



## Axis or Ad Hoc Alignment? Understanding Russia's Partnership with China, Iran and North Korea<sup>1</sup>

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### Key Points

- Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China, Iran and North Korea have emerged—each country in its own way—as important enablers of the Russian war machine.
- Russia's growing alignment with China, Iran and North Korea has raised alarms in Western capitals that a new four-way “axis” is posing a formidable challenge not just on the Ukrainian battlefield, but to the liberal international order in more fundamental ways.
- Labels like “axis of autocracies”, an “axis of the sanctioned”, or an “axis of upheaval” can obscure more than they reveal. The depth of alignment among the axis members varies across policy areas.

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<sup>1</sup>This paper forms part of the Centre for Grand Strategy's 'Spotlight on Foreign Policy' 2024 series, showcasing a diverse range of foreign policy issues and ideas. For more information about this series, please contact [Dr Maeve Ryan](#) or [Dr Jade McGlynn](#), Centre for Grand Strategy, King's College London.

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- An excessive focus on the four countries risks neglecting other actors in the “outer ring” of the axis which either stand to benefit from increased cooperation among them, or which will impede the formation of an exclusionary four-member club.

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- Despite its illiberal, revisionist tendencies, the four-way axis lacks a shared, concrete vision for a future global order.
  - However, these ambiguities and imperfections should not lead the United Kingdom to underestimate the challenges posed by this axis especially in relation to illicit procurement of critical technologies, knowledge sharing, and fragmentation of the global order.
  - To help mitigate these challenges, this paper proposes HMG strengthen multilateral alliances; enhance trade sanctions and export controls against the axis; support regional allies' deterrence and defence capabilities; enhance intelligence gathering and coordinate strategic disclosures; promote diplomatic engagement; and engage global partners on their own terms and on the basis of these countries' own interests rather than through the lens of great power competition.

## Introduction

- (1) **Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, China, Iran, and North Korea have emerged as key supporters of Russia.** Tehran has supplied combat drones and small-arms ammunition, while Pyongyang has provided artillery shells and ballistic missiles. China's aid, though less lethal, includes critical warfighting technology like semiconductors and jet-fighter parts.
- (2) **Russia's growing ties with China, Iran, and North Korea have alarmed Western capitals, which fear a new four-way "axis" challenging not just the Ukrainian battlefield but also the liberal international order.** In late July, General Sir Roly Walker emphasized the urgent need to modernize the British army because of the “converging geopolitical threats” posed by Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea.<sup>3</sup> Observers have conceptualized the axis in different ways, variably warning of an “axis of autocracies”, an “axis of the sanctioned”, or an “axis of upheaval”.<sup>4</sup>
- (3) **These labels can be misleading as the depth of alignment among these countries varies significantly across policy areas. Overemphasizing this axis also risks ignoring other actors** who may benefit from or hinder its formation. Additionally,

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<sup>3</sup> “UK has 3 years to prepare for war, says army chief,” *Financial Times*, July 23, 2024, <https://www.ft.com/content/8a741760-695b-45a2-8bd7-2b779a07fa4d>.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, “The Axis of Upheaval,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>; Hanna Notte, “Russia's Axis of the Sanctioned,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 6, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russianfederation/russias-axis-sanctioned>.

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internal divergences in risk tolerance and policy objectives among the four countries suggest a solid alliance is unlikely.

- (4) **Instead of branding it with a single label, it is more useful to understand how the alignment manifests, where concrete cooperation occurs, where the countries differ, and what this means for the future.** As Hal Brands noted, today's axes differ from the post-World War Two U.S. alliance system in being “ambiguous and ambivalent”

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in how they enable their members to contest Western power.<sup>5</sup> This paper explores the ambiguity and ambivalence within the four-way axis, focusing on military-technical cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and risk tolerance regarding regional escalation.

## Brothers in Arms

- (5) The [Washington Summit Declaration](#) adopted at the 2024 NATO summit acknowledges the roles China, Iran, and North Korea play in supporting Russia's military campaign in Ukraine. <sup>6</sup> Each country's specific military-technical support for Russia is well documented. **They all want Russia to avoid defeat, viewing the war as a broader geopolitical contest with the West, particularly the United States.**

Beyond this shared interest, each country has additional motivations:

- (6) **Iran has tested its military technology in real combat** by providing drones to Russia, gaining valuable insights. This has allowed Iran to market its technology to other customers. It has also reversed the decades-old client-patron dynamic with Russia, accumulating leverage to seek Russian military and political support in return.
- (7) **North Korea, more isolated than Iran, has elevated its status and seen economic benefits from supporting Russia**, while also recently concluding a Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership with Moscow. Pyongyang also seeks Russian military-technical support in sensitive areas, such as for its satellite, nuclear submarine, and ballistic missile technologies.
- (8) **China's support for Russia, unlike Iran's and North Korea's, is driven less by tangible quid-pro-quo and more by a desire to maintain a stable strategic partner in Russia.**
- (9) Going forward, **the support of these three countries for Russia will most probably continue to complicate Ukraine's efforts in defending itself** in a long war of attrition. Against this backdrop, Russia's bilateral military cooperation with each of China, Iran, and North Korea will continue to evolve.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Hal Brands, “The New Autocratic Alliances,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/new-autocratic-alliances>.

<sup>6</sup> “Washington Summit Declaration,” July 10, 2024, [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_227678.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm).

<sup>7</sup> On this, see for instance Mark Cozad et. al., “Future Scenarios for Sino-Russian Military Cooperation,” RAND,

- (10) **Meanwhile, there is little evidence of trilateral or quadrilateral defence cooperation among the four countries, except for isolated efforts**, such as three-way naval drills involving Russia, China, and Iran. However, this could change, with multi-way cooperation and synergies potentially evolving. Past military-technical cooperation exists among most of the dyads, and all four countries view the United States as their primary adversary.
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- (11) **Each country has unique military needs and strengths that could create valuable synergies.** For example, Russia, China, and Iran might collaborate on developing antiship ballistic missiles (ASBMs) to counter U.S. or allied naval forces and share this technology with North Korea. Given that all four countries face Western sanctions and export controls, they may intensify efforts to assist each other in illicitly procuring critical technologies or share technical and operational insights from tests, exercises, and the use of missiles and drones. The strategic communities of these four nations are poised to engage in more intensive knowledge exchange than before.
- (12) **Such cooperation may not involve all four countries equally or become institutionalized.** Specific activities within dyads, like Russia-Iran cooperation on UAV development, may or may not benefit other axis partners. Technology flows will be uneven: Iran and North Korea, the weaker partners, will likely support Russia by replenishing its arsenal of artillery shells and inexpensive drones and missiles. They will be more reliant on advanced technology from Russia, and possibly China, than vice versa.
- (13) **Weaker partners, on the periphery of the axis, with adversarial relationships with Western states may benefit from enhanced intra-axis defence cooperation.** For instance, Russia might help Myanmar establish military ties with North Korea, a goal the junta has expressed interest in. Encouraged by Russia, Belarus has increased its military cooperation with both China and Iran. The juntas in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, forming the “Alliance of Sahel States,” have sought support from China, Russia, and Iran. Additionally, Russia may increase its provision of weapons to Iran’s partners and proxies in the “axis of resistance,” including Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis.
- (14) **Whether defence cooperation remains bilateral or evolves into full-fledged intraaxis cooperation, Iran and North Korea are likely to feel emboldened.** Combined defence and diplomatic support from Russia and China may lead these countries to believe they have de facto immunity—the former as a near-nuclear state, the latter as a nucleararmed state—making regional adversaries hesitant to attack them. This growing risk appetite by Iran and North Korea, or their perceived entrenchment as near-

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June 18, 2024, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA2061-5.html#:~:text=Short%20of%20a%20mutual%20defense,expanded%20technology%20and%20skills%20transfers;Hanna Notte and Jim Lamson, “The Uncomfortable Reality of Russia and Iran’s New Defense Relationship,” \*War on the Rocks\*, July 24, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-newdefense-relationship/>.](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA2061-5.html#:~:text=Short%20of%20a%20mutual%20defense,expanded%20technology%20and%20skills%20transfers;Hanna%20Notte%20and%20Jim%20Lamson,%20%22The%20Uncomfortable%20Reality%20of%20Russia%20and%20Iran%20s%20New%20Defense%20Relationship,%20%22%20War%20on%20the%20Rocks,%20July%2024,%202024,%20https://warontherocks.com/2024/07/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-russia-and-irans-new-defense-relationship/)

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nuclear and nuclear-armed states, has implications for regional stability and proliferation pressures in the Middle East and Asia Pacific in the medium term.

## A Fragmented Approach to Fragmenting Global Order

- (15) **Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea aim to create an alternative international order, feeling the current U.S.-dominated system does not accord them the status or freedom of action they believe they deserve, including a sphere of influence.**
- (16) **If their shared antipathy to the existing global order is what binds them, we should expect not just intensified military-technical cooperation, but also coordinated efforts to reform or replace current institutions, regimes, and rules. So far, evidence of this happening is mixed.**
- (17) In multilateral nuclear forums and agencies like the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), and during meetings related to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) or at the UN First Committee, there has been growing Russian alignment with China, North Korea, and Iran since 2022. **This alignment stems from the widening rift between Western states and Russia and Russia's reduced interest in supporting nuclear non-proliferation.**<sup>8</sup>
- (18) **While China has been less aggressive than Russia in disrupting these institutions, Russia's open siding with Iran and North Korea, coupled with its efforts to undermine these institutions, has accelerated the ongoing fragmentation of the global nuclear order.** In the nuclear sphere, Russia's (and to some extent, China's) diplomatic shielding of a near-nuclear Iran and a nuclear-armed North Korea is also undermining key nonproliferation norms.
- (19) **Dynamics at the UN Security Council, where Russia and China hold veto powers, suggest it is simplistic to paint Beijing and Moscow with the same brush.** China has sometimes moderated Russia's actions on the Council, indicating different motivations.<sup>9</sup> While both are revisionist powers aiming for a post-Western order, China is less aggressive in undermining legacy institutions and still finds value in working within them, unlike Russia.
- (20) **The above-outlined intra-axis alignment in some legacy multilateral fora doesn't fully capture the fragmentary dynamics in the multilateral system.** Russia and China are also moving diplomacy into new forums that keep Western states out in the cold. They are expanding BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, promoting integration among what Russian diplomats call the “world majority.” By disrupting legacy institutions

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<sup>8</sup> Hanna Notte, “Russia, the Global South and the Mechanics of the Nuclear Order,” *Survival*, Vol. 66, Issue 3, 2024, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2024.2357480>.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Gowan, “The UN Security Council in the New Era of Great Power Competition,” International Crisis Group, May 30, 2024, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/un-security-council-new-era-great-power-competition>.

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while advancing non-Western multilateral fora, Russia hopes to accelerate the fragmentation of the global order.

- (21) **In its quest to reshape the global order, Russia is not relying solely on China, Iran, and North Korea.** The expanded BRICS now includes Arab states like Egypt and the UAE, highlighting Russia's and China's desire to deepen ties with states concerned about Iran. Their shared interest in consolidating new alliances among a wide circle of non-Western states suggests they will want to avoid appearing as an exclusive axis tied to Iran and North Korea.
- (22) **While all four countries aim to promote a post-Western global order, they differ in their tolerance for "upheaval."** Intra-axis defence cooperation may embolden Iran and North Korea, but China is more risk-averse than Russia regarding escalation in the Middle East and the Korean Peninsula. China is wary of the deepening Moscow-Pyongyang cooperation,<sup>10</sup> fearing reduced influence over North Korea and heightened regional

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conflict. Similarly, China does not want Iran or its proxies to provoke a Middle Eastern war, which would jeopardize its economic interests in the Persian Gulf and regional markets.

- (23) **Russia, prioritizing confrontation with the West over Ukraine, seems more willing than China to fuel escalations elsewhere, possibly to tie down the U.S.** However, even Russia likely does not want Iran to provoke a war with Israel, given the potential losses for Moscow.<sup>11</sup> In short, while the four countries share a long-term revisionist agenda, they differ in their comfort levels with using military escalation to pursue it.

### The Devil Will Be in the Detail

- (24) It is clear what the four-way axis is not: **it is not a club of equals, not exclusionary, not formalized, and not fully aligned on ends and means. Despite its illiberal, revisionist tendencies, it lacks a shared, concrete vision for a future global order.** However, these ambiguities and imperfections should not lead the United Kingdom to underestimate the challenges posed by this axis.
- (25) **Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea are dissatisfied powers capable of significant disruption.** The varying degrees and methods of their cooperation across institutions, regions, and statecraft areas complicate the task for British analysts and policymakers. Instead of broadly labelling them as an "axis," it is essential to delve into the specific bilateral, trilateral, and quadrilateral dynamics. Analysts must scrutinize the military

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<sup>10</sup>Tong Zhao, "Beyond the Kim-Putin Alliance: How Can the International Community Engage China to Contain Nuclear Risks Over the Korean Peninsula?," Carnegie China, July 10, 2024,

<sup>11</sup>Hanna Notte, "What Russia Wants in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs*, July 15, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/what-russia-wants-middle-east>.

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technologies and diplomatic issues likely to enhance cooperation and identify where Russia and China will draw red lines in supporting Iran and North Korea.

- (26) **Understanding the axis's internal dynamics, pull factors, and limitations is critical for the United Kingdom.** This insight will help assess its impact on the four countries' military capabilities, regional conflict dynamics, nuclear proliferation, and its potential to fragment the global order. Confronting these challenges will require a nimble U.K. foreign policy across policy dossiers and regions.

#### Policy recommendations:

- **Strengthen multilateral alliances:** Develop a joint approach within NATO and with the EU towards the axis, including enhanced coordination on sanctions and in multilateral fora, especially on nuclear and WMD issues.
- **Enhance trade sanctions and export controls; counter illicit activities:** Target critical "chokepoint" technologies needed by axis members for drones, missiles, and other

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<https://carnegieendowment.org/posts/2024/07/beyond-the-putin-kim-alliance-how-can-the-internationalcommunity-engage-china-to-contain-nuclear-risks-over-the-korean-peninsula?lang=en&center=china>.

systems, while acknowledging that sanctions and controls alone will not suffice due to the axis's long history of evading such measures.

- **Support regional allies' deterrence and defence capabilities:** Assess and adjust procurement, force posture, resource commitment, and partner support in response to enhanced military-technical cooperation among axis members. For example, strengthen integrated air and missile defences among Middle Eastern allies.
- **Enhance intelligence gathering and coordinate strategic disclosures:** Improve intelligence sharing with allies on axis activities and use strategic disclosures to warn of technology transfers and deter sensitive cooperation, as previously applied in the case of Iran and Russia.
- **Promote diplomatic engagement:** Increase diplomacy with countries on the axis's periphery to prevent their closer alignment with it, as well as with countries that have leverage over axis members. For example, encourage Gulf Arab states to exert pressure on Moscow and Beijing to limit support for Iran.
- **Get the narrative right:** In approaching partners across the globe, avoid framing engagement in the context of great power competition, i.e., as being about countering China or Russia, since such framing often antagonizes. The United Kingdom needs to engage these partners on their own terms and on the basis of these countries' own interests.

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