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RUSSIA TOMORROW:
NAVIGATING A NEW PARADIGM

THE CRINK: Inside the new bloc supporting Russia's war against Ukraine

Angela Stent

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Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 challenged much of the common Western understanding of Russia. How can the world better understand Russia? What are the steps forward for Western policy? The Eurasia Center's new "Russia Tomorrow" series seeks to reevaluate conceptions of Russia today and better prepare for its future tomorrow.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Russia's war against Ukraine has brought it a new set of partners. While this group is sometimes referred to as an axis, in reality it is a set of intensifying bilateral ties with countries—China, Iran and North Korea—that are essential for Russia's continued prosecution of the war. The presence of these countries' leaders at the military parade in Beijing to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the end of World War II in Asia—and their fulsome commitment to a new world order that the United States no longer dominates—suggests that these countries increasingly constitute an anti-US bloc, united not by shared values but by shared grievances.

These three authoritarian states are essential allies not only in the war on Ukraine, but also in Russian President Vladimir Putin's plan for a "post-West" global order. In Putin's vision, this would be a multipolar world in which the United States has lost its "hegemonic" role and is only one of several great powers setting the global agenda. As Putin noted at the 2024 Valdai International Discussion Club, "What is at stake is the West's monopoly, which emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union and was held temporarily at the end of the twentieth century. But let me reiterate, as those gathered here understand: any monopoly, as history teaches us, eventually comes to an end."

What is the nature of Russia's relationship with these three revisionist powers? To what extent do they coordinate their policies? How durable are these new sets of relationships and how might they evolve once the war is over? This report will address these questions and suggest how the West might deal with "the CRINK"—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—collectively and individually going forward.

CHINA

For centuries, Russia's ties with China were complex and often adversarial, culminating in armed clashes on the Sino-Soviet border in 1969 (the latest in a series of skirmishes that occurred over the centuries). The original Russian mission to China was established in Beijing in 1658, and the two countries' ties fluctuated between cooperation and conflict for the next three hundred years. The Russian empire in the mid-nineteenth century annexed what is now the Russian Far East from China, building up the city of Vladivostok, which in Russian means "ruler of the East." Joseph Stalin did not welcome Mao Zedong's victory in the Chinese Civil War and, after Stalin's death, relations deteriorated rapidly, culminating in the 1969 border clashes. Relations began to improve under Mikhail Gorbachev, even though the Chinese were appalled by the collapse of the USSR and the end of Soviet communism. Throughout the centuries, it was clear that Russia and China were not natural partners; Russians consider themselves culturally to be Europeans, not Asians.

In 2022, Putin closed Russia's window on Europe. Before the invasion of Ukraine, he had prioritized improving ties with China, but since 2022 he has made an unprecedented turn to Asia, courting a larger group of countries. In his quarter century in the Kremlin (with a technical hiatus from 2008–2012 when Dmitry Medvedev nominally led Russia), Putin has courted China, especially after Xi Jinping came to power in 2013. Xi's first foreign trip was to Russia and the two leaders have met more than forty times since then. They appear to enjoy close personal ties, even if one discounts some of the hyperbole they use when praising each other. Both are autocratic leaders, ideologically aligned and allergic to Western criticisms of their democratic deficits. Neither publicly criticizes the other's domestic politics. Both publicly favor a multipolar world in which the United States is much diminished and retreats from their respective neighborhoods. China has been Russia's largest trading partner since 2009, and their bilateral trade has doubled since 2020. The economic relationship is much more important for Russia than for China, but China is a top purchaser of Russian hydrocarbons. Since the start of the war in Ukraine and the imposition of Western energy sanctions against Russia, China has benefited from importing cheap Russian oil.

Putin's pivot to China began in earnest after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 and the beginning of the war in the Donbas instigated by Russian proxies and aided by Moscow. China intensified its economic and political ties with Russia after the imposition of Western sanctions and Russia's ejection from the Group of Eight. Russia and China might not be formal allies, but their ties have deepened and strengthened since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As Putin has said, Russia and China "are better than allies." So, despite all the asymmetries in this relationship, it represents a major reorientation of centuries-old Russian foreign policy away from the West and to the East. Even if the partnership is essentially transactional, as long as the leadership in Moscow and Beijing continues to share a basic worldview, the Russian-Chinese partnership will remain a seri-

ous challenge to the United States, Europe, and their Asian allies through 2050 and beyond.

What does Russia get out of its strategic partnership with China? Without knowing that China would support him, Putin would not have launched his full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Indeed, he visited Beijing weeks before the invasion and apparently understood that Xi would not criticize his actions as long as he delayed the invasion until after the end of the Beijing Olympics.

China is an enabler of Putin's war. It has repeated the Russian narrative about NATO's responsibility for the war and blames the West for the conflict. More importantly, China has given Russia substantial economic, military, and technological assistance for its war machine and is a top purchaser of Russian hydrocarbons, providing the financial wherewithal for the war to continue. Chinese contract soldiers are also fighting with the Russian army in Ukraine. Despite some initial Western hopes that Beijing could act as a mediator and help broker peace between Russia and Ukraine, China's anemic peace plan was never serious and China has shown no interest in bringing the war to an end. Indeed, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi told the European Union's foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas that Beijing cannot accept Russia losing its war against Ukraine as this could allow the United States to turn its full attention to China, contradicting Beijing's public position of neutrality in the conflict. Indeed, Putin sees China as essential for preserving his own regime's security.

The Russia-China economic relationship is essential for Russia. China became Russia's economic lifeline after the Western sanctions were imposed in 2022. It is a highly asymmetrical relationship, with Russia far more dependent on China than vice versa, exchanging raw materials and military hardware for Chinese manufactured goods and technology. Trade with China represents 26 percent of Russia's total trade, while trade with Russia represents only 3 percent of China's total trade. China remains Russia's most important trade partner, whereas Russia ranks sixth for China and the United States is by far China's highest-ranked trading partner. Chinese goods have now replaced many of the Western goods that disappeared from Russia after the 2022 sanctions. Bilateral trade has doubled since 2022 and payments in rubles and renminbi are replacing the US dollar and the euro. Beijing and Moscow are also actively constructing an alternative international payments system to the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication (SWIFT) system, from which Russia was partially ejected after the invasion.

Moreover, there is evidence that China has increased sales to Russia of machine tools, microelectronics, and other technology that Moscow is using to produce missiles, tanks, aircraft, and other weaponry for use in its war against Ukraine. For example, 90 percent of Russia's microelectronics come from China. Even if China does not directly export weapons to Russia, it supplies key components used in Russia's arsenal.

Military cooperation has also increased significantly in the past few years. This includes joint exercises in the South China Sea, long-range bomber patrols near Alaska, and air and naval joint exercises that have intruded into Japanese and South Korean airspace. Russia and China have conducted joint naval exercises with Iran and with South Africa in recent years. While cooperation and integra-

tion between the Russian armed forces and China's People's Liberation Army is limited, the potential for deeper integration is there. Russian-Chinese technological cooperation in the military field is growing, including in artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and space technology. This multifaceted military cooperation has been beneficial for Russia, which remains behind China technologically.

China is Russia's essential partner in seeking to challenge US and Western interests around the world and undermine the current international order. Both countries want to make the world safe for authoritarianism at home and abroad and to eliminate what remains of Western democracy-promotion efforts. Both see the United States as their principal adversary. And both are promoting alternative multilateral organizations, such as the expanding BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which have no Western members. Russia has managed to increase its influence in the Global South since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine and China has largely supported it in these efforts. It joins Russia in appealing to Global South countries that are wary of the United States and its allies, refuse to choose sides in the Russia-Ukraine war, or view the war as an opportunity to increase their own leverage internationally.

But Russia's quest for a post-West global order might put it at odds with China going forward. For now, Russia accepts being the junior partner in this alliance; it really has no other choice. But China ultimately does not view Russia as a peer. It sees Russia as a second-rate power, whereas China views itself as a first-rate power and an equal with the United States. As the world's second-largest economy and largest trading state, China has a far greater stake in regional and global stability than does Russia. Putin used to favor a tripartite Yalta model (after the World War II US-UK-USSR Yalta Conference) for a future global order, in which Russia, China, and the United States would divide the world into three spheres of influence and would not interfere in the other countries' spheres. But Putin also appears to favor a Hobbesian world order in which instability and disruption serve Russia's interests. China seeks a post-West order with rules, while Russia prefers a world disorder will no rules.

Despite proclamation of a "no-limits" partnership, mistrust and rivalry in the Russo-Chinese relationship persists. China is wary of Russia's growing relationship with North Korea because it could embolden North Korea to act more aggressively on the Korean peninsula. Xi might also wonder about the longer-term implications of a reset of US-Russian relations under President Donald Trump. The Trump administration has implied that improved ties between Trump and Putin might cause Putin to rethink Russia's close ties with China. This is probably an unrealistic goal, given the close ties between the two countries, but Xi cannot be unaware of Washington's hopes on this score. Indeed, shortly before his election, Trump said of Russia and China, "I'm going to have to un-unite them, and I think I can do that, too." Moreover, areas of potential Sino-Russian rivalry extend from Central Asia to Africa, South Asia, and the Arctic. And then there are unresolved territorial issues, although these are a longer-term problem. Many in China believe that the Russian Far East, which was conquered by the tsars in the mid-nineteenth century, rightfully belongs to China and must one day be returned.

The Russian concern about longer-term Chinese goals was revealed in a leaked document from the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB), which referred to

China as “the enemy” and warned that China is a serious threat to Russian security. The FSB fears Beijing’s efforts to recruit spies from Russia’s scientific community and access sensitive military technology through them. China, it claims, is spying on Russia’s military operations in Ukraine to gain knowledge about Western weapons and warfare. There is also evidence that Chinese groups linked to the government have repeatedly hacked Russian government agencies and companies, searching for military secrets.

Despite mutual suspicions and espionage, Russia and China, in Xi’s words, will continue to walk hand in hand. Putin has framed defeating Ukraine and its Western supporters as an existential issue for both the survival of the Russian state and his own ability to remain in power. Without China, he cannot subdue Ukraine nor secure his regime’s security.

IRAN

Russia and Iran have historically had a complex and sometimes antagonistic relationship. But since February 2022, Iran has become an indispensable supporter of Russia's war, supplying it with drones that have killed Ukrainian soldiers and civilians and destroyed Ukrainian infrastructure. Iran—like China, North Korea, and Russia—seeks to challenge the US-led international order.

For centuries, the Persian and Russian empires were rivals and fought a succession of wars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These wars led consecutive Iranian dynasties to cede the three South Caucasus states and Dagestan in the North Caucasus to the Russian Empire. The Soviet Union supported secessionist movements in Iran in the 1920s. And just after World War II ended, Moscow refused to withdraw its troops from northern Iran, which it had occupied during the war. The Soviets then developed a profitable economic relationship with the shah's regime while, at the same time, supporting the Iranian Communist Party. In the initial years following the overthrow of the shah in 1979, relations between Moscow and Tehran became strained. Iran's new rulers called the atheist Soviet Union the "Lesser Satan," as opposed to the United States as the "Great Satan." The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan further galvanized Islamic anti-Soviet sentiments, but ties improved after the Soviet-Afghan War ended.

Once Putin came into office in 2000, nuclear power became a focus of the relationship, much to the consternation of the United States. Russia accelerated the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and agreed to build eight more plants in Iran. When Medvedev was president, US President Barack Obama persuaded him to join tough United Nations (UN) sanctions against Iran after its secret uranium enrichment facility was uncovered near Qom. But after the sanctions were lifted, Russian-Iranian relations grew closer.

It is not known what Iran is receiving in return for its current support of Russia's war and whether imports from Russia are strengthening Iran's ability to weaponize its enriched uranium. A decade ago, a Russian Middle East expert reported a conversation with a Russian diplomat who said that "a pro-American Iran is far more dangerous for us than a nuclear Iran."

From the 1990s until 2022, Russia provided important military assistance to Iran across the ground, aerospace, and naval domains. This was focused more on hardware than technology transfer and consisted of tanks, armored vehicles, anti-tank missiles, combat aircraft, and surface-to-air missiles. There was also unofficial assistance for Iran's ballistic missile and suspected chemical and biological weapons programs.

Prior to the 2022 war on Ukraine, Russia and Iran also grew closer once Moscow involved itself in the Syrian civil war and joined with Iran in backing former Syrian

dictator Bashar al-Assad. Russia's intervention also strengthened the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps fighting there. Before February 2022, it appeared that the two countries were working closely together in Syria despite differences over issues such as the Caspian Sea demarcation.

Iran was instrumental in assisting Russia at the outbreak of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine after Moscow failed to take Kyiv in three days. It provided Shahed drones, which the two countries now co-produce, and Russian-Iranian defense cooperation has increased markedly since then. Russia, however, has been constrained in how much of its own equipment it can deliver to Iran, such as SU-35 fighter jets and the S-400 missile defense systems, given its own needs as Moscow continues the war.

Russia and Iran have also formalized this relationship. In January 2025, Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian traveled to Moscow to sign a comprehensive strategic partnership treaty with Russia. The treaty was presented as a breakthrough between the two countries, but that is an exaggeration. It mainly codifies the close ties that have developed since February 2022. It also stipulates that Russia would not come to Iran's assistance if it were attacked by the United States or Israel.

Questions also hang over the Russian-Iranian relationship since the overthrow of Assad in Syria and the coming to power of Ahmed al-Sharaa, whose forces fought both Russia and Iran during the long Syrian civil war. While Russia and Iran were joined in supporting Assad, that cooperation is no longer relevant.

Russia sees Iran as an important bridge between Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and South Asia, enhancing the connectivity and the reach of Putin's Greater Eurasia project. A key component of this project is the North-South Transportation Corridor (INSTC). The completion of the INSTC is now a strategic goal for Moscow, and the corridor will facilitate trade between Russia, Iran, and other regional partners, connecting Eurasia to the Persian Gulf and South Asia. The ability to bypass Western-aligned countries will allow Russia not only to skirt sanctions, but also to facilitate closer ties with countries along the corridor.

Before the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023, Russia and Israel enjoyed close relations. Israelis described Russia as a neighbor because of its presence in Syria. Russia worked with Israel to prevent the Iranian-backed Hezbollah from attacking Israeli targets, and Israel remained dependent on Russia for security in its north. Since October 7, the situation has changed as Russia has supported Hamas and Putin has distanced himself from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. But at the same time, Russia does not share Iran's commitment to the destruction of Israel. One-sixth of Israel's population comes from the former Soviet Union and there are multiple family and business ties between Russia and Israel.

Of course, one important element of the Russian-Iranian relationship is ideological: their shared animosity toward the United States and commitment to a post-West world. Putin has said that he views Iran as important to the "formation of a more equitable multipolar world order."

Russia and Iran have been driven closer together since February 2022 because of their isolation from much of the world. But that could change if the war with

Ukraine ends and Trump's new reset attempts result in a restored US-Russian relationship. How might that change the Russian-Iranian relationship? Over the years, Iran has become an increasingly important part of Putin's drive to replace the current international system with a post-West order in which the United States can no longer set the rules. Even if US sanctions on Moscow are lifted and US-Russian ties improve, Iran will remain both a political ally and a customer for Russian goods. If either country experiences a regime change, the situation could look different. But for now, the leaders in Moscow and Tehran appear to be securely ensconced, even if their respective populations remain wary of each other. Just as a US-Russian rapprochement will not succeed in separating Russia from China, better ties with Washington will not induce Moscow to rupture the partnership it has developed with Tehran.

During the Obama administration, Russia played a positive role in negotiating the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) agreement restricting Iran's nuclear program. However, Trump pulled the United States out of that agreement during his first term. Now he seeks to negotiate a new nuclear deal, and Putin has offered to help facilitate such an agreement. However, the Kremlin's attitude toward a new deal is ambivalent. Lifting sanctions on Iran is not necessarily in Russia's interest, as Iran could produce additional volumes of oil and compete with Russia again on the international market. So the ideal scenario for the Kremlin would probably be to have the negotiations continue indefinitely with no resolution.

Israel's attack on Iran highlights the dilemma Moscow faces in dealing with Tehran—and the limits of its influence. Russia immediately condemned the attacks, and Putin and Xi called for a cease-fire and negotiations. But Russia has done little to help Iran militarily and is not obliged to do so by the terms of their strategic partnership treaty. It needs Iran less than it did at the beginning of the Ukraine war, because it is now capable of manufacturing up to 2,700 Iranian-designed Shahed drones a month inside Russia.

Russia's relations with Iran are indeed linked to its complex ties with Israel. Despite the souring of Israeli-Russian relations since October 7, 2023, both Moscow and Jerusalem want to preserve their bilateral ties. Russia does not share Iran's stated goal of destroying Israel and might have more to gain economically from Israel than from Iran.

NORTH KOREA

Relations between Moscow and Pyongyang have fluctuated in the eighty years since the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) was first established. Today, North Korea's main value for Russia is twofold: to provide artillery, other weapons, and troops for Russia's war against Ukraine and to be part of the cheering squad for Russia's emergence as the leader of the so-called "world majority" (i.e., the Global South). Preventing Korea being reunited and allied with the West has always been a key Russian goal.

The Soviet Union helped create the DPRK and largely bankrolled it until the Soviet collapse. It was instrumental in launching the Korean War and then supporting North Korea during the war, although Stalin miscalculated the US response. The war remained a controversial topic between the two countries for many years. Demonstrating his independence, North Korean dictator Kim Il-Sung refused to join Comecon, the Soviet-led economic bloc, and North Korea remained neutral during the years of the Sino-Soviet split. No top Soviet leader ever visited the country, although the Soviet Union continued to provide military assistance to Pyongyang. When Gorbachev came to power, he upended the bilateral relationship by establishing diplomatic relations with South Korea and seeking investment and loans from Seoul. Shortly thereafter, the Soviet Union collapsed and financial support for Pyongyang disappeared, with disastrous consequences for North Korea. Bilateral ties recovered slowly, and Putin visited Pyongyang early in his presidency. Kim Jong-Il visited Russia in 2001 and 2002, but little came of these visits.

Before the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Russia-North Korea ties had started to improve. Before the invasion, ten thousand North Korean workers were sent to work in Russia's Far East. Despite UN sanctions on North Korea, Russia continued to export coal, oil, and food to North Korea. But China was seen as North Korea's main supporter until the Russian war on Ukraine.

Russia's invasion transformed ties between Moscow and Pyongyang. North Korea immediately supported Russia after the war began, particularly at the UN. North Korea was one of only two states (Syria is the other) to give diplomatic recognition to the Russian-occupied Ukrainian territories of Donetsk and Luhansk in 2022. Unlike China, which often abstains on Ukraine-related votes, North Korea has voted many times to support Russian positions on Ukraine at the UN. In 2023, in recognition of North Korea's support, Russia increased its exports of food and oil, and North Korea and Russia began to exchange high-level visits—more than two dozen since 2023.

A turning point came when Kim attended the 2023 Far East Economic Forum in Vladivostok, where he met Putin and visited the Vostochny Cosmodrome to see Russia's latest technological innovations in the space field.

Shortly thereafter, Pyongyang began supplying millions of rounds of badly needed ammunition and missiles to Russia. In return, it is believed that Russia supplied North Korea with missiles and space technology; North Korea later carried out a successful missile test. And in the fall of 2024, Pyongyang began sending soldiers to fight in the Kursk region of Russia to dislodge Ukrainian forces there. It is estimated that up to twelve thousand soldiers have fought the Ukrainians, approximately four thousand of whom have died. Ukraine has produced videos of captured North Korean soldiers saying they did not know where they were going or who they would be fighting when they deployed.

North Korea and Russia are now formal allies. In June 2024, Putin went to Pyongyang and the two leaders signed a treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership. It includes a mutual defense clause, obligating both parties to come to the other's defense should it be attacked by a third party: "Russia shall immediately provide military and other assistance" to the other party if it "falls into a state of war due to armed invasion from an individual or multiple states." Putin said that the treaty represented a "breakthrough" in Russia's relations with North Korea.

It is clear what Russia is getting out of this relationship—ammunition, missiles, and troops to fight in Kursk. North Korea has also announced that it will send thousands of military construction laborers to work in Russia.

North Korea likewise receives weapons, including attack drones directed by artificial intelligence, tanks with improved electronic warfare systems, a new naval destroyer fitted with supersonic cruise missiles, and a new air-defense system. Russia is helping North Korea to modernize its antiquated Soviet-era arsenal.

This is a transactional partnership that has elevated North Korea's international profile and reinforced Putin's claim that Russia is a leader of the world majority. It has also helped Russia to continue fighting Ukraine.

IS THE CRINK AN AXIS?

The US 2025 Intelligence Community's Worldwide Threat Assessment, delivered to Congress, does not refer to the CRINK as an axis:

> These primarily bilateral relationships, largely in security and defense fields, have strengthened their individual and collective capabilities to threaten and harm the United States, as well as improved their resilience against US and Western efforts to constrain or deter their activities. Russia's war in Ukraine has accelerated these ties, but the trend is likely to continue regardless of the war's outcome.
>
> US adversaries' cooperation has nevertheless been uneven and driven mostly by a shared interest in circumventing or undermining US power, whether it be economic, diplomatic, or military—Russia has been a catalyst for the evolving ties, especially as it grows more reliant on other countries for its objectives and requirements including in but not limited to Ukraine. Moscow has strengthened its military cooperation with other states, especially Pyongyang and Tehran. Russia also has expanded its trade and financial ties, particularly with China and Iran, to mitigate the impact of sanctions and export controls.

Some analysts, on the other hand, have argued that the CRINK represents a new "Axis of Upheaval."

"The group is not an exclusive bloc and certainly not an alliance," Andrea-Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine wrote in *Foreign Affairs*. "It is, instead, a collection of dissatisfied states converging on a shared purpose of overturning the principles, rules, and institutions that underlie the prevailing international system." More recently, Kendall-Taylor and Nicholas Lokker have argued that the group has intensified its military collaboration, creating new challenges for the West.

Experts claim that because these countries share a common goal of ending what they view as a Western-dominated system that ignores their interests, they collectively represent a new threat to the interests of the United States and its allies.

Historian Philip Zelikow argues that the CRINK members' cooperation is closer than that of the original Axis powers before Pearl Harbor.

Others disagree, arguing that the analogy of the World War II Axis between Germany, Italy, and Japan is not apt because that was a formal alliance dedicated to defeating the Grand Alliance of the United States, the United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union. Moreover, as Sino-Russian relations expert Elizabeth Wishnick argues in a report for the Foreign Policy Research Institute, "An axis would require more than a shared authoritarian playbook and anti-Western orientation. We

would expect to see some formalized cooperation among the three countries—We would anticipate a coordinated approach to assisting Russia in Ukraine."

Russia's relations with the three countries that have enabled it to continue its war against Ukraine are focused on bilateral ties. Moscow has separate partnerships with all three countries and they vary; the mutual defense clauses with North Korea and Iran, for example, are quite different. Russia is obliged to come to North Korea's defense should it be attacked, but it has no such obligation to Iran. The four countries have not signed a quadrilateral pact and, apart from a shared desire to upend the current international order, their respective interests are not always congruent. Tensions between Russia, China, and North Korea from the Korean War remain. And China looks warily on the burgeoning Russia-North Korea relationship.

Moreover, the Israeli and US attacks on Iran and the destruction of some of its nuclear program raise issues about the future Russian-Iranian relationship and the Chinese-Iranian relationship. While Putin and Xi condemned the Israeli attacks, warning of the risks of escalation, they were both silent following the US attacks. They subsequently held a phone call urging negotiations but did not come to Tehran's defense. Given the destruction of Iran's military installations and the elimination of its key scientists and leading officials, both Russia and China will question Iran's role as a reliable partner in the future. Russia needs Iran for drone production much less that it did at the beginning of the war, but the Israeli strike might have disrupted elements of Russia's drone-production supply chain. If the Trump administration were to succeed in improving ties with Iran, that could further complicate the Russian-Iranian relationship.

Moscow will continue to rely on these partners for the duration of its war against Ukraine and beyond. They collectively represent a threat to the United States and its European and Asian allies. But alliances of autocratic leaders contain inherent contradictions. They might collectively share the goal of upending the international order, but they are mainly focused on remaining in power and advancing their own interests, as opposed to creating a new order on which they all agree. Russia might be the driver of the CRINK today, but a new reality might emerge if leadership changes in any of these countries.

Recent developments suggest that the CRINK could be developing into a bloc. As noted earlier, Xi hosted the leaders of North Korea, Iran, and Russia for the first time in September to watch a military parade celebrating the end of World Word II in Asia, a historic show of united opposition to the US-led world order. Western nations, whose leaders were largely absent from the parade and who have voiced disquiet over China's military ambitions in East Asia, rightly expressed concern about this ostentatious show of unity. Indeed, during the parade China showcased its nuclear ambitions by debuting two new intercontinental ballistic missiles, the DF-5C and DF-61.

The optics of the leaders of China, Russia, and North Korea standing together to review troops and weapons was a powerful reminder that a new global order no longer dominated by the United States is emerging. On his Truth Social site, Trump took aim at Xi as he hosted the parade: "Please give my warmest regards to Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong Un, as you conspire against The United States of America." Trump also questioned whether Xi would credit the United States for

the "massive amount of support and blood" it provided to China during World War II. Trump added, "Many Americans died in China's quest for Victory and Glory."

RESPONDING TO THE CRINK

The CRINK represents a growing challenge to the West, both individually and collectively. Responding to the dangers these countries represent will be difficult and costly. Moreover, the Trump administration's uneven, and at times uncoordinated, approach to countering these threats has raised questions about the extent to which the most powerful Western country will be willing to expend the resources to resist these countries in the future. Driving wedges between them—particularly between Russia and China—is unlikely to work in the short term. The inherent tensions between all of them might eventually lead to a fraying of their ties, but that is unlikely to happen for the duration of the Russian war and its immediate aftermath.

The first Western goal should be to seek to contain the ambitions of all four countries. The United States Department of Defense has defined China as the main pacing threat: "China is the only country that can pose a systemic challenge to the United States in the sense of challenging us, economically, technologically, politically and militarily."

The Trump administration has highlighted the threat from China and is engaged in difficult tariff negotiations with the country. Trump has also indicated that he would like to improve ties with China, even though he has acknowledged that it will be difficult to reach a deal.

The second goal should be to contain Russia more effectively than has been the case since the Soviet collapse. Every US president since 1992 has sought to reset ties with Russia, but all these resets have failed because of fundamentally mismatched expectations on both sides. Trump's Russia policy has been contradictory and inconsistent, praising Putin and criticizing Volodymyr Zelensky, reversing himself, and then reiterating his praise for the Russian autocrat. His failure to impose penalties on Russia after Putin reversed himself on agreements that he and Trump had apparently reached days before at their Alaska summit revealed the US inability to follow a consistent policy of deterring Russia from further attacks on Ukraine. Trump has repeated that he seeks a reset of ties with Russia, and he envisages a bright economic future for bilateral relations.

The current US determination to improve ties with Russia works against any attempt to push back against the CRINK. Washington's European and Asian allies are almost unanimous in their agreement that Moscow must be contained and isolated as long as Russia continues its war. If the United States moves in the opposite direction, allies' influence will be limited. Nevertheless, the US allies in Europe and Asia might need to step up their policies aimed at containing both Russia itself and its CRINK partners.

The United States has also stressed the threat that North Korea represents. However, Trump has suggested resuming talks with Kim on North Korea's nuclear weapons program after the failed negotiations of his first administration. And

after the US strikes on Iran, Trump has also suggested resuming negotiations on Tehran's nuclear program.

In other words, it is unclear how far the Trump administration will be willing to take actions to push back consistently against the CRINK and lessen the danger it represents to Western interests. So far, "America First" has not meant a US withdrawal from the world, but has included both military actions against Iran and negations to resolve a number of difficult regional conflicts.

In the face of these uncertainties, Russia will continue to view the CRINK countries as essential partners in its determination to defeat Ukraine and upend the current international order. In addition to seeking to constrain Russia's ability to continue waging its war against Ukraine and acting as a disruptor on the world stage, the United States should refrain from taking actions that push these four countries toward closer cooperation. Although India is not a member of this group, Prime Minister Narendra Modi went to Beijing for the Shanghai Cooperation Organization meeting that preceded the military parade. India and China have been involved in various border disputes over the past few years, but Modi's public show of warm ties with both China and Russia in Beijing occurred shortly after Trump imposed 50-percent tariffs on India because of its purchases of Russian oil. Modi has also appeared to endorse the new world order Xi touted in Beijing.

The presence of so many leaders from the Global South at the parade in Beijing was also a reminder that Russia's war against Ukraine has strengthened both Moscow's and Beijing's ties with Global South countries, which do not want to be drawn into the conflict and often reiterate the Russian version of the war's origins. The United States needs to develop a more effective way of reaching out to countries in the Global South.

While the CRINK appears to be emerging as a more coherent bloc, many tensions continue to exist among all four countries. The United States should devise a consistent, targeted strategy of seeking to exploit the points of tension between the countries, however difficult that is. It should also seek to deter further aggression by Russia, alone or in concert with its CRINK partners, and strengthen its own defenses against future military challenges by these countries.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Before joining AEI, Stent was professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University and directed its Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies. She was also a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, senior adviser to the United States Institute of Peace, and senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund. Previously, she served as a member of the external advisory board to the director of the CIA, a national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia for the National Intelligence Council, and a member of the State Department's Office of Policy Planning.

Stent's work has been published in a variety of media outlets and academic journals, including *Foreign Affairs, Internationale Politik Quarterly, the Washington Post,* and *Politico*. A popular speaker, she has appeared on CBS, CNN, Bloomberg, BBC, and NBC, among other cable news outlets. Stent has also testified before Congress and is the author of *Putin's world: Russia against the West and with the rest* (2023).

She holds a PhD in government and an AM in Soviet studies from Harvard University. Stent also holds an MSc in international relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science and a BA in economics and history from the University of Cambridge.

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