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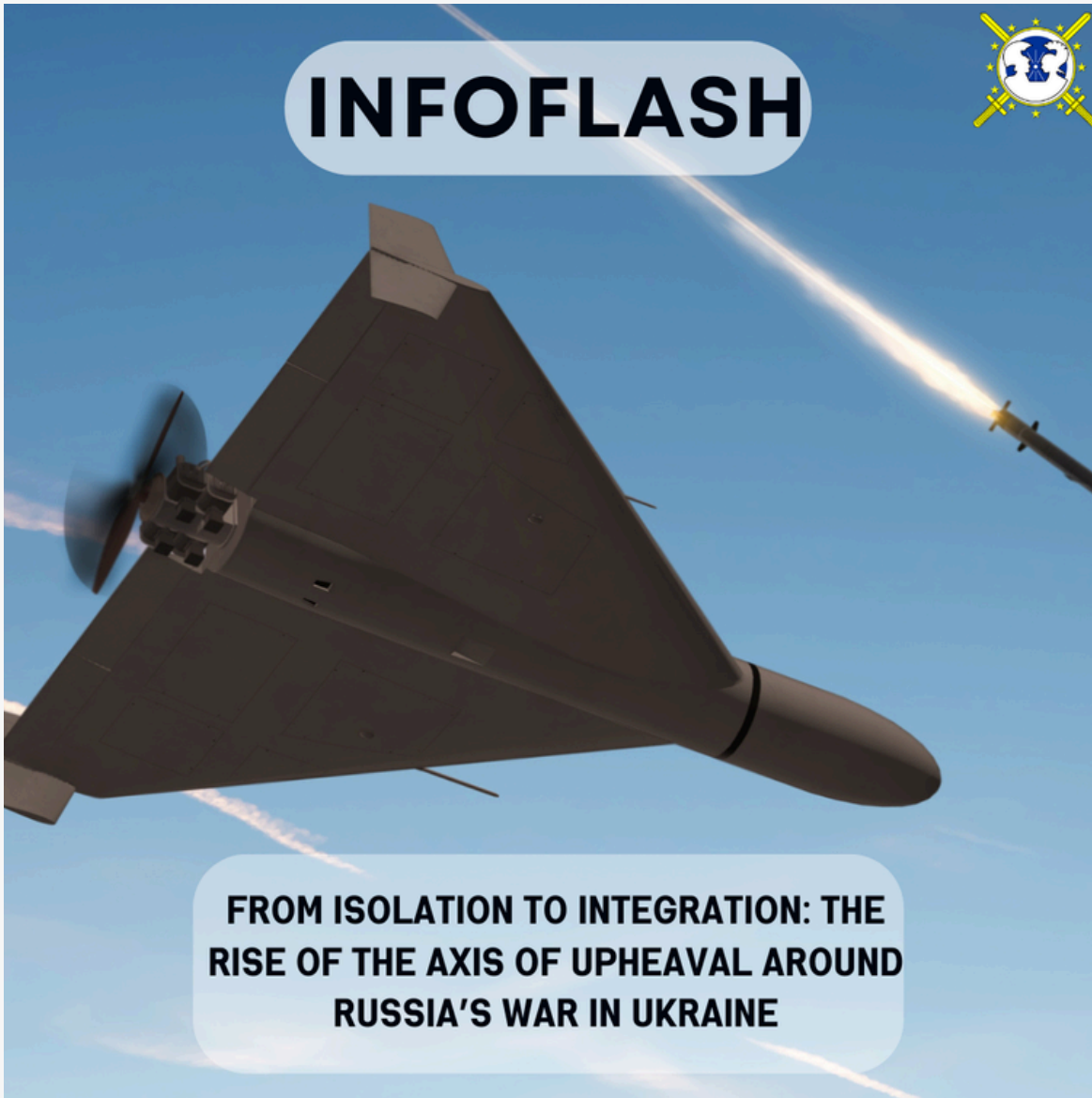

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1. Introduction

For decades, particularly since the collapse of the Soviet Union, security threats to the liberal international order were largely circumscribed to a small number of rogue states, with little capacity to produce real systemic ruptures (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024). Yet, following President Putin's invasion of Ukraine, a paradigm shift occurred, as China, Iran, and North Korea moved closer to Russia. This approximation has seen the informal group of four being referred to as CRINK (Lau, 2024) or 'Axis of Upheaval' (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024), as they are often defined by their shared autocratic governance and grievances toward the Western-dominated system. However, while significant in fostering their convergence, these two factors should not overstate what, thus far, has essentially amounted to a pragmatic defence partnership around Russia's war effort.

Sanctioned by the West and entangled in a protracted war of attrition, the Kremlin turned to the group-of-four to maintain a vital flow of supplies to the battlefield (Bergmann et al., 2024). From augmented Chinese purchases of oil and gas, that are financing this war, to Iranian drones and North Korean ballistic missiles, the Axis of Upheaval represents a framework for defence cooperation with Russia. Beyond allowing Moscow to sustain a relentless war effort and undermine Western isolation attempts (Bergmann et al., 2024; Fontaine and Kendall-Taylor, 2024), these countries saw their own military capabilities enhanced in return. New pathways for defence integration among the four are growing stronger and, as Kendall-Taylor & Lokker (2025) expose, the potentially long-lasting consequences of these synergies intensifies the military threat Russia and the Axis pose to Europe.

This paper deconstructs the idea of ideology as the primary unifying driver of the Axis of Upheaval, defining defence cooperation around Russia as its raison d'être. It examines what this entails for each bilateral relationship and concludes by assessing the broader significance of the collaboration for the future defence and security landscape.

2. Understanding the Axis of Upheaval

The defining feature that led scholars to group Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea together as agents of 'upheaval' is their shared interest in defying a system from which they have been largely excluded (Coonan, 2025). This is supported by a history of political sympathies, in which Russia and China have shielded North Korea and Iran from international pressure through their seats at the UN Security Council and other fora (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). Yet it is misguided to interpret their affinities as evidence of ideological alignment or a unified vision of an alternative world order (Chivvis & Keating, 2024; Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024). They are the simple reflection of overlapping survival instincts within the global order (Al-Alquaili, 2025). A common pattern among autocratic regimes, these dynamics are

neither new nor unique to them.

Therefore, while political sympathies are necessary, they are not sufficient to define the Axis of Upheaval. What transformed these affinities into something more consequential was Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Moscow's pivot to Beijing, Tehran, and Pyongyang in search of support acted as the catalyst for rapprochement. Anchored in steadily increasing defence integration, the most consequential effects of the Axis of Upheaval stem from the cooperation pathways established around Russia's war machine.

2.1. Russia and China

Since the full-scale invasion in 2022, China has refrained from openly providing weapons to Russia. Nonetheless, through its imports of Russian energy and exports of dual-use products, Beijing has been the foremost enabler of the Kremlin's war effort (Bergmann et al., 2024). The Chinese have supplied Russia with machine tools, semiconductors, and microelectronics used in weapons systems, drones, and fighter jets (Jones, 2025; Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025). Some Chinese companies have provided cotton cellulose and critical ingredients for nitrocellulose, which are explosive precursors that the Russian military uses to produce gunpowder, rocket propellants, and other explosives (Jones, 2025). Others have assisted the Russians in producing two generations (1A and 3) of Garpiya long-range attack drones, the Russian variant of the Iranian Shahed (Reuters, 2024; Reuters, 2025). Russia's state-owned manufacturer Almaz-Antey has coordinated the production of these unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) from factories in China through to final fitting at IEMZ-Kupol, Almaz-Antey's subsidiary. The Chinese firms Xiamen Limbach and Redlepus respectively supply the L550E engine used in the Garpiya, and components to IEMZ-Kupol via TSK Vektor, a Russian intermediary (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2025). As of September 2025, Kyiv reported that roughly 500 Garpiya drones were being deployed each month in Ukraine (Reuters, 2025). This is but one example of how embedded China is in key sectors of the Russian industrial complex, to a greater extent than might appear. Chinese imports account for up to 60 per cent of foreign components in Russian military hardware, that figure likely excluding many resources shipped clandestinely between the two neighbours (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025; Jones, 2025).

Overall, this type of integration is enabling Russia not only to develop modern military capabilities but also to overhaul many Soviet-era combat systems, including artillery, tanks and missiles (Bergmann et al., 2024). With evident implications on the battlefield, the consequences of this collaboration are likely to be long-lasting, for they reflect an old security partnership that started with the Kremlin's support for the development and modernisation of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) (Chivvis & Keating, 2024).

Beginning after the end of the Cold War, integration accelerated following the 2014 annexation of Crimea and culminated in the declaration of a 'no-limits' partnership just before the 2022 invasion of Ukraine (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024). From China's perspective, the PLA's air defence, anti-ship, and submarine capabilities remain dependent on advanced Russian defence technology that is difficult to reverse engineer (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024). This dependence is particularly acute in the air and space domains, where up to 40 per cent of the Chinese air force fleet relies on Russian-made engines (Bergman et al., 2024). In aggregate, between 2018 and 2022, Russia supplied 83 per cent of China's arms imports (Fontaine and Kendall-Taylor, 2024). Despite these figures, trade relations remain tilted in China's favour. Economically, Moscow accounts for only 4 per cent of Beijing's trade, whereas Beijing accounts for around 22 per cent of Moscow's trade. Energy exchange may be an exception to this imbalance, but it still essentially reflects mutual dependency. For the CCP it represents just one business opportunity among its network of energy providers. For the Kremlin, it entails exporting nearly half of its Western-sanctioned oil and gas – a lifeline for its war economy (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). Therefore, economic relations between China and Russia matter primarily for Russia. In the near-future, as the war continues, this dependency could lead Moscow to make greater concessions to China, such as sharing more advanced, war-tested defence and technological know-how (Bergman et al., 2024).

The *raison d'être* of the Axis centres on Russia's war economy, with China serving as its primary backer and the most powerful partner among the three. Russia's current threat potential and its strategic significance in a post-Ukraine scenario will heavily depend on this cooperation.

2.2. Russia and Iran

Russia–Iran relations began to warm in 2015, when President Putin provided military support to Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, an ally of Iran. Moscow and Tehran coordinated military efforts helping Assad's regime recover from the brink of overthrow in 2011 (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024). What emerged from that period seems to have laid the groundwork for cooperation between the two capitals on matters related to Ukraine (Chivvis & Keating, 2024).

Iran's support for the war effort has encompassed shipments of Fateh-110-type ballistic missiles (Hafezi et al., 2024) and, more significantly, the transfer of UAVs along drone-related expertise (Bergmann et al., 2024). Assistance began with shipments of the Shahed-136 and Shahed-131 kamikaze drones, and there are reports that Mohajer-6, Shahed-129, and Shahed-191 have also been deployed on the battlefield (Kushnikov, 2024; Warrick & Nakashima, 2022). In addition, the Kremlin acquired licenses over Iranian designs and since September 2024 (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025) began producing its own Shahed replicas:

the Geran in Yelabuga (Iran International, 2024) and the Garpiya at IEMZ-Kupol. The latter, manufactured in Russia in factories reportedly employing North Korean labourers (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025), designed by Iran, and powered by Chinese engines (Reuters, 2024), exemplifies how the Axis of Upheaval exists as the cumulative result of bilateral cooperation around Russia's defence needs.

These drones' domestic production represented a game-changer for President Putin's war efforts. Estimated to produce up to 170 long-range UAVs per day, in the last three months Russia is deploying more than 1,000 of these drones weekly (Segura, 2025; Jensen & Atalan, 2025). Since each drone costs USD 20,000-50,000, while modern surface-to-air missile batteries or interceptor missiles can cost several hundred thousand dollars, Moscow is conducting cost-effective attrition warfare through drone-saturation tactics. The strategy involves a sustained campaign to overwhelm Ukrainian air defences and inflict civilian terror, while simultaneously mapping Ukrainian air defences and gathering battlefield intelligence (Jensen & Atalan, 2025). The Russia-Iran military cooperation that began in 2022 is now reshaping the future of military operations. Through the mass production of inexpensive UAVs designed to overwhelm costly defences, three major changes have emerged in aerial warfare. First, the focus of attacks has expanded beyond exclusively precision targets; secondly, missile stockpiles can be conserved and deployed more efficiently; and finally, the cost burden has begun to shift from offense to defence (Chivvis & Keating, 2024; Jensen & Atalan, 2025).

New technological advancements are likely. Ukrainian intelligence reported that Russia is developing jet-powered and more destructive versions of the Shahed – the Geran-3 and the Shahed-238 loitering munition, respectively (Jensen & Atalan, 2025). While the Shahed-238 is intended to maximise civilian harm, the Geran-3 will travel at speeds three times faster than its predecessor, making interception significantly harder (Barkhush, 2025).

In short, this is, and will be, a relationship driven by defence-sector business opportunities between two nations excluded from the world. They will likely persist in regional conflicts, prolonging the utility of the links forged in the war against Ukraine, long after its end.

2.3. Russia and North Korea

The invasion of Ukraine has shifted the once chilly relationship between North Korea and Russia toward pragmatic cooperation (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). As this paper argues, Russia sought any available support to sustain its war machine, and North Korea capitalised on the opportunity to make itself important to the Kremlin (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025).

In August 2023, facing acute shortages of artillery ammunition and a defence industry

unable to meet battlefield demands, President Putin turned to Supreme Leader Kim for support (Cranny-Evans, 2025). By July 2025 North Korea had become the main external supplier of ammunition for nearly all Russian artillery systems. Estimations are of around 6.5 million artillery shells, primarily 152 mm and 122 mm (Hyun-soo, 2025; Jones, 2025). This is significant given that Russia produces only 2–3 million shells annually (Chivvis & Keating, 2024), and that up to 40 per cent of the munitions fired at Ukrainian forces since 2023 are of North Korean origin (Cranny-Evans, 2025). Without these supplies, daily artillery expenditure would drop to just over half, approaching Ukraine's rate of fire. The fact that the tempo of weapons shipments from North Korea appears to precede major Russian offensives reveals Pyongyang as a true disruptor of this war (Cranny-Evans, 2025).

In parallel, North Korea has supplied Russia with around 600 weapons systems, including KN-23 and KN-24 solid-propellant short-range ballistic missiles, KN-25 multiple rocket launcher systems, and several transporter-erector-launchers (TELs) (Hyun-soo, 2025). Armed with warheads of up to one tonne, making them more powerful than their Russian equivalents (Balmforth, 2025), the KN-23s have seen extensive use, accounting for one-third of all ballistic missiles fired by Russia toward Ukrainian territory in 2024, 60 out of 194 (Butenko et al., 2024). Earlier this April, these missiles were part of a deadly attack on Kyiv alongside Shahed-131/136-type UAVs (Barkhush, 2025), offering yet another example of how military cooperation within the Axis of Upheaval translates into enhanced Russian attack capabilities. Aerial offensives like these have been recurrent (see RFE/RL's Russian Service & RFE/RL's Ukrainian Service, 2025; The New Voice of Ukraine, 2025).

Finally, in its most alliance-like and concerning move, North Korea sent around 11,000 troops to the Kursk Oblast following the June 2024 North Korea–Russia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty (Ponomarenko, 2025). Despite the 4,000 who have been killed or wounded in combat (Martin, 2025), reports indicate that more than 30,000 additional troops are expected to be sent to the front (Seo et al., 2025). The Kremlin is probably paying the impoverished North Korean regime a minimal amount per soldier, treating the troops as expendable cavalry to lead offensive charges (Martin, 2025). President Putin did not turn to Supreme Leader Kim out of desperation, but to apply sustained, cost-effective pressure and to shift the manpower imbalance that typically favours defenders in armed conflict (Martin, 2025).

In turn, from North Korea's perspective, it has received only marginal returns for the billions of dollars' worth of troops and ammunition provided to Russia (Ponomarenko, 2025). This is alarming, as, in slight contrast to China and Iran, it indicates that Supreme Leader Kim values the relationship less for short-term profit and more for ideological alignment and long-term strategy. Russia has helped North Korea circumvent economic sanctions through oil transfers and by hosting illicit North Korean labourers, e.g. in drones' factories, whose

earnings help fund the Korean regime. Moscow has also provided weapons-manufacturing supplies, access to advanced military technology, and the 2024 security agreement (Chivvis & Keating, 2024). The deployment of North Korean weapons on the battlefield has provided Pyongyang with data to refine its missile program and has qualified these weapons as combat-tested, potentially opening new markets for them (Fontaine & Kendall-Taylor, 2024; Bergmann et al. 2024). Similarly, North Korean troops have gained combat experience against NATO-trained Ukrainian forces, including expertise in anti-drone tactics and first-person-view drone operations, all while Shahed-136/Geran drones have also been transferred to North Korea (Ponomarenko, 2025).

This convenient defence partnership is likely to endure for the duration of the Ukraine war. The longer it lasts, the deeper the military integration and the more consequential the threat. As with Iran, even after the war ends, it is plausible that these countries continue to leverage the figurative and literal links, like logistical shipping, rail connections, and trade in goods that were established since the conflict began (Chivvis & Keating, 2024; Ponomarenko, 2025).

3. Key Considerations for the Future of the Axis of Upheaval

With the war against Ukraine as a catalyst for convergence, the Axis' defence cooperation has (1) been critical in sustaining the Kremlin's arsenal and defence industrial base, thereby weakening Western efforts to aid Ukraine; (2) altered the nature of aerial warfare, with Iranian-designed drones powered by Chinese engines flying alongside North Korean missiles over Ukraine, prompting a shift from precision to volume and rebalancing the costs between offense and defence; and (3) enhanced the overall defence capacities of all four states through insights gained from battle-tested weaponry.

As long as Western efforts at isolation persist, cooperation will continue in these terms, for more than an axis of upheaval, they form an axis of necessity (Al-Alquaili, 2025). This logic will apply to the post-war period too, particularly if Russia secures a favourable outcome, thereby confirming the partnership's utility. Facing a rearming Europe, Moscow will have every incentive to rely on the defence pathways established so far to rapidly rebuild its military capabilities. Recent Russian drone incursions into Lithuania, Romania, and Poland, some involving Iranian-Shahed and Shahed-type decoy Gerbera drones, provide a clear glimpse of what that continued cooperation could look like in the period ahead (Brennan, 2025; Allison, 2025; The Guardian, 2025).

The future of this partnership points to a scenario in which all four states possess enhanced defence capacities and more integrated military-industrial bases, enabling them to project influence more effectively within their respective regions, individually or simultaneously. As Kendall-Taylor and Lokker (2025) suggest, a crisis over Taiwan, for example, could provide Moscow with a strategic opportunity to target a European state within its eastern

neighbourhood at the same time. It is also conceivable that deepening cooperation could enable Axis members to project power into new regions, as illustrated by China's growing presence in the Arctic following its first joint patrol with Russia in 2024 (Kendall-Taylor & Lokker, 2025).

Finally, the fact that CRINK has allowed Russia to circumvent isolation and enhance its war machine means the cost of interstate aggression is being recalculated. These four authoritarian states will continue to develop parallel trade networks and military supply chains, leading to the gradual normalisation of alternative norms in the international system. Many countries will be closely studying the lessons of the Axis of Upheaval, and that should serve as a warning sign for Europe and its allies.

4. Conclusion

After more than three years of hostilities in Ukraine, it has become evident that Russia is not fighting alone. China, Iran, and North Korea have provided money, technology, expertise, weapons, and even troops, all essential to the war effort. In return, their defence capacities were enhanced by Russia's battle-tested technology and operational expertise. Several analysts have understood this as an expression of a broader trend reflecting the emergence of an 'Axis of Upheaval'. This essay, however, argues that it is precisely the cumulative bilateral cooperation in military aid to Russia that defines the Axis' true significance. Without such cooperation, the grouping would amount to little more than a label for four dissatisfied states - hardly an axis and with very limited realistic potential for upheaval.

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