

Cooperation Between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia

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The idea that the United States now faces an imposing new Axis of Autocracy around which it should orient its national security strategy has caught on recently, but it risks exaggerating the degree of cooperation between these four U.S. adversaries—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Cooperation between these U.S. adversaries does present clear national security challenges in specific areas, including Ukraine, future nuclear proliferation, and what I will call opportunistic coordination in a crisis. Policymakers should be careful, however, to avoid exaggerating the overall depth of these countries' cooperation in order not to waste precious U.S. resources or create a self-fulfilling prophecy that more deeply unifies them.

This coalition's military cooperation has been increasing, the members have made rhetorical statements of mutual support, and Russia has signed formal treaties with Iran and North Korea. It is not inevitable that this cooperation will deepen further, however, and on many comparative measures the coalition's cooperation is still weak. For example, the members' cooperation is almost entirely bilateral, is grounded on modest economic links in most cases, lacks institutional supports, and covers over important differences of national interest and outlook. These countries do not share a common ideology. Their ties look unimpressive beside the robust network of alliances that America today enjoys.

Russia's war on Ukraine has been the main driver of these countries' cooperation to date. Iranian, North Korean, and Chinese contributions to Russia's war effort harm U.S. interests by increasing Russian resilience in the face of sanctions and support to Ukraine. Once the war ends, however, their cooperation may attenuate. U.S. policy should seek to encourage this lest their wartime ties take deeper root. This means negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine and discouraging the deepening of China's relationships with the other three countries. This will be difficult, given Beijing's current foreign policy trajectory, but without China, the coalition looks much less formidable and China's medium-term interests are not well aligned with the others'.

THE CENTRAL ROLE OF THE WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia's war on Ukraine has played a driving role in deepening the cooperation between these U.S. adversaries. Most of the observable cooperation that has drawn attention to the coalition is directed at supporting Russia's war effort on a bilateral basis. When the war ends, cooperation should be expected to diminish.

Iran

Iran and North Korea's military backing for Russia hampers U.S. efforts to support Ukraine and coerce Russia to end its invasion. Russia has compensated Iran and North Korea for their contributions to its war effort in the form of cash, energy, advanced weapons technology, and promises of deeper economic ties.

Iran has equipped Russia with its Mohajer and Shahed drones and short-range ballistic missiles, and helped Russia establish domestic drone production facilities east of Moscow.¹ Iran's support builds on ties that were established when the two militaries cooperated to support Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria after Russia's 2015 intervention there.² In exchange for Iran's support, Russia has reinvigorated preexisting plans to provide Iran Su-35 fighter aircraft to replace its aged F-14s. Iran plans to operationalize these new Russian jets by the end of 2025.³ Russia and Iran will integrate their payment systems and activate a new free trade agreement, reducing tariffs on many goods. This should foster bilateral trade, but because of the size of Iran's economy, Iran is unlikely to become as critical a trading partner to Russia as other regional partners like Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates.

Overall, however, military ties between Russia and Iran should not be exaggerated. Despite recent cooperation, mutual suspicion is strong and the new strategic agreement signed in January 2025 only commits each side not to support an attacker of the other.⁴ In short, this means committing not to support the United States if it attacks one of them.

¹ Julian E. Barnes and Christoph Koettl, "A Drone Factory that Iran Is Helping Russia Build Could Be Operational Next Year, the U.S. Says," *New York Times*, June 9, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/09/world/europe/iran-russia-drone-factory.html?smid=nytcore-android-share>; and Dan De Luce, "U.S. Says Iran Is Sending Ballistic Missiles to Russia in a 'Dramatic Escalation'" NBC News, September 10, 2024. <https://www.nbcnews.com/investigations/us-says-iran-sending-ballistic-missiles-russia-dramatic-escalation-rcna170414>.

² Nicole Grajewski, "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria", Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 17, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria>; and Hanna Notte, Jim Lamson, "Iran-Russian Defense Cooperation: Current Realities and Future Horizons," James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, August 6, 2024, <https://nonproliferation.org/op61-iran-russia-defense-cooperation-current-realities-and-future-horizons/>.

³ "Iran's Revolutionary Guards commander says Iran purchased Russian-made Sukhoi 35 fighter jets" Reuters, January 27, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/irans-revolutionary-guards-commander-says-iran-purchased-russian-made-sukhoi-35-2025-01-27/>; "Iran to Operationalise Russian Su-35 Fighters by Year's End," *Military Watch Magazine*, January 5, 2025, <https://militarywatchmagazine.com/article/iran-to-operationalise-russian-su-35-fighters-by-year-s-end-reports>.

⁴ Nikita Smagin, "New Russia-Iran Treaty Reveals the Limits of Their Partnership," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 21, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/politika/2025/01/russia-iran-strategic-agreement?lang=en>.

Russia also sought support for its war from North Korea. North Korea has now deployed some 11,000 troops to fight alongside Russian soldiers in Russia's Kursk border region, which Ukraine invaded in August 2024. Some reports indicate the North Korean troops are now pulling back, but Pyongyang has promised to send more.⁵ The effectiveness of the North Korean troops is an area of some debate among experts, and their losses have been heavy, but they are nonetheless helpful to Russia in a war where manpower has become vital.⁶ Russia has now also deployed North Korean artillery systems against Ukraine and used dozens of North Korean missiles in strikes, according to defense blogs and news wires.⁷

North Korea has also benefited materially from its support to Russia's war. Reports indicate that Russia is providing North Korea with upgraded air defense systems and additional Mi-29 and Su-27 fighter jets.⁸ Russia has also been sending oil to North Korea—a significant benefit given North Korea is the only country in the world that cannot buy oil on the open market. Russia may also be loosening proliferation controls on advanced technologies that could benefit North Korea's strategic nuclear capabilities as discussed below in the section on key threats. In November 2024, Russia and North Korea also reached an agreement that will expand economic cooperation, but did not elaborate on the details.⁹ The two countries are working from a very low baseline; in 2023, Russia only accounted for 1 percent of North Korean trade.¹⁰

⁵ James Waterhouse and Jaroslav Lukiv, "Ukraine Says North Koreans May Have Pulled Out of Front Line," BBC, January 31, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cjder8zgzk48o>; and Justin McCurry, "North Korea Preparing to Send More Troops to Ukraine War, Says South Korea," *The Guardian*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/jan/24/north-korea-preparing-to-send-more-troops-to-ukraine-war-says-south-korea>.

⁶ Christina Harward et al., "Russian Offensive Campaign Assessment, January 11, 2025," Institute for the Study of War, January 11, 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-january-11-2025>; Mark F. Cancian and Chris H. Park, "North Korean Troops Deploy to Russia: What's the Military Effect?" Center for Strategic International Studies, October 25, 2024, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/north-korean-troops-deploy-russia-whats-military-effect>; Angelica Evans, "Ukraine's Kursk Incursion: Six Month Assessment," Institute for the Study of War, February 6, 2025, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounders/ukraine%E2%80%99s-kursk-incursion-six-month-assessment>; and Frank Gardner, "About 1,000 North Koreans Killed Fighting Ukraine in Kursk, Officials Say," BBC, January 22, 2025, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c87djeezjxeo>.

⁷ Tom Balmforth, "Exclusive: Ukraine Sees Marked Improvement in Accuracy of Russia's North Korean Missiles," Reuters, February 6, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/ukraine-sees-marked-improvement-accuracy-russias-north-korean-missiles-2025-02-06/>.

⁸ Thomas Newdick, "North Korea Getting New Air Defenses In Return For Supporting Russia in Ukraine: Official," *The Warzone*, November 22, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/land/north-korea-getting-new-air-defenses-in-return-for-supporting-russia-in-ukraine-official>.

⁹ Kim Tong-Hyung, "North Korea and Russia Agree to Expand Their Economic Cooperation," AP News, November 21, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/north-korea-russia-trade-flights-tourism-ukraine-a6dd64440b4d451026c0bb32d5235a91>.

¹⁰ "Trade Turnover Between Russia, North Korea Up 9 Times in 2023—Russian Presidential Aide," TASS, June 17, 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1804561>.

The partnership treaty that North Korea and Russia signed in June 2024 has a foreboding ring to it, but what it amounts to in practice is unclear. The language only promises vague “military assistance” in the event of a war. Russia likely kept the terms of the treaty vague in order to preserve flexibility and avoid getting entrapped into a war with the United States in Asia. Tellingly, Russian President Vladimir Putin has avoided calling the partnership an alliance, unlike North Korean Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un, who quickly touted his new “ally” to the world.¹¹ Right now, Russia would be very unlikely to divert meaningful resources from its war in Ukraine to support North Korea in a conflict on the Peninsula.

China

Among the four members of this coalition, China and Russia are the most powerful. This makes their relationship the most important. When it comes to the war in Ukraine, China has refused to condemn Russia’s invasion, eschewed western sanctions on Russia, and supported the Russian war economy. Its deepening political relations with Russia predate the war and reflect Putin’s need for partners at a time of growing pressure and isolation from the West. Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping’s declaration of a “no limits” partnership on the eve of Russia’s invasion was a step toward greater cooperation at a critical moment but has not resulted in unlimited Chinese support to Russia.¹²

Russia-China security ties are long-standing and rooted in Russia’s support for the development and modernization of China’s military, but the relationship has deepened considerably as a consequence of the war. China benefits from the war in several ways. For one, it greatly reduces the threat that Russia can pose to China itself from its eastern regions and thus alleviates a long-standing strategic concern for China. Clearly, the fact that the war is a burden for the United States and has distracted Washington from a strong focus on Asia is also beneficial to Beijing. Moreover, Beijing is now benefiting from higher supplies of energy from Russia at lower prices and a stronger position in the bilateral relationship overall.

¹¹ Kim Tong-Hyung and Jim Heintz, “What’s Known, and Not Known, About the Partnership Agreement Signed by Russia and North Korea,” AP News, June 20, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-north-korea-putin-kim-agreement-7221909867dbb999de8adb23604e3c79>.

¹² “Moscow-Beijing Partnership Has ‘No Limits,’” Reuters, February 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/moscow-beijing-partnership-has-no-limits-2022-02-04/>.

China is reported to have provided Russia with a range of dual-use goods for its war, including machine tools, semiconductors, drone engines, and other technology.¹³ Russia does not produce many of these technologies domestically and needs them for its weapons. China's export of advanced microchips is important for Russia's precision-guided weapons.¹⁴ In 2023, about 90 percent of Russia's microelectronics came from China.¹⁵ In September 2024, the United States claimed that this assistance was now going beyond dual-use technologies and that Russia was providing China with advanced military technologies.¹⁶

Despite its support for Russia's war, however, there is reason to believe that Beijing may have reservations and is limiting its support as a result. For one, Beijing has tried to maintain "a façade of impartiality"¹⁷ about the war, and its avoidance of blatantly providing weapons to Russia suggests that it is not wholly committed and may fear more severe Western reprisals.¹⁸ Beijing may also have lingering frustrations with Moscow because the war has strained its own relations with Europe—a dynamic that Washington should exploit.¹⁹ China may also be concerned that Russia could collapse, creating chaos on its border. Russia's defeat could also end in regime change and a pro-Western government in the Kremlin, another development that Beijing would surely view as a strategic threat.

COMPARATIVE WEAKNESS OF THE COALITION

Beyond their support for Russia's war in Ukraine, the ideological, economic, and institutional ties that bind these four states remain fairly weak, especially when compared with the ties that bind

¹³ Kylie Atwood, "China Is Giving Russia Significant Support to Expand Weapons Manufacturing as Ukraine War Continues, US Officials Say," CNN, April 12, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/04/12/politics/china-russia-support-weapons-manufacturing/index.html>.

¹⁴ Nathaniel Sher, "Behind the Scenes: China's Increasing Role in Russia's Defense Industry," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 6, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia- Eurasia/politika/2024/05/behind-the-scenes-chinas-increasing-role-in-russias-defense-industry?lang=en>.

¹⁵ Aamer Madhani, "US Intelligence Finding Shows China Surging Equipment Sales to Russia to Help War Effort in Ukraine," AP News, April 19, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/united-states-china-russia-ukraine-war-265df843be030b7183c95b6f3afca8ec>.

¹⁶ Stuart Lau, "US Accuses China of Giving 'Very Substantial' Help to Russia's War Machine," Politico, September 10, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-states-accuse-china-help-russia-war-kurt-campbell/>.

¹⁷ Eugene Rumer, "Taiwan and the Limits of the Russia-China Friendship," September 3, 2024, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/08/taiwan-and-the-limits-of-the-russia-china-friendship?lang=en>.

¹⁸ Alexander Gabuev, "Putin and Xi's Unholy Alliance," *Foreign Affairs*, April 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/putin-and-xis-unholy-alliance>.

¹⁹ James Palmer, "Did Russia Catch China Off Guard in Ukraine?," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/02/china-russia-ukraine-invasion-surprise/>.

the United States to its allies in Europe and Asia. Recent attention to the coalition’s wartime military support to Russia also obscures differences of national interest and strategic outlook.

The limited role of ideology

These states have sometimes been referred to as an “axis of autocracy,” but this moniker can be misleading.²⁰ In practice, the states in this coalition are animated by quite different ideologies. Iran is a religious theocracy whose intellectual origins are essentially premodern, and it came to power by defeating its secular Marxist counterparts.²¹ China’s animating ideology is a blend of Confucianism and Marxism.²² Russia under Putin is animated by Russian nationalism, which has little in common with China or Iran.²³ The only real ideological affinity between these U.S. adversaries is therefore between China and North Korea, which shares China’s communist ideology.

The ideologies that animate these states also do not for the most part prescribe existential conflict with America. In contrast, the Marxist ideology that animated the Soviet Union during the Cold War expressly predicted, and in some interpretations prescribed, conflict with liberal capitalist world. These states also do not champion “autocracy” as a preferred system in the same way that Western leaders uphold liberal democracy, the Soviets championed communism, or Hitler proclaimed National Socialism.

Cooperation among these states is driven far more by the perception that they are threatened by the United States and its allies than by ideological affinity.²⁴ All four have seen their relations with the United States deteriorate sharply in recent years. In 2018, the United States withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal and pursued a “maximum pressure” campaign on Tehran. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine provoked an impressive reaction from NATO that has severed Russian ties to Europe, increased European defense spending, and resulted in the enlargement of NATO. The United States has meanwhile identified China—for obvious reasons—as its main adversary in the Donald Trump

²⁰ Jonathan Leader Maynard, “Authoritarian and Totalitarian Ideologies,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Ideology and International Relations*, ed. Jonathan Leader Maynard and Mark L. Haas (Routledge, 2022).

²¹ Robin Wright, *The Last Great Revolution: Turmoil and Transformation in Iran* (Knopf Doubleday, 2010) [notes from original working paper].

²² Kevin Rudd, *On Xi Jinping: How Xi’s Marxist Nationalism is Shaping China and the World* (Oxford University Press, 2024); Rana Mitter, “The Real Roots of Xi Jinping Thought,” *Foreign Affairs*, February 20, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/reviews/china-real-roots-xi-jinping-thought>.

²³ Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia’s New Nationalism* (Yale University Press, 2017).

²⁴ Stephen M. Walt, *The Origins of Alliances* (Cornell University Press, 1987); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (W.W. Norton, 2001).

administration's 2018 National Defense Strategy and in the Joe Biden administration's 2022 National Security Strategy.²⁵ The United States and U.S. allies have of course long ostracized and sanctioned North Korea because of its nuclear program, which threatens regional stability and long-standing U.S. non-proliferation goals.

Modest economic ties beyond energy

Among the axis countries, Russia and China have the deepest economic relationship. The foundation is China's desire for cheap and reliable energy, which it imports in exchange for manufactures that Russia is unable to produce domestically—some of which help Russia in its war effort. China has benefited from the war's diversion of Russian energy away from Europe and the resulting lower prices to increase its imports of Russian oil and gas. Beijing now accounts for around 40 percent of all Russian fossil fuel exports, and Russia is now China's top supplier of gas.²⁶ China's overall trade with Russia is still one-fifth of its trade with Europe and the United States, however.²⁷

China also imports a discounted supply of Iranian oil as part of a twenty-five-year strategic partnership. In 2024, an estimated 15 percent of China's oil imports came from Iran.²⁸ This is not trivial, but China will likely seek to prevent a deepening dependency by maintaining large imports from the Gulf Arab states. Russia and Iran seek to deepen economic ties in other areas,²⁹ but as two energy exporters, they have less to offer one another in trade. The inherent difficulties are reflected in their long-standing but stalled effort to build a north-south trade corridor.

²⁵ "Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy," Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

"National Security Strategy," White House, October 14, 2022.

²⁶ Daisy Xu, Cindy Liang, and Oceana Zhou, "Russia to Increase Oil, Gas Exports to China in 2025 to Sustain Income: Tsingua," S&P Global, December 13, 2024, <https://www.spglobal.com/commodity-insights/en/news-research/latest-news/crude-oil/121324-russia-to-increase-oil-gas-exports-to-china-in-2025-to-sustain-income-tsinghua>; and Vaibhav Raghunandan and Petras Katinas, "Monthly Analysis of Russian Fossil Fuel Exports and Sanctions," Centre for Research on Energy and Clean Air, January 10, 2025, <https://energyandcleanair.org/december-2024-monthly-analysis-of-russian-fossil-fuel-exports-and-sanctions/>.

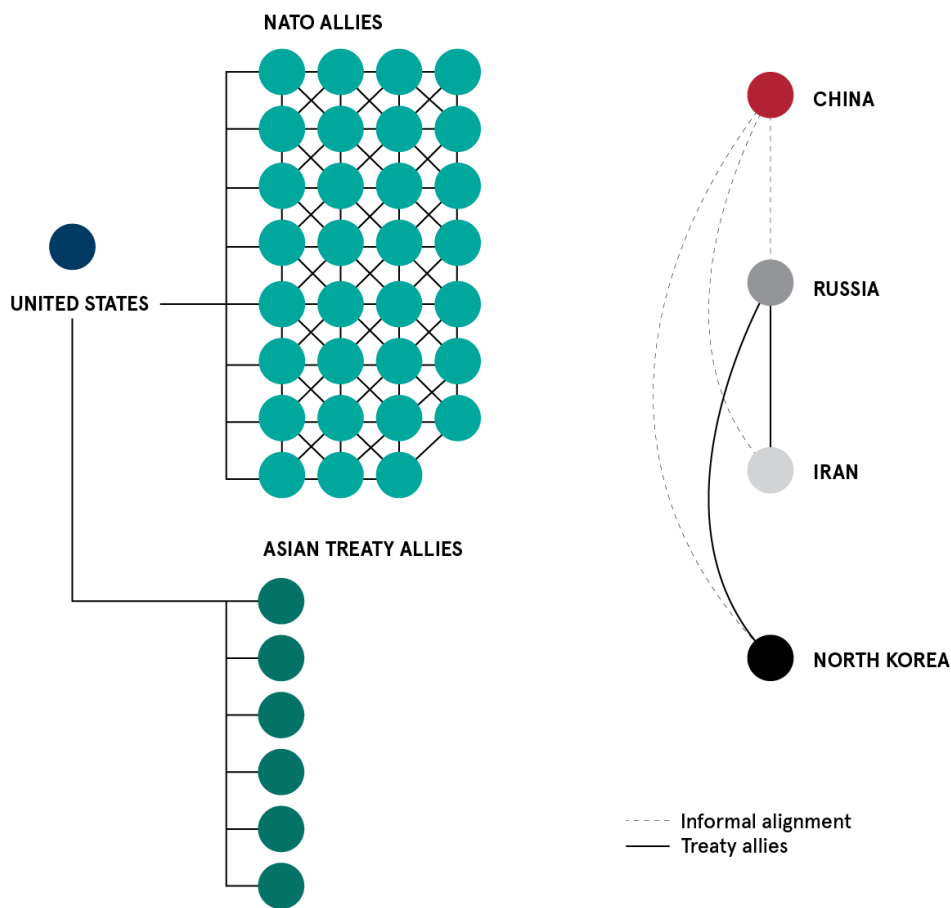
²⁷ For China-Russia trade, see "China-Russia 2024 Trade Value Hits Record High – Chinese Customs," Reuters, January 13, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/china-russia-2024-trade-value-hits-record-high-chinese-customs-2025-01-13/>. China-EU trade totaled \$762 billion in 2024, according to China's customs data. See "China-EU Trade Rises by 1/6% in 2024, Largely Resilient Despite Some Trade Spats: General Administration of Customs," *Global Times*, January 13, 2025, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202501/1326779.shtml>. China-U.S. trade totaled \$582 billion. See United States Census Bureau, "Trade in Goods with China, 2024," <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html>.

²⁸ Keith Bradsher, "China Buys Nearly All of Iran's Oil Exports, but Has Options if Israel Attacks," *New York Times*, October 4, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/04/business/iran-oil-sales-china.html>.

²⁹ Vladimir Isachenkov, "Russia and Iran Sign a Partnership Treaty to Deepen Their Ties in the Face of Western Sanctions," AP News, January 17, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-putin-iran-pezeshekian-treaty-partnership-71a20990373851741d1fe76a81699036>.

The shambolic state of North Korea’s economy makes it a supplicant for assistance from the other countries in the coalition. Its economic relationship with China is highly lopsided, with China making up over 90 percent of North Korea’s trade yet North Korea only a small fraction of China’s.³⁰ Its trade with Russia and Iran is meager, although imports of Russian energy are important to its economy.³¹

Coalitions, Compared: Treaty Allies vs. Loose Ties



³⁰ “China’s Exports to North Korea Return to Growth in November,” Reuters, December 20, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/chinas-exports-north-korea-return-growth-november-2023-12-20/>; and Anton Sokolin, “North Korean Trade with China Doubles in 2023 to Highest Since Pandemic Began,” North Korea News, January 18, 2024, <https://www.nknews.org/2024/01/north-korean-trade-with-china-doubles-in-2023-to-highest-since-pandemic-began/>.

³¹ “Trade Turnover Between Russia, North Korea Up 9 Times in 2023 – Russian Presidential Aide,” TASS, June 17, 2024, <https://tass.com/economy/1804561>.

Bilateral nature of their cooperation

The coalition is also weakened by the fact that their cooperation is almost entirely in bilateral channels, unlike America's cooperation with many of its allies. Russia has deepened cooperation with Iran and separately with North Korea, for example. China has supported Russia while maintaining its long and complicated relationship with North Korea and a separate relationship with Iran. Iran and North Korea have almost no ongoing cooperation.

Occasionally these states have conducted coordinated military exercises that go beyond the bilateral framework. These operations are conducted primarily for their optics. For example, Russia, China, and Iran now conduct a trilateral naval exercise called the "Sea Security Belt" with the stated purpose of expanding multilateral cooperation on maritime security and "to create a maritime group in the future."³² The latest iteration of this, in Spring 2024, was a five-day naval and aviation exercise near the Gulf of Oman involving around twenty Chinese, Russian, and Iranian warships.³³ This pales in comparison to exercises regularly conducted by the United States and its allies, such as NATO's Neptune Strike exercise in 2024, which stretched from the Mediterranean to Arctic Circle and involved aircraft carriers, submarines, surface vessels, aircraft, and exercises ranging from drone defense and counter-mine operations to amphibious landings.³⁴

Points of divergence and potential friction

Although they share a common animosity toward the United States, there are differences in how these states view the world that could hamper their future cooperation. For example, each of these countries has a different relationship with the EU. China has sought to maintain a positive economic and political relationship with the EU, but this has become more difficult on account of its support for Russia's war on Ukraine (among other issues, such as electric vehicle exports). Needless to say, Russia's relations with the EU are in freefall. Iran also may have once hoped to repair its frayed relationship with Europe, which has historically been an important source of technology and finance, but its deepening relationship with Russia will complicate this.

³² "Russian, Chinese Warships Arrive in Iran's Territorial Waters For Joint Drills," Islamic Republic News Agency, March 12, 2024, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85416320/Russian-Chinese-warships-arrive-in-Iran-s-territorial-waters>.

³³ Dzirhan Mahadzir, "Russia, China and Iran Finish Drills in Gulf of Oman," *U.S. Naval Institute News*, March 14, 2024, <https://news.usni.org/2024/03/14/russia-china-and-iran-finish-drills-in-gulf-of-oman>.

³⁴ "NATO Begins Neptune Strike 2024-2," NATO, October 23, 2024, <https://sfn.nato.int/newsroom/news-archive/2024/nato-begins-neptune-strike-242>.

Other sources of contention include the fact that China does not wholly back Russia’s claim to Crimea, frictions from Russia’s recent outreach to North Korea, long-standing historical issues between Iran and Russia, and the fact that China has a greater overall stake in maintaining a rules-based international order supportive of continued cross-border trade and investment—even if it seeks to change the current rules in its favor.³⁵

Future cooperation between these states is also likely to be constrained by the non-democratic nature of their regimes, which creates commitment problems. Strategic cooperation between nations requires the capability to make credible long-term commitments. Authoritarian or autocratic leaders are less able to make such commitments because doing so entails limits on sovereignty in foreign policy, which they are especially eager to avoid.³⁶ The lack of domestic constraints on their foreign policy and the generally capricious nature of such regimes—especially when they are personalized—also creates a trust and credibility deficit.³⁷

³⁵ Zhang Lihua, “Explaining China’s Position on the Crimea Referendum,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, April 1, 2015, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2015/04/explaining-chinas-position-on-the-crimea-referendum?lang=en>; and Karim Sadjadpour and Nicole Grajewski, “Autocrats United: How Russia and Iran Defy the U.S.-Led Global Order,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 10, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/russia-iran-oil-gas-ukraine-syria?lang=en>.

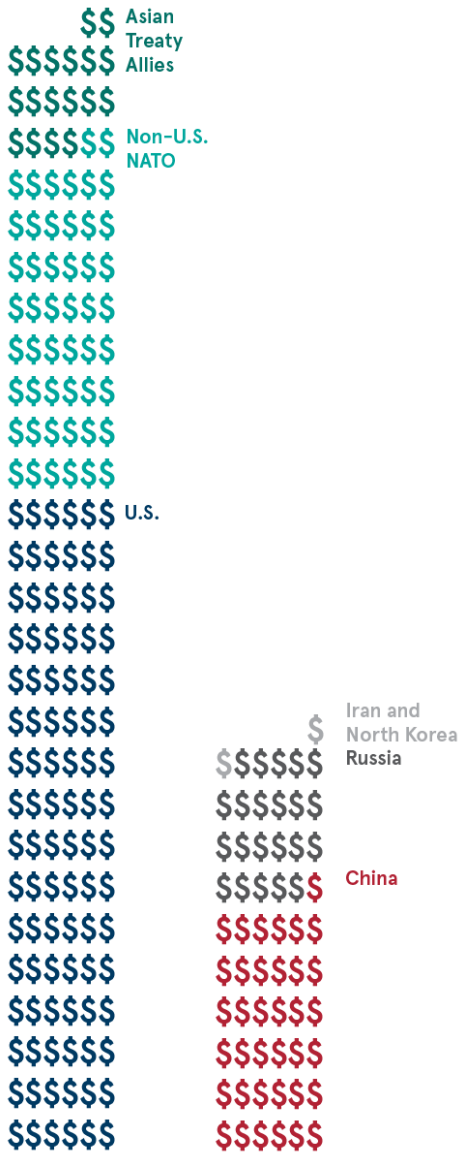
³⁶ Matthew Kroenig, “The Autocratic Advantage?,” in *The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China*, ed. Matthew Kroenig (Oxford University Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190080242.003.0003>.

³⁷ Michaela Mattes and Mariana Rodríguez, “Autocracies and International Cooperation,” *International Studies Quarterly* 58, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1111/isqu.12107>.

Defense Spending, 2024

Billions of U.S. Dollars

\$ = \$10 billion



Sources: Asia Power Index, Lowy Institute, 2024

Comparison with U.S. alliances

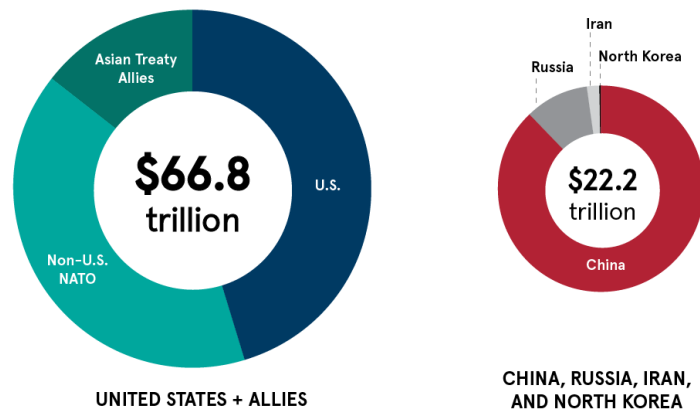
In general, the cooperation between these four countries pales in comparison to that between the United States and the allies it enjoys around the world. America has an unparalleled global network of allies and partners. Not only are U.S. alliances far greater in economic, and military power, the levels of economic and military integration are also light years ahead of where this coalition is today. Moreover, if China is excluded from this coalition of adversaries, the disparity grows far greater, as discussed below.

Whereas U.S. security relationships are deeply institutionalized through formal structures at the international and domestic levels, the relationships between the four coalition countries have little glue holding them together. Although there are some military-military relationships that Russia and Iran have leveraged in their recent practical cooperation, truly strategic cooperation between America’s adversaries would not be bilateral but entail joint mechanisms, regular military exercises to integrate command and control at the strategic and operational level, military interoperability, and joint strategic planning. None of this has occurred and nothing in this coalition resembles the cooperation that occurs on a daily basis through NATO headquarters or at U.S. Forces Korea.

Nothing resembles the established domestic interests and bureaucratic structures that have grown up in support of America’s alliance relationships both in Washington and in allied capitals.

This coalition could still deepen institutional links over time, of course. Although it would be mistaken to assume that an automatic deepening will take place based on current cooperation, cooperation may beget more cooperation if it is viewed as providing mutual benefit.

Total GDP, 2024



Source: IMF World Economic Outlook 2024

KEY RISKS FOR THE UNITED STATES

To summarize, this coalition is driven primarily by the war in Ukraine, lacks a deep economic or ideological basis, and has proceeded largely along bilateral lines. The treaty commitments of its members are weak and could be reversed or obsolete. The continuation and deepening of cooperation among these nations, however, does present important risks for U.S. national security. The key risks are proliferation of advanced weapons technology to Iran and North Korea, and the threat of opportunistic coordination in a future crisis.

The proliferation risk

Offering Iran and North Korea nuclear and other advanced military technologies is one way Russia can compensate them for their war support. Proliferating to both countries also serves Russia's interests by intensifying existing problems for the United States and its allies in the Middle East and East Asia. Russia may also view arms and technology transfers to Iran and North Korea as a means of

imposing costs on the United States in the Middle East and East Asia—doing unto the United States in these regions as it believes the United States is doing unto it in Ukraine.

Pyongyang could benefit substantially from Russian technology to enhance its nuclear and ballistic missiles programs. Russia once joined U.S. efforts to persuade North Korea to denuclearize as a participant in the Six Party Talks, but Russia now appears to accept North Korea as a nuclear-armed state.³⁸ Russian technology could help North Korea upgrade its tactical nuclear weapons, reconnaissance satellites, intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), and submarines. Russia might also help North Korea develop nuclear-armed cruise missiles or MIRVed ICBMs, thus creating serious problems for U.S. missile defenses—both regionally and in CONUS. These are dangerous possibilities.

Russia could also offer technology that would accelerate Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Once a key supporter of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Russia may now see a nuclear Iran as a useful way to distract the United States from the war in Ukraine.³⁹ In September 2024, the U.S. intelligence community reported that Russia had expanded its nuclear cooperation with Iran in exchange for short-range ballistic missiles for use in Ukraine.⁴⁰ Since July 2023, Russia has sent technicians to help Iran with its space launch vehicle program—a move that experts and U.S. officials view as a way for the countries to share missile technology.⁴¹ Iran has not built a nuclear weapon, but its weakened conventional position after a devastating Israeli strike in October may push it to weaponize. Press reports indicate that Iran has been sending its top leaders to meet secretly with Russian officials as part of a back-channel effort to gain their assistance on Iran’s nuclear program and air defense capabilities.⁴² The closer Iran gets to building a nuclear weapon, the greater the chance that Russia (and theoretically China) could view its prior counter-proliferation position as overtaken by

³⁸ Michelle Nichols, “US Alarmed Russia Close to Accepting Nuclear-Armed North Korea,” Reuters, December 18, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us-alarmed-russia-close-accepting-nuclear-armed-north-korea-2024-12-18/>.

³⁹ Nicole Grajewski and Or Rabinowitz, “Will Iran and Russia’s Growing Partnership Go Nuclear?,” *Foreign Affairs*, January 28, 2025, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/will-iran-and-russias-partnership-go-nuclear-trump>.

⁴⁰ Shweta Sharma, “Growing Fears in UK and US of a Secret Nuclear Deal Between Iran and Russia,” *Independent*, September 16, 2024, <https://www.the-independent.com/news/world/europe/iran-russia-nuclear-deal-uk-us-nato-b2613388.html>; Grajewski and Rabinowitz, “Will Iran and Russia’s Growing Partnership Go Nuclear?”

⁴¹ “Russian Rocket Launches Iranian Satellites Into Orbit as Moscow and Tehran Expand Ties,” AP News, November 5, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/russia-iran-satellites-space-launch-944a6bc87aa2511e38acf58e37c02c28>; and “Fireside Chat with Director William Burns: Aspen Security Forum 2023,” U.S. Embassy in Russia, July 20, 2023, <https://ru.usembassy.gov/fireside-chat-with-director-william-burns-aspen-security-forum-2023/>.

⁴² Gabrielle Weiniger and George Grylls, “Iran in Secret Talks With Russia to Bolster Nuclear Ambition,” *Times*, January 12, 2025, <https://www.thetimes.com/world/middle-east/article/iran-russia-nuclear-talks-deal-lfzbdh7z7>.

events and embrace a nuclear Iran. This could turn Iranian nuclear weapons into a dangerous source of conflict between the world's major powers.

Russia and China do have incentives to protect their technological advantages from these less powerful states. For example, if they become nuclear powers in their own right, Iran and North Korea will be less susceptible to Russian and Chinese pressure over time. Neither Russia nor China wants uncontrolled escalation in their respective regions, or a nuclear cascade.

Nightmare scenario: Coordination in a major crisis

Longer-term, but more concerning, this coalition might opportunistically coordinate in a crisis. For example, if China were to blockade or invade Taiwan, Iran might seize the opportunity to attack U.S. forces in the Middle East directly or through its proxies. North Korea might engage in provocations against South Korea and Japan that could complicate the politics of the war and constrain U.S. military responses. Russia would almost certainly not intervene directly in support of China, but it might be China's most reliable source of energy, materiel, or other indirect support for the war. Moreover, Russia might issue threats of its own in Europe, timed to maximize strain on the United States and thus extract concessions in a form of blackmail. Coordination of this kind would resemble the interplay between Nazi Germany and Japan in the Second World War, although it would be more improvisational in nature.

This type of coordination would not, of course, be automatic. These states would face significant challenges in committing to credible joint action, given their divergent interests and the autocratic nature of their regimes. Moreover, the timing and circumstances of joint action would have to align perfectly for all parties involved. This is why coordination would likely be opportunistic rather than planned in advance. Regardless, if an orchestrated crisis did arise, it would stretch U.S. resources, force Washington into very difficult strategic tradeoffs, and transform a regional crisis into a global one—potentially on a massive scale.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The foregoing analysis implies the following four major policy recommendations for Congress:

- 1) Congress should support efforts to intensify monitoring and prevention of the proliferation described above, including by preparing additional sanctions legislation, by fully funding U.S. monitoring and intelligence collection tools, and with any other actions that will strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime. Congress should call on Beijing to support these nonproliferation objectives, which are in China's interest.
- 2) Congress should support steps to attenuate China's ties to Russia. This includes ensuring that future U.S. technology export restrictions remain limited to the "small yard, high fence" model, protecting open trade and investment regime with China, and moderating rhetoric on Taiwan to ensure congruence with Washington's long-standing One China policy. Reassuring Beijing that the U.S. Congress does not seek to change the status quo with regard to Taiwan will be especially important in the next few years.
- 3) Congress should also back realistic efforts to negotiate an end to the war in Ukraine and establish a stable balance of power in Europe that features continued burden-shifting toward European allies. This includes backing current White House initiatives to achieve a ceasefire by providing military and reconstruction funding that will be needed to secure a deal and preparing to either impose or gradually lift sanctions on Russia in accordance with its degree of cooperation with the effort.
- 4) Strategically, in order to reduce the risk and consequences of a worst-case scenario of opportunistic collaboration in a crisis, Congress should support measures to limit U.S. exposure to Iranian threats in the Middle East. This requires both funding systems to protect U.S. forces in theater and seeking to reduce the number of U.S. forces in exposed positions in Iraq and Syria. Under current conditions, this objective would be furthered by eschewing major new U.S. security commitments in the region.