

Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission

Hearing: China's Role in the Axis of Autocracy

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The views and opinions expressed in this document are solely my own and do not reflect those of any past or present employers, affiliations, or institutions. This testimony follows the format of the seven questions proposed by the Committee, slightly rearranged.

1. What are China's objectives for its military cooperation with Russia, Iran, and North Korea? What does China hope to gain strategically or operationally?

China's military cooperation with Russia, Iran, and North Korea advances its overarching strategic goal of reshaping the global balance of power by weakening the U.S.-led security order.¹ United in their rejection of "unilateralism," Beijing and its partners see Washington as the chief obstacle to their geopolitical resurgence.² For them, restoring past grandeur requires not only the pursuit of revisionist territorial claims but also securing spheres of influence commensurate with their perceived status and power.³ Thus, in Russia, Iran, and North Korea, China has willing associates that actively challenge the United States by asserting themselves regionally and undermining the rules-based international order in both word and deed.

China's engagement with its partners advances several strategic objectives:

First, it places sustained pressure on the United States. While China's partners act independently, their actions collectively strain Washington's diplomatic, economic, and military resources. Managing simultaneous challenges—from Ukraine to the Middle East to the Korean Peninsula—stretches U.S. capabilities and potentially weakens its long-term resolve and capacity to exercise global leadership.

¹ As noted in the Department of Defense's 2023 China Military Power Report, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) leaders have stated that China would benefit from "a profound adjustment in the international balance of power." In his CCP 100th anniversary speech, Xi asserted that, as the world experienced "once-in-a-century changes," China had to adopt "a holistic approach to national security that balances development and security imperatives" and implement "the national rejuvenation." See, Department of Defense, *2023 China Military Power Report*, p.6.

² "Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development," <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Portals/10/CASI/documents/Translations/2022-02-04%20China%20Russia%20joint%20statement%20International%20Relations%20Entering%20a%20New%20Era.pdf>; "Old friends the best partners for bright future," President of Iran, February 13, 2023, <https://president.ir/en/142404>.

³ Robert Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, "No Limits? The China-Russia Relationship and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations Special Report No. 99*, December 2024, p.37.

Second, and relatedly, it distracts Washington from focusing on the Indo-Pacific. Since it was first announced in 2012, the United States’ “Pivot to Asia” policy has proceeded in fits and starts.⁴ The 2022 National Defense Strategy was the first in its history to name the People’s Republic of China (PRC) as its pacing challenge.⁵ And, in spite of historic defense partnerships achieved between the United States and several partners in the Indo-Pacific, ongoing international crises have continued to divert U.S. attention and resources away from the region, undermining Washington’s ability to counter China effectively.

Third, it lays the foundation for a multipolar world, with Chinese characteristics. By deepening military and strategic ties with like-minded states, Beijing is actively cultivating an alternative power structure that challenges Western dominance. In this evolving order, China seeks to position itself as a central pillar, expanding its influence and leadership on the global stage.

Operationally and tactically, the benefits China derives from its military cooperation depends on the partner in question. Joint exercises with Russia provide Chinese personnel with combat-relevant experience from a battle-hardened partner. Moscow’s purported transfer of sensitive military technologies—spanning submarines, missiles, and stealth aircraft—support the development of China’s capabilities in these areas.⁶ Trilateral exercises conducted with Iran and Russia in the Arabian Sea offer China valuable experience in long-range naval operations, advancing Beijing’s goal of building a true blue-water navy that is capable of sustained global deployments.⁷

2. What is the extent of military cooperation between China and Iran? How has China contributed to Iran’s military and technological development?

Over the past decade, China-Iran military cooperation has deepened. In an open source study co-authored with Lucas Winter and Jason Warner for the U.S. Army TRADOC’s Foreign Military Studies Office, we assessed Chinese efforts to gain military influence in Iran by using Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic (DIME) instruments as “High,” with an “Increasing”

⁴ Robert Blackwill and Richard Fontaine, *Lost Decade: The US Pivot to Asia and the Rise of Chinese Power*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2024).

⁵ Department of Defense, National Defense Strategy, 2022, p.111.

⁶ 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/>.

⁷ Aaron Marchant, China’s Global Maritime Ambitions 10,000 Miles Beyond Taiwan, Proceedings, Vol. 150/12/1,462, December 2024, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2024/december/chinas-global-maritime-ambitions-10000-miles-beyond-taiwan#:~:text=China%20aspires%20to%20build%20a,ocean%E2%80%9D%20an%20objective%20worth%20pursuing.>

trajectory projected over the next three years.⁸ Likewise, Russia-Iran bilateral DIME engagement was also rated “High” and “Increasing.”⁹

Figure 1: Summary of China-Iran DIME Engagement¹⁰

DIPLOMATIC / INFORMATION			MILITARY / ECONOMIC					
	D1	Defense-Related Diplomacy			M1	Formal Bilateral Military Engagements		
	D2	International Military Education and Training			M2	Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements		
	D3	Soft Power Activities			M3	Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements		
	I1	Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment			E1	Arms Transfers		
	I2	Information/Communications Technology Support			E2	Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements		
	I3	Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications			E3	Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors		
CURRENT DEGREE OF INFLUENCE			PROJECTED FUTURE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE					
Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	None/Unobserved	Increasing	Steady	Decreasing

Figure 2: Summary of Russia-Iran M-DIME Engagement¹¹

DIPLOMATIC / INFORMATION			MILITARY / ECONOMIC					
	D1	Defense-Related Diplomacy			M1	Formal Bilateral Military Engagements		
	D2	International Military Education and Training			M2	Shared Informal/Multilateral Military Engagements		
	D3	Soft Power Activities			M3	Defense/Security Pacts and Agreements		
	I1	Cultural/Media Outreach, Collaboration, Alignment			E1	Arms Transfers		
	I2	Information/Communications Technology Support			E2	Technology-Sharing, Joint Production Agreements		
	I3	Cooperation in Military Intelligence/Communications			E3	Trade/Cooperation in Strategic Commodities/Sectors		
CURRENT DEGREE OF INFLUENCE			PROJECTED FUTURE DEGREE OF INFLUENCE					
Very High	High	Medium	Low	Very Low	None/Unobserved	Increasing	Steady	Decreasing

⁸ FMSO report China-Iran The Military DIME (M-DIME) Research Project is a research effort from the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command’s Foreign Military Studies Office (FMSO) to provide open-source analysis and assessments of China (and Russia’s) influence in third countries. The M-DIME framework builds on the traditional DIME model, national power into Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic domains.

⁹ Lucas Winter, Jason Warner, and Jemima Baar, “Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Iran,” U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command G-2 Foreign Military Studies Office, December 2023.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Our study highlights several key aspects of China’s military cooperation with Iran:

Defense-Related Diplomacy

High-level military diplomacy between Iran and China has increased over the past decade, with at least eight meetings taking place between senior defense officials and military commanders. For instance, in April 2022, then Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi hosted then Chinese Defense Minister Wei Fenghe in Tehran. Wei also met his Iranian counterpart, Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, and the Iranian Chief of Armed Forces, Mohammad Bagheri.¹² Wei expressed the intention to “push the relationship between the two militaries to a higher level.”¹³ In September 2019, Bagheri met General Li Zuocheng, the Chief of China’s Joint Staff Department of the Central Military Commission (CMC), in Beijing and General Xu Qiliang, the CMC’s Vice Chairman.¹⁴ During the visit, he toured a Chinese naval base in Shanghai.¹⁵ In December 2019, Lieutenant General Shao Yuanming, Deputy Chief of the CMC’s Joint Staff Department, visited Tehran and met Bagheri.¹⁶

These meetings have often led to formal agreements that appear to promote closer military collaboration, although publicly available details remain limited. For instance, during President Xi’s 2016 visit to Tehran, the bilateral relationship was elevated to “Comprehensive Strategic Partnership” and 17 agreements related to “energy, industry, transportation, technology, and other fields” were signed.¹⁷ In 2021, Chinese and Iranian foreign ministers signed a 25-year cooperation program, which was rumored to involve significant Chinese investments in Iran’s key sectors such as energy and infrastructure, as well as cyber and military cooperation.¹⁸ President Raisi’s 2023 visit to Beijing resulted in 20 additional cooperation agreements. In a joint statement following the visit, Presidents Xi and Raisi pledged deeper military collaboration through joint exercises and strategic communication.¹⁹

¹² “China, Iran agree to push military ties to higher level.” CGTN, April 28, 2022, <https://news.cgtn.com/news/2022-04-28/China-Iran-agree-to-push-military-ties-to-higherlevel-19AEBvT2swg/index.html> and “Iran, China agree to expand military cooperation: Iranian military chief,” Al Arabiya, April 27, 2022, <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2022/04/27/Iran-China-agree-to-expand-military-cooperation-Iranian-military-chief>.

¹³ Shi Jiangtao and Teddy Ng, “China and Iran set to step up defence cooperation.” South China Morning Post, April 28, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3175845/china-and-iran-set-step-defencecooperation>.

¹⁴ “Baqeri: Iran, China reviewing 25-year strategic relations document,” PLA Daily, December 4, 2019, http://english.pladaily.com.cn/view/2019-12/04/content_9689281.htm and Xu Qiliang met with Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces,” China Military, September 12, 2019, http://eng.chinamil.com.cn/CHINA_209163/TopStories_209189/9620567.html.

¹⁵ Hiddai Segev, *China and Iran: Resurging Defense Cooperation?* (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies, 2021), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/chinairan/>.

¹⁶ “Baqeri: Iran, China reviewing 25-year strategic relations document.”

¹⁷ Semira N. Nikou, “Timeline of Iran’s Foreign Relations,” The United States Institute of Peace, August 10, 2021, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/timeline-iransforeign-relations>.

¹⁸ Maziar Motamedi, “Iran and China sign 25-year cooperation agreement,” *Al-Jazeera*, March 27, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/27/iran-and-china-sign-25-year-cooperation-agreement-in-tehran>

¹⁹ “Iran, China ink 20 pacts,” President of Iran, February 14, 2023, <https://president.ir/en/142442> and “Joint Statement of Iran and China: Importance of close relations between the leaders of Iran and China in deepening comprehensive strategic partnership,” Government of Iran, February 16, 2023, <https://irangov.ir/detail/406540>

Information and Communication Technology (ICT)

China and Iran have forged a robust partnership in information technology, which carries significant military implications. In 2016, the two countries signed a pact to expand cooperation in ICT infrastructure and satellites.²⁰ China has played a key role in Iran's 5G development, funding projects worth nearly \$470 million, and both countries collaborate in satellite tracking through the Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization.²¹

Iran is one of very few countries—alongside Pakistan and Saudi Arabia—with full access to China's indigenous satellite system, BeiDou.²² In 2015, the Iranian defense electronics company Salran signed an agreement with Chinese defense companies to begin using BeiDou PNT technology on Iranian missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) to improve their targeting capabilities.²³ In 2021, Iran was granted full access to the PRC's BeiDou satellite system for military purposes.²⁴

Military Exercises

In 2014, China and Iran conducted basic search and rescue and anti-piracy exercises in the Gulf of Aden²⁵ and in 2017, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and Iranian Navy conducted four days of drills in the Strait of Hormuz.²⁶ Over the past five years, bilateral drills between the Iranian Navy and the PLAN have ceased and been replaced by trilateral drills with the Russian Navy in the Arabian Sea.²⁷

I elaborate on the implications of China's military exercises with Iran in Question 3.

²⁰ "Iran, China sign protocol for ICT cooperation," Islamic Republic News Agency, January 22, 2016, <https://en.irna.ir/news/81931019/Iran-China-sign-protocol-for-ICTcooperation>.

²¹ Nariman Gharib (@NarimanGharib), "Exclusive: Just obtained a confidential document on the Islamic Republic's Ministry of Communications & Technology projects, revealing ongoing work & Chinese contractors' involvement.," Tweet, May 16, 2023, <https://twitter.com/NarimanGharib/status/165843546576096461?s=20>.

²² <https://jamestown.org/program/beidou-and-strategic-advancements-in-prc-space-navigation/>

²³ Jason Warner, Lucas Winter, and Jemima Baar, "Instruments of Chinese Military Influence in Iran," Iran's Growing Dependency on China's BeiDou Satellite Navigation." SpaceWatch.Global, November 2016. <https://spacewatch.global/2016/11/irans-growing-dependency-on-chinas-beidou-satellite-navigation/> and Farzin Nadimi, "Iran and China Are Strengthening Their Military Ties." The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 22, 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-and-china-are-strengtheningtheir-military-ties>.

²⁴ Vahid Ghorbani, Mostafa Pakdel, Mehrdad Alipour, "An Analysis of China's Military Diplomacy towards Iran," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 12, 1 (2021)

²⁵ Same LaGrone, "Chinese Ships in Iran for Joint Exercises." USNI News, September 22, 2014. <https://news.usni.org/2014/09/22/chinese-ships-iran-joint-exercises>.

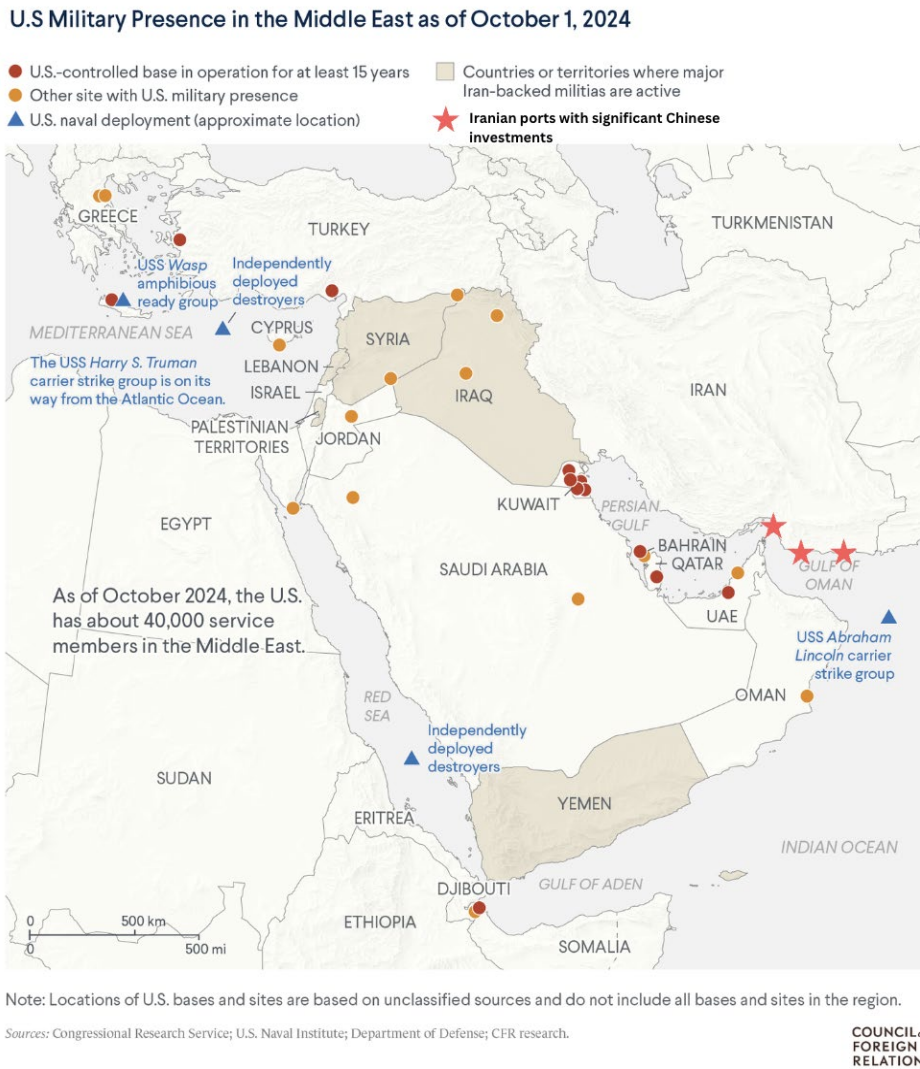
²⁶ "Iran and China conduct naval drill in Gulf." Reuters, June 18, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-chinamilitary-drill/iran-and-china-conduct-naval-drill-in-gulfidUSKBN1990EF>.

²⁷ Lucas Winter, Jemima Baar, and Jason Warner, "The Axis Off-Kilter: Why an Iran-Russia-China 'Axis' is Shakier than Meets the Eye," *War on the Rocks*, April 19, 2024, <https://warontherocks.com/2024/04/the-axis-off-kilter-why-an-iran-russia-china-axis-is-shakier-than-meets-the-eye/>.

Ports

China has invested heavily in strategically located ports along the Strait of Hormuz, including Jask, Bandar Abbas—the Iranian Navy’s main base—and Chabahar.²⁸ This development may align with scholar Isaac Kardon’s assessment that, in the absence of overseas bases, the PLA relies on commercial access points to extend its operational reach beyond the first island chain.²⁹

Figure 3: China has invested in key ports along the Strait of Hormuz³⁰



²⁸ Farnaz Fassihi and Steven Lee Myers, “Defying U.S., China and Iran Near Trade and Military Partnership,” *New York Times*, September 24, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/11/world/asia/china-iran-trade-militarydeal.html> and “China’s Private Sector Enters Iranian Port City Of Bandar Abbas,” *Iran International*, March 25, 2023, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202303250552/>

²⁹ Isaac Kardon, “Pier Competitor: Testimony on China on China’s Global Ports,” *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 74, Issue 1, Winter 2021.

³⁰ Original source: Council on Foreign Relations, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-troops-middle-east-mapping-military-presence>; additions (Iranian ports): my own.

In 2022, China opened a consulate in Bandar Abbas, a move hailed by Chinese Ambassador to Iran, Chang Hua, as a “landmark moment in China-Iran relations.” He further emphasized Beijing’s view of its ties with Tehran as “strategic.”³¹ Earlier, in September 2014, two People’s Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) vessels—the destroyer *Changchun* and frigate *Changzhou*—conducted a five-day port visit to Bandar Abbas, during which PLAN officers met with Iran’s Naval Coastal Defense Area Command and Southern Fleet commanders.³² However, no open-source records indicate subsequent PLAN port visits to Bandar Abbas.

It remains unclear whether Iran would grant China basing rights if Beijing were to seek them. Precedent suggests reluctance—Russia’s use of Iran’s Hamedan air base in 2016 to launch airstrikes in Syria triggered domestic backlash, forcing Moscow to withdraw soon after.³³ This episode underscores Iran’s sensitivity to foreign military presence on its soil.

Arms Transfers

Between 2010 and 2019, Iran accounted for 19% of China’s arms exports to the Middle East, but only 1% of its global arms exports.³⁴ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s arms transfers database, China officially halted arms shipments to Iran after 2015, following the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Before 2015, China supplied Iran with anti-ship missiles, armored personnel carriers, and portable surface-to-air missiles.³⁵ However, observers suspect that Chinese nationals have continued to conduct unofficial arms and dual-use technology transfers to Iran. In recent years, U.S. authorities have sanctioned and indicted several individuals for transferring arms from China to Iran.³⁶

Notably, China and Russia opposed a U.S.-proposed Security Council resolution to extend the UN arms embargo on Iran.³⁷ Since the embargo was lifted in 2020, China may have resumed official arms sales to Iran, though open-source information provides little insight into such activity.

³¹ “China Finally Opens Consulate In Iran’s Persian Gulf Port,” Iran International, December 22, 2022, <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202212224576>.

³² Joel Wuthnow, *China-Iran Military Relations at a Crossroads*, (Washington, DC: Jamestown Foundation, 2015), <https://jamestown.org/program/china-iranmilitary-relations-at-a-crossroads/#.ViD-Kn6rTV0>.

³³ Laura Rozen, “US says Russian use of Iran base unhelpful but won’t derail Syria talks,” *Al Monitor*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/08/russiause-iran-air-base-strike-syria-negotiations.html> and Rohollah Faghihi, “Putin, Rouhani hold ‘intensive’ talks in Moscow,” *Al Monitor*, March 28, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/03/iran-rouhani-moscowvisit-putin-medvedev-zarif-syria.html>.

³⁴ Hiddai Segev, *China and Iran: Resurging Defense Cooperation?* (Tel Aviv: The Institute for National Security Studies, 2021), <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/chinairan/>.

³⁵ SIPRI, *Arms Transfers Database*, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers>.

³⁶ See, for example: Press Release: Extradited Chinese National Sentenced to Nine Years for Providing U.S. Goods to Iran in Support of its Nuclear Weapons Program.” United States Department of Justice, January 27, 2016, <https://www.justice.gov/usao-ma/pr/extradited-chinese-national-sentenced-nineyears-providing-us-goods-iran-support-it>.

³⁷ Kelsey Davenport and Julia Masterson, “Security Council Rejects Iran Arms Embargo Extension,” *Arms Control Association*, August 17, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2020-08/p4-1-iran-nuclear-deal-alert>.

Technology Sharing

Much of Beijing's military technology sharing with Tehran dates back to before 2012, yet Iran continues to incorporate these designs into its arms production. Several Iranian missile series draw on Chinese designs and technology, such as the short-range Oghab and Nazeat, and the long-range Shahab 3, which was successfully tested in 2016.³⁸ The Nasr anti-ship cruise missile is nearly identical to the Chinese C-704, and it has been reported that China helped Iran establish a manufacturing plant for the Nasr in 2010.³⁹

As the world's top combat drone exporter, China sells UAVs across the Middle East and South Asia, including to Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iraq, and Pakistan.⁴⁰ Yet no open-source evidence suggests similar levels of exports of finished drones to Iran. This is likely not due to Chinese reluctance but because Iran already possesses a robust domestic UAV industry—bolstered, in part, by China's role in advancing Iranian drone technology and supplying critical components. In March 2023, the United States sanctioned five Chinese firms—based in Hangzhou, Shenzhen, Guilin, and Hong Kong—for providing Iran with drone parts.⁴¹ Although Iran manufactures the Shahed-136 domestically, it relies on the MD550 engine, produced by the Chinese firm Beijing MicroPilot Flight Control Systems.⁴²

Furthermore, China's main arms manufacturers all have a presence in Tehran, suggesting ongoing arms and military technology transfer between China and Iran. The Aviation Industry Corporation of China and China Electronics Technology Group Corporation have offices in Tehran and have been involved in infrastructure projects in Iran.⁴³ China South Industries Group Corporation has a

³⁸ "Iran Missile Milestones: 1984-2023," Iran Watch, March 29, 2023, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/weapon-program-background-report/iran-missilemilestones-1985-2021>; Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html, p.7.

³⁹ Scott W. Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2012), https://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP351.html, p.7.

⁴⁰ Zaheena Rasheed, "How China Became the World's Leading Exporter of Combat Drones." Al Jazeera, January 24, 2023, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/24/how-china-became-the-worlds-leading-exporter-ofcombat-drones>.

⁴¹ 华盛顿制裁伊朗无人机零部件的中国供应商本文来源全球无人机网, 81.com, March 10, 2023, <https://www.81uav.cn/uav-news/202303/10/74941.html>; Lucas Winter, Jemima Baar, and Jason Warner, "The Axis Off-Kilter: Why an Iran-China-Russia Axis is Shakier than Meets the Eye."

⁴² David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, and Spencer Faragasso, "Iranian Drones in Ukraine Contain Western Brand Components," Institute for Science and International Security, October 31, 2021, https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/Iranian_Drones_Contain_Western_Brand_Components_October31_FINAL.pdf, p.3

⁴³ "伊朗中资企业联谊会第六届理事会," Ministry of Commerce of the People's Republic of China, September 13, 2017, <http://ir.mofcom.gov.cn/article/zxhz/201709/20170902642804.shtml> and "Company Profile," AVIC International, Accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.cccme.cn/shop/cccme0883/introduction.aspx>. and "About," CETC, <http://www.cetc.com.cn/zgdk/1592571/1592492/1627790/index.html>; "China's AVIC to build 1.6GW power plant in Iran," Tehran Times, April 28, 2015, <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/246392/China-s-AVIC-to-build-1-6GW-power-plantin-Iran> and "Chinese Corp. to Help Transform Tehran Into Smart City," Financial Tribune, April 3, 2018, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/economy-sci-tech/83959/chinese-corp-to-help-transform-tehran-into-smart-city>.

manufacturing facility in Tehran.⁴⁴ China North Industries Group Corporation (NORINCO) was sanctioned by the United States in the 2000s for transferring proliferation technology to Iran and it remains on many U.S. states' scrutinized lists over its dealings with Iran. In 2017, NORINCO built a petrochemical plant in Iran worth \$1.5 billion, and, in 2018, it set up a subsidiary in Iran for "new energy projects."⁴⁵

Trade in Strategic Commodities

China has been Iran's largest trading partner from 2012 to 2022, helping Tehran withstand U.S. sanctions. Iran exports oil and petroleum to China at a steeply discounted price, which may have generated as much as \$70 billion in 2023.⁴⁶ In return, Iran imports machinery, electronics, and appliances from China.⁴⁷

China Nonferrous Metal Industry's Foreign Engineering and Construction Co. (NFC), a state-owned enterprise, has been actively involved in the development of Iran's aluminum mining industry. Documents related to NFC's creation of an aluminum refinery in Iran, along with comments from an Iranian official, suggest that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has used the China-owned refinery to produce aluminum powder in support of its missile program.⁴⁸ In 2019, Chinese firms were sanctioned by the United States for supplying Iran's Centrifuge Technology Company with aluminum products used in the manufacture of centrifuges.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ "China South Industries Group Corp," Epicos, Last updated, July 1, 2016, <https://www.epicos.com/company/13419/china-south-industries-group-corp>.

⁴⁵ "China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO)," Iran Watch, Last updated, December 16, 2004, <https://www.iranwatch.org/suppliers/china-north-industries-corporation-norinco>; "Norinco," United Against Nuclear Iran, Accessed July 26, 2023, <https://www.unitedagainstnucleariran.com/company/norinco>; Dou Shicong, "Norinco International to Build USD1.5 Billion Chemical Plant in Iran," Yi Cai Global, November 28, 2017, <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/norincointernational-to-build-usd15-billion-chemical-plant-iniran>; Tang Shihua, "China's Norinco International to Establish New Energy Development Firm in Iran," Yi Cai Global, February 1, 2018, <https://www.yicaiglobal.com/news/china-norinco-international-to-establish-new-energydevelopment-firm-in-iran>.

⁴⁶ "Inside the secret oil trade that funds Iran's wars," *The Economist*, October 17, 2024, <https://www.economist.com/finance-and-economics/2024/10/17/inside-the-secret-oil-trade-that-funds-irans-wars>

⁴⁷ Emil Avdaliani, "China's 2023 Trade and Investment with Iran: Development Trends," Silk Road Briefing, February 12, 2023, <https://www.silkroadbriefing.com/news/2023/02/08/chinas-2023-trade-and-investmentwith-iran-development-trends/>.

⁴⁸ Will Green and Taylore Roth, *China-Iran Relations: A Limited but Enduring Strategic Partnership*, (Washington, DC: U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, 2021), https://www.uscc.gov/sites/default/files/2021-06/China-Iran_Relations.pdf, p.14-15.

⁴⁹ "Press Release: Treasury Sanctions Global Iranian Nuclear Enrichment Network," US Department of Treasury, July 18, 2019, <https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm736>.

3. Are Russia, China, Iran and North Korea taking steps towards interoperability or greater military coordination with their joint exercises? What would be the implications for U.S. interests were these powers to deepen their levels of coordination?

Despite strong bilateral ties between China, Russia, and Iran, there is little evidence of meaningful progress toward trilateral interoperability at present.

Trilateral naval exercises—the only publicly known instance of military coordination among China, Russia, and Iran—remain relatively limited. Unlike the more advanced bilateral drills between Russia and China over the past five years,⁵⁰ trilateral exercises featuring Iran have involved fairly standard tactical-level maritime exercise activities and have hardly changed in this focus over the years. The 2024 edition, called “Security Bond–2024” (or alternatively “Maritime Security Belt 2024”) was focused primarily on “firing at sea and armed rescue of hijacked merchant vessels.” Previous iterations of the exercises were similarly focused on simulated hijacked vessel rescue operations and nighttime target shooting. The types of Russian and Chinese vessels involved in these exercises have changed little over the years.⁵¹

Beyond multilateral exercises, however, coordination among these states could deepen in other critical areas. China, Russia, and Iran’s expanding collaboration in space and cyber domains warrants close attention as a potential avenue for strengthened trilateral cooperation.⁵² In 2021, Iran gained full military access to China’s BeiDou satellite navigation system. The following year, during President Vladimir Putin’s high-profile visit to Beijing for the Winter Olympics, China and Russia signed an agreement to integrate BeiDou with Russia’s GLONASS system.⁵³ Later in 2022, the two countries reinforced this commitment by convening the ninth meeting of the China-Russia Satellite Navigation Major Strategic Cooperation Project Committee, where they signed additional agreements on the joint construction, operation, and maintenance of BeiDou and GLONASS ground stations to “achieve mutual compatibility and data sharing between the two systems.”⁵⁴

⁵⁰ Dmitry Gorenburg, Elizabeth Wishnick, Paul Schwartz, and Brian Waidelich, “How Advanced Is Russian-Chinese Military Cooperation?,” *War on the Rocks*, June 26, 2023, <https://warontherocks.com/2023/06/29000/>; Brian G. Garrison, “The Growing Significance of China-Russia Defense Cooperation,” Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, September 18, 2024, <https://ssi.armywarcollege.edu/SSI-Media/Recent-Publications/Display/Article/3908561/the-growing-significance-of-china-russia-defense-cooperation/>.

⁵¹ Lucas Winter, Jemima Baar, Jason Warner, “The Axis Off-Kilter: Why an Iran-Russia-China Axis is Shakier than Meets the Eye”

⁵² Minnie Chan, “North Korea using Russian satellite navigation system instead of China’s BeiDou.” *South China Morning Post*, January 18, 2022, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3163727/north-korea-using-russian-satellite-navigation-system-instead>.

⁵³ Jemima Baar, “BeiDou And Strategic Advancements in PRC Space Navigation,” *Jamestown Foundation China Brief* Vol. 24 Issue 5, March 1, 2024, <https://jamestown.org/program/beidou-and-strategic-advancements-in-prc-space-navigation/>.

⁵⁴ He Qisong and Ye Nishan, “Analysis of Space Cooperation Between China and Russia,” *中国与俄罗斯太空合作分析*, *Russian Studies*, August 2, 2021, via CSIS <https://interpret.csis.org/translations/analysis-of-space-cooperation-between-china-and-russia/>

Increased interoperability between positioning, navigation, and timing (PNT) systems would enable the three states to provide more effective support to each other in the event of hostilities. This could range from supplying arms and critical military hardware that is interoperable to offering real-time intelligence, secure communications, and battlefield awareness. Ultimately, deeper integration between these systems could strengthen collective military capabilities, making coordinated action in different theaters and across multiple domains more feasible and therefore complicating the United States' strategic calculations.

4. How does China's leadership plan to balance its relationship with Iran and other Gulf countries?

China carefully balances its relationships across the Middle East to secure a stable oil supply while avoiding overdependence on any single country. To this end, Beijing tries to limit crude oil imports from any one supplier to no more than 20% of its total intake.⁵⁵ In 2023, China imported 1.1 million barrels per day (bpd) from Iran, making it China's fourth-largest supplier after Russia (2.15 million bpd), Saudi Arabia (1.73 million bpd), and Iraq (1.19 million bpd).⁵⁶ While Beijing's ties with Tehran are significant, they are far from exclusive: China's economic engagement with Gulf states is far deeper. In 2022, China's trade with the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia reached \$99 billion and \$87 billion, respectively, compared to just \$16 billion with Iran.⁵⁷ Given these dynamics, Beijing has little incentive to prioritize relations with Tehran at the expense of its Gulf partners.

For the same reasons, China carefully calibrates its level of strategic engagement with each of its partners in the Middle East. In 2016, China upgraded its ties with Saudi Arabia to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership—the second-highest tier in Beijing's diplomatic hierarchy—just three days before doing the same with Iran.⁵⁸ China later extended this status to the United Arab Emirates in 2018.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Yun Sun, "Forecasting China's strategy in the Middle East over the next four years," Brookings, December 19, 2024, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/forecasting-chinas-strategy-in-the-middle-east-over-the-next-four-years/#:~:text=Continued%20dependence%20on%20Middle%20Eastern%20oil&text=In%202022%2C%20about%2053%25%20of,compared%20to%20the%20previous%20year>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Christopher S. Chivvis and Jack Keating, "Cooperation Between China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia: Current and Potential Future Threats to America," Carnegie, October 8, 2024, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america?lang=en¢er=russia-eurasia>.

⁵⁸ Saeed Vaidya, "Analysing China-Saudi Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, ORCA," February 28, 2023, <https://orca.org/article/156/analysing-china-saudi-comprehensive-strategic-partnership>; "Quick guide to China's diplomatic levels," *South China Morning Post*, January 20, 2016, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy-defence/article/1903455/quick-guide-chinas-diplomatic-levels>; "Statement on 'Document of Comprehensive Cooperation between Iran and China,'" Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, March 27, 2023, <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/newsview/632866>.

⁵⁹ "Ambassador Zhang Jianwei Gives an Exclusive Interview with Kuwait TV Program '10-minute Talk on Diplomacy,'" Embassy of the People's Republic of China in the State of Kuwait, December 12, 2023, http://kw.china-embassy.gov.cn/eng/xwdt/202312/t20231227_11213542.htm; "Bilateral Relationship," UAE Embassy in Beijing, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/Missions/Beijing/UAE-Relationships/Bilateral-Relationship>.

5. Describe areas of divergence in the China-Iran relationship. Are there any significant points of friction in the China-Iran relationship that could derail it?

China's ties with the Gulf states remain a significant constraint on deepening its relationship with Iran, as these partnerships are too economically valuable to jeopardize. In a notable example of Beijing's balancing act, China sided with the United Arab Emirates in a dispute over three Gulf islands claimed by Iran, prompting Iranian international relations scholar Hassan Beheshtipour to question whether Iran's ties with China are truly "strategic."⁶⁰

China has been consistently cautious about openly defying U.S. sanctions on Iran, limiting overt state activity in the country. Most major Chinese state-owned oil refiners have ceased transactions with Iran due to sanctions risks.⁶¹ Instead, approximately 90% of Chinese crude imports from Iran come from small, independent "teapot" refineries, which purchase oil through a shadow fleet of tankers that rebrand it as originating from Malaysia or elsewhere in the Middle East.⁶² Yet, China remains wary. As Yang Xiaotong, an analyst at a Beijing-based think tank observes, "Chinese refineries will only assume the risk of buying Iranian oil if the price is low enough."⁶³

Meanwhile, Iran seeks a far closer partnership with China. Following trilateral naval exercises in 2023, Iranian analysts enthusiastically proclaimed that "a new anti-NATO coalition is slowly forming," even speculating that North Korea could join to create a powerful military alliance.⁶⁴ Although it is the newest member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Tehran has aggressively pushed for a reorientation of the bloc toward greater military cooperation. Shortly after Iran's accession, Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad-Reza Ashtiani asserted that SCO member states share "the responsibility for designing a new world order."⁶⁵ He proposed the creation of a "Shanghai Maritime Security Belt," a military initiative to safeguard trade among SCO members.⁶⁶ Though this proposal has not gained traction, had it been embraced, it would have marked a fundamental shift in the SCO's mission—from countering what China defines as

⁶⁰ Umud Shokri, "Obstacles and opportunities for closer Iranian-Chinese economic cooperation," Middle East Institute, June 23, 2023, <https://mei.edu/publications/obstacles-and-opportunities-closer-iranian-chinese-economic-cooperation>.

⁶¹ Kimberly Donovan and Maia Nikoladze, "The axis of evasion: Behind China's oil trade with Iran and Russia," Atlantic Council, March 28, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/the-axis-of-evasion-behind-chinas-oil-trade-with-iran-and-russia/>

⁶² Chen Aizhu and Muyu Xu, "Exclusive: Iran's oil trade with China stalls as Tehran demands higher prices," Reuters, January 7, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/irans-oil-trade-with-china-stalls-tehran-demands-higher-prices-2024-01-05/>.

⁶³ Yang Xiaotong, "China's influence over Iran limited by teapot refineries," Asia Times, August 27, 2024, <https://asiatimes.com/2024/08/chinas-influence-over-iran-limited-by-teapot-refineries/>.

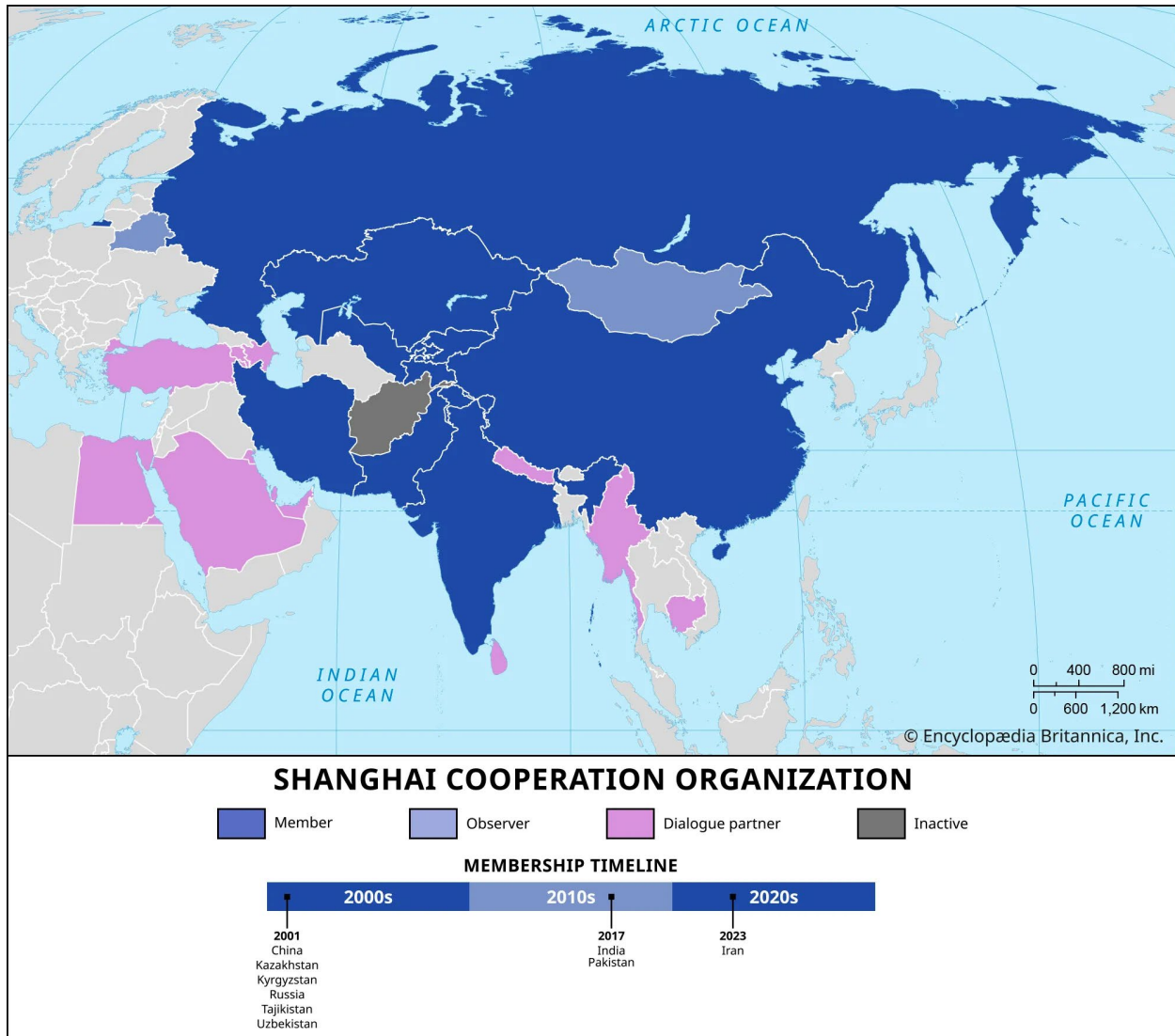
⁶⁴ "A powerful military alliance of Iran, Russia, and China is being formed," *Tehran Times*, December 4, 2023, <https://media.mehrnews.com/d/2023/12/03/0/4760662.pdf?ts=1701625160885>.

⁶⁵ "Iran Calls for Shanghai Cooperation Organization's More Balanced Defence Policies," Islamic Republic News Agency, April 28, 2023, <https://en.irna.ir/news/85095207/Iran-calls-for-Shanghai-group-s-more-balanced-defense-policies>

⁶⁶ Lucas Winter, "Iran's Proposed Maritime Security Alliance Draws Mixed Reviews," Foreign Military Studies Office, August 27, 2023, <https://fmso.tradoc.army.mil/2023/irans-proposed-maritime-security-alliance-draws-mixed-reviews/>

the “Three Evils” (terrorism, separatism, and extremism) to directly countering external state threats.⁶⁷ Tellingly, neither China nor Russia has publicly responded to Iran’s proposal.

Figure 4: Members and Dialogue Partners of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization⁶⁸



Despite these divergences, there is no indication that China-Iran relations are fraying. The debate is not over whether a partnership should exist but rather over how closely aligned it should be. While Tehran seeks closer and more militarized coordination (even to the extent of a formal alliance), Beijing holds sufficient leverage to temper these ambitions while maintaining the relationship at a level that serves its strategic interests.

⁶⁷ Charter of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, https://www.iri.edu.ar/publicaciones_iri/manual/Doc.%20Manual/Listos%20para%20subir/ASIA/SHANGAI-ORG/charter_shanghai_cooperation_organization.pdf

⁶⁸ Encyclopedia Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Shanghai-Cooperation-Organization>.

6. To what extent could China’s relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea evolve into formalized alliances? Are there scenarios where any or all of these countries would consider providing military, economic, or political support to China in a military conflict?

The most critical factor in determining whether China’s relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea evolve into formalized alliances is China itself.

Over the past year, Russia and North Korea have committed to provide “military and other assistance” if either party faces armed invasion. Russia has signed a “comprehensive partnership treaty” with Iran, though without a mutual defense clause. Meanwhile, Iran is eager to foster a more formalized alliance with China, Russia, and North Korea.

Meanwhile, successive Chinese leaders, including President Xi Jinping, have continued to emphasize China’s commitment to the non-alliance principle.⁶⁹ In an address to the Chinese Communist Party’s Central Conference on Foreign Affairs in 2014, Xi Jinping called on China to “develop a distinctive diplomatic approach befitting its role as a great power” by “making more friends while abiding by the principle of non-alignment and building a global network of partnerships.”⁷⁰ Though the announcement of China and Russia’s “no limits” friendship just days before Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 shone a spotlight on the deepening relationship between the two states, officials on both sides vociferously reject any portrayal of the relationship as a formal alliance.⁷¹ The joint statement issued after Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin met in March 2023 specified that the Sino-Russian relationship differed from Cold War-era military and political alliances and adhered to Deng-era principles of “non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting of third countries.”⁷²

China’s reluctance to form military alliances may stem from several factors. First, its historical experiences during the Cold War left lasting scars. Alliances with the Soviet Union and North Korea proved costly and fraught with strategic divergences, reinforcing China’s wariness of entangling commitments. The Sino-Soviet split, in particular, demonstrated the perils of aligning too closely with another great power, while China’s intervention in the Korean War underscored the dangers of being drawn into conflicts driven by allies’ interests rather than its own.⁷³

⁶⁹ “Full Text of Jiang Zemin’s Report at 14th Party Congress,” 29 March, 1992; *China’s Peaceful Development* (Beijing: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, September 2011).

⁷⁰ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, ‘The Central Conference on Work Relating to Foreign Affairs Was Held in Beijing’, 29 November, 2014.

⁷¹ “Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China on the International Relations Entering a New Era and the Global Sustainable Development,” *Kremlin*, February 4, 2022.

⁷² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “中华人民共和国和俄罗斯联邦关于深化新时代全面战略协作伙伴关系的联合声明,” (Joint Statement between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation on Deepening the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership of Coordination for a New Era), March 22, 2023.

⁷³ Jemima Baar, “Cold War Confrontations: US Intelligence Insights and Policy Responses to the Sino-Soviet Split and the Second Taiwan Strait Crisis (1956-1961),” <https://intelligencestudies.utexas.edu/inman-award/>; Zhihua Shen, “Sino-Soviet Relations and the Origins of the Korean War: Stalin’s Strategic Goals in the Far East” *Journal of Cold War Studies* 2:2 (2000).

Second, the Communist Party's Marxist-Leninist governance model prioritizes centralized decision-making and absolute control over both domestic and foreign affairs.⁷⁴ Formal alliances, especially those requiring mutual defense commitments, inherently involve some degree of strategic coordination and obligation. This contradicts Beijing's preference for flexibility in its foreign policy, where it seeks to maximize autonomy while minimizing external constraints on its decision-making.

Third, each of China's potential allies—North Korea, Russia, and Iran—are aggressive actors with ongoing hostilities against other states. North Korea's persistent threats against South Korea, Russia's war in Ukraine, and Iran's hostilities toward Israel all raise the specter of entrapment.⁷⁵ A formal military alliance with any of them could obligate China to intervene in conflicts that do not align with its strategic priorities or national interests.

However, the lack of a formal alliance structure does not diminish the operational and strategic depth of these partnerships. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea's shared grievances against the U.S.-led world order have already proven capable of shaping global conflicts in meaningful ways. The states have demonstrated a pattern of mutual support that extends beyond rhetorical alignment. They have collectively shaped global narratives, coordinated messaging to challenge Western-led institutions, and worked together in international organizations (for instance, China and Russia using their UN Security Council veto to block an extension of the arms embargo on Iran in 2020). Russia, Iran, and North Korea and (in secondary terms) China comprise what could be termed the "axis of the sanctioned" and have already provided each other with significant economic relief, circumventing Western-led sanctions through alternative trade mechanisms, currency swap agreements, and illicit networks. This economic backing has not only allowed regimes like Russia and Iran to sustain themselves under heavy sanctions but has also strengthened their ability to support military operations abroad. Given these precedents, it is plausible that such economic assistance would persist, insulating China from the full impact of any economic measures imposed in the event of a conflict.

Moreover, as Russia's case demonstrates, the absence of a mutual defense clause does not preclude substantial military aid. This sets a clear precedent: if China were to engage in a military conflict, Russia, Iran, and North Korea could provide lethal assistance if needed. Moreover, the states might even coordinate operations to exert pressure on multiple fronts simultaneously, though such a scenario remains speculative and contingent on leadership decisions at the time.

⁷⁴ Kevin Rudd, "The World According to Xi Jinping," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/world-according-xi-jinping-china-ideologue-kevin-rudd>

⁷⁵ The concept of entrapment was developed by Glen Snyder in *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

7. The Commission is mandated to make policy recommendations to Congress based on its hearings and other research. What recommendations for legislative action would you make based on the topic of your testimony?

1. **Define a Clear, Forward-Looking Vision**

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are explicit, consistent, and proactive about their goals. As the defenders of the status quo, the United States and its allies, by contrast, risk being merely reactive. This must change. Washington needs a compelling, proactive vision—a blueprint for what the United States and its allies stand for, what they seek to achieve, and why it matters.

This means articulating not just what Washington opposes, but what it offers—a model of stability, prosperity, and sovereignty that resonates globally. Rather than relying on ad hoc responses, Washington must build a coherent framework that integrates economic statecraft, technological leadership, military deterrence, and diplomatic engagement into a unified strategy. As in the Cold War, such a vision should be directed to unite domestic and allied publics and form the guiding principles to prevail in a prolonged strategic competition.

2. **Expose and Define the Threat**

The United States is unlikely to offer incentives or threats strong enough to break the bonds between China, Russia, and Iran. But there is a broader global audience to persuade. The expanding network of dialogue partners within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization risks legitimizing Beijing's efforts and directly undermining Washington's influence. To counter this, the United States must coordinate a concerted messaging campaign to expose Beijing's violations of international norms and its complicity in global instability. China's deepening ties with Russia and Iran should be framed as a threat to all, not a tantalizing alternative.

3. **Target China's Illicit Trade Networks**

Given its deep trade ties with the United States, China remains wary of provoking American sanctions. This leverage should be exploited more assertively. Sanctions enforcement must be stricter, with harsher penalties on Chinese state-owned enterprises complicit in sanctions evasion, arms trafficking, and illicit finance. A more aggressive approach could curb China's engagement with Iran.

4. Share the Burden—Strengthen Alliances

The scale of this challenge demands a coordinated, multilateral response. Washington must delegate responsibilities strategically; meanwhile, U.S. allies should take on greater responsibility in their respective regions. By distributing the burden, the United States can maintain focus on overarching strategic priorities without stretching its resources too thin, preserving its ability to counter China’s global influence effectively.

5. Prepare for the Worst—Without Losing Sight of Priorities

The United States must stay resolute in its Pivot to Asia, recognizing that Beijing benefits from a distracted Washington. However, a hasty or complete disengagement from the Middle East or Europe would be equally perilous. Stability in these regions underpins the broader strategic environment, ensuring the free flow of energy, securing vital trade routes, and preventing adversaries from filling a power vacuum. By maintaining a balanced global posture—prioritizing Asia while sustaining credible deterrence and partnerships in other key theaters—the United States preserves its strategic flexibility, preventing China from exploiting disorder elsewhere to its advantage.

Ultimately, Washington must set the terms of the competition rather than allowing revisionist powers to dictate them. A clear, forward-looking agenda will not only strengthen the United States’ alliances but also expose the contradictions in the alternative vision offered by China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—one rooted in coercion, instability, and suppression of sovereignty. Just as George Kennan’s Long Telegram provided the intellectual foundation for Cold War strategy, Washington must now craft a 21st-century doctrine that unites allies and persuades the undecided, ensuring that the balance of power tilts toward a free and open international order.