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Hearing on “China’s Role in the Axis of Autocracy”

BY

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I. Introduction

Commissioner Friedberg, Commissioner Stivers, distinguished members of the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission, thank you for inviting me to speak today about China and its role in what I call the axis of upheaval, a term my colleague Richard Fontaine and I coined to describe the growing partnership between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea.^{1,2} Some people bristle at the term “axis,” but in my view it is the most appropriate way to describe the dynamics among these four countries that we see today. Benito Mussolini’s first use of the term “axis” was in a speech he gave in Milan in 1936. Back then, he described Italy’s relationship with Germany as “an axis around which all European States animated by a desire for peace may collaborate on troubles.”³ This well describes what China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are doing—they are collaborating on their troubles. Their shared aim of weakening the United States and its power and influence provides such strong motivation for their actions. This new axis of upheaval, then, is best thought of as a collection of dissatisfied states converging on a shared purpose of overturning U.S. leadership, along with the principles, rules, and institutions that underlie the prevailing international system.

My overarching argument today is that the cooperation among these four countries is likely to be deeper, more durable, and more consequential than many policymakers and analysts currently assume, making the axis of upheaval one of the most significant national security challenges facing the United States and its allies. My goal now is to unpack that argument. To do that, I will make two broad points. I will argue that the axis of upheaval matters because it: 1) amplifies the military capabilities of America’s adversaries and 2) dilutes the foreign policy tools we have to confront them.

II. Amplifying the Military Capabilities of America’s Adversaries

Analysts understand well the challenges that China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea individually pose to the United States, but little thought has been given to how their actions combine. When these four countries cooperate, their actions have far greater effect than the sum of their individual efforts.

China, along with Iran and North Korea, are critical enablers of Russia’s war machine in Ukraine, allowing Moscow to sustain and prosecute its war in a way that would not have been possible without their backing.

Since the start of the war, Moscow has fired more than 8,000 drones at Ukraine—most of them Shaheed drones provided by Tehran. As the war has continued, relations between Russia and Iran have only deepened. Russian drone strikes against Ukraine increased tenfold from 2023 to 2024, in large part because Moscow and Tehran signed a deal in early 2023 for Russia to start production of the Iranian drones in Russia’s Alabuga Special Economic Zone, about 600

¹ This testimony reflects the personal views of the author alone. As a research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity, the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) maintains strict intellectual independence and sole editorial direction and control over its ideas, projects, publications, events, and other research activities. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues and the content of CNAS publications reflects the views of their authors alone. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. CNAS will not engage in any representational activities or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from non-U.S. sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. The Center publicly acknowledges on its website annually all donors who contribute.

² Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, “The Axis of Upheaval: How America’s Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order,” *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>. Much of this testimony is based on the analysis first presented in this essay.

³ Jason Daley, “Why We Call the Axis Powers the Axis Powers,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/why-we-call-axis-powers-axis-powers-180960980/>

miles east of Moscow.⁴ That factory produced more than 2,500 drones in 2023 and is on track to more than double that figure in 2025 to 6,000 attack drones per year.

North Korea is sending ballistic missiles to Russia and has provided Moscow with more than 2.5 million rounds of ammunition in a war in which ammunition is a highly coveted commodity. Russia has received more ammunition from North Korea than Ukraine did from the United States and NATO combined. And even if some of that ammunition is faulty and low quality, the sheer volume of it has helped Russia in the war. Likewise, by 2024, North Korea's missiles made up nearly a third of Russia's ballistic missile launches at Ukraine⁵—a key factor allowing the Kremlin to bombard Ukrainian cities while its own missile production was hobbled by Western sanctions. Then, in a turn that no one saw coming, North Korea sent 12,000 soldiers to fight on Russia's behalf—the first time in more than a century that Russia has invited foreign troops onto its soil.

Beijing, for its part, has emerged as Russia's most critical lifeline. China has increased its purchase of Russian oil and gas, putting billions of dollars into Moscow's coffers, and just as critically, is sending vast amounts of technology. China has provided machine tools for tanks, propellants for missiles, intermediary goods used in producing gunpower and explosives, turbojet engines, and geospatial intelligence, including satellite imagery which the Russian military uses to support military operations in Ukraine.⁶ China has also allowed Russia to circumvent the sanctions and export controls put in place by the West. Russian customs data shows, for example, that despite Western sanctions, Moscow's imports of computer chips and chip components—parts that are needed to sustain Moscow's defense industrial production—are back to pre-war levels, with China sourcing more than half of these imports.

Just as important as what Russia has received from its backers is what it is having to give away in return, increasing the military capabilities and brazenness of America's adversaries.

Military cooperation between Russia and China was already problematic before Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. From 2018 to 2022, Russia supplied 83 percent of China's arms imports.⁷ Moscow has played a meaningful role in the People's Liberation Army's (PLA) efforts to augment its air defense, anti-ship, and submarine capabilities, which make a possible U.S. intervention in a Taiwan contingency more difficult. Joint military exercises between Russia and China have grown in scope and frequency and give Chinese officers valuable operational experience alongside their Russian counterparts who have now seen combat in Ukraine and Syria—helping offset one of the PLA's most significant weaknesses relative to the United States.

China's own military modernization makes defense cooperation with Russia less pressing, but the two countries are likely to step up cooperation on joint development, licensed production, and transfers of technology. In February, Russian officials confirmed that the two countries are consulting on military applications of artificial intelligence. Yet while China is narrowing the technological gap, Chinese industry remains behind in certain key areas, including submarine technology, remote sensing space satellites, and aircraft engines. If China can pressure a more dependent Russia to provide support in these areas, it would erode America's military position relative to China in the Indo-Pacific.

⁴ Howard Altman, "Russia Firing Record Number of Shahed-136s at Ukraine," *The War Zone*, November 4, 2024, <https://www.twz.com/air/russia-firing-record-number-of-shahed-136s-at-ukraine>. Clare Sebastian, et al., "Russia Is Intensifying Its Air War in Ukraine. A Secretive Factory Is Ramping Up Drone Production to Fuel the Offensive," *CNN*, December 27, 2024, <https://www.cnn.com/2024/12/27/europe/russia-ukraine-war-drones-alabuga-factory-intl-invs/index.html>

⁵ Daria Tarasova-Markina, Lauren Kent, Nick Paton Walsh and Victoria Butenko, "Ukraine is being hit with a surge of attacks using North Korean missiles. Western components help make it possible," *CNN*, November 23, 2024.

⁶ Cameron Manley, "China is providing satellite intelligence for military purposes to Russia, US warns, says report," *Business Insider*, April 7, 2024.

⁷ Pieter Wezeman, Justine Gadon and Siemon Wezeman, "Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2022," *SIPRI*, March 2023. https://www.sipri.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/2303_at_fact_sheet_2022_v2.pdf

I would like to highlight one notable announcement that underscores how rapidly the defense relationship between China and Russia is evolving. In September 2024, U.S. officials announced that Russia had provided China with sophisticated technology that will make Chinese submarines quieter and more difficult to track.⁸ Such an agreement was hard to imagine just a few years ago, given the sensitive nature of the technology.

This same dynamic is now playing out in Iran and North Korea. In Iran, Moscow is advancing Iranian weapons capabilities. Russia has provided Iran with multi-role aircraft, air defense, cyber, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance capabilities that would complicate any U.S. or Israeli military operation against Iran, whether to take out Iranian nuclear infrastructure or other reasons. Likewise, in return for its support, North Korea is reportedly seeking advanced space, missile, and submarine technology from Moscow. If Russia were to comply with those requests, North Korea would be able to improve the accuracy and survivability of its nuclear-capable intercontinental ballistic missiles and use Russian nuclear propulsion technology to boost the range and capability of its submarines. Already, Russia's testing of North Korean weapons on Ukraine's battlefields has supplied Pyongyang with information it can use to refine its missile program, and Russian assistance may have helped North Korea launch a military satellite in November 2024 after two previous failures.⁹

Even beyond the weapons and technology, deepening relations with Moscow are emboldening the leadership in Tehran and Pyongyang, spurring more antagonistic and destabilizing actions. Kim Jong Un, who now enjoys strong backing from both China and Russia, abandoned North Korea's decades-old policy of peaceful unification with South Korea and stepped up its threats against Seoul, and indulged in nuclear blackmail and missile tests.¹⁰ And although there does not appear to be a direct connection between their deepening partnership and Hamas's attack on Israel on October 7, 2023, growing support from Russia likely made Iran more willing to activate its regional proxies in the aftermath.

Finally, this military cooperation will deepen, producing new challenges for the United States and its allies.

As defense cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea grows, it will enable these countries to offset vulnerabilities relative to the United States. Each of these countries will use their relationships to fill key gaps and shortcomings, making them more formidable and resilient adversaries.

Their cooperation will also move into new areas. Already, Russia and China have stepped up their cooperation in the Arctic, including between their coast guards—cooperation that paved the way for a Chinese coast guard fleet to enter the Arctic Sea for the first time for a joint patrol with Russia in 2024.¹¹ Likewise, Russia and China may be increasing cooperation in the hybrid domain. Although it is difficult to assess the extent of cooperation and/or coordination, in October 2023 the Chinese container ship the *Newnew Polar Bear*—sailing near a Russian vessel—damaged the Balticconnector pipeline in the Gulf of Finland.

Their convergence complicates net assessments. Contemplating a war between NATO and Russia, policymakers and defense planners will now have to consider what military assistance China, Iran, and North Korea could provide in addition to what they have given Russia for its war in Ukraine. A war between Russia and NATO would likely illicit greater military cooperation between the four countries.

⁸ Stuart Lau, "US Accuses China of Giving 'Very Substantial' Help to Russia's War Machine," *POLITICO Europe*, September 10, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/united-states-accuse-china-help-russia-war-kurt-campbell/>.

⁹ Hyonhee Shin, "Failed North Korea satellite launch engine points to Russian role, say South Korean lawmakers," Reuters, July 29, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/daughter-north-koreas-kim-being-trained-next-leader-media-report-says-2024-07-29/>

¹⁰ Choe Sang-Hun, "North Korea Says It Is No Longer Interested in Reunifying With the South," *New York Times*, January 16, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/16/world/asia/north-korea-reunification-policy.html>

¹¹ Reuters, "China's coast guard enters Arctic for the first time for patrol with Russia," October 2, 2024. <https://www.reuters.com/world/chinas-coast-guard-enters-arctic-first-time-patrol-with-russia-2024-10-02/>

The cooperation among members of the axis of upheaval will also lead these countries to increase their power projection by allowing each other basing and overflight rights. This is, to an extent, already a reality. In July 2024, Russian and Chinese nuclear-capable bombers flew together into the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ). This incident was the first of its kind for the two countries. Beijing and Moscow coordinated their strategic nuclear forces and together signaled their willingness to stand up to Washington by taking a joint action near the U.S. homeland. This joint flight was only possible because of their deeper cooperation; it was the first time that Chinese and Russian aircraft have taken off from the same (Russian) air base. That new power projection, in turn, will force U.S. strategists to account for new scenarios.

III. Diluting the Foreign Policy Tools the United States and Its Allies Have to Confront Them

The axis of upheaval dilutes the efficacy of Washington's economic tools of coercion.

China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are learning from and aiding each other in how to effectively circumvent U.S. and Western sanctions. We all understand how China is undercutting sanctions on Russia, but all members of the axis of upheaval are learning and aiding each other. Moscow, for example, released millions of dollars in North Korean assets that previously sat frozen—and in compliance with UN Security Council sanctions—in Russian banks.¹²

They are also working to reduce their dependency on the U.S. dollar. The share of Russia's imports invoiced in Chinese yuan jumped from 3 percent in 2021 to 20 percent in 2022.¹³ And in December, Iran and Russia finalized an agreement to conduct bilateral trade in their local currencies.¹⁴ By moving their economic transactions out of reach of U.S. financial measures, they dilute the efficacy of Western-imposed sanctions.

The axis of upheaval makes it harder to rally coalitions of countries to oppose their destabilizing actions.

China's refusal to condemn Russia's invasion of Ukraine, for example, made it far easier for countries across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East to do the same. Beijing and Moscow have impeded Western efforts to isolate Iran. They brought Tehran into the Shanghai Cooperation Organization last year as a permanent member and then orchestrated an invitation for Iran to join the BRICS.

Their parallel efforts in the information domain further weaken international support for U.S. positions.

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, all four countries defended Russia's actions and parroted Kremlin talking points that NATO was to blame for instigating the war. Their response to the October 7 Hamas attacks on Israel followed a similar pattern. Iran, Russia, and to a lesser extent China used state media and social media networks to express support for Hamas, vilify Israel, and denigrate the United States for enabling Israel's response. Even if axis members do not overtly coordinate their messages, they still push the same themes—and the repetition makes them appear more credible and persuasive.

Finally, geography matters, and the axis of upheaval is taking advantage of their shared borders and littoral zones, building trade and transportation networks safe from U.S. interdiction.

¹² Motoko Rich, "A Russian Bank Account May Offer Clues to a North Korean Arms Deal," *New York Times*, February 6, 2024. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/02/06/world/asia/north-korea-russia-missiles-bank.html>

¹³ Jorgelina Do Rosario, "Russia ramps up China yuan payments for imports amid sanctions, study finds," *Reuters*, September 27, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/russia-ramps-up-china-yuan-payments-imports-amid-sanctions-ebrd-2023-09-27/>

¹⁴ *Reuters*, "Iran, Russia to trade in local currencies instead of US dollar - state media," December 27, 2023. <https://www.reuters.com/world/iran-russia-trade-local-currencies-instead-us-dollar-state-media-2023-12-27/>

Iran, for example, ships drones and other weapons to Russia across the Caspian Sea, where the United States has little power to stop the transfers. If the United States were engaged in conflict with China in the Indo-Pacific, Beijing could increase its overland exports of oil and gas from Russia, reducing Beijing's dependence on maritime energy imports that U.S. forces could block during a conflict. Russia's defense industrial base, now in overdrive to supply weapons for Russian troops in Ukraine, could later pivot to sustain a Chinese war effort. Such cooperation would increase the odds of China prevailing over the U.S. military and help advance Russia's goal of diminishing the United States' geopolitical influence.

IV. Looking Forward

I want to close by making three additional points:

First, the axis of upheaval can develop quickly and unpredictably.

The arrival of North Korean troops in Russia is a worrisome reminder that with highly personalized authoritarian regimes at the helm in Russia and North Korea and with the regimes in China and to a lesser extent Iran moving in this direction, cooperation can evolve rapidly and in unpredictable ways. A body of political science research shows that this particular type of regime tends to produce the most risky and aggressive foreign policies. Countries with personalist authoritarians at the helm are the most likely to initiate interstate conflicts, the most likely to fight wars against democracies, and the most likely to invest in nuclear weapons. Russia's growing military and political support for China, Iran, and North Korea will only facilitate these tendencies.¹⁵

Second, the axis of upheaval will persist beyond the Ukraine war.

It is tempting to imagine that if the United States presses Ukraine to end the war and pursue a more pragmatic relationship with Russia, Moscow's cooperation with members of this axis could lessen. Yet this is wishful thinking. The growing ties among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia are driven by incentives far deeper than the transactional considerations created by the war in Ukraine. Russia is preparing for a long-term confrontation with the West and the Kremlin understands that it is less isolated and vulnerable when it has the backing of these countries. Because Russia has been the critical catalyst, it will continue to drive this confrontation. If anything, concessions made to Russia to end the war would only enhance the Kremlin's ability to help its partners weaken the United States.

Finally, China and Russia, and to a far lesser extent Iran and North Korea, are increasingly forging a shared vision for a future global order—a vision that enhances the durability and potentially the consequences of their partnerships.

You often hear that these countries agree on what they oppose, but that they lack a shared, positive vision for the future. That is changing. In the last two to three years, the broad contours of a shared vision for the future appear to be taking shape. These countries agree on the centrality of state-determined political rights. They share a desire for spheres of influence, and Russia and China both seek multipolarity. They share the notion of indivisible security, or that one country cannot take actions that make another country feel unsafe. This was the justification that Vladimir Putin used for his invasion of Ukraine. Now this language has found its way into China's Global Security Initiative (GSI) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. There is strong overlap in Xi Jinping's vision of building a "community with a shared future for mankind" and Russia's attempts to work with "the world majority."¹⁶

¹⁵ Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Michael Kofman, "Putin's Point of No Return: How an Unchecked Russia Will Challenge the West," *Foreign Affairs*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/russia/putins-point-no-return>.

¹⁶ Andrea Kendall-Taylor, et al., *Russia and China in Central Asia: Cooperate, Compete, or De-conflict?* (Center for a New American Security, November 12, 2024), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/russia-and-china-in-central-asia>.

The fact that this emergent order lacks a cohesive and fully developed view of the future at this stage of their project is not historically unique. For example, the Concert of Europe—the order that emerged in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars—was borne out of a shared desire to fight against national and liberal movements. It began as a bastion against democracy and revolution. It is only with time that the states challenging the status quo forge a more positive vision. The early contours of the new order Russia and China envision are emerging. We have to remain attentive.

V. Recommendations for Confronting the Axis of Upheaval

Enable Ukraine to achieve a just peace.

Washington and its allies must help Ukraine strengthen its position ahead of negotiations to end the current war. Getting a Ukraine settlement right is the most urgent and impactful thing the United States can do to confront the axis of upheaval—it will deter China, isolate Iran, and take the wind out of North Korea's sails. More generally, even as Washington rightly sees China as its top priority, addressing the challenge from Beijing will require competing with other members of the axis in other parts of the world. If the United States is to counter an increasingly coordinated axis, it cannot treat each threat as an isolated phenomenon.

To effectively address China, ramp up pressure on Russia.

If the United States is to counter an increasingly coordinated axis, it cannot treat each threat as an isolated phenomenon. Once the fighting in Ukraine ends, Russia may have a significant percentage of its forces and defense budget freed to pursue such operations and assistance elsewhere, fomenting challenges that will benefit more than just Moscow. Russia has become the pointy end of Beijing's spear—willing to upend dynamics in key regions in ways that aid China's ambitions to undermine U.S. dominance. Those that are skeptical of Russia's relations with China argue that Beijing dislikes the Kremlin's penchant for disruption because it threatens China's economic interests. Yet China did not object to Russia's provision of support to the Houthis, despite the risks it creates for global shipping. And even if Beijing is wary of Russia's deepening relations with North Korea, it is unlikely to do much to stop it. Instead, Russia is likely to do much of the heavy lifting in upending the international system and creating an environment more conducive for China's rise.

Likewise, while prioritization is important, so too is sequencing.¹⁷ To effectively address China, Washington must first set European security on the right path. The United States cannot simply hand off European security to a Europe that is not yet capable of managing the Russian threat. If Washington downsized its commitment to Europe prematurely, Moscow could take it as a sign of growing U.S. disinterest and use the opportunity to press ahead, both directly and through the axis of upheaval it supports.

Prepare for opportunistic aggression.

If Beijing invades Taiwan and prompts a U.S. military intervention, for instance, Russia may be tempted to move against another European country, and Iran or North Korea could escalate threats in their regions. Even if the axis members do not coordinate their aggression directly, concurrent conflicts could overwhelm the West. Washington will therefore need to press allies to invest in capabilities that the United States could not provide if it were already engaged in another military theater.¹⁸

Engage the “swing states.”

¹⁷ Kendall-Taylor and Kofman, “Putin's Point of No Return: How an Unchecked Russia Will Challenge the West.”

¹⁸ Greg Weaver and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, “What NATO Allies Must Do to Prepare for Russian Aggression,” *POLITICO Europe*, March 5, 2024, <https://www.politico.eu/article/nato-allies-prepare-russia-aggression-defense-military/>.

Neither the West nor the axis will become wholly distinct political, military, and economic blocs. Each coalition will compete for influence all over the world, and blunting the implications of the axis will depend on the ability of Washington and its allies to compete in the “global swing states.” Brazil, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, and Turkey are likely to be especially important. The United States and its allies should work to deny advantages to the axis members in these countries, encouraging their governments to choose policies that favor the prevailing order. In practice, that means using trade incentives, military engagement, foreign aid, and diplomacy to prevent swing states from hosting axis members’ military bases, allowing axis members access to their technology infrastructure or military equipment, or helping axis members circumvent Western sanctions.

Increase spending on defense, foreign aid, diplomacy, and strategic communications.

The axis of upheaval now represents a new center of gravity—a core around which other states that are dissatisfied with the United States and the order it leads can coalesce, even if just opportunistically and unevenly. The axis of upheaval, then, is transforming the international system into one now characterized by two increasingly organized and competing orders, which will have profound effects on global stability. Political science research shows that such periods of competing order are characterized by a higher incidence of inter-state war. Wars grow out of their own unique conditions—territorial disputes, intent to protect nationals or commercial interests, defending an ally, or regime survival, for instance. But the likelihood that those conditions lead to the onset of war increases during periods of dueling orders.

Navigating such a rise in global instability, along with the other challenges I have described will require the United States to devote additional resources to national security, engage in more vigorous diplomacy, sustain existing partnerships while developing new ones, and, at a minimum, maintain Washington’s positive role in the world. Generating public consensus to meet this moment will require that public officials communicate the changing geopolitical climate to the public. More leadership is needed in this regard.

There is a tendency to downplay the significance of growing cooperation among China, Iran, North Korea, and Russia. Many have argued, for example, that Russia’s turn to Iran for drones and use of North Korean munitions illustrates the Kremlin’s desperation. Or that China’s embrace of Russia shows only that Beijing could not achieve the positive relationship it originally sought with Europe and other Western powers. Yet such analysis misses the underlying dynamics at play. There are four powers that are increasingly aligned and coordinating their efforts to upend the prevailing world order and its U.S. leadership. Their combined military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities, propelled by a shared motivation to change the way the world has worked since the end of the Cold War, make for a dangerous mix. This is a group bent on upheaval, and Washington and its allies must treat the axis as the generational challenge it is.