

China's Balancing Act with the "Axis of Upheaval"



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Introduction

Everyone remembers George W. Bush's 2002 designation of an "axis of evil",¹ at the time made of Khamenei's Iran, Saddam's Iraq and Kim Jong Il's North Korea. Today, CNAS experts refer to an "axis of the upheaval"² and H.R. McMaster to an "axis of the aggressors"³ in order to describe the dynamics between China, Russia, North Korea and Iran. Europe is itself concerned by the ties between the Asian and European strategic theaters.⁴ China is in a state of **quasi-alliance with Russia**, which has invaded Ukraine, as demonstrated by Marcin Kaczmarski, in **"strategic cooperation" with Iran**,⁵ which entertains its own axis of disruption through the Near East as evidenced by Pierre Pinhas. Meanwhile, Beijing has renewed in 2021 a **mutual defense treaty with North Korea**⁶ – the only such formal alliance that China entertains as Adam Cathcart explains.

As always in these links, one must wonder who is really in control, and who is being driven: junior partners may also pursue autonomy in their decisions, and even bring their senior partner down a road it did not wish to travel.

Junior and Senior Partners, Who Has the Lead?

That question is particularly acute for China. **North Korea uses almost any burning international crisis to advance its own agenda.** There is increasing suspicion – even in China – that the country's nuclear and ballistic program benefits from Russian technology obtained against the delivery of weapons and ammunition. The overt quid pro quo is North Korea's access to food though. Russia may or may not have

¹ "The 'axis of evil' speech", *New York Times*, November 5, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/politics/100000004021075/the-axis-of-evil-speech.html>.

² Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, "The axis of upheaval", *Foreign Affairs*, April 23, 2024, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

³ "Axis of aggressors: H.R. McMaster on defending America's interests", *Foundation for Defense of Democracies*, September 26, 2024, <https://www.fdd.org/events/2024/09/26/axis-of-aggressors-hr-mcmaster-on-defending-americas-interests/>.

⁴ James Crabtree and Alexander Lipke, "Russia, Ukraine, and the two Koreas: How east Asian powers are influencing Europe's security", *European Council on Foreign Relations*, September 27, 2024, <https://ecfr.eu/article/russia-ukraine-and-the-two-koreas-how-east-Asian-powers-are-influencing-europes-security/>.

⁵ "Full text of Joint Statement on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between I.R. Iran, P.R. China", *President of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, September 23, 2016, <https://web.archive.org/web/20200913200218/http://www.president.ir/EN/91435>.

⁶ Hyung-Jin Kim, "Leaders of North Korea, China vow to strengthen ties", *Associated Press News*, July 11, 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/health-china-coronavirus-pandemic-north-korea-8fc7a269318c481035c43b030754cbf0>.

informed Beijing of its intentions against Ukraine, and its blustering with nuclear threats does not sit well with Beijing. Iran itself, drawn into further conflict by its Hamas proxy and the need to support Hezbollah, has hurt the balance that China was seeking to keep in its relations with Israel. China has been forced to choose Iran over Israel – an opportunistic move that could in the end prove less than opportune...

More broadly, **China has struggled to establish significant and profitable economic relationships with countries that are confronted with its current questionable partners.** Russia's war on Ukraine is today the number one security concern of Europe, increasingly described as a European "core interest". China has built profitable relations throughout the Near and Middle East, including all Gulf states and Israel, with which relations had been blooming.⁷ China has also achieved a positive trade balance with Japan and recently with South Korea. There is even deeper trade integration of South Korea's economy into China's trade sphere.

Yet, **China's global export drive is meeting new barriers and de-risking is becoming a widely shared policy among China's trade partners.** There is a distinct possibility of being drawn by geopolitics into a downward economic spiral. This is not fully recognized by Chinese leaders, who see their impressive export success as the result of their own policies, and not as that of more prudent predecessors.

China's assertive and even aggressive posture in its neighborhood already creates a backlash as seen in the surge of military spending across Asia and the renewed vigor in defense partnerships with the United States. Still, does the United States have enough military strength and will power to deter China, Russia, Iran and North Korea if they combine forces? **China**

evidently believes that projecting strength and strong-arming neighbors is as effective as making itself economically irreplaceable.

But how far does this strategy extend to other partnerships, if it has undesirable consequences for China? Where to draw the line? China's responses to this dilemma reflect a balancing act. One should often distinguish between words and deeds. In its public diplomacy, China presents itself as a promoter of peace and a mediator, as a paragon of stability. **It acknowledges national sovereignty and territorial integrity – but does not apply explicitly these values** to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.⁸

Lately, it has become a vocal critic of the division of the world into "two camps", a general designation that intends to be broader than its traditional rejection of alliances. The term implies that crises must be solved bilaterally or regionally, avoiding escalation and prioritizing the agency of individual states over strategic alignment. Against this, **China's proclamation of a "friendship without limits" with Russia only days before the invasion of Ukraine does not sit well,**⁹ nor does its lack of balance in statements concerning specific crises. While there is professed neutrality on Russia's war with Ukraine, China puts the blame for the conflict on a faulty European security architecture and with NATO eastward's expansion, while never actually condemning Russia's moves.

A New Doctrine on Sanctions

Similarly, China proclaims respect and support for the United Nations (UN) as the arbiter of international disputes. Yet, beyond the abstract mention of international law, this respect is no longer accompanied by support for international sanctions. In principle,

⁷ Tuvia Gering, "From Tel Aviv to Brussels: Who is China's new Ambassador to the EU?", *Discourse Power*, July 23, 2024, <https://discoursepower.substack.com/p/from-tel-aviv-to-brussels-who-is>.

⁸ Wang Yi, "Building on past achievements and forging ahead together – Toward a community with a shared future for mankind", *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China*, September 29, 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjbxhd/202409/t20240929_11499995.html.

⁹ "Joint statement of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China on the international relations entering a New Era and the global sustainable development", *Kremlin*, February 4, 2022, <http://en.kremlin.ru/supplement/5770>.

China may sign up to sanctions endorsed by the UN. In practice, it stands with Russia in blocking any such decision at the Security Council and has effectively neutered the UN committee created to oversee their implementation in the case of North Korea. Indeed, the **increased sanctions decided against Russia in 2022** – including the seizure of financial state holdings abroad – **have changed China's calculus**. Technological export controls by some of China's partners are viewed by China as sanctions. It systematically opposes their adoption, while busily creating mirror legislation enabling similar bans.

In truth, **China has always used the opportunity of U.S. or Western sanctions to improve its own economic relations with the states coming under these sanctions**. And this has in some cases been tacitly accepted by Washington. In the interest of global oil supply, China's continuing purchases from Iran were tolerated, including a never fully implemented agreement to develop the South Pars Iranian gas field. Today's sanctions against Russia have even larger loopholes for oil and gas. China has vastly increased its exports with Russia while displacing Europe as a major energy buyer from Moscow.

Rhetorically, it is blurring its stand regarding the most questionable partners by adopting and using the notion of a "Global South". The term originated in the West but is now used by Chinese public diplomacy to its advantage on the Ukraine file. **A key claim is that China's response to the war in Ukraine**, including the view that this is both an issue of regional European security and the result of a faulty European security architecture – not to mention American influence – **is shared by all countries in the so-called Global South**. This includes the refusal of sanctions designated as Western, even though states such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore in Asia actually implement these sanctions.

Strikingly, on the refusal or circumvention of sanctions against Russia, China indeed finds itself in good company. **Apart from European and East Asian**

allies, no nation follows them, except when compelled to do so. Much of China's trade with Russia flows through countries as diverse as Kazakhstan and Turkey, while re-exported liquified natural gas finds its way to Europe.

But is this the consequence of the "historical change unseen in a century" that China claims in its favor? **Is the Global South the safe anchor for China's most questionable partnerships?** This remains doubtful. Even without resurrecting the notion of the Third World, emerging and developing countries – with the exception of directly concerned nations – have never joined Western alliances or formal coalitions, whether during the Korean, Vietnam or Gulf wars. The problem for the United States, its transatlantic and its Pacific allies today is not so much the change of doctrine in the Global South. It is rather the global shift in economic growth that has given much more importance to states often grouped under the mantra of neutrality or non-alignment.

Support without Crossing the Red Lines

Still, **China is aware of the risks it runs by exceeding red lines with the quasi-allies in a revisionist axis**. Published expertise from China shows awareness of the fault lines in Russia, Iran and North Korea, even if this is said in very restrained ways. North Korea's aid dependence is cited. There is particular criticism of a new Russia-North Korea alliance, including potential nuclear technology transfer, and also because it would spark stronger action by the United States and Asian allies.

On Iran, while experts minimize the impact of the "headscarf protests" and of Masoud Pezeshkian's election, they acknowledge mounting social woes and do not hesitate to mention enemy infiltration in Iran's security apparatus. Interestingly, in December 2022 and June 2024, China has issued statements supporting the United Arab Emirates in efforts to solve the issue of Persian Gulf islands (Abu Musa and Tunb) occupied by Iran.¹⁰

Apart from the reluctance towards Russia's ever tighter relationship with North Korea, it is hard to find any distancing away from Moscow. Often cited by others, but not so much in China, is Xi Jinping's statement with Chancellor Olaf Scholz against the use, or the threat to use, nuclear weapons.¹¹ **Generally taboo in China is any mention of weapon transfers or trade in dual use goods, whether by China itself, or by Iran and North Korea.** Is this restraint in words, or restraint in action? Abundant trade in semi-conductors flows through Hong Kong and third countries. But even the United States treads lightly on these issues, perhaps persuaded that practical restraint is

better obtained through silence – or by not accusing China of crossing red lines. **As for Europe, it has not yet found the key to contain China's support for Russia.**

In the coming weeks and months, it will be very interesting to observe any change in China's relations with Iran. Will the sudden and huge strategic loss for the ayatollahs in Lebanon and beyond change China's calculus? As the benefits of supporting Iran dwindle, will its costs be reevaluated? This is an important test of the real motivations of China's relations with the new "axis of upheaval" countries.

¹⁰ Benjamin Houghton, "With China-Iran ties on rollercoaster, Tehran can only grit its teeth, hang on", *Al Monitor*, June 13, 2024, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2024/06/china-iran-ties-rollercoaster-tehran-can-only-grit-its-teeth-hang>.

¹¹ Andreas Rinke and Eduardo Baptista, "Xi, Scholz warn against 'irresponsible' nuclear threats over Ukraine", *Reuters*, November 4, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/china/german-chancellor-scholz-lands-beijing-2022-11-04/>.



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China's Caution in Supporting Iran within a Volatile Middle East

Iran as a country “trapped but not falling” (困而不倒)¹ – that is the picture painted by recent Chinese analyses of Iran’s domestic trends and confrontation with Israel in the Middle East. Over the past two years, Tehran has **shown resilience in the face of internal unrest, a steadily escalating but contained conflict with Israel, and power politics involving the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and, increasingly, China.** Notably, China played a significant – though highly opportunistic – role in the 2023 rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Amid Israel’s conflict with Iran’s proxies and the looming risk of a broader regional war, how do Chinese analysts interpret Iran’s strategies and decisions? And to what extent do Chinese publications frame Iran’s actions as aligning with China’s interests?

Domestic Politics in Iran: Authoritarian Stability and the Threat of Foreign Infiltration

Iran’s recent domestic developments have played a key role in shaping Chinese perceptions, though the

notion of a stable regime remains a constant among analysts. Even the May 2024 **plane crash involving President Ebrahim Raisi, which brought the question of succession to the fore**, did not seem to evoke much anxiety in Chinese commentaries – despite the sensitivity of the topic in China. Most experts maintained a view of stability, citing Iran’s well-organized succession process.

In the race to succeed Raisi, Chinese experts, like many foreign observers, largely expected Mohammad Mokhber, the interim president and close ally of Ayatollah Khamenei, to take over. **The unexpected July victory of Masoud Pezeshkian, the only opposition candidate permitted to run, therefore caught some off guard, including prominent figures in China** like Qin Tian, Deputy Director of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR)’s Institute of Middle East Studies, or Liu Zhongmin, a professor at Shanghai International Studies University (SISU)’s Institute of Middle East Studies.²

¹ The September 2024 edition of *世界知识* (World Affairs), a leading Chinese journal, qualified Iran as such based upon three articles on its modern history, its recent “diversified” diplomacy and its socio-political domestic challenges.

² Qu Gongze, “总统坠机影响哈梅内伊布局? 专家: 伊朗领袖交接一直是糊涂账” [Does the presidential crash affect Khamenei’s layout? Expert: Iran’s leadership transition has been a muddle], Phoenix New Media, May 20, 2024, <https://news.ifeng.com/c/8ZkQzp1UL6c>; Liu Zhongmin, “作为伊朗政治‘钟摆’的操盘手, 哈梅内伊面临什么压力?” [As a manipulator of Iran’s political ‘pendulum’, what pressures does Khamenei face?], *Guancha*, May 21, 2024, https://www.guancha.cn/LiuZhongMin/2024_05_21_735431.shtml.

But both authors were quick to point out that the **victory of a moderate and reformist candidate was not a radical shift**. Indeed, in the words of Liu Zhongmin, Khamenei remains the “operator of Iran’s political ‘pendulum’” (伊朗政治‘钟摆’的操盘手). Moreover, as summarized by Li Shaoxian, the Dean of Ningxia University’s Institute of Chinese and Arab Countries, the new Iranian government has “both a conservative core and a reformist coat” (既有保守派内核, 又有改革派外衣).³ As a consequence, few are the voices that believe in the success of a reformist policy agenda as pushed by Pezeshkian.

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The treatment of protests after the death of Mahsa Amini at the hands of the police is also of interest. **The weight given to these protests varies depending on the expert commenting on them. This shows how they are, just like the “color revolutions”, a sensitive topic for Chinese thinking.** As such, Qin Tian talks about the “relatively calm period after the headscarf protests”, while Liu Zhongmin is less explicit in his reference: “some grassroots forces in Iranian society (...) that voice[d] dissatisfaction with the government”.⁴ For both, the insufficiently structured

opposition is unlikely to represent a threat to Iran’s political system.

A third scholar, Wang Jin, the Director of Northwest University’s Center for Israeli Studies, downplays the importance of the movement, explaining that “although women’s protests broke out in Kurdistan, the protests did not trigger nationwide political turmoil, and the Raisi government [did] not take radical measures to intensify the conflict” – a minimizing vision of the protests to say the least.⁵ On the contrary, Fan Hongda’s on-the-ground testimony stands out since he describes the relative societal liberalization as an outcome of the protests, while also talking about the morality police’s steadfastness.⁶

Internal weaknesses are not ignored, whether on the unemployment front, as underlined by Han Jianwei from SISU,⁷ **or regarding the security apparatus** according to Li Shaoxian and Liu Zhongmin. Li goes as far as saying that “Iran is a country that has been infiltrated very badly”,⁸ while Liu believes “Iran’s security organs, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been seriously infiltrated”.⁹ Hereafter, it is useful to put these claims into perspective with the financial means allocated to Iran’s security entities: 1/5th of Iran’s budget was allotted to the five major military sectors and their affiliated institutions in 2023, while the Ministry of Intelligence itself received a 43% budget increase in 2024!¹⁰

³ Xu Xiaoyu, “伊朗新内阁提名名单‘全员过关’ 佩泽希齐扬开了个好头?” [The list of nominees for the new Iranian Cabinet is ‘unanimous’, Pezeshkiziyani off to a good start?], Shanghai Observer, August 22, 2024, <https://www.shobserver.com/staticsg/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=787208&sid=300>.

⁴ Liu Zhongmin, May 2024.

⁵ Wang Jin, “伊朗总统莱希罹难: 意外的变动与变量” [Iranian President Raisi’s death: Unexpected changes and variables], Guangming Daily, May 20, 2024, https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s?__biz=MjM5NzU0MzQ4MQ==&mid=2654839466&idx=1&sn=50db19e0f6d6523e6058d17c3711bef4&chksm=bcb5ba82fc347d00371ce68897495486982674220c944fb3b4c834921deeb2acc1b65d482d8&scene=27.

⁶ Fan Hongda, “这次去伊朗, 年轻女性的变化对我冲击很大” [On this trip to Iran, the change in young women hit me hard], Guancha, August 22, 2024, https://www.guancha.cn/FanHongDa/2024_08_22_745632.shtml.

⁷ Han Jianwei, “伊朗新总统的改革之路注定不会平坦” [Iran’s new president’s road to reform is not destined to be smooth], China.com, August 7, 2024, http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2024-07/08/content_117297086.shtml.

⁸ Hou Yichao, “哈马斯一号人物遇袭身亡有何影响? 中东专家李绍先解读” [What are the implications of the attack and death of Hamas’s No.1? Middle East expert Li Shaoxian explains], Phoenix New Media, July 31, 2024, <https://news.ifeng.com/c/8bfUYnM1f5c>.

⁹ Liu Zhongmin, “誓言报复‘迟迟未落地, 伊朗的顾虑是什么?” [‘Vow of retaliation’ delayed, what are Iran’s concerns?], Guancha, August 17, 2024, https://www.guancha.cn/LiuZhongMin/2024_08_17_745117.shtml.

¹⁰ “Iran’s new budget bill pours money into security and military sectors”, Middle East Eye, February 12, 2023, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-new-budget-bill-pours-money-security-military-sectors>.

“Iran's security organs, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have been seriously infiltrated”

From Beijing's perspective, **Iran appears caught between the stability of its conservative political structure and the external threats challenging its regime's security** – compounded by the economic strain of ongoing sanctions. In this context, how does China view the escalating tensions with Israel, not only concerning Gaza but also as part of the broader regional confrontation?

Iran's Strategy against Israel: Responding without Escalating?

On two occasions in 2024 did Chinese experts pay close attention to Tehran's response against Israel: following Israel's bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Syria on April 1st and after Ismail Haniyeh's assassination on July 31st. Missiles launched on October 1st towards Israel following the death of Hassan Nasrallah and the ground invasion in southern Lebanon will also most likely be very much discussed – Sun Degang, Director of Fudan University's Center for Middle East Studies, already stating that, **without any action, Iran's regional legitimacy would have been seriously weakened.**¹¹

Iran's long standing view of Israel as an enemy to be eradicated has been consistent, though its intensity has varied over time. Liu Zhongmin offers a broader perspective by placing this deep-rooted hostility within a historical context. He describes how, **since 1979 and the advent of the present-day Islamic Republic of Iran, the country “has been striving for the moral high ground by opposing Israel and seeking a voice on the Palestinian-Israeli issue”**, including by supporting the terrorist organization Hamas,¹² and with a real deterioration of relations accelerating after the end of the Cold War.¹³ The SISU scholar considers **Iran's radical policy to be in a “gray zone” (灰色地带)** though, lacking political legitimacy and an international legal basis.¹⁴

Chinese analyses of Tehran's actions often emphasize their cautious approach, as **Tehran is not seen as a primary instigator of regional instability from Beijing's point of view.** A portion of Chinese literature on the topic presents highly tactical interpretations of Iran's responses. To name a few: the Tsinghua scholar Liu Lanyu's description of a “bluffing” strategy (虚张声势),¹⁵ the “fighting but not breaking” (斗而不破) approach of Li Ruiheng from Peking University,¹⁶ Fang Xiaozhi of the National University of Defense Technology's “saturation strike method” (饱和式攻击),¹⁷ Gao Wanying from CICIR's balance between “effective counterattack” (有效回击) and “cautious counterattack” (谨慎回击).¹⁸ According to these perspectives, Iran consistently responds in order to save

¹¹ Qiu Wenhan, “不再克制？伊朗为何突然对以色列动手？” [No longer restrained? Why did Iran suddenly take action against Israel?], Shanghai Observer, October 2, 2024, <https://www.shobserver.com/staticsg/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=803210&sid=300>.

¹² Liu Zhongmin, “巴以问题三大症结难解，巴勒斯坦或面对更残酷未来” [Palestine may face a bleaker future as three major sticking points in the Israeli-Palestinian issue remain unresolved], The Paper, March 6, 2024, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_26573016.

¹³ Liu Zhongmin, “伊以冲突升级将把中东引向何处？” [Where will the escalation of the Israeli-Israeli conflict lead the Middle East to], Global Times, April 15, 2024, <https://opinion.huanqiu.com/article/4HOZloPFIrF>.

¹⁴ Liu Zhongmin, “‘哈尼亚风暴’或已减弱，中东局势‘物极必反’？” [The “Haniyeh Storm” may have weakened, has the situation in the Middle East turned to “what goes around comes around”?], The Paper, August 9, 2024, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_28350209.

¹⁵ Liu Lanyu, “伊朗克尔曼惨案是否将成为地区战争导火索” [Will Iran's Kerman tragedy be a trigger for regional war?], World Affairs, February 2024, <https://www.51haodu.com/t/OHFkNlhmaXRLTA==>.

¹⁶ Li Ruiheng, “中东‘抵抗轴心’的兴起及前景” [The rise and future of the “axis of resistance” in the Middle East], CICIR, April 2024, <http://www.mesi.shisu.edu.cn/upload/article/files/64/cc/e0052e7e4f118501209d015709df/6af16098-03fd-4988-8703-9f2e5c0cbac7.pdf>.

¹⁷ Fang Xiaozhi, “伊朗空袭以色列打出了新战法” [Iran's air strikes on Israel are a new tactic], World Affairs, May 2024, <https://m.fx361.com/news/2024/0603/24052308.html>.

¹⁸ Gao Wanying, “伊朗报复以色列，为何迟迟不动手？” [Why is Iran delaying its retaliation on Israel for so long?], China.com, August 16, 2024, http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2024-08/16/content_117371061.shtml.

face and preserve its strategic deterrence. However, **Tehran remains cautious, as it cannot afford to escalate into a full-scale confrontation with Israel.**

Tehran is not seen as a primary instigator of regional instability from Beijing's point of view.

Meanwhile, another fringe of Chinese analyses spares no effort in using metaphors to illustrate Iran's retaliation. Li Shaoxian talks of retaliation as "an arrow on the string, inevitable" (箭在弦上, 不可避免),¹⁹ while Liu Zhongmin refers to it as "vow of revenge" (誓言报复). Nevertheless, this revenge has so far been "only been heard in the staircase, but no one is coming down" (只听楼梯响, 不见人下来).²⁰ **Iran's direct response to Israeli attacks therefore took some Chinese experts off-guard.**²¹ The series of missiles fired towards Israel could again bring more interrogations than certainties among the Chinese commentariat. Yet, to gain a clearer understanding of the ongoing Iran-Israel confrontation as seen from China, it is essential to take a broader regional perspective.

Costs and Benefits of Iran's Regional Revisionism

Iran is regularly portrayed at the helm of an "axis of resistance" (抵抗轴心), more occasionally as an "alliance of resistance" (抵抗联盟), **an axis that historically acted against the United States and Israel, but also recently contributed to disrupting maritime**

trade. Its scope varies but Li Ruiheng includes in this alliance the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of Iran, along with the Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, the government and Shiite militias in Syria, the Hamas in Palestine and the Houthis in Yemen. He further describes these actors as having "**an important impact on the evolution of geopolitics in the Middle East, [while] ensur[ing] Iran's national security**".²² Compared to previous anti-American forces, Li underlines the axis' differences in terms of ideology, actors, operational command and alliance system, and resistance methods.²³

Whether overtly or covertly, Iran exerts influence over certain non-state actors in the region by orchestrating cross-border military operations, and supplying funds, materials, weapons, and equipment. To some extent, Iran benefits from this regional destabilization, particularly when Israel is worn down by the constant "harassment" from surrounding resistance groups, as noted by Li Weijian from SIIIS.²⁴ However, the **instability generated by this informal alliance also weakens Tehran.** In Wang Jin's words, "whether Iran can effectively control its regional allies and prevent the risk of regional conflicts from increasing will be a strategic challenge".²⁵

While ambitioning to weaken Israel and the United States, **Iran's foreign policy still seeks some regional "stability"**. It is all the more true that Liu Lanyu is convinced neither Iran nor Israel would withstand the pressure of a full-scale conflict.²⁶ This stabilization argument is also the one presented by Qin Tian, who notes that Iran's foreign policy looks East, improves

¹⁹ Zhang Quan, "伊朗称'不会沉默, 但中东为何还'静悄悄'?" [Iran says it 'will not remain silent', but why is the Middle East still 'quiet'?), Shanghai Observer, August 8, 2024, <https://www.shobserver.com/statics/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=781793&sid=300>.

²⁰ Liu Zhongmin, August 2024.

²¹ Adam Koi, "Chinese perspectives on the recent Iran-Israel lash", China Global South Project, May 2, 2024, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/analysis/chinese-perspectives-on-the-recent-iran-israel-clash/>.

²² Li Ruiheng.

²³ This axis has respectively gone from secular nationalism to modern Islamism ideologically, from state actors to non-state actors representatively, from decentralized to centralized organizationally, and from conventional warfare to deterrence and asymmetric strikes tactically.

²⁴ Li Weijian, "巴以冲突背后, 美西方对中东影响力持续下降" [Behind the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the influence of the United States and the West on the Middle East continues to decline], Xinmin Evening News, April 25, 2024, <https://paper.xinmin.cn/html/xmwb/2024-04-25/15/183336.html>.

²⁵ Wang Jin.

²⁶ Liu Lanyu.

relations with neighbors and coordinates with regional partners, allies and non-state actors. However, he also considers that the rivalry with the United States and Israel continues to loom in the background.²⁷ According to Yang Yulong, a historian from Northwest University, the **new president's election will therefore not remove Iran's focus on improving diplomatic relations with the Arab world** – a complex balancing act to counter accusations of regional revisionism.²⁸

Niu Xinchun calls the United States aversion to a large-scale war in the Middle East a “weak spot” (软肋) that would allow Iran to “seize the initiative in the next stage of confrontation”.

With regards to the United States specifically, Iran has often tried to exploit the United States' aversion to a large-scale war in the Middle East that would jeopardize Washington's regional interests, even more so in the context of the U.S. presidential elections. Niu Xinchun, Executive Director of Ningxia University's Institute of Chinese and Arab Countries, goes as far as calling this aversion a “weak spot” (软肋) that would allow Iran to “seize the initiative in the next stage of confrontation” (下一阶段对抗中抢占先机).²⁹ On the other hand, **Khamenei and Pezeshkian have made prudent yet existing openings in recent weeks towards the United States, hoping for renewed**

discussions before a potential return of Donald Trump. These openings have caught the attention of the Chinese media but this reality may only be temporary within an ever tense Middle East.³⁰

The typology introduced by Sun Degang is also of interest to understand the existing regional power games and revisionist tendencies of Tehran. Countries are grouped into “four poles” according to their stance on a U.S.-led Middle East order.³¹ As such, Iran is portrayed as “revolutionary” (革命者), whereas Turkey is “reformist” (改革者), Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Egypt “improvers” (改良者), and Israel a “defender” (维护者). Consequently, **Iran emphasizes that the Middle East is a Middle East of the Middle Eastern people, not that of the United States**. This stance somehow echoes Wang Yi's declaration that “the people of the Middle East are the masters of the Middle East”, following the visits of Middle Eastern foreign ministers to China in early 2022.³² And although **Iran's economic reforms have been lackluster**, Sun considers **it has not prevented Iran from gaining significant influence and pursuing its “rise outside [this] system” (体系外崛起)**.

Iran is viewed both as a trigger and as a potential solution to the region's instability.

Sun Degang also applies his theoretical framework to the Palestinian issue to indicate how **Iran's advocacy for military struggle against Israel diverges**

²⁷ Qu Gongze.

²⁸ Yang Yulong, “外交的、政治的、宣传的、心理的, 伊朗新政府把戏做足了” [Diplomatically, politically, propagandistically, and psychologically, the new Iranian government is doing a great job], *Guancha*, August 18, 2024, https://www.guancha.cn/yangyulong/2024_08_18_745209_s.shtml.

²⁹ Niu Xinchun, “伊朗与美国的对抗又上新台阶” [The confrontation between Iran and the United States has reached a new level], *Chinese Academy of Social Sciences*, January 20, 2024, https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/mhgj/202401/t20240119_5729720.shtml.

³⁰ Lu Yifei, “中东局势紧张之际, 伊朗新总统亮相联合国, 系列表态透露哪些信息?” [As the situation in the Middle East becomes tense, Iran's new president appears at the United Nations. What information does his series of statements reveal?], *Shanghai Observer*, September 25, 2024, <https://www.shobserver.com/statics/res/html/web/newsDetail.html?id=800700&sid=300>; Sun Degang, “伊朗态度变软了吗?” [Has Iran softened its stance?], *Guancha*, September 28, 2024, https://www.guancha.cn/sundegang/2024_09_28_750064.shtml

³¹ Sun Degang, “New cohort of Middle Eastern countries”, *Xinhua*, June 13, 2024, http://www.news.cn/globe/2024-06/13/c_1310777907.htm.

³² Wang Yi, “Middle East has no ‘power vacuum,’ needs no ‘foreign patriarch’”, *Global Times*, January 22, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202201/1246036.shtml>.

from political or advocacy solutions pushed by others. This categorization exercise here again confirms Iran's unique position and underlines how its revisionist behavior may impact its relations with non-regional actors. Consequently, the United States is not the only non-regional actor calling for refraining from escalating. In their various official communiqués, both China and Russia defended this line and, as recalled by Liu Zhongmin, are among the "countries inside and outside the region [that] jointly restrain the escalation of conflicts".³³ **Iran is therefore viewed both as a trigger and as a potential solution to the region's instability.** Thereafter, arises the key question of how Iran's recent interactions and dealings affect its relations with China?

The China-Iran Relation: Who Gains the Most From It?

Regional dynamics have undeniable influence on China-Iran relations but the bilateral relationship also has ramifications of its own. **Whereas Tehran gains from China's geopolitical protection and trading opportunities, Beijing also benefits from Iran's oil and subscription to a new international order.**³⁴ China has long been Iran's largest trade partner, especially considering Beijing was ready to trade with a regime under sanctions, allowing Iran to access

telecom parts it could not purchase from the West for instance.

Trade further accelerated in January 2016, soon after the signature of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, when Xi visited Iran and announced a \$600 billion (€552 billion) bilateral trade objective by 2026.³⁵ The partnership was even upgraded to a 25-year comprehensive cooperation agreement in 2021,³⁶ but with limited success so far: bilateral trade volume was only at \$14.7 billion (€13.5 billion) in 2023.³⁷ Moreover, **there is a significant trade asymmetry considering China** – who has diversified its sources of oil imports –³⁸ **purchases nearly all of Iran's current oil exports**, under market prices and through third countries to avoid sanctions.³⁹

On the nuclear issue, some commentators advocate a firmer stance against Iran's military program, although China has been a strong supporter of Tehran's civilian program historically.⁴⁰ Indeed, retired Senior Colonel Zhou Bo from Tsinghua University enjoins China to make it clear "that **although Iran has the right to peacefully develop nuclear energy, it must not develop nuclear weapons**".⁴¹ Recently, the entry of Iran to the Shanghai Cooperation Organization had likewise been delayed due to international tensions over issues on its nuclear program.

³³ Liu Zhongmin, August 2024.

³⁴ For instance, in June 2024, at the Board of Governors of the International Atomic Energy Agency, China, Iran (and Russia) published a joint statement urging Western countries to "to demonstrate political will [and] restrain themselves from the endless wheel of escalation": <https://documents.un.org/doc/undoc/gen/n24/168/93/pdf/n2416893.pdf>.

³⁵ Golnar Motevalli, "China, Iran agree to expand trade to \$600 billion in a decade", Bloomberg, January 23, 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-01-23/china-iran-agree-to-expand-trade-to-600-billion-in-a-decade>.

³⁶ William Figueroa, "China-Iran relations: the myth of massive investment", The Diplomat, April 6, 2021, <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/china-iran-relations-the-myth-of-massive-investment/>.

³⁷ "China-Iran relations", Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, Last updated in July 2024, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/gjhdq_676201/gj_676203/yz_676205/1206_677172/sbgx_677176/.

³⁸ Imports of Iranian oil tripled between 2020-23 but they were still only 10% of China's total imports in 2024: Christina Lu, "How much leverage does China really have over Iran?", Foreign Policy, April 19, 2024, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2024/04/19/iran-china-israel-attack-oil-trade-economic-leverage/>; "Iran's Petroleum Exports to China and U.S. Sanctions", Congressional Research Service, May 8, 2024, <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/IN/IN12267>.

³⁹ Jonathan Fulton and Michael Schuman, "China's Middle East policy shift from 'hedging' to 'wedging'", Atlantic Council, September 5, 2024, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/chinas-middle-east-policy-shift-from-hedging-to-wedging/>.

⁴⁰ In the 1980s, China assisted Iran in building a research reactor and supplied the country with four additional research reactors.

⁴¹ Zhou Bo, "美国、中国及宿命论陷阱" [America, China, and the fatalism trap], CISS, May 14, 2024, https://ciss.tsinghua.edu.cn/info/china_wzft/7185.

Wu Shiyao's comparative perspective is also interesting to understand China-Iran relations comprehensively.⁴² The scholar from the University of International Business and Economics in Beijing lays down a framework for Middle Eastern countries depending on their "Look East" policies, with Iran described as adopting a strategic approach (战略型“向东看”) towards China, while Israel takes a more pragmatic stance, and Saudi Arabia's approach is described as more complex.⁴³ In this regard, **Iran views its relationship and cooperation with China as a key pillar of its foreign policy, treating it as a foundational strategy**, and with Tehran aiming to deepen comprehensive, high-level, and strategic collaboration by fostering institutionalized and systematic channels of exchange.

But the other side of the coin is that these **growing, and excessive, expectations created the sense that Beijing should provide even stronger support to Iran** according to Wu⁴⁴ – as materialized recently on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, for example, when Foreign Minister Wang Yi pledged China would support Iran in safeguarding its security against “external forces” and “always be a trustworthy partner”.⁴⁵ However, **China's support is not**

a given and China values as much, if not more, its partnerships with Iran's rivals on the Arab side of the Gulf.

Wang Yi pledged that China would support Iran in safeguarding its security against “external forces” and “always be a trustworthy partner”.

In the coming years, Iran will face the challenge of preserving its autonomy and influence within a turbulent regional landscape while avoiding overdependence on China, especially in the realm of energy exports. On the other hand, **China must navigate its relationship with a deeply entrenched authoritarian regime that**, despite alienating some of its neighbors and creating regional instability, **could become an important partner in promoting China's vision for the future international order**. This dynamic likely explains the cautious approach adopted by both Chinese decision-makers and experts – Iran's revisionism is useful but to a certain point only.

⁴² Wu Shiyao, “中东国家‘向东看’及其对华政策选择” [Middle Eastern countries 'Look East' and their policy choices toward China], *Foreign Affairs Review*, March 2024, http://www.mesi.shisu.edu.cn/_upload/article/files/16/12/48bda0424f138a670fb1a9dd1a87/0474e1dc-a922-4f92-bfb1-609de7493213.pdf.

⁴³ “Look East” policies are defined by the author as the “policies and practices of Middle Eastern countries to actively strengthen relations, exchanges and cooperation with China”.

⁴⁴ For instance, in June 2024, Iran unsuccessfully pressured Cong Peiwu, the new Chinese ambassador, to reverse his country's position on a territorial dispute with the United Arab Emirates.

⁴⁵ “FM Wang says China pledges ‘support’ for Iran”, *China-Global South Project*, September 25, 2024, <https://chinaglobalsouth.com/2024/09/25/fm-wang-says-china-pledges-support-for-iran/>.



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Chinese Perspectives on the North Korea-Russia Alliance: Too Much of a Good Thing

As questions continue to evolve over the existence of a de facto set of linkages and alliances amongst the quartet of China-Russia-Iran-North Korea, an examination of Chinese viewpoints on **North Korean-Russian interactions indicates the existence of both encouragement and frustration from Beijing**. How does the government in Beijing interpret the recent intensification – up to and including – of a formal alliance between Pyongyang and Moscow? It has been over five years since the last in-person meeting between Xi Jinping and Kim Jong Un, and, in spite of the resumption of high-level visits to Pyongyang with the Zhao Leji visit in April 2024, the **Chinese-North Korean relationship is in need of greater coordination** in order to facilitate more cross-border trade, the management of inter-Korean tensions, and the flow of food aid into North Korea.

A review of recent policy literature and think-tank essays demonstrates a few key points: while **Beijing is unconcerned with the erosion of the international United Nations sanctions regime against North Korea, it appears to be worried about Russian aid on the missile and nuclear fronts**. Amid a tendency

to frame North Korea as heavily aid-dependent and a subordinate state in ties with Russia, there is careful omission of discussion around North Korean agency in areas of sensitivity to Chinese foreign policy, such as North Korea's recognition of the puppet states of Donetsk and Luhansk,¹ or North Korean provision of artillery munitions on the battlefield in Ukraine.² There are many elements of continuity amongst the Chinese commentariat – not least of which are the complaints about tightening and potentially harmful U.S. alliances with South Korea and Japan. Still, their writings also convey **concern over Russia and North Korea's joint actions exacerbating a downward spiral in regional tensions**.

There is careful omission of discussion around North Korean agency in areas of sensitivity to Chinese foreign policy.

¹ "North Korea recognises breakaway of Russia's proxies in east Ukraine", Reuters, July 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/north-korea-recognises-breakaway-russias-proxies-east-ukraine-2022-07-13/>.

² Alex Gangitano, "White House: North Korea has provided Russia with 1K containers of military equipment, munitions", The Hill, October 13, 2023, <https://thehill.com/homenews/administration/4254660-white-house-north-korea-provided-russia-military-equipment-munitions/>.

Chinese Responses to the Russian-North Korean Security Alliance

The Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs sponsors a world politics journal since 1950, *世界知识* (World Affairs). While it rarely serves as an explicit signaling device, and it is seldom as overtly confrontational as the Ministry's spokesperson's regular remarks, the journal's general scope and tone with respect to the Putin-Kim meeting in July 2024 are worth noting. For an overview of Putin's rapid swing through Pyongyang and Hanoi, the magazine commissioned Li Yonghui, a researcher at the Eastern European Studies Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), to comment.³ After a long summary, Li concludes with an overt critique: the **Russian embrace of North Korea into a formal alliance is "likely to further exacerbate competition in the Asia-Pacific region and the formation of long-term competition blocs"**.

Hao Junfeng with Wang Fudong, two Korea-oriented scholars based in Shandong, take a more neutral stance on the new agreement, in an essay whose title simply says that Putin's visit to Pyongyang "accelerated changes" (加速演变) in the region.⁴ Their discussion of the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership moves into counterintuitive terrain, depicting **North Korea more as the supplicant and the Russians in no particular hurry** to cement the details of an agreement which surely has widely diverging interpretations in Pyongyang and Moscow.

Similarly, Dang Haonan, calls Putin a man in a hurry (马不停蹄), but not needing anything in particular from the North Koreans, apart from serving as another

voice and supporter like Belarus in the modified chorus of "Global South" on UN votes.⁵ Dang, a possibly pseudonymous Chinese graduate student in Moscow, whose surname is identical to that of the Party, takes care not to lend credence to reports of North Korean artillery shell deliveries to Russia for use in Ukraine, instead saying that Russia had "already basically achieved self-sufficiency of weaponry" on the battlefield there. Keeping the **focus on North Korea as the potentially supplied, rather than as a supplier of weaponry**, Dang recalls Kim Jong Un's visit to Vladivostok in September 2023, where the North Korean leader showed much excitement over and detailed interest in the latest Russian missile technology.

North Korea as an Aid Recipient and Sanctions Victim

Zheng Jiyong is a relative rarity in Chinese academia, because he describes one of his research areas as "the structure of North Korean state power" (朝鲜权力结构).⁶ A professor at Fudan University's Institute for International Relations, **Zheng reviews problems in North Korea's domestic economy without blaming sanctions or U.S.-China tensions**. Instead, the country's long closure appears to be a source of malaise: "with the country closed for several years" (封国数年), he writes, "the North Korean economy has experienced a severe test, but it isn't just a grave retrogression economically [that is concerning], North Korean society itself is manifesting many new problems". Zheng **attributes to North Korean leadership a desire in 2024 to expand its trade relations with China, which have yet to recover to prior 2018-19 levels**.⁷ Zheng cites "facilitating

³ Li Yonghui and Pan Zexin, "普京访问朝鲜,越南,俄罗斯'向东看'政策添新内涵" [Putin's visit to North Korea, Vietnam adds new dimension to Russia's 'Look East' policy], *World Affairs*, July 2024, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240716A019OM00>.

⁴ Hao Junfeng and Wang Fudong, "普京访朝,东北亚地区格局加速演变" [Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea accelerates the evolution of Northeast Asia], *China.com*, June 20, 2024, http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2024-06/20/content_117265264.shtml.

⁵ Dang Haonan, "普京访朝,俄罗斯的全球战略以及俄朝合作的限制" [Putin's visit to North Korea, Russia's global strategy, and the limits of Russian-North Korean cooperation], *The Paper*, June 20, 2024, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_27797422.

⁶ Zheng Jiyong, "螺旋下降的东北亚与朝鲜半岛" [Downward spiraling in Northeast Asia and the Korean Peninsula], *Fudan Development Institute*, January 10, 2024, <https://fdi.fudan.edu.cn/12/e8/c21257a660200/page.htm>.

⁷ Jangho Choi and Yoojeong Choi, "North Korea's 2023 trade with China: Analysis and forecasts", *Korea Institute for International Economic Policy*, March 26, 2023, https://www.kiep.go.kr/gallery.es?mid=a20301000000&bid=0007&list_no=11231&act=view.

customs clearance not just for goods but for people” (货物通关便利化, 人员通关协商等举措) – a clear nod to North Korean laborers going to China. His analysis of North Korea is thus far more developed than Yang Bojiang’s, as underlined later on, and he sees greater agency in Pyongyang.

The country’s long closure appears to be a source of malaise.

Indeed, Zheng considers that the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea is adopting a “**three-stage diplomatic style**” (三段式外交风格) in which military deterrence serves as the background, foreign policy as the means, and economic improvement as the purpose (军事威慑为背景, 外交政策为手段, 经济提升为目的). Zheng does not draw out how this might be different from past iterations of Kim Jong Un’s foreign policy such as the much-touted “Byungjin line” of the early 2010s,⁸ but for Chinese readership the emphasis remains: **North Korea needs space and security in which to develop its domestic economy**. This has been a running theme in Zheng Jiyong’s analysis, whereby expanded ties with China allow Pyongyang to place greater emphasis on economic development.⁹

North Korea’s “three-stage diplomatic style” (三段式外交风格) in which military deterrence serves as the background, foreign policy as the means, and economic improvement as the purpose.

After Kim’s visit to Moscow, there were **few signals that North Korea would follow Vietnam’s model of gradually taking over some of China’s low-end manufacturing** while also strengthening its own well-developed defense industry. It is therefore Russian rather than North Korean “economic strength” cited by the Shandong authors Hao Junfeng and Wang Fudong, who credit Russia with “guaranteeing the stability of North Korean food prices” via the provision of 1,200 tonnes of flour and 1,000 tonnes of corn, a figure slightly under half the total amount of food aid Russia had provided to the North in 2013.

For Yang Bojiang, Director of CASS’s Institute of Japanese Studies, **North Korean actions are not posed as an emerging “contradiction” (矛盾), nor do they appear to be much of an issue for China.**¹⁰ Instead, Yang praises the shutting down of the UN Panel of Experts on North Korea as “an important step forward” for cooling down the region. Ignoring China’s support of the sanctions regime in 2017, Yang notes that **sanctions on North Korea have been ineffective for thirty years**. Yang goes further, recommending that China take action on “the reversible clauses in the [UN] sanctions resolutions [which] can alleviate the difficulties of the North Korean people and push forward denuclearization on the peninsula”. While he does not hold out an explicit “carrot” for North Korea prior to taking such an action, this point of view seems common among Chinese analysts.

Chinese Views of the Korean Peninsula: Irritation and Regional Architecture

Yang Bojiang laments the lack of a post-Cold War peace dividend in the region, saddened that every time the region is on the brink of greater regional economic integration, security crises like the THAAD controversy in 2016 emerge, which are the fault of

⁸ As announced by Kim Jong Un at a Korean Workers’ Party meeting in March 2013, it corresponds to the ambition of simultaneously improving North Korea’s economy while strengthening its nuclear “deterrent”.

⁹ Zheng Jiyong, “朝鲜领导人年内要访华？可能性确实存在，但也有几件大事需先完成” [North Korean leader to visit China within the year? It’s a real possibility, but there are a few big things that need to be first accomplished], Sohu, May 24, 2023, https://www.sohu.com/a/678367190_121631769

¹⁰ Yang Bojiang, “东北亚安全困局加深” [A deepening security dilemma in Northeast Asia], Aisixiang, May 6, 2024, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/151200.html>.

the U.S. allies, Japan and South Korea. He sees “great power competition and order reconstruction” (大国博弈与秩序重) occurring in the region. Here **North Korea’s newly robust ties with Russia can be framed more as responsive to the “institutionalization” (制度化) of trilateral ties between the US-ROK-Japan** and August 2023 Camp David meetings, an institutional process giving the hub and spoke system even more coordination. Yang further points to increasing defense spending in Japan as evidence that Cold War remnants are not being dissolved in the region.¹¹

What is North Korea’s role in this discourse? It is simply a reactive one. According to Yang, the coordination between the **United States and its regional allies inevitably “produces a huge influence on the strategic choices of countries in the region” (战略选择产生重大影响)**. Yang simply explains “North Korea’s frequent missile tests” as occurring as a result of “the Biden government’s policy of maximum pressure” and sanctions enforcement, or as equivalent actions to South Korea’s own military exercises.

Zheng Jiyong, too, wrings his hands over the downward security spiral in Northeast Asia, but looks at the Korean Peninsula, characterizing the **new normal or mainline of North-South Korea relations as a confrontation and a standoff (南北关系对抗, 对峙成主线)**. Naturally, North Korea is not portrayed as the region’s main problem; quite the contrary. It is the Yoon government in Seoul, in power since May 2022, which has taken provocative actions. Zheng also criticizes Yoon Suk Yeol with an ironic aside, saying the South Korean president disproves the old maxim that conservatives are good with money.

North Korea is not portrayed as the region’s main problem; quite the contrary.

Freely mixing metaphors, Zheng writes that the Yoon administration has “broken open the door bolts and released the brakes put in place during the [previous] Moon Jae-in administration to prevent a recurrence of the Korean War”. **There is little illusion that North Korea accepts this passively, itself “provoking” (刺激) South Korea** in return with missile tests, turning its back on eventual unification, and by unilaterally reactivating facilities in the Kaesong Industrial Complex.¹² Ultimately, under North Korea’s apparent aggressive actions is only a need to obtain benefits; they are not undertaken in order to trigger a war (以引发战争的极端悬崖策略获取利益是根本, 真正引发战争无疑并非其最终目的).

Zhang Wang, Associate Professor at Waseda University in Tokyo, frames the Russia and North Korea rapprochement by borrowing from the late Columbia University political scientist Robert Jervis, calling this **intensification of relations an “unintended delayed effect” (非故意滞后效应) of the Russia-Ukraine war**, demonstrating that conflict’s gradual spillover effects into Asia, and the need for more imaginative contingency planning by Chinese policy makers.¹³

He clearly **advises Chinese readers and leaders not to align explicitly into a trilateral defense framework with North Korea and Russia**, as such a step would have negative consequences in the form of heightened activation of Japan-South Korea-U.S.

¹¹ Shinnosuke Nagatomi, “Japan’s defense spending climbs to 1.6% of GDP”, *Nikkei Asia*, April 27, 2024, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Defense/Japan-s-defense-spending-climbs-to-1.6-of-gdp>.

¹² Peter Makowsky, Jenny Town and Iliana Ragnone, “Kaesong industrial complex: a tortured history and uncertain future”, *38 North*, September 4, 2024, <https://www.38north.org/2024/09/kaesong-industrial-complex-a-tortured-history-and-uncertain-future/>.

¹³ Zhang Wang, “俄乌战争在东亚的滞后涟漪” [Russo-Ukrainian war’s leaving ripples in East Asia], *Global China*, July 14, 2024, <https://blog.haiwaikanshijie.com/%e5%bc%a0%e6%9c%9b%e4%b8%a8%e4%bf%84%e6%9c%9d%e6%8e%a5%e8%bf%91%ef%bc%9a-%e4%bf%84%e4%b9%8c%e6%88%98%e4%ba%89%e5%9c%a8%e4%b8%9c%e4%ba%9a%e7%9-a%84%e6%bb%9e%e5%90%8e%e6%b6%9f%e6%bc%aa%e4%b8%a8%e6%b5%b7/>, Zheng appears to be referring to Robert Jervis, “System effects: Complexity in political and social life”, Princeton University Press, 1997, pp.29-31.

military coordination and heightening regional tension (中国如果加入俄朝三国框架, 将导致美日韩同盟关系更加紧扣, 势必加局东亚国际关系紧张). The article ends with **sharp questions about North Korea's request to Russia for advanced missile and nuclear technology**. This should give concern to Chinese leaders, as it might embolden Kim Jong Un to change the strategic status quo on the Peninsula and cause China to lose its valuable buffer state. But perhaps Zheng's position in Waseda allows him to make a more explicit statement than is commonly seen within Chinese state media.

Zhang Wang advises Chinese readers and leaders not to align explicitly into a trilateral defense framework with North Korea and Russia.

Current alignments are the results of multiple possible historical echoes, or "ripples" to use Zheng's term. Instead of looking back at the Korean War, Yang Bojiang uses an unusual historical analogy when assessing the impact of the "Ukrainian crisis": he sees the **United States as engaged in an extension of the 1951 San Francisco Treaty architecture**, that re-established peaceful relations between Japan and the Allied Powers, **while China and Russia are painted as the guardians of the presumably**

more stable and irrefutable 1943 Cairo and 1945 Potsdam declarations. Yang has explained this idea previously: China and Russia are not simply responding to unwelcome NATO expansion, but are themselves guardians of the morally pure post-war order of Cairo, with Chiang Kai-shek's participation, and Potsdam, without any Chinese representatives, while the San Francisco Treaty is obviously a "distortion and a falsification" (歪曲, 篡改) of the older agreements.¹⁴ This is **a fascinating rhetorical maneuver which entirely avoids Chinese or Russian sponsorship of North Korea**, and is probably meant more for domestic consumption or university seminars than any type of negotiating stance for China.

North Korea's amplified range of interaction with Russia does not enhance China's global standing. However, it also provides more stabilizing food aid for the North, accelerates North Korea's ginger opening up of its borders, and enhances Russia's ability to fight what one Chinese military blogger calls a "protracted war" (持久战) in and around Ukraine.¹⁵ And this is **hardly the Chinese Communist Party's first time facing an ambitious North Korean leader who is keen to manipulate Moscow to his own advantage**. As long as Vladimir Putin does not provide Kim Jong Un with the young leader's long wish list of missile and nuclear-related kit, or push him toward a tipping point of rash military action against South Korea, **China is in no danger whatsoever of being displaced from its uncomfortable position as North Korea's truly indispensable ally**.

¹⁴ Yang Bojiang, "俄乌冲突触发亚太深层次问题, 亚太"北约化"和北约"亚太化"趋势更加明显" [Russia-Ukraine conflict triggers deep-rooted problems in Asia-Pacific, and the trend of "NATO-ization" of Asia-Pacific and "Asia-Pacificization" of NATO becomes more apparent], *China Daily*, July 12, 2023, <https://cn.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202307/12/WS64aea168a3109d7585e44997.html>.

¹⁵ Shen Duying, "论持久战, 或没人是俄罗斯对手, 为何这样说? 乌克兰该何去何从?" [On protracted war, Russia has no match. Why do you say it like that? What path should Ukraine take?], *NetEase.com*, April 28, 2024, <https://www.163.com/dy/article/J0QTDULG05564NUO.html>.



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Russia: China's Most Important Non-Alliance

China's post-Cold War relationship with Russia has evolved in an incremental way: with periods of accelerated cooperation following the 2008-09 global economic crisis, Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, and, most recently, Russia's war against Ukraine and the conflict with the West that ensued since February 2022. **Chinese observers tend to emphasize positive aspects of the relationship, even if they express doubts regarding Russia's particular actions.**

An ever-closer cooperation with Russia is seen to be among the key achievements of Chinese foreign policy, defined by strategy, pragmatism and continuity.¹ The relationship represents "a new paradigm of great power relations"² and "a model of relations between neighboring major powers" (大国关系新范式).³ **For China, the relationship is grounded in "five always" (五个始终):** "always follow the strategic guidance of the head of state diplomacy, always adhere to the principle of 'non-alignment, non-confrontation, and non-targeting third parties', always stick

to the right path in the face of major issues, always pursue inclusive and win-win cooperation in cooperation, and always promote equal and orderly world multipolarization".⁴

Russian and Chinese leaderships go to great lengths to emphasize that their cooperation is not directed against any third party.

Economic complementarity between the two states, security and people-to-people ties further represent the backbone of the relationship from the perspective of Chinese observers.⁵ At the same time, they see Beijing's ties with Moscow as a "partnership without alliance".⁶ **Russian and Chinese leaderships go to great lengths to emphasize that their cooperation**

¹ Zhao Long, "赵隆接受环球时报采访, 谈中俄元首会晤" [Zhao Long interviewed by Global Times on China-Russia heads of state meeting], Shanghai Institutes for International Studies, May 24, 2024, <https://www.siiis.org.cn/sp/15624.jhtml>.

² Liu Jin, "中俄打造大国关系新范式" [China and Russia create a new paradigm for great power relations], China.com, May 15, 2024, http://www.china.com.cn/opinion2020/2024-05/15/content_117188893.shtml.

³ Zhao Long.

⁴ Xiao Bin, "提升安全合作水平是普京访华战略目标" [Putin visit to China highlights security cooperation], China-US Focus, May 9, 2024, <https://cn.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/20240509/43229.html#>.

⁵ Han Lu, "中俄关系展现更广阔发展前景" [Where China-Russia relations stand], China-US Focus, May 27, 2024, <https://cn.chinausfocus.com/foreign-policy/20240527/43252.html#>.

⁶ Liu Jin.

is not directed against any third party, that it is not a typical Cold-War alliance, and that, at the same time, it “performs” better than a traditional alliance. Chinese analyses of Sino-Russian cooperation underline its long-term nature and its independence from external factors, while still admitting the importance of Western pressure on Russia.

Countering “the Collective West” while Learning from History

The pressure Russia and China have been facing from the West, and the United States in particular, represents the key driver underpinning Sino-Russian collaboration. “Dual containment” (双重遏制) of Moscow and Beijing is mentioned either explicitly by Xiao Bin from the Chinese Association of Social Sciences (CASS),⁷ or implicitly with Russia squeezed out of Europe and China being encircled in the Asia-Pacific region as exposed by Han Lu of the China Institute of International Studies.⁸ **Russia seems to have a more direct need to strengthen its cooperation with China in order to counter “the collective West”.**⁹ Admitting the role of external factors, Chinese observers emphasize that “China-Russia relations also have their own endogenous driving force and independent value”.¹⁰ These arguments are specified, with particular observers pointing to more **specific drivers of the recent wave of Sino-Russian cooperation.**

History is among the main obstacles to Moscow and Beijing formalizing their cooperation in an alliance-like form.

Feng Shaolei, from East China Normal University, provides the broadest analysis, attempting to reposition the Sino-Russian relationship within the context of the world’s move away from unipolarity and the fading of U.S./Western primacy.¹¹ For Feng, Russia’s war with Ukraine is “a mirror of the global transformation” (反光镜全球转型). Liu Jin, the Executive Director of East China Normal University’s Centre for Russian Studies, explains that even though the “**negative teaching materials**” (反面教材) in history **have always reminded China and Russia that cooperation is beneficial to both sides**, while fighting is equally harmful, history, of the failed Sino-Soviet alliance implicitly, is among the main obstacles to Moscow and Beijing formalizing their cooperation in an alliance-like form.¹² As for Han Lu, she points to the role of Western sanctions on Russia as the driver for economic cooperation, asserting that “in view of the strong economic complementarity between China and Russia, China promptly filled the above market gap”.¹³ Both Liu Jin and Han Lu therefore argue that **regional cooperation and cross-border cooperation are among the most promising areas for strengthening the ties.**

The Limits to the “No-Limits Partnership”

Direct criticism towards the relationship is almost non-existent. Nonetheless, it is telling that Chinese commentators do not use the phrase “no-limits partnership” and instead point to persistent obstacles that slow down or limit cooperation.

While Xiao Bin sees Putin’s most recent proposal for the Eurasian security framework as a “quasi-alliance” (准联盟) of the type that fits with China’s generally

⁷ Xiao Bin.

⁸ Han Lu.

⁹ Xiao Bin.

¹⁰ Han Lu.

¹¹ Feng Shaolei, “全球转型、俄乌危机与中俄关系” [Global transformation, Russia-Ukraine crisis and China-Russia relations], Aisixiang, March 14, 2024, <https://www.aisixiang.com/data/149917.html>.

¹² Liu Jin.

¹³ Han Lu.

cautious non-alignment policy,¹⁴ he goes furthest in warning Beijing against aligning too closely with Russia. Xiao admits that **a quasi-alliance would help Moscow and Beijing to fend off the “dual containment”** pursued by the United States. Still, he warns that “it is risky to join the Russian ‘quasi-alliance’ in the context of the Ukrainian war, because the degree of common threats faced by countries is different, and countries within the framework of the ‘quasi-alliance’ usually consider whether the risks and benefits of cooperation match” each other.¹⁵

A geopolitical situation
of “Russia retreating and
the West advancing” (俄退西进).

One of the criticisms concerns **Russia’s insufficient engagement with China’s Belt and Road Initiative**. In the words of Feng Shaolei, “there is still room for Russia to significantly improve its connection with the Belt and Road”.¹⁶ Another weakness recognised by Han Lu is **Russia’s weakening position in the post-Soviet region**. After the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis, Russia was unable to take care of itself and its resource investment in its “backyard” (后院) decreased. The United States, the West and third-party forces took the opportunity to infiltrate the region, and a **geopolitical situation of “Russia retreating and the West advancing”** (俄退西进) appeared in the region.¹⁷

Russia Reaching Out to
the “Friendly Non-West”

The pressure and the isolation that Russia has faced since February 2022 are the dominant reasons in Chinese scholars’ views for Moscow’s growing engagement with the non-Western world – all termed as “friendly countries” –, beginning with North Korea and Iran, and ending with Latin American and BRICS countries. Li Yonghui and Pan Zexin, respectively an academic at CASS and an assistant researcher at the University of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, assert that Russia’s war against Ukraine and the **Western response** that followed have **elevated the Asia-Pacific region to a priority direction in Russian foreign policy**.¹⁸

Putin’s visit to North Korea and Vietnam in mid-June 2024 understandably attracted special attention, given Beijing’s close ties with the former and tense relations with the latter. Xu Shuai and Zhou Chenyi, from the National Defense University – and thus close to the People’s Liberation Army –, also interpret Russia’s growing political-military activities in Latin America, such as the visit of four Russian ships to Cuba and Venezuela, or joint military exercises with Cuban troops, through the prism of a response to the U.S. pressure since February 2022.¹⁹

Li and Pan go so far as to speak of a breakthrough in political and security cooperation with North Korea, and an “unprecedented level of cooperation” (前所未有的合作水平) between Moscow and Pyongyang, following the conclusion of the Russian-Korean strategic partnership treaty.²⁰ Li Min, an assistant researcher at

¹⁴ Vladimir Putin proposed to start a dialogue on a new security framework in Eurasia in his speech to the Federal Assembly (February 2024) and during a meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (June 2024).

¹⁵ Xiao Bin.

¹⁶ Feng Shaolei.

¹⁷ Han Lu.

¹⁸ Li Yonghui and Pan Zexin, “普京访问朝鲜、越南, 俄罗斯‘向东看’政策添新内涵” [Putin’s visit to North Korea, Vietnam adds a new dimension to Russia’s ‘Look East’ policy], *World Affairs*, July 2024, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240716A019OM00>.

¹⁹ Xu Shuai and Zhou Chenyi, “俄罗斯出兵‘拉美’蕴意几何” [Russia’s ‘troops’ in Latin America: What does it mean?], *World Affairs*, July 2024, <https://new.qq.com/rain/a/20240717A01DTH00>.

²⁰ Li Yonghui and Pan Zexin.

the Institute of Asia-Pacific Studies of the China Institute of International Studies, traces the shift in Russia's approach to North Korea back to the aftermath of Russia's invasion against Ukraine.²¹ **While all those authors analyze the details of defense, political and economic cooperation** between Moscow and Pyongyang, **they shy away from evaluating its relevance for Beijing.**

Additionally, Chinese observers differ in their assessments of the implications for Russia's relations with South Korea. For Li and Pan, North Korea took precedence over South Korea, with the latter being a kind of "lost cause" for Russia, as South Korea joined the Western sanctions and strengthened its defense ties with the United States. Li Min, in turn, argues that it would be **difficult for Russia and South Korea to break up their cooperation completely**, given both the existing level of cooperation and what Li interprets, contrary to Li and Pan, as South Korea's self-restraint in following the Western pressure on Russia. Li Min also points to **the limitations Russia faces in its support to North Korea due to the UN Security Council membership and obligations** to follow the sanctions regime. Similarly, Dang Haonan, a graduate student at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, underscores these limitations, adding that Russia must also navigate its relatively stable relations with South Korea while balancing its stance on North Korea.²²

BRICS provides the broadest conduit for Moscow's engagement with the Global South. Li Yonghui, a researcher at CASS's Institute of Russian, East European and Central Asian Studies, sees it as "an important institutional tool for promoting the multi-polarization of the world and realising geopolitical and

economic interests" (该机制是其推动世界多极化和实现地缘政治, 经济利益的重要制度工具).²³

Moscow's ties with Vietnam can be considered a sensitive topic for China scholars.

Interestingly, China is "the elephant in the room", left unmentioned in most of those discussions. Russia's policy in South-East Asia, especially **Moscow's ties with Vietnam, can be considered a sensitive topic for China scholars.** Feng, for instance, speaks about Russia's growing ties with ASEAN without any hints that those might become problematic from Beijing's point of view. Instead, China emerges in his account as a link between Russia and ASEAN. The feasibility of such a construction aside, this proposition indirectly challenges the Russian-led narratives promoting the Greater Eurasian Partnership that put Moscow as the key hub in linking different parts of Eurasia and East Asia. As he further elaborates, **"China and Russia cannot only develop in the depths of Eurasia, but also play an important role in promoting the development and cooperation between Russia and countries in the Western Pacific region"**.²⁴

Russia's Uncertain Future

As China's partner, **Russia's usefulness is weakened by the limits to its development**, due to domestic challenges and external pressures. As Liu Jin points out, "Russia's development is facing considerable pressure. Economic transformation and social stability and sustainable development under the background of sanctions are Russia's key tasks in the near future".²⁵

²¹ Li Min, "在朝韩之间, 俄罗斯的政策天平加速倾斜" [Between North and South Korea, Russia's policy scales tilt faster], China Institute of International Studies, February 2, 2024, https://www.ciis.org.cn/yjcg/sspl/202402/t20240206_9188.html.

²² Dang Haonan, "普京访朝、俄罗斯的全球战略以及俄朝合作的限制" [Putin's visit to North Korea, Russia's global strategy, and the limits of Russian-North Korean cooperation], The Paper, June 20, 2024, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_27797422.

²³ Li Yonghui, "俄罗斯如何看'大金砖合作'" [How Russia sees 'Greater BRICS cooperation'], Institute of Russian, Eastern Europe & Central Asian Studies, China Academy of Social Sciences, March 25, 2024, http://euroasia.cassn.cn/kycg/lw/202403/t20240325_5741049.shtml.

²⁴ Li Yonghui.

²⁵ Liu Jin.

Russia is trying to consolidate the wartime system without pursuing “the old path of excessive militarization”.

Against this backdrop, Han Yichen and Li Jingya, two associate researchers at the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations, analyze what Putin's recent governmental reshuffle can tell us about the longer-term prospects of the Kremlin.²⁶ They believe this “re-organization is not a ‘disruptive’ one, but a fine-tuning of the ruling system by Putin under the new situation” (新形势下对执政体系的一次微调). Their **assessment points to the weakening of siloviki**,²⁷ though they do not use this term, **and to the strengthening of technocrats**, the aim of which is to renew Putin's governance system: “the powers of technical bureaucrats have been expanded. Technical officials who performed well during the Ukrainian crisis have been confirmed”. This, in turn, leads them to a conclusion that the **ultimate aim is to consolidate the wartime system without pursuing “the old path of excessive militarization”** (避免走过度军事化老路). They do not, however, explore what it means for future Russia-China relations.

Feng Shaolei provides the most extensive and ambitious vision in which China and Russia would emerge as the key powers setting up a new regional construction, the “Asian Mediterranean” – a concept he borrowed from the French economist Francois Gipouloux. Feng emphasizes that, as a result of the war with Ukraine, Russia's economic center of gravity shifted to Asia. Still, he views **Russia primarily as a natural resource supplier**: “in the long term, Asia will need energy, food, environment, agricultural products, clean water and other bulk materials, as

well as a vast market environment to be developed, and Russia is one of the most convenient sources”. The second aspect he insists on is the **necessity of opening the Arctic passage**, which would make Russia the key nod in linking East Asia with Europe. The Northern Sea Route would not only shorten the shipping time, by two to three weeks compared with the Suez Canal route, but should also provide China with a route more difficult for the U.S. Navy to access.

Finally, Wang Wen, an author of the report on China's role in Russia's future development and the Executive Director of the Chongyang Institute for Financial Studies, outlines ten suggestions on how to strengthen the ties between Moscow and Beijing.²⁸ Some of those recommendations follow the paths of already existing, if not under-performing, cooperation, such as expanding cooperation in a number of areas from finance and energy to the Arctic.

The Yamal-LNG project is seen as the model for Sino-Russian energy cooperation directed at third country markets.

When discussing energy, the report recommends “completing the energy pricing mechanisms”. It implicitly points to the key contentious issue in energy cooperation, and mentions the **Yamal-LNG project** – developed by Russia's Novatek, China's PetroChina and France's Total – **as the model for Sino-Russian energy cooperation directed at third country markets** (“中俄+第三方市场”). While Russia's liquified natural gas exports have not been sanctioned yet, this approach seems to completely ignore the

²⁶ Han Yichen and Li Jingya, “大选后, 普京更新执政团队有何考量” [What Putin has in mind for renewing his ruling team after the election], Fx361.com, June 9, 2024, <https://www.fx361.com/page/2024/0609/24139804.shtml>.

²⁷ The term originally referred to those members of the Russian ruling elite who had a security, intelligence, and military background. Now it is used to describe a faction of the regime which is in charge of the security apparatus and the armed forces; siloviki are contrasted with technocrats in charge of the Russian economy.

²⁸ Liu Yue, “俄罗斯未来重塑, 中国可积极引导” [As Russia's future is reshaped, China can lead positively], Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, February 22, 2024, https://www.cssn.cn/gjgc/mhgj/202402/t20240222_5734422.shtml.

implications and possible widening of the Western sanctions. Surprisingly, it does not mention the Power of Siberia-2 gas pipeline, heavily promoted by Russia.

The report further advocates for the deepening of Sino-Russian cooperation in the green and digital economy, education, science and technology fields. While both sides achieved some progress in these areas, by setting up the joint campus between the Harbin University and Saint Petersburg University for instance, there have been spectacular setbacks that the report omits. Among others, Commercial Aircraft

Corporation of China (COMAC) pushed its Russian counterpart out of the most ambitious Sino-Russian civilian technology cooperation joint venture, a wide-body passenger jet project, in 2023 – not to mention the direct impact of Western sanctions to prevent sales of a plane with Russian components.

Overall, the report's tone is highly optimistic, pointing to numerous opportunities for cooperation. At the same time, its authors clearly indicate that it is the **Russian side that is in a more direct and immediate need of cooperation with China, a feeling shared by a majority of Chinese analysts.**

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