Testimony before the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission Hearing on China's Role in the Axis of Autocracy

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Introduction

The People's Republic of China's (PRC) engagement with U.S. adversaries is rooted in its strategic assessment that the United States is in decline and that accelerating this trajectory will hasten China's ascent as the dominant power in Asia.[1] At the same time, Beijing perceives Washington's response to this decline as a strategy of containment with the potential for conflict. Its partnerships with North Korea, Iran, and Russia serve distinct strategic purposes. North Korea provides a critical buffer on China's periphery, Iran offers access to energy resources and regional influence, and Russia supplies advanced military technology and energy while diverting U.S. strategic focus from the Indo-Pacific. Although these relationships cater to different strategic needs, Beijing leverages them to undermine U.S. influence and interests as part of a broader effort to reshape global power dynamics. In other words, China's alignment with these state actors, from its perspective, emerges naturally from the structural tensions shaping U.S.-China relations. In turn, a significant improvement in U.S.-China relations or a decisive reassertion of U.S. global leadership could create opportunities to shape Beijing's approach to these partnerships, whereas isolated engagement on these issues is unlikely to drive meaningful change.[2]

The long-term implications of China's current approach are profound. The military capabilities and defense technologies China transfers today will shape regional security environments for years to come, often in ways that are difficult to anticipate. Previous Chinese arms sales to Iran have already surfaced in the arsenals of its regional proxies, contributing to instability across the Middle East.[3] The same dynamic could unfold with China's military-industrial cooperation with Russia and North Korea, as weapons, technology, and expertise circulate across multiple conflict zones. The interconnected nature of these relationships demands a policy response that moves beyond addressing each engagement in isolation and instead recognizes the strategic logic driving China's actions. Without a clear understanding of this dynamic and a comprehensive approach to counter it, the United States risks allowing these alignments to deepen, compounding future security threats around the globe.

This testimony examines China's support to North Korea, Russia, and, to a lesser extent, Iran. It begins with an analysis of arms trade dynamics, followed by an assessment of cooperation in

cyberspace. It then assesses Chinese and North Korean support for Russia's invasion of Ukraine before considering the implications of these partnerships for potential conflicts in the Taiwan Strait and the Korean Peninsula.

Chinese Military Assistance

The strategic logic behind China's military cooperation with North Korea has remained consistent since the Korean War: to sustain a capable buffer state just 400 miles from Beijing.[4] In the decades following the war, China provided extensive free military assistance to North Korea and other communist states, supplying artillery, armored vehicles, small arms, and fighter aircraft to bolster Pyongyang's defense.[5] This approach shifted in the 1980s as China's economic reforms reoriented its defense industry toward profitability, leading to a transition from free aid to arms sales. Despite this shift, China continued to supply North Korea with key systems, including Romeo-class submarines, F-6 fighters, HY-2 ("Silkworm") anti-ship missiles, HN5A man-portable surface-to-air missiles, and multiple launch rocket systems.[6] The relevance of these historical sales endures, as many of these aging systems remain in active use within the Korean People's Army (KPA) today.[7]

Unable to afford modernization of its conventional forces following the collapse of the Soviet Union, North Korea has retained and operated these outdated systems, which have become a source of strategic vulnerability.[8] As a result, Pyongyang turned to the development of nuclear and ballistic missile capabilities to offset its conventional imbalance. This shift in strategy has been in part facilitated by China. During the 1990s, China provided professional training and technological exchanges to North Korean engineers involved in the Rodong missile program and assistance from the Chinese Academy of Launch Technology in developing the Kwangmyong satellite series.[9] Notably, satellite cooperation has continued in recent years. In 2014, a delegation of North Korean engineers received training at the National Remote Sensing Center of China, run by the PRC Ministry of Science and Technology.[10] The center develops new capabilities in geographic navigation and positioning. In the summer of 2018, North Korean trainees were also invited to a satellite operations course in Beijing.[11]

China has more recently sought ways to avoid the international reputational risks associated with arms sales to North Korea, further altering the character of bilateral dynamics between them. First, Chinese assistance increasingly involves the provision of dual-use technology. For example, in October 2010, the China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation sold ultra-heavy-duty, 8-axle off-road vehicles to North Korea. These trucks were later seen in a 2012 military parade in Pyongyang, repurposed as transporter-erector-launchers for KN-08 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBM).[12] This instance represented North Korea's first road mobile ICBM, increasing the survivability of North Korea's nuclear arsenal and improving the country's second-strike capability. China has also played a pivotal role in North Korea's indigenous drone program through dual-use technology transfers. The PRC initially shared early models of piston-engine reconnaissance UAVs, later advancing to more modern commercial drone technology. North Korea has since leveraged these drones for reconnaissance along the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ) and the Northern Limit Line in the Yellow Sea.[13]

China also enables North Korea's black-market procurement networks, allowing illicit acquisitions to obscure direct Chinese state support. For example, U.S. sanctions reports describe North Korean procurement networks operating freely in China, where front companies have shipped steel alloys, chemicals, and software for the development of weapons of mass destruction.[14] These networks function through layers of intermediaries, exploiting weak enforcement mechanisms and corrupt local officials who facilitate shipments, sometimes through third-party states. While China denies direct involvement in North Korea's black-market activity, its failure to disrupt these operations over decades should be seen as a strategic choice.

China's military relationship with Iran has followed an evolution similar to its cooperation with North Korea, transitioning from direct arms sales to technology transfers and trainings. During the Iran-Iraq War, Beijing was a primary supplier of conventional weaponry to Tehran, including J-6 fighter aircraft, T-59 and T-69 tanks, and Silkworm anti-ship missiles.[15] This dynamic continued into the early 1990s, when China provided Iran with F-7 fighter jets, M-7 short-range ballistic missiles, and Houdong-class missile boats.[16] However, as international scrutiny of arms sales to Iran intensified, China shifted its approach. In 1996, Beijing signed a contract to transfer missile, naval, and aviation technologies to Iran, laying the groundwork for Tehran's domestic defense industry.[17] This trend accelerated in the 2010s, with China facilitating production of Iran's Nasr-1 anti-ship missile—modeled on the Chinese C-704—and granting Iran access to the BeiDou-2 satellite navigation system, China's GPS alternative with both civilian and military applications.[18] As with North Korea, China's military engagement with Iran has transitioned from conventional arms sales to technology transfers, a shift that reduces Beijing's direct exposure to international sanctions and reputational costs. This pattern of indirect support is also evident in cyberspace, where the inherent deniability provides avenues for cooperation without the same diplomatic and economic liabilities as traditional arms sales.

Cyber Cooperation

China plays a central role in North Korea's cyber capabilities, providing both the internal infrastructure necessary for domestic control and the external access required for offensive cyber operations. To start, China has played a foundational role in establishing and maintaining North Korea's cyber infrastructure. In 2005, China Unicom opened the first land-based fiber-optic cable linking North Korea to external networks.[19] This physical connection allows China to regulate North Korea's bandwidth and monitor traffic as it passes through Chinese infrastructure.[20] This dependency has since diminished, as a Russian company established a second internet connection to North Korea in 2017.[21]

North Korea's national intranet, Kwangmyong, connects government agencies, industries, military institutions, and universities through a domestically controlled network built primarily with Chinese networking equipment. The system operates in near-total isolation from the global internet, relying on Chinese imports of servers, routers, and workstations to sustain its functionality.[22] Without this hardware and technical support, the large-scale deployment of a national intranet would be difficult to maintain.

China has also enabled North Korea's telecommunications sector. After Kim Jong Il's visit to Huawei headquarters in 2006, the company assisted in building North Korea's 3G network,

operated by Koryolink, which remains the primary mobile communication platform.[23] To further secure internal communications, Beijing-based Panda International Information Technology helped North Korea develop encryption software, ensuring that sensitive transmissions, particularly among elites, remain shielded from foreign interception.[24]

Likewise, China plays a key role in enabling North Korean offensive cyber operations. According to the U.S. military, many members of North Korea's Bureau 121 operate from China.[25] Specifically, the KPA is keen to establish "enclaves from which to plan, prepare, and conduct its activities and influence."[26] By operating abroad, North Korean agents can take advantage of the advanced Internet infrastructure in other countries as well as claim plausible deniability for destructive cyber operations. This positioning allows North Korea to carry out a range of cyberattacks, including persistent distributed denial-of-service attacks on South Korean websites, often using China as a base of operations.

In addition to targeting South Korea, North Korean hackers have conducted significant operations on other nations and organizations. In 2018, the U.S. Justice Department unsealed charges against the North Korean hacker Park Jin Hyuok, accusing him of carrying out major cyberattacks from China, including the WannaCry ransomware virus that befell the UK's National Health Service.[27] The U.S. Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation released an advisory stating that "hundreds of DPRK IT workers subordinate to MID were operating in China in 2019 and 2020" that "contributed to its weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile programs."[28] In a full-scale conflict, the presence of North Korean cyber operatives in China would likely ensure operational continuity for their cyber forces, even if North Korean internal systems were compromised. This form of indirect support highlights the broader question of how China and North Korea might interact in a conflict involving the United States.

North Korean and Chinese Assistance to Russia's Invasion of Ukraine

Since the fall of 2023, North Korean assistance has played a significant role in supporting Russia's high-intensity combat operations in Ukraine. By providing millions of artillery rounds, advanced anti-tank systems, long-range multiple rocket launchers, and tactical ballistic missiles, Pyongyang has enabled Russian forces to maintain a daily burn rate of approximately 10,000 artillery rounds against Ukraine. North Korea's defense industrial base has operated at full capacity, depleting its strategic reserves to meet Russian demands. Additionally, 12,000 North Korean soldiers are deployed in the heavily contested Kursk region, reinforcing Russian positions amid severe personnel losses. These forces augment Russian sustainment at a critical moment, as Moscow has increasingly relied on prisoners, private military contractors, and activated reservists to replenish depleted ranks. North Korea's support has reinforced Russia's ammunition stockpiles and provided additional manpower, helping to sustain its offensive operations despite battlefield losses.

Beijing is increasingly wary that North Korea's military support for Russia is intensifying security linkages between Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Chinese academic discourse has been more explicit than government sources in voicing concerns, with analysts like Shen Dingli warning that deeper North Korea-Russia cooperation could accelerate the formation of an "Asian

NATO" and entrench Europe's strategic focus on East Asia.[29] Similarly, Zhu Feng has highlighted the risk that this alignment could draw China into a more adversarial position against the U.S.-South Korea-Japan alliance.[30]

While PRC leaders have refrained from overt criticism of North Korea's intervention, subtle diplomatic signals suggest unease. Notably, Beijing's ambassador to North Korea was absent from Pyongyang's "Victory Day" commemorations in 2024, despite participation from Russian, Vietnamese, and Mongolian diplomats.[31] The anniversary of China's entry into the Korean War—ordinarily a joint commemorative event—was marked separately by Beijing and Pyongyang.[32] These decisions could reflect a desire to signal unease while avoiding overt tension in the trilateral relationship.

Beijing's core concern is that North Korea's role in Ukraine could accelerate security linkages between the Euro-Atlantic and Indo-Pacific theaters. PRC analysts have warned that framing Taiwan and Ukraine as interconnected security crises strengthens transatlantic resolve against China.[33] The war in Ukraine has already driven greater cooperation between European and Indo-Pacific states, with South Korea supplying artillery rounds to Ukraine and Taiwan quietly aiding Ukraine's air defense capabilities.[34] Given that 40 percent of the EU's external trade transits the Taiwan Strait, China faces the increasing risk that a future Taiwan conflict could elicit a coordinated Western response similar to that seen in Ukraine.

Despite these strategic concerns, China has also provided diplomatic and economic support to Russia's invasion of military assistance.[35] While the PRC has not delivered large-scale military assistance to Russia like North Korea, there are recent reports that Chinese entities are involved in the development and production of critical weapons systems on behalf of Russia, like the Garpiya series of long-range attack unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs).[36] Beijing has also supplied Russia with dual-use technologies essential for battlefield operations, including semiconductors, drone components, sensors, earthmovers, and nitrocellulose for rocket propellant. These transfers have bolstered Russia's defense industrial base, enabling continued production of advanced weaponry despite Western sanctions.

At the strategic level, China's alignment with Russia has forced the United States to contend with simultaneous security challenges in both Europe and the Indo-Pacific, straining U.S. defense planning and complicating resource allocation.[37] In conclusion, China's support for Russia's war effort, while carefully calibrated to avoid direct escalation with the West, has reinforced Russia's war effort by mitigating the impact of Western sanctions and sustaining critical defense production. This measured but persistent assistance reflects a broader pattern in Beijing's engagement with U.S. adversaries and has significant implications for the evolving global security landscape.

China-North Korea Interactions in Future Conflict Scenarios

The potential for North Korean involvement in a Taiwan contingency, or for Chinese intervention in a renewed Korean war, is an essential consideration for strategic assessments and defense appropriations. In the early stages of a war over Taiwan, Chinese leaders are unlikely to request North Korean assistance. The PLA has been preparing for a swift and decisive war

against Taiwan for decades. Moreover, Chinese military writings on a Taiwan scenario indicate a strong preference for avoiding lateral escalation or "chain reaction warfare."[38] However, North Korea would likely view an increased US military buildup in the region as a threat, heightening the risks for provocations irrespective of China's position. Moreover, while Beijing maintains significant economic and political leverage over Pyongyang, its ability to restrain North Korean actions in a crisis is likely limited.

North Korea in a Future Taiwan Contingency

Even without direct involvement in the initial invasion, North Korea could create significant challenges for the United States and its allies. Pyongyang would likely perceive the presence of increased U.S. forces in the region as a potential precursor to coordinated actions aimed at opening a "second front" in the event of a wider conflict. In response, North Korea would escalate tensions by placing key units on high alert or conducting missile tests, forcing the United States to reallocate resources and focus on deterring instability on the Korean Peninsula. In other words, even in a limited intervention scenario, North Korean provocations would exacerbate challenges for U.S. command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance systems (C4ISR), force allocation, and logistics. Over time, these strains would divert critical resources from efforts in the Taiwan theater, weakening U.S. and allied positions and opening the door for North Korea to influence the broader conflict.

If a conflict over Taiwan becomes protracted, North Korea's involvement could become a more critical factor, much like its support to Russia in the invasion of Ukraine. Assuming China fails to win a quick and decisive war over Taiwan, North Korean materiel assistance could have a disproportionate impact on the development of the conflict as both sides deplete their stockpiles of advanced strike munitions. As in Ukraine, North Korea would be eager to test its more advanced indigenous systems under modern battlefield conditions. Additionally, the economic incentive to sell munitions to China would be significant for the economically isolated regime. In sum, while China is unlikely to request direct North Korean military assistance in a Taiwan contingency, Pyongyang could still shape the conflict's trajectory by forcing the United States to divert critical assets, straining force allocation and logistics. As magazine depth becomes a greater constraint in a prolonged war, North Korean materiel support could become a more significant factor in assisting Chinese operational sustainment.

China in a Future Korea Contingency

China would almost certainly intervene in the event of a renewed conflict on the Korean Peninsula, whether in parallel to or independent of a Taiwan crisis. Chinese policymakers, academics, and military practitioners have publicly articulated deep concerns about the need to manage nuclear security risks, a potential refugee crisis, and the threat of U.S. forces near the PRC border in a Korea contingency. Historically, China has demonstrated its willingness to intervene in such scenarios, as seen in its military preparations during the 1993-1994 North Korea nuclear crisis and again amidst heightened tensions in 2017. The scope and scale of Chinese intervention would likely depend on North Korea's ability to occupy and hold territory, as Beijing's primary strategic concerns would be exacerbated by any rapid collapse of North Korean forces.

Should North Korean forces hold their positions against U.S.-ROK forces, Chinese assistance would likely center on intelligence-sharing to enhance North Korea's operational effectiveness. Leveraging its advanced satellite constellations and reconnaissance capabilities, China could provide targeting data to enhance North Korea's precision-guided munitions and situational awareness. The 2020 *Science of Military Strategy* emphasizes the necessity of joint situational awareness among participating forces to enhance coordination and operational effectiveness. [39] China has already integrated satellite-based tracking and navigation services into its Belt and Road Initiative for dual-use applications, and North Korean engineers have received satellite training from Chinese institutions.[40] While the extent of real-time data-sharing between China and North Korea remains unclear, China's ISR infrastructure could significantly enhance North Korea's operational effectiveness in a protracted conflict.

If North Korean forces instead quickly collapse across the front, China would likely intervene to support the North Korean regime that is in power at the time of conflict. However, the absence of combined exercises, longstanding political distrust, and disparities in military capabilities would pose significant challenges to effective coordination. Civil-military frictions could further complicate operations, as neither Xi Jinping nor Kim Jong-un has wartime command experience, increasing the risk of political interference in military decision-making or a clash of personalities. Nevertheless, interoperability would likely improve over time in a protracted conflict.

The extent of Russia's involvement in a future conflict could significantly shape the dynamics of China-North Korea military coordination, particularly in resolving command and control (C2) challenges. For instance, a key step in enabling combined operations would be establishing command relationships. For Chinese forces, the forward command structure is largely in place through the Northern Theater Joint Operations Command Center (JOCC, 战区联合作战指挥中心). However, as seen in the Korean War, North Korea is likely to resist Chinese command.[41] Similar issues of command and authority would likely arise in a future war. Historically, Soviet arbitration was crucial in resolving command disputes during the Korean War.[42] In a future conflict, Russia might play a similarly crucial role in mediating disputes related to command relationships between China and North Korea.

While China is not currently preparing for combined operations with North Korean forces, PLA exercises suggest that China is more prepared to absorb foreign forces into its command structure compared to alternative structures.[43] In 2021, the multilateral peacekeeping exercise in Henan "Shared Destiny" involved Chinese, Pakistani, Mongolian, and Thai troops working in "mixed training" (混编联训) groups, utilizing Chinese equipment and weapon systems.[44] Chinese officers were in command of these foreign forces' "force formations" and "operational flow," spanning infantry, high mobility forces, helicopters, engineers, transportation, and medical teams.[45] Nevertheless, the exact arrangement in a future conflict scenario remains unknown and would be much more demanding. The United States and allies must monitor the scope of future exercises, particularly those involving PLA Northern Theater Command personnel, to understand what China is prepared to accomplish in a future war.

Implications

The course of U.S.-China relations has shifted toward long-term strategic competition, creating potential for deeper cooperation in Beijing's partnerships with North Korea, Iran, and Russia. However, this testimony has in part demonstrated that Beijing has exercised restraint in specific areas to avoid direct confrontation with the West. It has refrained from providing large-scale military aid to Russia's war in Ukraine, despite possessing far greater capability than North Korea to do so. Likewise, China has withheld significant conventional military assistance to North Korea, opting instead for dual-use technology transfers. These calculated limitations suggest that Beijing continues to see value in strategic ambiguity, balancing its alignment with U.S. adversaries against the risks of escalating tensions with Washington.

However, if Chinese leaders conclude that U.S.-China competition is headed toward inevitable confrontation, Beijing may reassess these constraints and pursue deeper, more overt military cooperation with its partners. A more entrenched axis could accelerate weapons proliferation, improve battlefield interoperability, and embolden adversaries across multiple regions. The risks for complex operational challenges in simultaneous theaters will also multiply. Over time, these partnerships could evolve beyond transactional cooperation into deeper alignment, compounding their collective ability to contest U.S. military operations and adapt dynamically to U.S. and allied strategies in ways that are difficult to predict or counter.

Recommendations

- Congress and the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission should hold regular hearings and increase funding for research on China's defense partnerships with North Korea, Iran, and Russia. These relationships fluctuate in response to shifts in U.S.-China dynamics and serve as a key indicator of Beijing's strategic outlook. A deeper understanding of these patterns will strengthen U.S. policymaking and ensure timely, informed responses to emerging threats.
- Congress must ensure that defense appropriations align with the strategic requirements necessary to both deter and, if necessary, respond to potential conflicts involving China and its partners. Investments should prioritize force posture, capabilities, and planning that account for simultaneous contingencies, such as a Taiwan Strait crisis coinciding with escalation on the Korean Peninsula. Future appropriations should also anticipate deeper interoperability and coordination between China and its adversaries, ensuring that U.S. forces remain postured to counter adversaries should U.S.-China relations remain unstable. Additionally, Congress should advocate for increased European burden-sharing within NATO to enable a more effective allocation of U.S. military resources to the Indo-Pacific.
- Congress should prioritize policies that accelerate reindustrialization, leveraging U.S. leadership in software and AI to revitalize domestic manufacturing and defense production. Strengthening domestic production will reinforce deterrence by demonstrating the United States' ability to sustain high-intensity operations and mitigate vulnerabilities that China perceives as indicators of U.S. decline.
- Congress should support diplomatic initiatives with the potential to reshape the trajectory of U.S.-China relations, addressing the underlying motivators that drive Beijing's engagement with U.S. adversaries. This means recognizing mutual vulnerabilities, de-

escalating tensions where possible, and identifying pragmatic avenues for reducing confrontation. This approach may involve reinforcing the impression or viability of peaceful resolution of the Taiwan issue to reduce Beijing's sense of strategic urgency. Broader engagement should seek to manage competition in a way that prevents unnecessary escalation and opens space for a more durable framework of interaction over time.

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[44] PRC Ministry of National Defense, "Transcript of the regular press conference of the Ministry of National Defense in September 2021[2021 年 9 月国防部例行记者会文字实录]," September 30, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/shouye/2021-09/30/content_4895952.htm.
[45] PRC Ministry of National Defense, "Transcript of the regular press conference of the Ministry of National Defense in September 2021[2021 年 9 月国防部例行记者会文字实录]," September 30, 2021, http://www.mod.gov.cn/shouye/2021-09/30/content_4895952.htm.