidance on conducting a longer-term hybrid war against Israel, the United States, and selected partners. Looking ahead, Moscow could provide the following forms of support to keep Iran functional as a potent and unpredictable force in the region:

- Moscow will probably be willing to provide Iran with its latest technology in electronic warfare. It already shared jamming systems, such as the Krasukha, following the conflict in June 2025.²² Moscow will also probably provide Iran with guidance on how to continue operating in the face of U.S. jamming and disrupt the functioning of Western Global Positioning Systems that are used for targeting.²³ Both these capabilities would be highly valuable to the Iranians and would enable them to continue functioning, even in the face of ongoing U.S. and Israeli attacks.
- Moscow could also look to provide more specific and sophisticated forms of intelligence, such as high-quality satellite imagery and near-real-time targeting updates, which would enable greater accuracy and impact for Iran's drone attacks. This will become increasingly important as Iran's ballistic and cruise missile systems are destroyed by U.S. strikes.
- Russia could consider providing munitions and technical components via land or across the Caspian Sea to replenish Iranian stocks that have been depleted during active conflict.
- If mass protests threaten the safety of senior members of the Iranian regime, Moscow would be willing to provide safe haven in Russia for Iranian leaders and their families, as it has for other allies.²⁴

Looking Forward: Russia and a New Iran

When hostilities end, the state of Iran's leadership, the level of destruction of the country's military and civilian infrastructure, and nature of Russia's and Iran's relationships with the United States, will shape the Russia-Iran relationship going forward. Russia will look to take advantage of the early stages of rebuilding and disarray to advance its interests, as it did in Afghanistan and Syria. Moscow will revitalize its relationship with Tehran and with different groups within the country. To Moscow, the form

or composition of the government or regime would matter less than taking early advantage of the window of opportunity to gain a presence, develop relationships, and find ways to advance Russian economic and security interests.

Moscow would then anchor its influence by assisting with rebuilding economic and energy assets in the country and by identifying opportunities to collaborate with local officials on shared security concerns, such as terrorism or violent protests within Iran. Where possible, Moscow would also try to limit U.S. influence—to ensure its own dominance—and would find ways to address threats that may harm Russian or Central Asian

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interests. As the new Iran gains stability, Moscow would likely also take advantage of the opportunity to shape and arm the military and security apparatus. Moscow would be prepared—and skilled enough—to balance the participation of outside parties who would be involved in the remaking or rebuilding of Iran, such as the United States, Israel, and Türkiye. It navigated these interests in Syria—and to a lesser extent in Afghanistan—with success.

Russia is well-positioned to help Iran wage a prolonged hybrid war against the United States and Israel by continuing to provide intelligence and targeting support, as well as expanding cyber cooperation. Russia will probably also continue to support Iran's economic and industrial resilience by continuing to share dual-use technology and sanctions-evasion techniques. These elements will help Iran sustain its war of deniability and asymmetric threat, while also undermining the leverage that the United States and Israel try to employ over Iran. While Russia lost significant influence in Syria with the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in late 2024, it immediately engaged with the new leadership, offering reconstruction assistance and guidance in rebuilding the Syrian military and managing security threats. Through this adept approach, Moscow was able to secure its most important military installations—the Tartus and Khmeimim bases on the Mediterranean. After the 2021 U.S. drawdown in Afghanistan, Moscow sought to establish relations with the Taliban primarily for national security reasons. Russia wanted to be well-positioned to ensure the safety of its Central Asian allies and to stem the flow of drugs and terrorism northward. To do this, Moscow developed a pragmatic relationship with the new government that centered on combating Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and pursuing trade and economic relations.

In 2025, Russia was the first country to officially recognize the Taliban as the legitimate government of Afghanistan.

Russia and, to a lesser extent, China retain a vested interest in ensuring that Tehran remains a viable, if diminished, regional actor. With much of its conventional capability degraded by U.S. and Israeli strikes, Tehran has limited external options for rebuilding, increasing its reliance on partners who are willing to operate outside Western constraints. Moscow is likely to see this as an opportunity to reestablish leverage in the relationship, providing selective military assistance, technical support, and operational know-how. For Russia (and China) a reconstituted Iran serves a broader purpose: acting as a persistent source of regional friction that ties down U.S. attention and resources. As a result, Russia is likely to support Iran's efforts to rebuild its conventional forces to ensure it remains a capable and distracting actor in the Middle East.

Russia & China: How Could Moscow Aid Beijing in a Protracted U.S.-China Conflict over Taiwan?

China is Russia's most consequential partner. If China were in a crisis—here, the authors posit a protracted conflict with the United States over Taiwan—Russia would almost certainly support China diplomatically, economically, and militarily, with the Kremlin's primary motivation being to raise the costs the United States incurs in the conflict and provide decision space for Beijing. Russia would also shape its support to preserve its relationship with Beijing, ensuring that it does not cause tensions in the relationship and is able to further leverage it in the future. Moscow would probably prefer any conflict to be protracted so that it degrades both the United States and China, while creating a more permissive environment for Russia to advance its aims—especially in Europe.

Russian support for China during a protracted U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan is not hypothetical—Russia is already providing China with increasingly sophisticated weapons that offset U.S. advantages and increase Beijing's capabilities in a Taiwan contingency.²⁵ Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, senior U.S. officials have publicly stated that Russia is giving China submarine, missile, and other sensitive technologies.²⁶ Although public sources make it difficult to determine exactly what technologies have been transferred, Moscow's help with submarine quieting, for example, would undermine one of the United States' relative advantages. According to a report by the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), Russia also agreed in 2023 to supply the People's Liberation Army (PLA) with "a complete set of weapons and equipment to equip an airborne battalion, as well as other special equipment necessary for airborne infiltration of special forces, along with a full cycle of training for operators and technical personnel to use this equipment"—capabilities that enhance the PLA's ability to seize Taiwan.²⁷

Russian support for China during a protracted U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan is not hypothetical—Russia is already providing China with increasingly sophisticated weapons that offset U.S. advantages and increase Beijing's capabilities in a Taiwan contingency.

In addition to weapon transfers, Russia is almost certainly already sharing key lessons from its war in Ukraine that will enhance the capabilities of China's largely untested military well in advance of conflict. China, for its part, has committed significant efforts to studying the Ukraine war and drawing lessons for Chinese policy.²⁸ Chinese military officers have reportedly been behind Russian lines in Ukraine to draw tactical lessons, according to open-source reporting.²⁹ Russia has reportedly shared electronic warfare techniques for defeating Western precision munitions with China, while joint drone development programs drawing on Iranian Shahed technology illustrate Beijing's ability to synthesize lessons from multiple partners into its own evolving arsenal.³⁰

China would almost certainly be interested in Russian lessons on long-range fires, counterbattery fires, drone warfare, electronic warfare, and air-defense integration—all highly relevant to a contested littoral and air campaign around Taiwan. In short, Russia is sharing battlefield lessons that could make the PLA a more formidable force.

While seeking to avoid direct involvement, Russia could aid China in the following ways, organized from highest to lowest probability.

Political support. Russia would almost certainly provide Beijing with robust diplomatic backing modeled on China's support for Russia after the invasion of Ukraine, making it harder for the West to impose costs on China. By standing with China and against the United States, Russia's position would make it easier for other countries to abstain from criticizing Beijing or taking punitive actions against it. Moscow would echo China's narratives that the conflict is an internal matter, that U.S. intervention constitutes illegitimate interference, and that Washington—not Beijing—is responsible for destabilizing the region, just as China amplified Russian claims that NATO provoked the Ukraine war. Russia would use its veto at the UN Security Council to block resolutions condemning China or authorizing collective action. Beyond the UN, Moscow would work to rally support—or neutrality—among Global South partners through BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and other forums, by framing the crisis as

another example of U.S. hegemonic overreach, and positioning Russia and China as defenders of a multipolar order. This alignment would blunt China's isolation and help sustain a prolonged confrontation. Russia could also help orchestrate the provision of weapons to China from non-Western partners such as SCO countries.

Energy and goods. Russia would give Beijing a resilient energy lifeline by supplying oil and gas overland via pipelines and rail that would be difficult to interdict. These overland routes—which could also transit food, weapons, and components—could prove critical in the event of a Chinese blockade of Taiwan, better positioning China to outlast Taiwan. The United States could respond by implementing its own blockade of Chinese ports to compel Beijing to stop. Overland access to Russian energy and goods would help China bypass a U.S. blockade and could lead Beijing to conclude it can withstand its blockade longer than Taiwan. These routes could also obscure the extent of Russian assistance, as Moscow would likely seek to obfuscate its support.

Sanctions circumvention. If the United States were to sanction Chinese exports, Russia would likely help China as a logistics and financial facilitator. Drawing on its experience since 2022, Moscow could reroute Chinese trade through Russian financial institutions already cut off from the global system, expand yuan–ruble settlement mechanisms, provide access to alternative payment channels such as System for Transfer of Financial Messages (SPFS), and serve as a transshipment hub for certain goods.³¹ While Russia lacks reliable access to many high-end sanctioned technologies, it could still enable evasion by obscuring supply chains, providing logistical pathways, and offering financial cover. Unlike Beijing—which has balanced support for Russia against its exposure to Western markets—Moscow has far fewer constraints. Its structural decoupling from the West, particularly if sanctions remain in place, reduces the costs of participation in sanctions evasion, making it a useful—if limited—partner in helping China withstand Western economic pressure.

Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR). Russia could provide China with substantial intelligence support, expanding on cooperation already visible in peacetime. The two countries conduct joint strategic bomber patrols that require real-time ISR sharing, and Putin confirmed in 2019 that Russia is helping China build a ballistic missile early-warning system.³² During the Ukraine war, U.S. officials stated that a Chinese firm supplied Russia with satellite imagery for targeting, creating a precedent for reciprocal support.³³ Russia could supply China with satellite intelligence, maritime domain awareness, and tracking of U.S. and allied naval and air movements across the Indo-Pacific. Russia could also provide cyber intelligence, electronic warfare insights, and assessments of U.S. force posture. While avoiding steps that risk direct confrontation with Washington, Moscow

could enhance China's situational awareness and resilience in a Taiwan conflict.

Cyber and information operations. In a U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan, Russia would likely coordinate with China in the information and cyber domains, where both states already operate with shared narratives and reinforcing tactics. Moscow could amplify Beijing's framing of the conflict through large-scale disinformation campaigns targeting Southeast Asian audiences, portraying the war as the result of American provocation and warning that further involvement risks catastrophic escalation. At the same time, Russia could conduct deniable cyberattacks targeting allied infrastructure—energy grids, transportation networks, financial systems, and government services—to impose costs and create public pressure to limit support for Taiwan. These actions would be low cost, plausibly deniable, and consistent with documented Russian and Chinese information warfare practices.

Weapons and equipment. Subject to the considerations discussed later in the section, Russia would likely provide China with munitions, drones, and air and missile defense systems. Russia could also pursue joint defense production arrangements, especially in the Russian Far East. As in the war in Ukraine, such support could help China sustain the conflict in ways that would otherwise be difficult.

Advisors and trainers. Russia would likely provide military advisors, trainers, and maintenance support as this form of assistance is low risk and easily deniable. Russia could embed advisors in Chinese headquarters, training centers, or command posts to help China exploit Russian experience in electronic warfare, counter-U.S. precision strikes, air defense integration, and battlefield deception. This would give China access to expertise derived from Russia's war against a Western-equipped adversary, while avoiding steps that might trigger direct confrontation with the United States.

Actions that divert U.S. allied and resources and bandwidth. Diversion is relatively cheap for Russia, and the benefits it could produce for China may exceed any direct military assistance. The extent of diversionary actions will depend on what Beijing asks for, but Russia could take several steps:

- **Escalate hybrid warfare in Europe.** Russia could escalate sabotage, air incursions, and drone attacks. These actions may have limited utility to Beijing but could exacerbate tensions within the transatlantic relationship and discourage European involvement in the Pacific.
- **Conduct joint bomber and naval patrols.** Russia could increase airspace incursions around Hokkaido and the Sea of Japan or conduct joint combat air patrols with the PLA near

Japan's air defense identification zone to divert Japanese and U.S. early-warning assets from Taiwan. Russia could also engage in maritime probing around Japan's exclusive economic zone and territorial waters, creating a persistent naval distraction.

- **Militarize the Southern Kurils/Northern Territories.** Russia could deploy antiship missile batteries, air defense units, or additional troops to force Japan to divert assets northward and tie down Japan's Self-Defense Forces in homeland defense.
- **Enable North Korean provocations.** Although Russia could do little directly, Moscow could facilitate greater North Korean provocations by providing political cover at the UN, fuel and food to sustain readiness, and possibly targeting data for missile tests over Japan. North Korea might exploit a Taiwan contingency to raise nuclear threats, while Russia could reinforce its narrative blaming the United States for "encircling" China and North Korea.³⁴ Russia could also hint that under the mutual assistance treaty, a U.S. strike on North Korea would activate Russian obligations. Finally, Russia could send troops to North Korea under the guise of exercises, or deploy Wagner Group-like forces, tying down U.S. and South Korean assets.



Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un toast during a reception at the Mongnangwan Reception House in Pyongyang on June 19, 2024. This visit was Putin's first to North Korea since 2000 and marked an improvement in relations between the two countries, partially as a result of North Korea's support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. (Vladimir Smirnov/AFP/Getty Images)

expanded military exchanges, weapon transfers, and technological cooperation—all of which is already enhancing North Korea's capabilities. Russia values North Korea because it is seen as willing to take risks—such as its provision of manpower—that others are not willing to take.

The deepening relationship was codified in the 2024 Russia–North Korea Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which includes a mutual defense clause committing each side to provide assistance if the other faces aggression.³⁷ Yet the language of the treaty—and the way Russian officials have interpreted it—appears designed to maximize deterrence while preserving Moscow's discretion. Russian experts focused on North Korea have interpreted the provision not as a commitment to automatic military intervention, but as a deliberately ambiguous mechanism meant to raise the perceived cost of any attack on North Korea while allowing Russia to calibrate its response.³⁸ Putin has emphasized that the treaty provides for "military and other assistance"—language broad enough to include political, economic, and technological support, without obligating Russia to directly participate in combat.³⁹ The clause enhances deterrence by introducing uncertainty into adversaries' calculations, while also leaving Moscow in control of escalation.

Moscow's overarching motivation in supporting Pyongyang is to prevent an outcome that strengthens the U.S. strategic position in Northeast Asia or produces instability along Russia's Far Eastern border. A collapse of the North Korean regime, a U.S. military victory on the Korean peninsula, or the emergence of a unified Korea aligned with Washington, would undermine

Russian naval forces, particularly submarines. These could threaten access to the region by U.S. naval forces attempting to join the fight from the eastern Pacific. While the PLA Navy and PLA Air Force concentrate on Taiwan, Russian submarines could threaten U.S. access to the region. However, this move is highly unlikely because Russia avoids direct conflict with the United States and because its blue-water navy is small, aging, and heavily tasked elsewhere.

Russia & North Korea: How Russia Could Aid North Korea Amid Rising Tensions on the Korean Peninsula

Of all Russia's strategic partnerships, it is Moscow's relationship with North Korea that has been most transformed by the war in Ukraine. North Korea has provided Russia with artillery shells, missiles, and troops for military operations against Ukraine, while Moscow has given Pyongyang political backing, economic support, and growing military cooperation. Intelligence reporting suggests that North Korean troops deployed in support of Russian operations against Ukraine have gained combat experience operating drones, clearing mines, and coordinating artillery strikes.³⁵ Ukrainian intelligence estimates that several thousand North Korean soldiers have already rotated home, with many now serving as instructors who are transmitting battlefield lessons to the Korean People's Army.³⁶ In addition to combat experience, the relationship has deepened through

Russian interests. As a result, Russia has strong incentives to ensure that North Korea remains capable of resisting coercion, while avoiding steps that could trigger a direct military confrontation with the United States.

In the event of a major crisis or protracted conflict on the Korean Peninsula, Russia would likely expand its support for North Korea across political, economic, and military domains. While seeking to avoid direct participation in the conflict, Moscow could aid Pyongyang in the following ways, organized from highest to lowest probability.

Political support in international forums and diplomatic cover. Russia would likely provide North Korea with robust diplomatic backing, shielding Pyongyang from international pressure and preventing the formation of a broad coalition against it. Moscow would likely veto UN Security Council resolutions condemning North Korea or authorizing coercive action, while echoing Pyongyang's narratives that tensions stem from U.S. and South Korean "provocations."⁴⁰ Russia could also mobilize diplomatic support—or neutrality—among Global South partners by framing the crisis as another example of U.S. military pressure and alliance expansion in Asia. This cover would complicate efforts to isolate North Korea and could weaken sanctions enforcement during a crisis.

Economic assistance and sanctions relief. Russia could provide North Korea with food, fuel, and other essential commodities that sustain regime stability during a crisis. Since the Ukraine war began, enforcement of sanctions on North Korea has already weakened as Russia and China have blocked new UN measures. In a conflict scenario, Moscow could further loosen sanctions enforcement, expand illicit trade channels, and provide shipments of fuel, grain, and industrial goods. Such support could help stabilize North Korea's economy and sustain its military operations.

Military technology transfers and weapons cooperation. Russia could provide North Korea with technologies that enhance Pyongyang's ability to deter U.S. and South Korean forces. Analysts suggest Russia may already be assisting with missile, satellite, and submarine technologies in exchange for artillery ammunition.⁴¹ In a crisis, Moscow could expand transfers to include guidance systems, missile reentry technologies, satellite reconnaissance support, or air-defense improvements. Such assistance would strengthen North Korea's capabilities without requiring Russia to deploy forces directly.

Intelligence sharing and surveillance support. Russia could provide intelligence that enhances Pyongyang's situational awareness during a crisis. Russian satellite imagery, signals intelligence, and early-warning data could improve North Korea's

ability to track U.S. and South Korean military movements. Russia could also share expertise in electronic warfare, cyber operations, and countering Western surveillance systems—lessons drawn from its war against a Western-supported military in Ukraine. This support would be valuable to North Korea and relatively low risk for Moscow.

Military training and operational lessons learned. Russia is already transferring battlefield experience from Ukraine to North Korean forces through direct interaction between the two militaries. North Korean troops who served alongside Russian forces have reportedly gained experience operating drones, coordinating artillery strikes, and conducting engineering operations.⁴² These lessons could significantly improve North Korea's operational competence. Russia could further expand training exchanges, provide instructors, and share doctrine on drone warfare, electronic warfare, and countering precision-guided munitions—areas directly relevant to conflict against technologically advanced adversaries such as the United States and South Korea.

Provision of munitions, drones, and defense systems. Russia could supply North Korea with additional munitions, drones, or air-defense equipment. While Russia's wartime needs might limit the scale of such transfers, Moscow could still provide specialized systems, production technology, or components that enhance North Korea's ability to sustain combat operations. Russia could also assist North Korea in expanding its domestic defense production capabilities.

Advisors, trainers, and technical personnel. Russia could provide military advisors and technical specialists to support North Korean operations, particularly in areas such as electronic warfare, missile operations, and air-defense integration. These personnel could operate in advisory roles within training centers or command structures without participating directly in combat. Such support would strengthen North Korea's capabilities, while maintaining plausible deniability.

Cyber and information operations. Russia could assist North Korea in conducting cyber and information operations targeting the United States, South Korea, and Japan. Moscow could amplify North Korean narratives blaming the crisis on U.S. military pressure, while launching cyberattacks against critical infrastructure, financial systems, or government networks in allied countries. These operations could impose costs on U.S. allies and create political pressure to limit their involvement.

Direct military deployments or combat operations. The least likely form of Russian support would involve deploying Russian combat forces to fight alongside North Korean troops. Although the mutual defense clause calls for military assistance, Moscow

Multilateralizing the Axis of Upheaval

Cooperation among more than two members of the axis has been rare but is increasing. Xi's hosting of Putin, Kim, and Pezeshkian in September 2025 was a notable occasion in which all four leaders were together for a high-profile event.⁴³ More often, the partners have gathered in trilateral groupings, particularly Russia, China, and Iran. Since the start of the year, this trio has concluded a trilateral security pact and a joint maritime exercise. Such efforts enhance communication and coordination among the parties but remain limited in terms of advancing military interoperability and providing mutual defense protection. This underscores the very pragmatic nature of the relationships, and the degree to which they are self-serving rather than advancing the collective interest. While cooperation among the axis partners remains primarily bilateral and issue-specific, a growing number of agreements, strategic frameworks, and joint exercises illustrate a gradual expansion of coordination across the group. Recent developments highlight both the growing scope of this cooperation and its continuing limitations. Key examples include the following:

- Bilateral agreements have formalized relations between the axis partners and laid the foundation for more coordinated or multilateral actions among them. Iran and China signed the Iran-China 25-Year Cooperation Program in March 2021, while China also renewed its long-standing Treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the North Korea the same year. Russia and North Korea signed the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership in June 2024, Russia and Iran concluded the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty in January 2025, and Russia and China issued a Joint Statement on Further Deepening the China-Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era in May 2025, accompanied by more than 20 bilateral cooperation agreements covering energy, investment, artificial intelligence, and other sectors.
- The comprehensive January 2026 Russia-Iran-China strategic pact formally aligns the three countries in domains

across diplomacy, energy, sanctions resilience, and military-technical cooperation, with the goal of countering U.S. pressure and undermining U.S. influence.⁴⁴ Russia played a central role in shaping the pact's framework—lifting elements from its 2025 partnership with Iran into a broader agreement. Russia also serves as the pact's primary driver of military-technical integration and diplomatic shielding for Iran.

- In February 2026, Russia, China, and Iran participated in the trilateral naval exercise “Maritime Security Belt 2026” at a time of intense U.S. military pressure on Iran. The exercise—which has been held annually since 2019—took place in the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf of Oman, and the northern Indian Ocean, and served as an operational show of force in a zone where the United States was preparing for strikes. It also provided political and strategic signaling that Iran had the backing of two major powers and presented a multipolar alternative to U.S. power projection. Russian, Chinese, and Iranian warships practiced tactical coordination, rapid-response procedures, and maritime security operations. Russia deployed several naval assets to the region, including its sophisticated Stoikiy corvette with antisurface, antiair, and antisubmarine warfare capabilities. Despite the show of force, the exercise was not integrated in terms of command and control but was a navigational coordination. And when faced with U.S. and Israeli strikes, Russian and Chinese ships did not come to Iran's defense. At the time of this report, the Iranian navy is nearly destroyed.⁴⁵

A move by the United States or a regional ally, such as South Korea, could serve as a catalyst for enhancing the coordination among axis members. This is particularly true for a scenario in which the axis members share concerns about a regional threat. This would likely motivate axis members to align or coordinate their approaches to the situation to maximize their ability to shape an outcome to their benefit. Situations in which each member can identify its own interests at stake are more likely to induce a more cohesive,

coordinated level of cooperation. This is because each country is driven by its own threat perception and security requirements. While Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea each engage with each other based on self-interest rather than collective interest, shared threat perceptions could nonetheless drive deeper coordination and create opportunities for more expansive cooperation in the future.

AXIS SCENARIO: SOUTH KOREA PURSUES A NUCLEAR WEAPON

It is worthwhile to consider a low probability, high-impact scenario in which Russia, China, and North Korea would work more closely together, such as South Korea pursuing its own nuclear weapon capability. In this scenario, the three members of the axis could bring their own “strengths” to the situation in a coordinated way that would result in maximum effect. China would bring economic leverage to the table, which could include threatening Seoul with trade restrictions, consumer boycotts, and supply chain pressures. Beijing would also apply high-level warnings, démarches, and condemnation—calling Seoul out for disrupting regional stability. North Korea would escalate its rhetoric and conduct missile testing to pressure South Korea militarily. Russia would likely play the role of coordinator and would take the lead in information and diplomatic relations. The coordination of political, economic, and military pressure on Seoul could be very effective in causing South Korea to rethink or at least delay its acquisition. Concerns about the responses from China, Russia, and North Korea could spur others, such as Japan, to also pressure South Korea to back down for the sake of regional stability.

From this scenario, it is clear that effective coordination in a nonkinetic situation can enable the partners to shape an evolving situation in their favor. The axis can be effective in situations that can be shifted or changed through coercion, influence campaigns, or power projection. It is when matters become kinetic, as with Iran, that the axis partnerships offer more limited returns.

has historically been cautious about entering conflicts that risk escalation with the United States. Direct intervention could expose Russia's Far Eastern forces to major losses, and risk broader confrontation with U.S. and South Korean militaries. Although Russia would be reluctant to send troops, the Kremlin could find creative ways to fulfill its commitments to North Korea—and attempt to uphold its image as a reliable partner—such as by sending prisoners or mercenary forces.

Naval or air operations against the United States or allied forces. Russia could theoretically deploy naval or air assets from its Pacific Fleet to threaten U.S. or allied forces in the region. However, such actions would represent a major escalation and could draw Russia into direct conflict with the United States. Given the limited capabilities of Russia's Pacific Fleet and Moscow's preference for avoiding clashes with U.S. forces, this scenario remains highly unlikely.

Implications

RUSSIA'S CAREFULLY SCOPED SUPPORT OF IRAN during Operation Epic Fury captures the essence of the axis of upheaval. The relationship among these countries is not an alliance built on automatic obligations or costly defense commitments. These states are reluctant to incur significant risks or bear substantial costs on behalf of one another—a reality reflected in the deliberately limited language of Russia's treaty with Iran even before the conflict. Instead, the axis functions as a flexible system of mutual reinforcement: Its members look for opportunities to help one another in ways that make each partner more resilient to U.S. pressure, while raising the costs for Washington. Cooperation tends to occur where it is useful and relatively low risk—through diplomatic backing, sanctions evasion, technology transfers, intelligence sharing, or limited operational assistance—rather than through direct military intervention.

Once the war in Ukraine ends, Russia is likely to remain committed to these partnerships. Several factors, however, will shape how far Moscow is willing to go in supporting its partners.

First, the outcome of the war in Ukraine will be the most significant variable. Ukraine will remain Moscow's top priority. If the war ends in a way Russia does not view as durable—for example, if Ukraine remains firmly aligned with the West, but faces limits on the size and capabilities of its military—Moscow would likely constrain support to its partners to preserve the forces and resources needed to renew hostilities when it sees an opportunity to do so. Similarly, if Ukraine maintains a robust military and strong ties to the United States and/

or Europe, Russia would still prioritize its resources to defending its Western border. By contrast, if Moscow judges that it has secured its objectives in Ukraine and faces little threat along that frontier, significant military and economic resources could be freed up to support China, North Korea, and Iran.

Second, Russia's ambitions in Europe will shape the extent of its support. Europe will remain Moscow's priority theater after Ukraine. If Russia seeks to exploit instability generated by one of its partners—for example, a crisis involving China or Iran—to revise the European security order, Moscow may limit support for those partners to preserve its own capabilities to pressure or intimidate Europe or potentially conduct military operations against NATO's eastern flank. In this sense, the degree of Russian support for its partners could provide insight into Moscow's broader strategic intentions: Exceptionally limited Russian involvement could signal that the Kremlin is reserving its capabilities for heightened pressure on Europe.

Third, the timeline of Russia's military reconstitution will matter. The pace at which Russia rebuilds its forces—shaped in part by Western sanctions, export controls on key components, and broader economic conditions—will influence how much assistance Moscow can provide. Slower progress in rebuilding Russia's military would constrain support to partners. A crisis over Taiwan could complicate this further: Russia currently depends on China for many components used in defense production, and those supplies could disappear if China were itself engaged in a major conflict and prioritized its own military needs. Conversely, faster Russian reconstitution could give Moscow the capacity to assist its partners more significantly, although it might also embolden Russia to pursue a more aggressive posture toward Europe, again limiting what it is willing to provide abroad.

A final factor—particularly relevant in a potential Taiwan contingency—is what China itself asks of Russia. Beijing would almost certainly prefer to win a conflict over Taiwan with as little external assistance as possible. Reliance on Russia—or on Iran or North Korea—would undermine Xi's narrative of national rejuvenation and China's claim to be a fully sovereign and independent great power. Beijing would also seek to retain tight control over the battlespace and avoid the unpredictability that outside partners could introduce. China would likely be cautious about requesting actions that might reveal its vulnerabilities. Moreover, Beijing is wary of a regional conflict escalating into a broader confrontation it cannot control—a concern reflected in Chinese strategic thinking that prioritizes avoiding a “hot war” that could invite third-party intervention and spiral beyond its control.⁴⁶ Escalatory Russian moves intended to distract the United States could increase the risk of wider

involvement by regional actors or European states—an outcome Beijing would prefer to avoid unless the war was going badly.

Russia's continued investment in its partnerships with China, Iran, and North Korea means that the axis of upheaval will remain a persistent strategic challenge for U.S. and allied policymakers and warfighters. These relationships are likely to deepen over time because Moscow sees continued utility in them—not only for sustaining its war effort today, but also for strengthening its ability to compete with the United States over the long term. Even after the war in Ukraine ends, Russia will have incentives to continue investing in these relationships as a way to blunt Western pressure, accelerate military reconstitution, and expand its global reach.

For defense planners, the central challenge is uncertainty. The analysis above suggests that Russia may not always be willing to incur significant costs on behalf of its partners. At the same time, planners cannot assume that Russia will remain on the sidelines in future crises involving China, Iran, or North Korea. Moscow has demonstrated a willingness to provide meaningful—if carefully calibrated—forms of support that can shape the course of a conflict. As a result, defense planners must assume that Russia could play a role in any major contingency involving these countries, even if that role falls short of direct military intervention.

These dynamics also increase the risk that future conflicts could become prolonged. External support—whether in the form of weapons, intelligence, economic lifelines, or sanctions evasion—can help sustain partners under pressure and allow them to continue fighting longer than they otherwise could. Russia's ability to provide such support—particularly when combined with assistance from other axis partners—could complicate U.S. and allied efforts to achieve rapid military or political outcomes in crises involving China, Iran, or North Korea.

The axis of upheaval may also embolden risk-taking by its members. Even limited Russian backing can alter the strategic calculus of U.S. adversaries by introducing uncertainty

about how Moscow might respond to a crisis. For example, the possibility of Russian political cover, economic support, or intelligence sharing could make North Korea more willing to undertake provocative actions against South Korea or the United States. In this way, the shadow of potential Russian involvement could contribute to an escalatory cycle in which adversaries feel more confident taking risks, while the United States and its allies must account for the possibility of a wider confrontation.

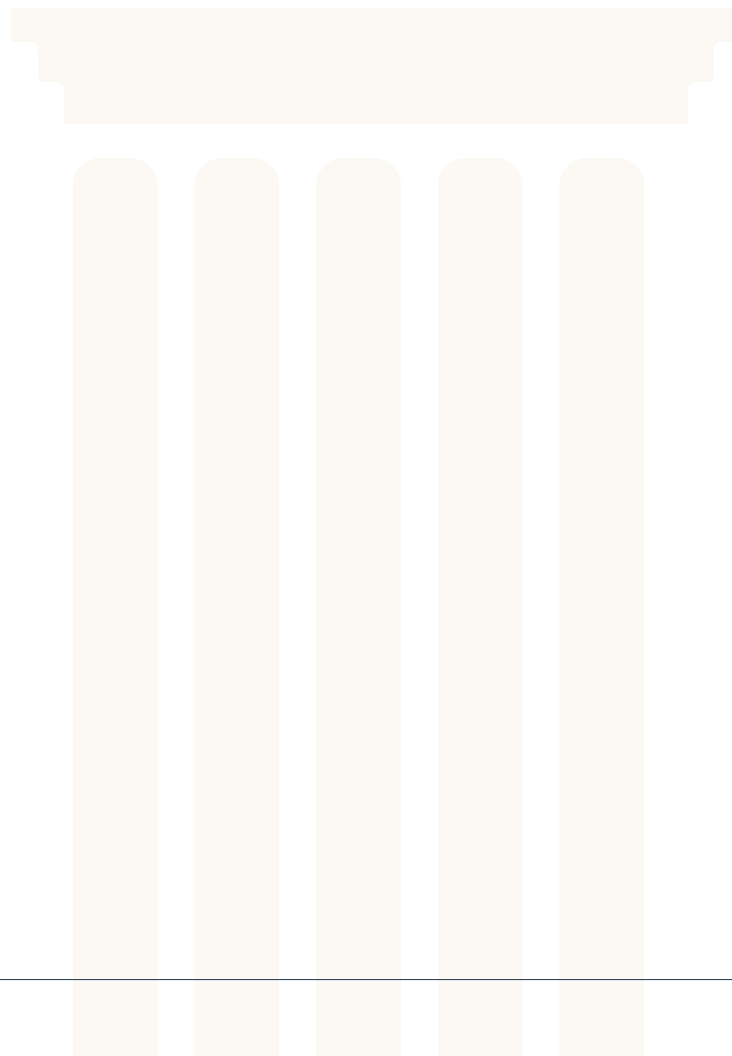
Although the axis operates primarily through bilateral relationships rather than a formal alliance structure, Russia plays a central role as a conduit for the exchange of knowledge, operational experience, and best practices among its partners. Russia's war in Ukraine, in particular, has generated a vast repository of lessons on modern warfare—from drone operations and electronic warfare to sanctions evasion and military mobilization—that Moscow can share with China, Iran, and North Korea. Moscow is also taking key lessons from the Iran conflict, including the emerging asymmetry of power that can be gained through leverage over an economic asset or the use of low-cost, high-tech munitions. This diffusion of knowledge and experience could gradually improve the capabilities of all three partners, further strengthening the networked challenge they pose to the United States and its allies.

Finally, axis members are at present hyper-alert to the foreign policy moves of the United States. Russia and China are particularly motivated by the opportunity to negotiate and potentially improve the terms of their respective relationships with Washington. In the short term, this may appear as a restraining factor on their ability to coordinate with each other as they prioritize self-interest in the pursuit of a deal with the United States. Constrained or more conciliatory behavior in the near term belies the broader, longer-term goal held by each of the axis members: to shape the global order in a way that diminishes U.S. power and advances their own national interests.

Conclusion

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE—and crises such as Operation Epic Fury—underscores a central point: The axis of upheaval is not defined by mutual defense commitments or a willingness to fight one another’s wars, but by a shared interest in weakening U.S. power and expanding each member’s room for maneuvering. Russia’s calibrated support to Iran illustrates that Moscow will remain risk-averse when core interests are at stake, but it does not signal diminishing commitment to these relationships. Rather, it highlights the model that is likely to endure—selective, opportunistic cooperation that delivers meaningful strategic effects without triggering direct confrontation with the United States. Critically, this approach is reinforced by the Kremlin’s view that the international order is breaking down and giving way to a world governed increasingly by “might makes right.” In that environment, Russia judges that it is stronger—and better able to withstand pressure and shape outcomes—when operating alongside capable partners. As long as the Kremlin views its competition with Washington as enduring and zero-sum, partnerships with China, Iran, and North Korea will remain a central feature of Russian strategy.

Looking ahead, Russia will retain the incentive to invest in this network, even once the war in Ukraine ends. Moscow will seek to rebuild its military, insulate itself from future sanctions, and reassert its global influence, all of which will increase the value of cooperation with capable, like-minded partners. At the same time, Russia will continue to see the axis as a force multiplier that can stretch U.S. attention across multiple theaters, complicate Western planning, and create opportunities for Russia to act with greater freedom, particularly in Europe. In a more fragmented and competitive international system, these relationships will not simply hedge against weakness—they will be central to how Moscow accumulates and exercises power. Even if cooperation remains uneven and bounded by self-interest, the cumulative effect of these relationships will endure. The axis of upheaval will persist, not as a formal alliance, but as a durable, adaptive system that strengthens Russia’s capacity to compete with—and challenge—the United States and its allies over the long term.



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