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THE AXIS OF UPHEAVAL

Gauging the Growing Military Cooperation
Among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

in 2022 was a critical catalyst for cooperation among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—what the authors call the “axis of upheaval.” Already, defense cooperation between these countries has enabled Russian aggression against Ukraine, increased their military capabilities in ways that make each country a more formidable threat, emboldened their more brazen and destabilizing actions, and magnified gray zone actions against the United States and its allies.

Although much of this cooperation occurs bilaterally among specific dyads of the axis, that cooperation is increasingly beneficial to the overall group. Russian advancements on the battlefield in Ukraine and experience in modern warfare, for example, are diffusing to each axis country. Iranian drone technology now flows through Russia to North Korea and China, and Russian defense officials frequently travel from one axis capital to the next, creating connectivity among multiple members of the axis that would not otherwise exist.

The cooperation among the axis of upheaval will persist, despite some claims that Russia's and China's limited support for Iran amid Israeli and U.S. strikes spell the end of their ties. China, Iran, and North Korea deliberated for months on the sidelines of Russia's war before moving to more fully support Moscow after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. China gave little more than its diplomatic support to the Kremlin in the first months after Russia's invasion, and it was nearly six months until public reports documented the arrival of Iran's drones in Russia. While these countries are reticent to incur unnecessary

costs on behalf of their partners, they will seek out opportunities to support one another, especially in ways that help them withstand Western pressure. The incentives fueling their cooperation have not changed since Israel's actions against Iran, and, if anything, Russia, China, and North Korea are likely to see value in helping Tehran reconstitute its capacity to antagonize the United States and create policy dilemmas for Washington.

Likewise, their cooperation will not end with Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia's aims go beyond Ukraine, and Moscow will continue to view cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea as essential to accomplishing these aims. Even if U.S. President Donald Trump's administration seeks to normalize relations with Moscow, the Kremlin will not fully shed its view of the United States as a threat and impediment to its objectives. Moreover, Russia may not be the only driver of cooperation. As U.S. competition with China intensifies, Beijing is likely to become ever more invested in cooperation with members of the axis as Beijing seeks closer partnerships to bolster its efforts to counter Washington.

Looking forward, the military challenges that the axis of upheaval poses are likely to grow. Military cooperation within the axis is likely to shorten the time it will take Russia to reconstitute its conventional forces, increasing the pressure on Europe to more rapidly ramp up its own capabilities. Axis cooperation will also complicate the picture for U.S. and allied defense planners who can no longer assume that any one of these countries would fight alone, either because one or more of these countries provides

military aid and weapons or, less likely, fighters. There is also a rising risk of simultaneity, or the prospect that these countries could initiate more than one crisis at the same time, in an explicitly coordinated or opportunistic manner.

Growing axis cooperation—their joint use of bases, for example—is also likely to increase Russia's and China's abilities to project power into regions where they would not otherwise have a presence, allowing axis countries to carry out new types of operations, raising questions about the survivability of U.S. forces, and creating new contingencies for the United States.

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Through their cooperation, these countries are also gaining valuable information and learning lessons that may strengthen each country's military, and their collaboration will likely increase the resilience of their regimes. Finally, cooperation among the axis countries may undercut the global nuclear and missile nonproliferation regime—thereby weakening strategic stability. Policymakers can no longer afford to view these countries as discrete threats but instead must understand—and disrupt—the growing connections among them.

INTRODUCTION

RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE has been devastating for Ukraine and its people. The effects of the war have also reverberated far beyond Ukraine, creating new geopolitical dynamics. Among the most transformative of these effects has been the way Russia's war has spurred greater cooperation between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—or what the authors call the “axis of upheaval,” a term intended to convey these countries' shared commitment to overturning the rules and norms that govern today's global system.¹

Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014 accelerated the ties between Moscow and Beijing that had taken root in the waning days of the Cold War. Sensing it had little future with the West because of the sanctions imposed on Russia following its illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent invasion of eastern Ukraine in 2015, the Kremlin committed then to growing its partnership with Beijing. Tehran, too, had already set in motion its own pivot to the east prior to February 2022.² But although these relationships were developing, Russia's full-scale invasion was a critical catalyst, taking their previous levels of cooperation to new heights. North Korea, for its part, capitalized on the opportunity the conflict presented to make itself newly important to the Kremlin. Its deployment of troops into Russia in late 2024 underscores just how quickly cooperation can evolve among countries where power is so highly concentrated in the hands of an individual leader or a small ruling clique.³

Cooperation among the axis members spans the full spectrum of their relations, including the military, economic, political, and informational domains of their partnerships. Their cooperation enables them

to present an alternative to the U.S.-led international system, including through their efforts to dilute the efficacy of Western sanctions, reduce the centrality of the U.S. dollar, align their messaging to increase the legitimacy to their narratives, and to provide political cover in international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) to shield them from international pressure.⁴ These effects make it harder for the United States and its allies to address their destabilizing actions.

But perhaps the most consequential effects of the axis of upheaval stem from their growing defense cooperation. Already, defense ties between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have enabled Russia to sustain its aggression against Ukraine, increased the military capabilities of each country, supported their more brazen and destabilizing actions, and magnified gray zone actions against the United States and its allies. Although much of this cooperation occurs bilaterally among specific dyads of the axis, that cooperation is increasingly beneficial to the overall group. Russian advancements on the battlefield in Ukraine, for example, are diffusing to each of the members of the axis. Iranian drone technology now flows through Russia to North Korea and China, and Russian defense officials frequently travel from one axis capital to the next, creating connectivity among multiple members of the axis that would not otherwise exist.⁵ In short, while much of the defense cooperation is conducted bilaterally, there are greater instances of trilateral cooperation, and increasingly synergies that amplify the military threat the axis of upheaval poses to the United States and its allies. Even as Russia and China provided immediate support to Iran in the face of Israeli and U.S. strikes,

questions remain about the extent to which the axis will help Iran reconstitute its capacity to antagonize the United States, including its possible efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon. Policymakers can no longer afford to view these countries as discrete threats but instead must understand—and disrupt—the growing connections among them.

The cooperation among the axis of upheaval will persist, despite some claims that Russia's and China's limited support for Iran amid Israeli and U.S. strikes or the eventual conclusion of the Ukraine war will spell the end of their ties. China, Iran, and North Korea deliberated for months on the sidelines of Russia's war before moving to more fully support Moscow after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. China gave little more than its diplomatic support to the Kremlin in the first months after Russia's invasion, and it was nearly six months until public reports documented the arrival of Iran's drones in Russia. While these countries are reticent to incur unnecessary costs on behalf of their partners, they will seek out opportunities to support one another, especially in ways that help them withstand Western pressure. The incentives fueling their cooperation have not changed since Israel's actions against Iran, and, if anything, Russia, China, and North Korea are likely to see value in helping Tehran reconstitute its capacity to antagonize the United States and create policy dilemmas for Washington.

Cooperation among the axis members spans the full spectrum of their relations, including the military, economic, political, and informational domains of their partnerships.

Likewise, the cooperation among the axis of upheaval will endure beyond Russia's war against Ukraine. Russia may have turned to China, Iran, and North Korea to help sustain its aggression against Kyiv, but Moscow's objectives extend beyond Ukraine. Russia not only seeks to control Kyiv and its choices, but also to push the United States out of Europe and revise the European security order. Even if U.S. President Donald Trump's administration seeks to

normalize relations with Moscow, the Kremlin will not abandon those objectives.⁶ Nor will Moscow fully shed its view of the United States as a threat and key impediment to those objectives. The Kremlin perceives that many—even a majority—within the U.S. government and public maintain hostile views of Russia and could thwart or reverse Trump's actions.⁷ Likewise, the Kremlin cannot be sure that the next U.S. leader will not be more focused on strengthening transatlantic relations and/or democracy and human rights. Russian President Vladimir Putin is likely to judge that Russia will once again find itself in confrontation with the United States and therefore will not turn on his partners in China, Iran, and North Korea. Instead, Putin is likely to seek to get as much as he can for Russia while Trump is in office, including by trying to lock in gains for Russia that would be difficult for future U.S. and European leaders to reverse, such as subjugating Ukraine or undermining the credibility of NATO's commitment to collective defense. Russia will continue to see cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea as important in that endeavor, creating a basis for sustained cooperation.

Moreover, Europe is on course to rapidly ramp up its military capabilities and will remain a key barrier to any Russian efforts to expand its influence and aggression, keeping it in Moscow's crosshairs.⁸ Already, the Kremlin is adapting its narratives to portray Europe as its primary adversary—or a “war party,” as Russian public statements have suggested.⁹ At a minimum, the Kremlin will sustain its efforts to intimidate countries in Europe to force them to pursue policies that are less antagonistic toward Russia. To that end, the Kremlin will continue to view cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea as strengthening its efforts to undermine not just NATO, but also other U.S. alliances and partnerships, including the U.S.-Japan and U.S.-ROK alliances and U.S. partnerships in the Middle East.

In these ways, Russia is likely to sustain its role as a key driver of and conduit for the axis of upheaval. Yet, Russia may not be the only driver going forward. As U.S. competition with China intensifies, Beijing is likely to become ever more invested in cooperation with members of the axis as it seeks closer partnerships to bolster its efforts to counter Washington. If China becomes more intent on increasing its influence over Taiwan, Beijing will likely increase

its outreach to and support for members of the axis to strengthen its own position, serving as a critical secondary driver of this axis.

Going forward, the axis of upheaval will continue to matter as military ties between the members evolve, including in ways that amplify the challenge each individual country poses to the United States and its allies. Together, they will create new challenges

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that Washington and its partners must confront. Sustained Russian military cooperation with the axis countries is likely to shorten the time it will take Russia to reconstitute its conventional forces. That cooperation will also complicate military assessments for U.S. and allied defense planners who can no longer assume that any one of these countries would fight alone—either because one or more of the axis countries provides military aid and weapons or,

less likely, fighters. Finally, their cooperation is likely to increase Russia's and China's abilities to project power, facilitate learning and the sharing of best practices, support the stability of those authoritarian governments, and further undermine the nonproliferation regime and global strategic stability.

This report assesses these military implications of the axis of upheaval. Rather than providing an inventory of the implications of each bilateral partnership, this report seeks to assess the overarching impact of the axis as a whole. The impact of their growing coordination is likely to be greater than the sum of their bilateral relationships, making it critical to think broadly about the challenge. To this end, the first section of this report identifies the military impact of the axis of upheaval so far. It then assesses the key drivers and constraints of their defense cooperation going forward, underscoring why their cooperation is likely to persist even after the war in Ukraine ends and despite changing dynamics in U.S.-Russia relations. Finally, this report projects the potential future implications of their military ties, should their cooperation continue and evolve. The coordination among members of the axis of upheaval has developed more quickly and deeply than observers expected just a few years ago, and greater multilateral coordination has the potential to expand. Policymakers should therefore plan and prepare for what the next three to five years might have in store.

OBSERVED IMPLICATIONS OF GREATER DEFENSE COOPERATION

ALTHOUGH THE INCREASED MILITARY coordination among Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea does not rise to the level of an alliance or even a formal partnership, policymakers must nonetheless understand the consequences of their deepened coordination. The synergies arising from their bilateral—and nascent trilateral—military relationships have already amplified the military challenge that each country poses to the United States and its allies. These relationships create an environment in which it is more difficult for the United States to advance its interests in the face of stronger and more united adversaries. The following are some of the current implications of this coordination.

Sustained Russian Aggression Against Ukraine

Support from China, Iran, and North Korea has enabled Russia to sustain its fighting in Ukraine in ways that would not have been possible without their backing. Perhaps the most conspicuous support has come from North Korea which, in fall 2024, sent between 10,000 to 12,000 troops to help Russia reclaim territory taken by Ukraine in Russia's Kursk region.¹⁰

According to the U.S. Department of Defense, these troops have made the fight “much harder” for Ukraine in Kursk.¹¹ This troop deployment followed the signing of a new mutual defense pact between Russia and North Korea earlier in the year.¹² Beyond personnel, North Korea has also provided Russia with millions of artillery shells, hundreds of artillery systems, and hundreds of short-range ballistic missiles (including

tactical guided missiles and multiple rocket launchers).¹³ In December 2024, South Korean intelligence indicated that North Korea was also preparing to send suicide drones to Russia.¹⁴

Iran has also provided weapons systems to Russia. This assistance began with shipments of Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 kamikaze drones.¹⁵ Iran is also suspected to have transferred to Russia Mohajer-6 armed uncrewed aerial vehicles (UAVs), Shahed-129 armed UAVs, and Shahed-19 armed UAVs.¹⁶ Tehran later sent drone trainers to Crimea to advise Russian forces and agreed to help Russia manufacture Iranian-designed drones.¹⁷ These manufacturing facilities are reportedly operational as of September 2024—and may be employing North Korean laborers.¹⁸ To illustrate the scale of this assistance, there are reports that Russia has paid Iran \$4.5 billion annually for Shahed drone imports and as of September 2024, Ukraine had reportedly downed more than 8,000 Iranian-designed drones.¹⁹ Notably, Iran has also sent drone trainers to Belarus and assisted with Shahed production in Russia's close ally.²⁰ While drones have been the most widespread form of support, Iranian military assistance to Russia has also included ballistic missiles, ammunition, and glide bombs.²¹ Russia and Iran also finalized a strategic partnership treaty in January 2025 that includes enhanced military and military-technical cooperation, though it lacks mutual defense or mutual defense assistance commitments—a fact that made clear the limits of the partnership and should have tempered expectations about the extent to which Moscow would aid Tehran in June 2025.²²

Although China has refrained from providing direct military aid to Russia—another clear limit on Beijing’s support to Moscow—it has nonetheless fueled the Kremlin’s war machine. Most significantly, Beijing has sent large quantities of the component parts Russia needs to manufacture its armaments, including machine tools, microelectronics, fighter jet parts, gunpowder, and more. These imports may constitute as much as 60 percent of all foreign components used in Russian weapons, according to Ukrainian officials.²³ In addition to these components, Chinese exports to Russia of dual-use goods, including unarmed drones, military-capable hardware such as body armor, and armored vehicles with both police and military applications, have increased following the 2022 invasion.²⁴ In September 2024, President Joe Biden’s administration directly accused Beijing of supporting Russia’s war against Ukraine when it described a “very substantial effort on the part of China to help sustain, build and diversify various elements of the Russian war machine” through these deliveries.²⁵ In fall 2024, reports also emerged that the production of armed drones destined for Russia was taking place on Chinese soil, though the nature of the Chinese government’s involvement remains unclear.²⁶ An additional indirect form of support has been Chinese financial assistance to the Russian defense industry, which has faced new challenges due to Western sanctions regimes.²⁷ Finally, China has played a role in facilitating the more direct assistance from Iran and North Korea, including by harboring North Korean ships transferring arms to Russia and contributing components to Iranian-made drones used in Ukraine.²⁸ Beijing also reportedly intends to send to Russia a new attack drone that it modeled on the Iranian Shahed design.²⁹

Taken together, support from the other axis of upheaval countries has been a tremendous boon to Russia in its war effort, helping it compensate for defense industrial and manpower deficiencies. While it is difficult to quantify the size of this advantage, there is no doubt that Moscow would be in a worse position today without it. Moreover, even after fighting stops in Ukraine, the assistance already provided by Iran, North Korea, and China is likely to have a lasting impact on the strength of the Russian military, heightening the threat that it poses to NATO’s defense and deterrence efforts going forward.

Enhanced Sophistication of Military Technology

In addition to making Russia more dangerous in its war against Ukraine, cooperation among the axis states has increased the technological sophistication of their militaries, amplifying the threat each country poses to the United States and its allies. Russia’s support to China has significantly aided Beijing’s military modernization, sharpening China’s military edge relative to the United States.³⁰ For instance, in September 2024, Washington accused Russia of having provided China with advanced submarine quieting technology, which would make it harder for the United States to detect and track China’s submarines, including in a crisis over Taiwan.³¹ Only a few years ago, it would have been hard to imagine the transfer of such a sensitive military technology, underscoring just how rapidly cooperation has deepened. As Moscow and Beijing increasingly work together, the U.S. military’s technological edge over China could become dulled, increasing the likelihood of a potential conflict in the Indo-Pacific if China believes it has gained the upper hand.³²

Russia also provided Iran with more advanced systems as Moscow has sought to reciprocate Tehran’s assistance in Ukraine. Iran confirmed in January 2025 that it had purchased Sukhoi Su-35 fighter jets from Russia—although whether they have been delivered is unclear.³³ Tehran also reportedly asked Moscow for assistance in designing and building new naval ships in December 2022.³⁴ Finally, Iran confirmed, as of August 2024, that Russia had begun making deliveries of requested air defense and advanced radar equipment.³⁵ Russia did not step in to repair or replace these air defense systems following Israeli efforts to destroy them in October 2024 and mid-June 2025, highlighting real limits on their relationship.³⁶ However, the degradation of Russia’s military in Ukraine, Moscow’s prioritization of its own requirements for its own war in Ukraine, and, after the United States joined the military campaign, the risk of conflict with the United States limited what Russia was willing to do for Iran.

While Russian support for Iran and its proxies has been most widespread, China and North Korea have not been absent. Chinese entities have provided key components for Iranian drones and ballistic missiles, having been sanctioned by the United States for this

role in July 2024.³⁷ In February 2025, Iran displayed a liquid-propellant rocket engine, likely based on RD-250 engine technology that Iran reportedly acquired from North Korea a decade earlier, which Iran could use to develop a new ballistic missile or space launch vehicle.³⁸

Although full details of what North Korea may be receiving in exchange for its support in the war against Ukraine remain vague, open source reports indicate that Moscow has promised to assist Pyongyang with the design and production of drones.³⁹ Moreover, some analysts suggest that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un has sought ballistic missile and submarine technology from Moscow.⁴⁰ Flights between Russian military sites and Pyongyang in September 2024 indicate that some technology transfer may have taken place. And South Korea has claimed that Russia provided North Korea with weapons manufacturing parts and anti-air missiles in exchange for its support in the Ukraine war, including its troop deployment.⁴¹ These observations align with Putin's promise in June 2024 to arm Pyongyang if the West did not stop sending weapons to Kyiv.⁴² Meanwhile, reports of a new North Korean drone resembling an Iranian suicide UAV—apparently a copy of an Israeli UAV—suggest Pyongyang may have received Iranian UAVs or technology.⁴³

Space-based capabilities have been a particularly fruitful area of collaboration among the axis of upheaval countries. This assistance has flowed from Russia and China, which have significantly more robust space programs than Iran and North Korea. For instance, Moscow has assisted Tehran and Pyongyang with satellite launches since 2022.⁴⁴ These ostensibly civilian satellites could have dual-use purposes. Similarities between space launch vehicle and intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) technologies have raised concerns about how Russia could be assisting the development of North Korea's nuclear weapons program.⁴⁵ Beijing and Moscow also demonstrated their support for Pyongyang's space program at the UN in June 2023 by refusing to condemn a North Korean satellite launch.⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Iran has pursued deals with China and Russia in recent years to obtain remote sensing satellite technology that could enhance Tehran's development of satellites for military surveillance.⁴⁷

China and Russia also cooperate with each other in the space domain. The two countries have signed numerous deals for outer space collaboration since 2022, including a comprehensive bilateral space cooperation deal that lasts until 2027, contracts on mutual deployment of navigation stations, and an agreement to jointly develop a nuclear power plant on the moon by 2035.⁴⁸ This deepening cooperation allows each country to bolster its position as a space power at a time when the militarization of outer space continues to accelerate.

Increased Support for China's Regional Ambitions

Russia has shown increased support—politically and through military coordination—for China's regional ambitions in the Indo-Pacific, which has probably contributed to Beijing's growing assertiveness in the region. Beyond technology transfers, Russia has publicly backed China's position of having a rightful claim to Taiwan.⁴⁹ It has also helped sharpen China's military edge by participating in regular joint exercises throughout the Indo-Pacific region. Since 2022, Russia and China have conducted coordinated air and naval patrols in the East China Sea—including areas near Japanese and South Korean air defense identification zones—and the South China Sea.⁵⁰ Moscow has also made a concerted, independent effort to demonstrate its strength as a partner for Beijing in the region, conducting its own anti-submarine drills in the South China Sea, launching Pacific Fleet exercises, emphasizing the capabilities of its Eastern Military District forces, and inviting China as the guest of honor to its "Vostok 22" exercises in eastern Russia.⁵¹

Such bilateral Russia-China cooperation has the potential to serve as an anchor for trilateral or broader cooperation with other countries—a development that Beijing would probably welcome as a way to demonstrate that it has strong backing for its aims. This has already occurred with Russia's de facto vassal Belarus, which joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in July 2024 and subsequently participated in joint exercises with China.⁵² Other evidence of nascent trilateral coordination on this front comes from the Indo-Pacific. In July 2023, Russia-China military drills in the Sea of Japan may

have been coordinated with North Korean missile launches.⁵³ Additionally, China conducted a large-scale exercise around Taiwan in October 2024, while it was also conducting joint naval and coast guard patrols with Russia. That same day, the Russian and Chinese defense ministers met, and China’s foreign minister called his Iranian counterpart the following day.⁵⁴ Although there is no public evidence that the conversation pertained to the exercises, it indicates the importance of analysts remaining open to the possibility that cooperation could occur increasingly on a trilateral basis.

Finally, Russia’s war in Ukraine has created conditions that have allowed Beijing to become more accepting of risk and therefore more willing to pursue increasingly assertive and brazen actions in the Indo-Pacific. Given Washington’s preoccupation with Ukraine under the Biden administration, Beijing seemed to judge that the U.S. inclination would be to deescalate in other regions to avoid being overstretched, allowing Beijing to pursue more brazen actions. In many ways, Russia has become the pointy end of Beijing’s spear—willing to upend dynamics in key regions in ways that aid China’s ambitions.⁵⁵ Moreover, Beijing likely views support from Russia and other actors as increasing the legitimacy of its own actions, particularly in terms of global public opinion.

Facilitated and Encouraged More Brazen Behavior

It is not only China that has been emboldened by the growing support from its backers; each member of the axis has grown more brazen in its behavior. With the support of China and especially Russia—which signed a mutual defense treaty with Pyongyang in June 2024—North Korea’s Kim has grown more assertive. In 2024, Pyongyang adopted a new constitution that formally defines inter-Korean relations as “hostile” and abandons any reference to peaceful reunification as a goal.⁵⁶ This has been accompanied by a series of provocations directed at Seoul, including blowing up parts of major roads and railways linking the two countries, as well as sending thousands of balloons filled with trash across the border.⁵⁷ Pyongyang’s audacity is heightening the possibility of a potential North Korean military action

on the Korean Peninsula—a major concern to stability in the region that would implicate the United States by affecting its ally in Seoul.

In the Middle East, too, support from Iran’s authoritarian partners strengthened the efforts of its various nonstate proxies—dubbed the “axis of resistance”—to incite turmoil in the region.⁵⁸ These proxies have been severely weakened by Israeli actions, but not without creating significant instability that ultimately led the United States to take military action in the region. Hezbollah, for instance, had reportedly used Russian-made weapons in conflicts, received air defense systems from the Kremlin-linked Wagner

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Group, and benefited from North Korean assistance in constructing underground missile storage facilities that helped the group endure Israeli attacks in fall 2024.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, Hamas had acquired weapons from China and North Korea, along with U.S. weapons captured by Russia on the battlefield in Ukraine.⁶⁰ Moscow also provided support to the Palestinian terror group by hosting senior Hamas officials at the Kremlin on multiple occasions in the past several years.⁶¹ And in Yemen, the Houthis received Russian and Chinese targeting data to assist in their assault on Red Sea shipping, which has the potential to increase after they acquired advanced Russian missiles through Iran-brokered negotiations.⁶² Russia’s ties with the axis of resistance were reciprocal: Houthi mercenaries fought in Ukraine, while Hezbollah assisted with the training of Russian drone operators.⁶³

Amplified Gray Zone Aggression Against the West

Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea have stepped up bilateral cooperation in the gray zone—increasingly carrying out attacks on the West that fall below the threshold of kinetic warfare. Russia and China, for example, have seemingly cooperated

on attacks on critical infrastructure. In October 2023, damage to a critical Baltic Sea gas pipeline made headlines, with reports later confirming that a Chinese-owned ship was responsible.⁶⁴ A year later, another Chinese-flagged ship—reportedly with a Russian captain—severed internet cables in the Baltic Sea.⁶⁵ While it is difficult to discern from open sources exactly what transpired, these attacks underscore the potential for stepped-up coordination on this front.

Alignment is also evident in other types of gray zone operations, including in the cyber domain. Following North Korea's troop deployment to Russia, reports of cyberattacks against South Korea by pro-Russian hackers increased, suggesting a possible quid pro quo arrangement.⁶⁶ Russia also provided Iran with advanced cyber warfare capabilities following Tehran's assistance in the war in Ukraine.⁶⁷ In the cyber domain, an agreement between Russia and China to enhance cooperation on artificial intelligence has the potential to boost both countries' future cyber warfare capabilities.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, coordination is increasingly evident in sabotage and espionage. In October 2024, the chief of the British spy agency MI5 announced that Russia and Iran had been responsible for a "staggering" uptick in deadly plots; meanwhile, in November 2024, Norway arrested one of its citizens working as a security guard at the U.S. embassy in Oslo on suspicions of spying on behalf of Moscow and Tehran.⁶⁹

A final area of widespread gray zone cooperation is disinformation and election interference. The Israel-Gaza war has been a fertile source of such cooperation, with Russia, China, and Iran all backing Hamas and pushing narratives designed to vilify Israel and to portray Washington as a destabilizing, domineering force in the world.⁷⁰ U.S. intelligence officials also revealed in October 2024 that these three countries had been engaging in influence activity—including hacking and disinformation campaigns—ahead of the U.S. elections that November.⁷¹ Even if such efforts are not directly coordinated, they have the effect of amplifying the disruption and confusion that each creates, exacerbating the problem that Western societies face in confronting them.

Intensified Efforts to Contest Global Norms

Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea support each other's efforts to challenge key norms and their attempts to establish new ones. The axis countries have supported each other diplomatically to challenge the norm of not seizing territory by force, which Russia violated with its invasion of Ukraine. In a UN General Assembly vote shortly following the invasion, North Korea voted with Russia against a resolution demanding the withdrawal of troops, while China and Iran abstained.⁷² Moreover, North Korea's Kim has emphasized to state media that Moscow "will prevail," and China has parroted Russian talking points about Western responsibility for the war.⁷³

These countries are also working together to popularize new norms. Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea all share sympathetic views on the idea of rightful spheres of influence. By invading Ukraine, Russia has attempted to assert this right. In the Indo-Pacific, Moscow has supported Beijing's challenge to the U.S. regional alliance system by adopting harsh rhetoric directed at Japan.⁷⁴ Iran too has reiterated its support for the one China principle and Beijing's right to defend its territorial integrity, suggesting tacit approval of its aggressive ambitions toward Taiwan.⁷⁵ With respect to the Korean Peninsula, Russia has rhetorically sided with Pyongyang—which sees its own sphere of influence as the entire Korean Peninsula.⁷⁶ Meanwhile, in the Middle East, Russia publicly backed Iran's April 2024 strikes on Israel, falsely equating Iran's actions to Israel's and blasting a UN Security Council meeting on the topic as hypocritical.⁷⁷

These actions serve to challenge global norms regarding respect for sovereignty and the lawful use of force. Rather than punishing rogue behavior, the axis of upheaval countries are supporting each other's violation of norms. This legitimizes existing aggression and encourages further aggression by signaling to other states that norm violation is acceptable and unlikely to result in significant punishment. By emboldening rogue behavior, the four countries raise the risk of an uptick in inter-state war, coups, and other threats to peace and security in the years to come.

DRIVERS OF AND CONSTRAINTS ON FUTURE COOPERATION

COOPERATION AMONG THE AXIS OF UPHEAVAL is driven by their shared aim of weakening U.S. power and influence, which these countries view as the primary impediment to attaining the status and freedom of action that they think they deserve. Each country views the United States as its primary threat. They pursue bilateral and nascent trilateral partnerships with each other to increase their capacity to challenge the United States and its allies, while simultaneously reducing their own shortcomings and vulnerabilities to U.S. and Western pressure. In short, these four countries view themselves as being in a long-term confrontation with the United States and its allies, and calculate that their partnerships better position them to sustain—and succeed—in that confrontation.

These overarching motivations provide a strong adhesive for the relations among the axis countries, yet there clearly are limits to the cooperation, as the June 2025 strikes on Iran underscore. Divergent interests, historic distrust, power asymmetry, and reputational risks all constrain—and are likely to continue to limit—how far these countries are willing to go to support one another. Yet, these constraints have long been present and have not precluded cooperation between Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea from deepening up to this point. These countries have largely accepted that there will be limits on their cooperation and have been willing to compartmentalize their differences to avoid frictions that could detract from their overarching objective of taking on the United States and the West.

One persistent limitation of the axis of upheaval has been that most of their cooperation has occurred bilaterally, between discrete dyads within the axis rather than as a coordinated bloc. There are exceptions: Russia, China, and Iran now hold regular joint military exercises; Russia and China brought Iran into the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, Iran, China, South Africa) grouping and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO); and, in the wake of Trump's proposal to restart nuclear talks with Iran, the deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and Iran held a trilateral meeting in Beijing to show their support for Tehran and demonstrate their ability to jointly address global challenges and, therefore, their willingness to provide an alternative to U.S. leadership.⁷⁸ But overall, their deepening cooperation has taken place bilaterally, and it is these bilateral arrangements that will likely remain the primary vehicle for their efforts in the coming years. Going forward, the depth and breadth of their cooperation will be shaped by the following long-standing drivers and constraints.

Drivers

The following shared aims are likely to drive their cooperation, including in the defense domain.

Safeguard Their Authoritarian Regimes. Each of these regimes prioritizes its maintenance of power above all else and sees the United States and its long-standing effort to support democracy around the globe as threatening the security of their regime.

The axis countries are likely to continue viewing cooperation with others in the group as bolstering the resilience of their governments. Most directly, Iran, North Korea, and Russia all use Chinese technology to repress their populations.⁷⁹ Russia and China use their seats on the UN Security Council to shield these governments from international pressure.⁸⁰ Mutual support in their efforts to circumvent sanctions, arms sales that generate revenue, and more tangible assistance—such as the food and money Russia provided to Kim in return for North Korea's support for Russia's war effort—all provide benefits that strengthen their respective regimes.⁸¹ These governments reject universal definitions of human rights and democracy, including what they view as outside attempts to meddle in their domestic affairs on the grounds of protecting these ideas, and are likely to continue to work together to insulate themselves from U.S. and Western pressure.

Address Their Regional Security Interests. To increase their own sense of security and raise their status and standing, each of the axis countries seeks to dominate its respective region—including by deterring and countering U.S. military forces, decreasing the influence of the United States and its alliances such as NATO and the Quad, and rolling back the stationing of U.S. nuclear weapons abroad. All four countries are likely to continue to see the United States as the primary long-term obstacle to establishing their spheres of influence. Iran, for its part, may be weaker after the June 2025 strikes, but it is unlikely to have abandoned its regional ambitions or national security strategy, although questions remain about the path it will take to achieve them (either by pursuing negotiations or dashing for a nuclear weapon). Actions by President Trump that concede a sphere of influence—for example, in Europe, where the administration is reportedly considering rolling back U.S. presence—could take the immediate urgency out of cooperation among the axis of upheaval, but these states are unlikely to abandon their partnerships and efforts against the United States.⁸² None of these leaders would bet that one U.S. president could erase decades of U.S. foreign policy animus, and they are instead most likely to pocket concessions from the United States and use them to strengthen their own position and that of their axis partners.⁸³

Spread U.S. Bandwidth Thin. Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea likely understand that their cooperation makes them a more formidable force, spreading U.S. attention and resources thin and limiting the extent to which Washington can focus on countering any one of them. This understanding will continue to motivate their cooperation in the future. Russia, for example, likely sees Pyongyang's increasing provocations as an added benefit of its military partnership with North Korea, given its potential to dilute U.S. focus on Russia and Ukraine. China, for its part, is likely to value Russia's role as a frontman that is willing to upend dynamics in ways that distract the United States from focusing on China and that advance its ambitions to undermine U.S. dominance. Russia and China are also likely to view efforts to help Iran reconstitute its capacity to antagonize the United States as useful to their own aims. China probably views the recurring tendency of the United States to redeploy critical assets—such as carrier strike groups, combat aircraft and bombers, and air/missile defenses—to the Middle East as a useful factor in undermining the U.S. military focus on East Asia.

Offset Shortcomings Relative to the United States. Having already offset certain weaknesses through cooperation, the axis of upheaval countries are likely to continue pursuing cooperation in ways that further address their vulnerabilities relative to the United States. During its war against Ukraine, Russia compensated for defense industrial shortages by sourcing weapons and/or component parts from Iran, North Korea, and China, while Pyongyang has provided troops to offset heavy personnel losses.⁸⁴ Russia has also used workers from North Korea to address labor shortages in the civilian sectors of its economy. Likewise, China looks to the axis countries to provide political support, energy supplies, and technology that it cannot get from the West. Beijing is also likely attuned to the support that Russia could provide during a crisis of its own, such as the provision of an overland source of oil and gas that is safe from U.S. interdiction, or ammunition and other weapons from Russia's now-developed defense industrial base. Iran, for its part, has few other countries it can turn to for support and will likely seek future

assistance that reinforces the regime's grip on power and rehabilitates its coercive capacity. These countries recognize that they are less isolated and less vulnerable when they work together.

Confront the United States. In the future, the axis countries are likely to view their continued cooperation as enabling them to more effectively signal their emerging strategic cohesion in challenging the United States and providing an alternative to it and the international order it leads. Russia and China are already working to strengthen and expand key multilateral organizations that exclude Washington—adding Iran to both the BRICS and the SCO.⁸⁵ In the military sphere, a trend toward more joint exercises illustrates their shared desire to confront the West. Joint exercises between the Chinese and Russian militaries have grown steadily in the past two decades, reaching an all-time high of 14 in 2024.⁸⁶ Beijing and Moscow have also been exercising with Iran in the Gulf of Oman on an annual basis since 2019, while Russia reportedly proposed trilateral exercises with North Korea and China in 2023.⁸⁷ These countries are likely to be driven by a shared desire to avoid any perceptions that they can be isolated, and instead share the intent and increasingly the capacity to stand together against the United States.

Constraints

The following factors are likely to limit future bilateral and multilateral cooperation. But these factors may also weaken in ways that could pave the way for greater bilateral—and eventually trilateral—cooperation and, thus, the axis's capacity for disruption.

Historic Distrust. The axis of upheaval countries generally lack a deep foundation of trust, having experienced significant bilateral tensions. Tensions between China and Russia over their shared border, for instance, boiled over in the late 1960s.⁸⁸ Russia's invasion of Iran in 1941, and Moscow's limits and halts to sensitive cooperation with Iran in the 1990s to 2000s due to U.S. pressure, likewise contribute to Tehran's wariness of getting too

close to Moscow.⁸⁹ Russia's lack of support for Iran amid Israeli and U.S. strikes have almost certainly reinforced Iranian views of Russia as an unreliable partner. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, Moscow cut off aid to Pyongyang and pivoted diplomatically toward Seoul, damaging the Russia–North Korea relationship.⁹⁰ Strains in the relationship between China and North Korea have been persistent over the years, due to a variety of factors, including Pyongyang's efforts to become self-reliant (including by developing nuclear weapons) and Beijing's growing economic ties with South Korea.⁹¹

The more these countries interact with each other, the more they are able to mitigate the impact of these historical tensions.

Nonetheless, the more these countries interact with each other, the more they are able to mitigate the impact of these historical tensions. For example, Russia and Iran's repeated interactions in Syria helped them overcome some of their historical distrust that paved the way for their growing defense ties, and Moscow could still enable Tehran to rebuild its military capabilities (and those of its proxies) degraded by Israel.⁹² Years of closer engagement between Moscow and Beijing have also created a context in which Russia was comfortable enough to move its troops away from its eastern border with China during the full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁹³ The frequency of bilateral meetings between senior officials from these countries has now increased dramatically since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, providing the repeated interactions that form the basis of deeper relations.⁹⁴ Thus, while history may constrain cooperation, its influence is far from decisive, leaving room for relations to evolve over time.

Divergent Interests. The axis of upheaval countries are not aligned on every issue or in every region. China and Russia each vie for influence in Central Asia, and Russia and Iran may be at odds in the South Caucasus, where Armenia has notably pivoted

away from Moscow and toward Tehran.⁹⁵ Russia and Iran also compete for energy markets.⁹⁶ Yet these countries go to great lengths to compartmentalize their differences to prevent them from tainting their overall partnerships. Most recently, political observers have suggested that China may be wary of Russia's deepening relationship with North Korea, not least because it reduces Beijing's leverage over Pyongyang. Russian support has also emboldened Kim, which China may worry will lead to greater provocations on the Korean Peninsula and accelerate U.S. cooperation with Japan and South Korea—which China seeks to avoid.⁹⁷ However, even if Beijing dislikes Russia's move to deepen ties with North Korea (and there are reasons why Beijing might actually support those ties, including that North Korean support has helped Russia in its war, a goal that Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping supports), Beijing is unlikely to oppose it, much less try to stop it.⁹⁸ When Putin and Kim signed a mutual defense treaty, China's Foreign Ministry dismissed it as matter of bilateral concern between Pyongyang and Moscow.⁹⁹ Beijing does not want to be sidelined in this triangle and, therefore, is likely to be dragged along. In these ways, the axis countries have a strong incentive to compartmentalize their frictions to prevent any such differences from detracting from the primary aim of confronting the United States.

Power Asymmetries. Structural disparities in power are another factor that could constrain future cooperation. None of these countries are equal in power, with China clearly being more powerful than the others, and there is a natural hierarchy among them, creating headwinds to bilateral and trilateral cooperation. For Russia, however, this asymmetry has been a minimal barrier to cooperation. Although concerns about becoming China's junior partner are likely to persist—especially as Moscow has grown more dependent on Beijing since its 2022 invasion—the Kremlin will remain focused on regime security. Putin seems to judge that a distant and ambiguous Chinese threat is less menacing than the clear and urgent threat he sees from the United States or the potential instability that could result from economic stagnation in Russia, which Chinese support is crucial in helping to combat.¹⁰⁰ More

broadly, all these countries avoid challenging each other's conceptions of their countries as significant powers and instead seek to work with each other on equal footing. Relations among the axis members need not be equal for their cooperation to be durable and consequential for the United States.

Reputational Risks. As their cooperation deepens, the axis countries are likely to be concerned about the negative reactions of non-axis countries and continue to seek to limit the costs they incur for their support to each other. China has notably been willing to incur some cost for its support to Russia, as its actions have tarnished relations with some European countries.¹⁰¹ However, Beijing was never willing to cross the line of providing lethal aid to Moscow, given the clear U.S. warning of the costs it would impose for doing so.¹⁰² In terms of its ties with Iran, Russia and especially China have limited their support in part to avoid alienating other key partners in the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States.¹⁰³

The axis countries have a strong incentive to compartmentalize their frictions to prevent any such differences from detracting from the primary aim of confronting the United States.

Russia, meanwhile, is likely attuned to the potential that its growing support for Beijing's regional ambitions could negatively affect Russia's relationships with other countries in the Indo-Pacific if they perceive Moscow to be too close to Beijing.¹⁰⁴ Moscow may also monitor how its growing support to Pyongyang could harm its relationship with Seoul, including by motivating it to step up its support for Ukraine. For its part, Iran has played a key role in providing drones and other military assistance to Russia but appeared to limit the range of missiles it is willing to provide to Russia out of concern for UN sanctions.¹⁰⁵

More broadly, China seeks to avoid the appearance that it is part of any overtly confrontational bloc, significantly restricting the development of more multilateral engagement among the group. Senior Chinese

officials regularly state that China has no interest in forming an anti-U.S. or anti-Western bloc of any kind.¹⁰⁶ In this way, China is limited in what it will support. Beijing seeks to be close enough to Russia, Iran, and North Korea that it can harness the benefits these actors bring but maintain enough distance that it doesn't get blamed for their bad behavior.¹⁰⁷ However, just because the countries do not regularly meet in trilateral or multilateral formats does not mean that coordination among multiple members is not taking place. Russia is likely serving as a conduit for some of this broader coordination. Russian officials will often string meetings together—for example, going directly from meetings in Pyongyang to Beijing, from Beijing on to Tehran, or Pyongyang to Tehran—creating connectivity among them.

Lack of Vision for the Future. Although the axis countries share the common goal of opposing the U.S.-led international order, it is not clear that they share a vision for what should replace it. For instance, Iran's ambitions for regional influence are driven by a

mix of pragmatic and ideological motivations—such as “exporting the Islamic revolution”—in contrast to the more straightforward imperialist objectives of Russia and China. North Korea, meanwhile, has a much more limited outlook than the other countries, focusing primarily on dominating the Korean Peninsula, rather than the global ambitions that Russia and China harbor.

Nonetheless, there is increasing overlap in these countries' visions for the future. Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran advocate for a multipolar world, the concept of indivisible security, and the centrality of the state in determining political rights.¹⁰⁸ Russia and China are likewise jointly seeking to establish a broad coalition of countries aligned behind this vision, defined by Xi as “a community with a shared future for mankind” and by Putin as “the world majority.”¹⁰⁹ As these countries continue to coordinate, it will be important for observers to monitor any further convergence in their vision for a future order, since a consensus would be a more compelling pitch for the alternative world order they seek to promote.

THE POTENTIAL CONSEQUENCES OF FUTURE DEFENSE COOPERATION

THE STRENGTHENING DRIVERS and weakening constraints underscore the potential for cooperation among the axis of upheaval to persist and, perhaps more likely, to grow. Their sustained collaboration, whether bilateral or multilateral, would have significant consequences for the United States and its allies and partners, including the following.

A Shortened Timeline for Russian Military Reconstitution

Russia's cooperation with China, Iran, and North Korea is likely to expedite Moscow's timeline for reconstituting its conventional forces, shortening the window that Europe has to ramp up its military capabilities, especially if the United States reduces its presence in Europe. The Trump administration's initial intent to normalize relations with Moscow notwithstanding, the standoff between Russia and the West is likely to continue.¹¹⁰ An end to the war in Ukraine on terms that are favorable to Russia—a prospect that grows more likely without strong U.S. support for Kyiv—would only embolden Russia and increase the likelihood of additional aggression against Europe after it has rebuilt its military forces.¹¹¹ Moscow, moreover, is highly attuned to European countries' efforts to rapidly build up their own defenses in anticipation of renewed

conflict on the continent.¹¹² This creates a limited window of time during which Russia may believe it has the maximum capacity to advance its strategic objectives in Europe. Moscow, therefore, is likely to look to China, Iran, and North Korea to accelerate its timeline for reconstitution to better position it to take advantage of any future opportunities that arise to undermine the NATO alliance. The support of China, Iran, and North Korea for Russia creates even greater urgency for NATO countries to ramp up their own defense industrial production and to ensure they retain a credible conventional deterrence against Russia.

More Complicated Net Assessments

The strengthening military ties among axis of upheaval countries pose a challenge to U.S. and NATO defense planning efforts. Although Russia did not step in to support Iran in June 2025, the war in Ukraine still demonstrates that defense planners cannot assume that the United States will be dealing with one adversary at a time. Instead, net assessments must now account for the possibility that—in the event of a conflict with one adversary—other axis countries will provide assistance, increasing the resilience of the country in conflict and creating various new and more complicated scenarios.¹¹³ In the event

of a NATO-Russia war, defense planners must assume that Iran, China, and North Korea will aid Russia, likely to a greater extent than they did in its war in Ukraine.¹¹⁴ A war between Russia and NATO would be much more expansive and could therefore elicit greater military cooperation between the four countries.

In the Middle East, it is still plausible that once Russia's war in Ukraine ends, Russia could complicate a future operation against Iran by inserting limited forces to dissuade or deter an attack on Tehran. Moscow could, for instance, send forces to guard

Growing cooperation among the axis countries could facilitate their abilities to project power into regions where they would not otherwise have a presence.

key assets in Iran, such as deploying an air defense bubble over nuclear power plants built in cooperation with Rosatom—the Russian state nuclear corporation.¹¹⁵ In this case, these forces could be deployed at the invitation of Tehran to ostensibly “help avoid accidents.” Even if these forces were to refrain from direct involvement in the fighting, their presence would complicate Western action.

Likewise, Russia and China could aid North Korea in a war against its southern neighbor. Russia's mutual defense treaty probably raises Pyongyang's expectations that Moscow would send assistance, just as North Korea has sent troops to Russia.¹¹⁶ Although Russia would be reluctant to send troops, the Kremlin could find creative ways to fulfill its commitments to North Korea, such as by sending prisoners or mercenary forces. China would also side with North Korea in a conflict with Seoul and provide support—even if reluctantly—if it became necessary.

Russia would probably also seek to support the People's Republic of China with an attack on Taiwan by looking for opportunities to raise the costs for the United States. At a minimum, Russia could help China withstand an energy blockade by sending its oil and gas overland. Or, given its ramped-up defense industrial base, once Russia's war in Ukraine ends, Moscow could send ammunition and other weapons that would help China protract a conflict with the

United States. A more direct intervention by Moscow could take the form of Russian fighter jets teaming up with Chinese forces to conduct defensive air patrols, as they have done previously. In this case, Washington might avoid hitting Chinese targets out of fear of going to war directly with Russia.¹¹⁷

Moreover, as cooperation between these countries grows, so does the risk of simultaneity—or the prospect that these countries could initiate more than one crisis at the same time, in either an explicitly coordinated or opportunistic manner. In the event of a Chinese invasion of Taiwan, Pyongyang could simultaneously make trouble on the Korean Peninsula—either for its own advantage or as a quid pro quo for concessions or support from China. Although Pyongyang would be unlikely to pursue a full-scale military operation against South Korea—a limited provocation potentially near the Northern Limit Line islands would be more plausible—the effect would nonetheless be to pin down U.S. forces in South Korea and prevent them from flowing south to aid in operations against China.¹¹⁸ Russia could also initiate a crisis over the disputed islands in northern Japan, creating a similar conundrum for U.S. forces in Japan.

A crisis over Taiwan would also create an opportunity for Russia to target a NATO country on the alliance's eastern flank, increasing the risk of a NATO-Russia war. In the case of U.S. engagement in a Taiwan contingency, the United States would likely draw on capabilities presently earmarked to reinforce European security, and/or redeploy some of its forces already in Europe to the Indo-Pacific, eroding NATO's conventional deterrence. Putin could then be tempted to test NATO, judging that Washington would have neither the political interest nor the resources to come to Europe's defense, and that absent those U.S. capabilities redeployed to Asia, European members of NATO would be vulnerable.¹¹⁹ In all these ways, the growing coordination among the axis of upheaval complicates defense planning for the United States and its allies.

Increased Chinese and Russian Power Projection Capabilities

Growing cooperation among the axis countries could facilitate their abilities to project power

into regions where they would not otherwise have a presence, allowing axis countries to carry out new types of targeting operations, raising questions about the survivability of U.S. forces, and creating new contingencies the United States would have to confront. To illustrate, access to basing and overflight cooperation can change the types of missions that axis countries can conduct. In July 2024, for example, Chinese and Russian nuclear-capable bombers conducted a joint flight into Alaska's air defense identification zone, or ADIZ. By coordinating their strategic nuclear forces, Russia and China were able to signal their willingness to militarily counter Washington near U.S. territory—an action only possible due to their increased cooperation. This was the first time that Chinese and Russian aircraft took off from the same (Russian) air base.¹²⁰ Shared base access among axis countries could also create new scenarios in the Middle East if Russia and China seek to gain access to bases in Iran. From Moscow's perspective, accessing Iranian air and naval bases may be increasingly necessary given uncertain future access to bases in Syria following the collapse of the Assad regime in late 2024.¹²¹

Cooperation among axis of upheaval countries could also undercut the global nuclear and missile nonproliferation regime—thereby weakening strategic stability.

Growing cooperation could also enable axis members to project power into new areas and domains. This cooperation between Russia and China has already allowed Beijing to play a greater role in the Arctic, in that a Chinese coast guard fleet was able to enter the Arctic Sea for the first time during a joint patrol with Russia in 2024.¹²² If such coordination continues, the United States and its allies may have to contend with both Moscow and Beijing as geopolitical competitors in the Arctic.

Similarly, Russia and China may take advantage of intra-axis cooperation to scale up their involvement in the Middle East and North Africa. Russia maintains an enduring interest in enhancing its geopolitical position in the region; meanwhile Beijing

may wish to increase its presence in the Middle East as it scales up its global ambitions—especially given its interest in promoting stability that would protect its significant economic investments in the Middle East.¹²³ For the past several years, Iran, Russia, and China have held joint naval drills in the Gulf of Oman, while Moscow and Tehran exercised together in the Persian Gulf in late 2024.¹²⁴ Iran and Russia have both sought to establish Red Sea military bases in Port Sudan through their involvement in the country's civil war, presenting another potential route for increased axis power projection in the region.¹²⁵ Increased axis presence around the Red Sea could challenge U.S. naval presence, further contributing to the disruption of a critical shipping route that the Houthis have been attacking since late 2023.¹²⁶

An Ecosystem of Learning and Knowledge Sharing

Through their cooperation, the axis countries are gaining valuable information and learning lessons that may strengthen their own military performance. Russia's war in Ukraine has been a valuable source of such data for other axis countries. Russia has provided Iran with data from the Ukraine war, intended to advance Tehran's electronic warfare capabilities.¹²⁷ The data that Russia gains from electronic warfare against Western systems is also likely to prove highly attractive to China in the future. Moscow also sent Tehran U.S. weapons captured on the battlefield, which Iran may be able to analyze to gain insights into the U.S. military.¹²⁸ Chinese soldiers have reportedly visited the front lines in Ukraine to take note of contemporary warfare tactics.¹²⁹ Finally, the Ukrainian military has indicated that the accuracy of North Korean ballistic missiles has improved over the course of the conflict—a clear sign that this learning ecosystem is already yielding results.¹³⁰

Knowledge transmission from its axis partners is helping Russia more effectively wage its war. Notably, Beijing has sent geospatial intelligence to Russia for use on the battlefield in Ukraine.¹³¹ Beijing has also assisted Moscow with improving its satellite capabilities for use in the conflict.¹³² These improvements will persist beyond the war, increasing the long-term threat to Europe from Russian space-based capabilities.

One of the most significant avenues for learning is likely through North Korea's direct involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war. The troops that have been deployed to Kursk are gaining valuable direct battlefield experience that Pyongyang can leverage to prepare itself for future military operations, such as a potential conflict on the Korean Peninsula. For example, these troops are likely to learn how to successfully execute drone warfare. On the civilian side, numerous North Korean engineers have also entered Russia and may be working in the defense industrial sector.¹³³ Applying insights from this experience—such as knowledge about how to produce drones at scale—could also enhance the North Korean military. In March 2025, Pyongyang announced that it had already learned how to make “suicide attack drones” following its experience in the war.¹³⁴

There are other possible forms of learning among axis countries that, while currently mostly speculative, could have an outsized impact on global security. For example, Moscow could also share lessons about how to effectively threaten to use nuclear weapons in a conflict to prevent intervention from the United States. Russia and China could also collaborate through the sharing of operational doctrine for their air forces—in areas such as surveillance, air combat, air defense, and long-range strikes—which would prove especially worrying to U.S. allies such as Japan.

Mutual Protection of Authoritarian Regimes

Enhanced cooperation among these countries is likely to increase the resilience of each regime. If a regime-threatening crisis erupted in an axis country, there is the potential for its partners to step in with more overt forms of support. A popular uprising precipitated by severe economic pressure, war, or other sources of domestic instability could result in axis countries sending security forces to help protect the embattled regime. While Moscow's reasoning is still uncertain, Russia may have made a different calculation in Iran if regime change had been an explicit objective of Israeli or U.S. actions. The precedents of Iranian and Russian support for the Assad regime in Syria and Russian support for Kazakhstani President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev underscore the potential for intervention. Likewise, the North Korean contract

soldiers sent to fight in Kursk suggest that future troop deployments from one axis country to another must be considered as a real possibility.¹³⁵

Further Undermining the Nonproliferation Regime and Global Strategic Stability

Cooperation among axis of upheaval countries could also undercut the global nuclear and missile nonproliferation regime—thereby weakening strategic stability. Perhaps the most concerning development in this area is the intensifying Russia–North Korea partnership, as it is increasingly clear that Russia no longer opposes North Korea's development of nuclear weapons. In March 2024, Moscow took the notable step of vetoing the renewal of the UN's 1718 Committee, ending international monitoring of sanctions on Pyongyang's nuclear weapons and missile programs.¹³⁶ In October 2024, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov explicitly stated Russia's non-opposition to North Korea's nuclear status by calling the idea of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula a “closed” issue.¹³⁷ Moreover, Moscow may not only have abandoned its opposition to North Korea's nuclearization, but it may be facilitating the development of Pyongyang's nuclear capabilities. In early 2024, a report surfaced that the United States suspected Russia of providing North Korea with nuclear submarine and ballistic missile technology in exchange for its support in the Ukraine war. As a result, Washington imposed sanctions on five Russian entities for funding North Korean weapons of mass destruction and missile programs.¹³⁸

Russia's approach to Iran's nuclear program has evolved in a similar direction. Though Moscow originally played a key role in negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, its 2022 invasion of Ukraine has hindered efforts to negotiate a new nuclear deal.¹³⁹ As occurred in the case of North Korea, Russia could enable Iran's nuclear weapons program, which might enhance Tehran's nuclear threshold status. The United States and the United Kingdom reportedly expressed concerns in September 2024 that Moscow had provided nuclear secrets to Tehran in exchange for its deliveries of ballistic missiles for the Ukraine war.¹⁴⁰ U.S. intelligence officials subsequently assessed that Iran has requested help from

Russia with the acquisition of nuclear materials and the fabrication of nuclear fuels.¹⁴¹ In January 2025, Western media reported that Tehran was sending secret diplomatic missions to Russia to seek assistance for its nuclear program.¹⁴² North Korea also has the potential to aid Tehran's nuclear program.

China is playing a supporting role in this erosion of the nonproliferation regime. This was visible at the United Nations where, in 2024, Beijing joined Russia in opposing the censure of Iran for failing to cooperate with the UN nuclear watchdog and abstained from the vote to renew monitoring of sanctions on North Korea.¹⁴³ China also joined Russia in vetoing new sanctions on North Korea in May 2022.¹⁴⁴ Meanwhile, for years, Beijing has helped Pyongyang evade sanctions, and provided it with missile components and launchers since at least 2017.¹⁴⁵ Much of this technological support from China may be occurring under the guise of academic exchange, helping Beijing to keep its support under the radar and to avoid international reputational damage that would occur as a result of overt assistance to Pyongyang.¹⁴⁶

The advancing nuclear programs of North Korea and Iran would pose significant risks to the United States and its allies. Pyongyang's increasing nuclear weapons capabilities heighten the potential threat it can pose to strategic stability—especially if it acts in tandem with other axis of upheaval countries. The Biden administration recognized this in its 2024 nuclear strategy, which explicitly considered “possible coordinated nuclear confrontations with Russia, China, and North Korea.”¹⁴⁷ This threat will further increase if Iran doubles down on its intent to acquire a nuclear weapon. Moreover, Pyongyang is now nearing its long-term objective of normalizing its status as a nuclear-armed state. Normalization of North Korean

nuclear weapons and the development of Iranian nuclear weapons could encourage other countries—such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, South Korea, or Ukraine—to acquire threshold or actual nuclear weapons capabilities, including by making them less concerned about potential consequences.¹⁴⁸ Finally, the undermining of the nonproliferation regime weakens the efficacy and credibility of Western sanctions as a foreign policy instrument and reinforces the ongoing dismantling of arms control.

Emboldening Actors Outside the Axis

The axis of upheaval countries also maintain ties with other more loosely aligned revisionist states. Growing cooperation among the axis would further increase their appeal to a broader network of malign actors and their capacity to support those actors, magnifying the effects of the axis of upheaval. In the Middle East, Iran reportedly brokered a potential deal for Russia to send advanced missiles to the Houthis.¹⁴⁹ In Europe, China and Iran have increased their support to Belarus—Russia's closest ally and its de facto vassal state.¹⁵⁰ And in North Africa, Russia changed its support in the Sudanese civil war to align with Iran in hopes that this would make Moscow and Tehran more likely to succeed in their objectives of acquiring new Red Sea naval bases.¹⁵¹ Most recently, in May 2025, Russia signed a strategic partnership agreement with Venezuela.¹⁵² The stronger the axis of upheaval becomes, the more attractive their model becomes, and the more capable they will be in supporting revisionist actors currently occupying more peripheral positions in the international order but that could become more relevant in the future.

CONCLUSION

INCREASED COOPERATION AMONG RUSSIA, China, Iran, and North Korea has already created numerous challenges for the United States and its allies. In addition to enabling Russia to wage its war against Ukraine, their collaboration has enhanced the military capabilities of all the axis countries. That collaboration is helping them to offset key shortcomings relative to the United States, making each country a more formidable threat to Washington and its partners. The amplification of their military capabilities and the political and economic support they derive from their partnerships includes political top cover in international organizations and reduced vulnerability to Western sanctions and other pressures. This has fueled their more brazen behavior, including China's more assertive efforts to advance its regional ambitions in East Asia. Their cooperation has also generated greater challenges in the gray zone, as well as more direct threats to international norms of state behavior.

These risks are likely to grow as their collaboration continues. Only a few years ago, the current extent of coordination among members of the axis of upheaval would have seemed unimaginable. The factors that have driven this cooperation persist, while many of the historical constraints on their partnerships are eroding. Even the Trump administration's changed approach toward the axis of upheaval countries—such as an effort to negotiate a settlement to the Ukraine war with Russia, military strikes on Iran, an emerging trade war with China, and a potential shift in U.S. policy toward North Korea's nuclear status—is unlikely to substantively alter the trajectory of these relationships.¹⁵³ If anything, these countries will look for opportunities to pocket any concessions from the United States, and use those advantages to strengthen their capacity to undermine U.S. power and influence.

The axis of upheaval, therefore, will remain consequential. U.S. policymakers and defense planners

must now expect that a future conflict or crisis with one of these countries could draw in support from others in the group. That support could range from material assistance that protracts a conflict, to opportunistic aggression that would strain and potentially overwhelm U.S. forces. Europe especially must prepare, as intra-axis cooperation is likely to shorten the amount of time required for Russia to rebuild its conventional forces. Meanwhile, risks in other regions such as the Arctic and the Middle East are likely to grow as these partnerships increasingly enable Russia and China in particular to enhance their abilities to project power. Their joint use of bases (for example, the potential for Russia and/or China to gain access to bases in Iran and for China to use Russian bases in the Arctic), intelligence cooperation, and shared military exercises are likely to enable these countries to carry out new types of operations. This raises questions about the survivability of U.S. forces and creates new contingencies for the United States. All countries are also sharing information and best practices, including lessons learned from Russia's experience in Ukraine on how to conduct modern warfare.

These and other implications of their partnership addressed in this report make clear that policymakers can no longer afford to view these countries as discrete threats, but instead must understand—and disrupt—the growing connections among them. The prospect of potential greater trilateral or even quadrilateral cooperation should be of particular concern, as it would increase the axis's capacity for disruption. It would also raise the prospect that onlooking countries come to see their collective as an increasingly viable alternative to the U.S.-led international system. Despite the changes in the international system since the Trump administration came to office, the axis of upheaval is here to stay. Policymakers must act accordingly.

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