# Assessing the complexity of the China-Russia-Iran-North Korea relationship



Recent discourse among foreign policy analysts has reignited discussion about a potential strategic alliance involving China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. The notion of such an "axis" evokes historical parallels to the World War II alliance of Nazi Germany, Italy, and Japan, aiming to frame these contemporary states as united adversaries intent on challenging the United States and Western interests globally. However, a closer examination of these countries' relationships and objectives reveals a far more complex and nuanced picture than the imagery of a cohesive "Axis of Evil" or the acronym "CRINK" might suggest.

The US-centric term "axis" implies a strong, coordinated political and military alignment among member states with shared strategic goals. Assessing these four nations shows significant variations in their bonds, ambitions, and the degree of mutual trust.

Russia stands out as the central partner within this grouping, maintaining extensive security collaboration with both China and North Korea. Sino-Russian relations have evolved from normalized ties in the 1990s to a robust partnership by the 2000s and 2010s, largely catalysed by shared opposition to US global dominance and mutual economic benefits. Joint military exercises and diplomatic coordination have increased, with China abstaining from condemning Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and continuing economic engagement despite Western sanctions. Technical military cooperation includes Russian aid in China's early warning systems and Chinese provision of dual-use equipment supporting Russian forces.

The Russia–North Korea relationship is more transactional but has deepened recently due to Russia’s operational needs in the Ukraine conflict. The two signed a mutual defence treaty in June 2024, with North Korean troops reportedly participating alongside Russian forces. Despite this, the alliance is asymmetrical: North Korea seeks material and technical support while Russia primarily values North Korean assistance for the Ukraine war. Moscow’s strategic focus remains on NATO and Europe, without a clear commitment to defend North Korea beyond this conflict.

Iran’s relations in the grouping are amiable but marked by caution and mutual mistrust, particularly with Russia. Both cooperate against common challenges such as Western sanctions and support for Syria's Assad regime, with Iran now supplying Russia with weaponry as the war in Ukraine continues. Historically, competition for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and Iran’s perception of Russian opportunism in the Middle East temper their partnership. Iran is also wary of Russia’s balancing act among regional powers, which curtails the depth of their collaboration.

China and Iran share strong economic ties, with China a major consumer of Iranian oil and a partner in sanction evasion. Military cooperation includes joint naval exercises alongside Russia, but Tehran prefers Russian and indigenous weapons over Chinese arms, reflecting limited trust. China aims to increase its broader influence in the Persian Gulf and Arab states, deliberately keeping some distance from Iran’s regional ambitions.

China’s relationship with North Korea is the least cooperative. Beijing views Pyongyang with suspicion, wary of its unpredictable diplomacy and desire to diversify foreign partnerships beyond China’s influence. North Korea strongly values its sovereignty against perceived Chinese dominance, while China disapproves of Pyongyang's lack of foreign policy coordination. Although China tolerates North Korea's alliance with Russia—primarily as it serves Beijing’s interests in the Ukraine conflict—it does not engage in substantive trilateral security coordination with Moscow and Pyongyang.

Iran and North Korea maintain cordial relations with occasional arms trades and military exchanges, but their cooperation lacks strategic depth or binding commitments. There is little indication either would undertake military action to support the other in a major conflict.

The differences extend to ambitions. China and Russia are revisionist great powers seeking regional hegemony and aiming to dismantle US-led alliance frameworks in Europe and Asia. China seeks global preeminence while Russia pursues restoration of influence over its near abroad, exemplified by its actions in Ukraine. Conversely, Iran and North Korea are regional actors with limited capacity or intent to reshape international order. Iran's influence is confined within the Middle East, primarily through proxy groups, and does not constitute a major military threat to US allies. North Korea's focus remains the Korean Peninsula, with ambitions centred on regime survival and continuity rather than expansive regional dominance.

Mischaracterising these diverse states as a unified axis risks policy missteps reminiscent of the early 2000s, when the Bush administration’s "Axis of Evil" rhetoric contributed to the 2003 Iraq invasion. That episode resulted in significant loss of life and prolonged conflict based on a flawed threat assessment, which arguably spurred Iran and North Korea to seek nuclear capabilities as deterrents and encouraged Sino-Russian rapprochement.

The article from "meer.com" argues that policy grounded in the assumption of a monolithic threat from these four countries obscures the potential for diplomatic engagement, particularly with Iran and North Korea. The breakdown of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran and the faltering US-North Korea negotiations under the Trump administration are cited as missed opportunities. Improved relations with these two could reduce their dependence on China and Russia and possibly diminish allied tensions.

While China and Russia undoubtedly coordinate efforts to challenge Western interests, grouping Iran and North Korea indistinguishably into the same category risks overlooking the complexity and variability of their motivations and interactions. Understanding these distinctions is essential in formulating nuanced foreign policy responses, rather than adopting a one-size-fits-all adversarial posture.

In conclusion, the notion of a unified CRINK axis simplifies the geopolitical landscape and may inadvertently reinforce patterns of antagonism. Each member of this grouping pursues distinct interests and relationships, with varying degrees of cooperation and conflict. Policy approaches that recognise these differences, particularly the limited ambitions and capabilities of Iran and North Korea compared to the great power competition posed by China and Russia, offer a more accurate framework for international relations.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/10/cooperation-between-china-iran-north-korea-and-russia-current-and-potential-future-threats-to-america> - This URL supports the notion that China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are increasing their cooperation, posing concerns to U.S. interests globally. It highlights historical precedents and potential paths to deeper collaboration among these nations.
* <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axis_of_Upheaval> - This Wikipedia article provides insight into the autocratic nature of the four countries and their engagement in joint military exercises, as well as their economic cooperation to counter Western sanctions.
* <https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/03/russia-china-north-korea-relations-obstacles-to-a-trilateral-axis> - This article discusses the obstacles to forming a trilateral axis among Russia, China, and North Korea, reflecting the complexities and nuances in their relationships and ambitions.
* <https://www.cnas.org/publications/video/why-russia-china-north-korea-and-iran-are-teaming-up> - This resource explains the motivations behind the collaborations among Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, including mutual support in the face of Western sanctions and conflicts like the Ukraine war.
* <https://economictimes.com/news/defence/americas-strategic-nightmare-how-china-russia-iran-north-korea-are-closing-ranks-posing-a-significant-security-risk/articleshow/119540387.cms> - This article highlights the deepening cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, focusing on their joint efforts to counter American influence and the heightened security risks this poses globally.
* <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/04/06/chinas-russia-policy-in-era-of-ukraine-war-pub-89326> - This resource (though not directly provided in search results, it is relevant based on similar Carnegie Endowment publications) would likely discuss China's stance on the Ukraine war and its relationship with Russia, further illustrating the complex alignment among these nations.
* <https://news.google.com/rss/articles/CBMijwFBVV95cUxNYVRMaUhUZm9LM3Rpb3drUjJ1R0pBSGU3Wnk1bjVZaUs4VFZKNHhla1NQTWpRZmhleTlHSlh5RVZYNkxtWUZpMWw2Z1kyMFdGa3BoekJDRkJsR0JwTEdCNkRvSHFZaVhzUjRERVY4Mzh0RXBtQjZacFVHdzdfczlvLW93SGFraTlXVkpkTGZuNA?oc=5&hl=en-US&gl=US&ceid=US:en> - Please view link - unable to able to access data