

# CRINK Diplomatic Ties

## *A Broader Tilt Toward the Global South*

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### THE ISSUE

- The so-called CRINK (China-Russia-Iran-North Korea) countries are strengthening bilateral diplomatic ties in important ways. Yet multilateral engagement among all four countries remains a rarity and underscores that CRINK still falls short of an “axis.”
- The relationship between China and Russia—on full display during the recent Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit and subsequent military parade—has transformed significantly and holds the greatest potential to adversely affect U.S. interests.
- Quieter diplomatic engagements between Russia and North Korea have also exhibited notable growth since 2022, as demonstrated by both UN voting behavior and high-level meetings.
- By contrast, Russia’s relationship with Iran appears to have cooled after an initial deepening at the outset of Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine. More broadly, Iran’s valence within CRINK has diminished, as it has less to offer in its weakened state following its 12-day war with Israel and the United States.
- The looming renewal of sanctions against Iran will put the real power of CRINK diplomatic alignment to the test. Moscow and Beijing have limited ability to shape a coherent and effective response, but CRINK will seize the opportunity to portray the U.S.-led international order as inherently biased against the Global South.

### INTRODUCTION

Since Russia’s 2022 invasion of Ukraine, various indicators suggest deepened diplomatic, economic, and military cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK)—by **some accounts** leading to an “Axis of Upheaval.” Among other objectives, these countries share a resistance to the U.S.-led world order and a desire to circumvent international sanctions levied against them. In the subsequent years, cooperation among these countries has continued, although limits to their relationships have also become apparent.

In September 2025, all four CRINK leaders **attended** the same gathering for the first time as they made an appearance at the Chinese-hosted military parade in Beijing commemorating the end of World War II. The parade’s **pageantry**—featuring Chinese weaponry, fighter jets, and goose-stepping troops—offered a dramatic backdrop for the meeting. Beyond optics, however, it does not appear that more substantive gains among the four were achieved.

From a diplomacy perspective, the gathering served as a barometer of CRINK ties. Among the four countries, North Korea appeared on the ascendant, with Beijing **seemingly**



*The deputy foreign ministers of Russia, China, and Iran meet to discuss the Iranian nuclear issue in March 2025, in what has been called “the Beijing Meeting.”*

Photo source: Lintao Zhang/Pool via Getty Images

**acquiescent** to Pyongyang’s nuclear power status. For his part, Russian President Vladimir Putin basked in the **Chinese reframing of the World War II narrative**, putting China and Russia front and center while diminishing the Allies’ role. Meanwhile, Iran seemed to be more of an afterthought in the meeting, perhaps garnering a “participation trophy” for Iranian President Pezeshkian’s presence at the gathering.

Iran is experiencing a moment of real need, having suffered devastating attacks to its nuclear program and security apparatus by Israel and the United States. In the wake of the 12-day war in June 2025, the E-3 countries—France, Germany, and the United Kingdom—**launched** a process to reimpose nuclear sanctions (also known as snapback sanctions) against Iran due to “significant non-performance” of its responsibilities outlined in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Unless Iran meets three conditions—restoring UN nuclear inspectors’ access, addressing enriched uranium stocks, and restarting negotiations with the United States—before September 28, 2025, these snapback sanctions will resume effect, leaving CRINK at a crossroads.

How China and Russia respond, in particular, will shed light on the degree and substantive nature of CRINK’s alignment moving forward. China, Russia, and Iran signed a joint

letter **rejecting** the European move and terming the snapback mechanism “legally and procedurally flawed.” Russia’s *chargé d’affaires* to the United Nations **disparaged** the E-3 action in stronger terms, calling it “diplomacy at the barrel of the gun.” Yet, CRINK’s ability to shape a coherent and effective response remains in question, especially since by design snapback sanctions cannot be vetoed by the UN Security Council. Moreover, China is likely to adopt a more pragmatic stance on reimposed Iran sanctions by increasing oil imports from other Gulf countries rather than deepening support for Iran.

To gain greater insight into the dynamics underlying CRINK ties, this brief examines CRINK since 2022 through a diplomatic lens, analyzing meetings—both multilateral and bilateral—involving high-level officials from the four countries, as well as voting patterns at the United Nations in the Security Council and the General Assembly.

## **METHODOLOGY**

To assess diplomatic ties within CRINK, this report focuses on two indicators: voting behavior at the United Nations and high-level meetings. For both elements, CSIS collected datapoints from January 1, 2022, to the present to capture the period since Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. This data is dis-

cussed in greater detail at the end of this report, after serving to support a number of key points regarding CRINK alignment.

CSIS analyzed the voting patterns of China and Russia on all 181 resolutions adopted by the UN Security Council since 2022, as well as on the 17 measures that were vetoed by a permanent member during this period. As China and Russia are the only CRINK members with seats on the Security Council, this analysis does not capture the voting behavior of Iran or North Korea. To address this limitation, researchers augmented Security Council voting data with voting data for 20 resolutions adopted by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), where all four CRINK countries are members. The assessed UNGA resolutions focused on topics of particular interest to the CRINK axis: Russia's actions in Ukraine, human rights in Iran, and disarmament.

Regarding high-level meetings, CSIS gathered open-source information on intergovernmental meetings between two or more CRINK countries, on any topic, at the ministerial level and above. A critical limitation of this dataset is that it only includes public meetings, necessarily excluding covert engagements. Additionally, the quality and substance of meetings varies widely, making it difficult to make a direct comparison among them. CSIS examined the rank of the

participating officials, which sector the meeting focused on, and whether the meeting yielded any agreements.

## CURRENT CONTEXT: IRAN SANCTIONS AND THE 12-DAY WAR

The recent Iran-Israel war, combined with longstanding concerns about Iran's nuclear program, offers an interesting vantage point from which to view CRINK diplomatic alignment—and its limits. Iran's nuclear ambitions have long provoked concern in the international community. Sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council in 2007—which were expanded in 2008 and again in 2010—were eased in 2015 as part of the JCPOA and enshrined by [UN Security Council Resolution 2231](#).

A key aspect of the Iran nuclear deal is what has become known as the [snapback mechanism](#), by which JCPOA signatories could unilaterally move to reimpose pre-2015 sanctions without going through the Security Council. This tool was originally designed as a way for Europe or the United States to address potential Iranian noncompliance without risking a veto by China or Russia in the Security Council. On August 28, 2025, citing Iranian noncompliance, the E-3



*Members of the United Nations Security Council gather in October 2024 to discuss Israeli airstrikes on Iran.*

Photo source: Spencer Platt via Getty Images

formally triggered this mechanism, which set into motion a 30-day countdown after which all pre-JCPOA sanctions will be automatically reinstated, unless the Security Council adopts a resolution extending Iranian sanctions relief or a new deal is reached.

During and just after the 12-day conflict, CRINK support to Iran was limited to public statements that often seemed drawn from boilerplate language. Though the BRICS nations released a **joint statement** condemning the attacks on Iran, it stopped short of specifically criticizing the United States or Israel. Similarly, Russian President Putin provided a measured statement on the matter while attending the St. Petersburg International Economic Forum, **acknowledging** Israel's security concerns alongside his condemnation of the attacks. Meanwhile, Chinese President Xi Jinping **called** for de-escalation in the midst of the conflict, and Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi **deemed** Israel's initial attack "unacceptable," calling on both parties to return to dialogue.

In anticipation of the E-3 snapback trigger, Iran made a concerted lobbying effort for support from China and Russia. In July, Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi held bilateral **meetings** with his Chinese and Russian counterparts, even **speaking** briefly with Chinese President Xi Jinping, on the sidelines of the SCO meeting of foreign ministers—a Eurasian economic and security bloc that Iran joined in 2023. This meeting came just one week after Mr. Araghchi traveled to Brazil to attend the annual BRICS summit, where he **discussed** the nuclear issue with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

During this period, Iran was also engaged in nuclear negotiations with Europe, attending meetings in **Geneva** and **Istanbul**. All the while, Iran was in close consultation with its CRINK partners in the Security Council, hosting meetings at the director-general level with Chinese and Russian counterparts in **Tehran** and in **New York** at Iran's permanent mission to the United Nations. Ultimately, these negotiations were under a time constraint; the snapback mechanism was due to sunset in October 2025, after which time Europe would lose diplomatic leverage over Iran. In the absence of a deal, the E-3 moved to reimpose sanctions on August 28—while it still could.

Given the nature of the snapback mechanism, China and Russia are rather constrained in their diplomatic response options. Without the ability to veto the reimposition of sanctions, their main recourse would be to push

for a resolution in the Security Council—prior to the 30-day deadline's expiration—extending Iranian sanctions relief.

Indeed, even before the snapback initiation, the Chinese and Russian representatives at the United Nations began to circulate a **proposal** that would prolong the lifespan of the JCPOA nuclear deal by six months, extending sanctions relief to Iran and giving more time for a diplomatic solution to take hold. On September 19, this draft resolution **failed** to receive enough votes to be adopted by the Security Council, with only Algeria, China, Pakistan and Russia voting in favor. Iranian leaders have been clear that they view the E-3 snapbacks as "unlawful" and have threatened that the reimposition of sanctions would prompt the country to **withdraw** from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which would mark a significant escalation.

## CASE STUDY: NORTH KOREA SANCTIONS

To inform speculation about how China and Russia might respond to the reimposition of sanctions on Iran, North Korea is a useful case study where Russia has adopted a more muscular approach and been more willing to exert its veto power than China. For nearly 20 years, North Korea has been subject to heavy international sanctions due to its nuclear testing and missile tests.

In the first few months of 2022, North Korea conducted six intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) tests; in May, the UN Security Council **voted** on a draft resolution that sought to condemn these actions and levy additional sanctions on the country. Both China and Russia **voted against** this measure, citing the ineffectiveness of sanctions to promote nonproliferation as well as the humanitarian impacts on North Korean citizens. As permanent members of the Security Council, China and Russia's negative votes vetoed the proposal.

Since 2022, there have also been three UNSC votes related to a panel of experts assisting the sanctions committee on North Korea. For years, the council unanimously voted to extend the panel's mandate for a period of one year. In 2024, however, Russia **vetoed** the resolution, citing changed conditions on the Korean Peninsula and provocations by NATO members conducting military exercises with the Republic of Korea. Instead of casting a veto alongside Russia, however, China abstained on this measure, noting the humanitarian issues driven by the continued sanctions regime against North Korea. This signals limits to China's willingness to exercise its veto.

Over the same period, North Korea has been equally supportive of Russia with its voting in the UN General Assembly. Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, UNGA has adopted 10 resolutions condemning this action, all of which North Korea voted against. China and Iran, meanwhile, only voted "no" on four of them, abstaining on the remaining six. This is evidence of an ever-deepening bilateral diplomatic **relationship** between Russia and North Korea. Indeed, Russian analysts and officials have **distinguished** ties with North Korea as a "blood alliance" given its troop contributions to the Russian war effort in Ukraine, while the relationship with Iran is only **considered** a strategic partnership.



*Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un share a toast during the former's visit to Pyongyang in June 2024 where the two leaders signed a mutual defense pact.*

Photo source: VLADIMIR SMIRNOV/POOL/AFP via Getty Images



*North Korean leader Kim Jong-un presents Russian President Vladimir Putin with two Pungsan dogs during the June 2024 summit.*

Photo source: Rodong Sinmun

After no high-level meetings between Moscow and Pyongyang in 2022, and only one in 2023, there was a drastic increase in diplomatic engagement between the countries in 2024, with six meetings taking place in both Russia and North Korea. At the time of writing, there have already been 10 high-level meetings in 2025, with no indications of slowing down. These meetings have resulted in numerous partnership agreements across several ministries, bolstering cooperation in areas including **public health, rail transport, education, sports,** and even **wildlife conservation**. The most notable of these agreements was a defense treaty **signed** in June 2024 which elevated the relationship between the two countries from a strategic partnership to a formalized alliance. A close personal relationship also appears to be budding between their two leaders. In a birthday message to President Putin, Kim Jong-un **called** him his "closest comrade," and the pair have engaged in an elaborate gift exchange including luxury vehicles and even dogs.

## IRAN'S DIPLOMATIC TIES WITH CRINK

Iran's diplomatic ties with CRINK differ considerably from those of North Korea. Mainly, Beijing and Moscow's partnerships with Tehran are pragmatic at their core—in stark contrast to the treaty-bound alliances that North Korea has with **China** and **Russia**, having signed mutual defense pacts in 1961 and 2024, respectively. In the wake of the 12-day war, both major powers have made a clear distinction between "ally" and "partner" in official statements.

Recent activity aside, there had been a steady year-on-year decline in high-level meetings between Russia and Iran since a peak in 2022, when the countries' representatives met 12 times. In 2023, this number dropped to seven meetings, including one teleconference between the presidents of Russia and Iran. In 2024, there were another eight high-level meetings, and until the war in June, there had been only three such meetings in 2025.

Highlighting the ways in which diplomatic ties can be impacted by security dynamics on the ground, this decline in meetings, following an initial surge, corresponds with a **diminished Russian need** for Iranian drone technology. Having acquired domestic production capacity since 2023, Russia is less reliant on Iran for access to the Shahed series "kamikaze" drones that have been key to Russia's military strategy in Ukraine. There are even **indications** that Russia has begun sharing this technology with its North Korean allies.

Moreover, Russia appears to increasingly prioritize its ties to the Arab Gulf states, given their growing and multifaceted influence in the Middle East and beyond. In October 2025, Russia will **host** its first-ever summit with the Arab League, which was announced by the Kremlin just days after U.S. President Donald Trump’s visit to the Gulf in May. Russia also seeks to **balance** its relationship with Iran with its ties to Israel, which deepened considerably after the fall of the Soviet Union. During the 12-day war between Iran and Israel, President Putin **offered** to mediate between the warring countries, though ultimately it was U.S. and Qatari efforts that **yielded** a ceasefire.

Similarly, China has demonstrated a growing desire to play peacemaker in the Middle East. Pointing to its **involvement** in the 2023 deal normalizing relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, China boasts its conflict resolution acumen—although this détente was largely the result of Omani and Iraqi mediation. Further, China has long enjoyed far greater trade and investment in the Arab Gulf than in Iran. In 2024, trade volume between China and Saudi Arabia reached **\$107.5 billion**, well above the **\$13.4 billion** trade volume between China and Iran that same year. China also trades significantly with Israel—Iran’s longtime adversary—with bilateral trade volume reaching **\$22 billion** in 2024. Taken together, China and Russia’s desire to increase relations elsewhere in the Middle East may limit their ability to significantly deepen ties with Iran.

In the UN Security Council, there have been no resolutions directly related to Iran since January 2022, but there have been votes on matters of strategic importance to Iran, involving the partners and proxies that play a key role in the country’s Forward Defense Doctrine. Since 2024, the Security Council has adopted four biannual resolutions related to attacks on Red Sea shipping routes by the Iran-backed Houthis. Neither China nor Russia supported the resolutions, echoing Iranian talking points in their opposition to the measures. That said, neither country went so far as to veto them, despite having the power to do so.

## **BROADER CRINK ALIGNMENT SINCE 2022: LIMITED BY POWER IMBALANCES**

A broader examination of CRINK multilateral ties casts doubt on the notion that these four countries have formed a coherent bloc. To date, there have been no quadrilateral meetings with all CRINK countries. While there have been

a few trilateral meetings, they have mostly been between China, Russia, and Iran. Until Kim Jong-un’s recent participation in the Chinese military parade, North Korea—known for its isolationist posture—had never participated in such an engagement.

Over the period considered for this report, there have been three trilateral meetings between China, Russia, and Iran, all of which took place in 2025. As previously mentioned, two of these trilaterals occurred in the immediate aftermath of the 12-day war, while earlier in 2025, China hosted the “**Beijing Meeting**” to discuss Iran’s nuclear issues and sanctions. This meeting was held at the deputy foreign minister level, rather than engaging higher levels of leadership.

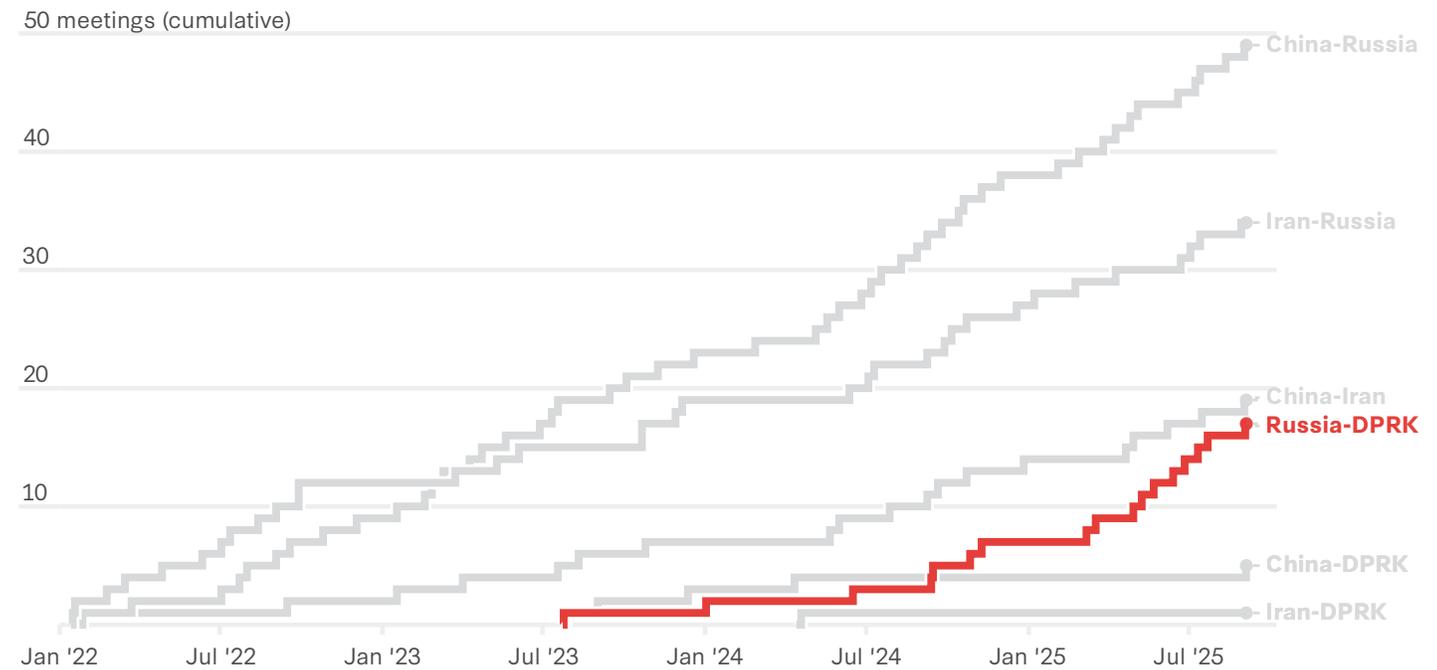
The recent expansion of the SCO and BRICS to include Iran reflects its increased diplomatic alignment with China and Russia—founding members for both blocs—albeit in a broader context of emerging economies. These multilateral groupings have become a key means of collaboration among CRINK countries, especially in recent years. Iran’s memberships in SCO and BRICS were only finalized in **2023** and **2024**, respectively, after the start of Russia’s war in Ukraine.

Even still, much of the diplomatic coordination between CRINK countries occurs bilaterally. An examination of the six bilateral relationships of CRINK reveals considerable power imbalances between global powers China and Russia and the less powerful, more isolated Iran and North Korea.

China has an especially lopsided relationship with Iran. Except for discussions held on the sidelines of summits, the only high-level meeting between China and Iran involving Chinese President Xi Jinping was during then-President Ebrahim Raisi’s **visit to China** in February 2023. Further, only three meetings were hosted in Tehran, with the majority of high-level engagement between the countries taking place in China. In combination with China’s unwillingness to veto UN resolutions related to Iranian interests, this signals a lack of depth in the relationship. It could also foreshadow limited willingness by China to do much in the face of snapback sanctions, should they be imposed on Iran.

Though China and North Korea are longstanding treaty allies, there is an imbalance in this relationship as well. As previously mentioned, China has shown some inconsistency with its use of the veto in the Security Council on matters related to North Korea. Furthermore, there has been a **dip in high-level meetings** between the two countries

Figure 1: Russia and North Korea Have Intensified High-Level Meetings



Source: Authors' analysis of media reports and official statements.

under their current leaders, Xi Jinping and Kim Jong-un, as compared to previous leaders. For the first several years of his presidency, Xi shunned Kim, only **traveling** to North Korea to repair ties after the latter's 2019 meeting with U.S. President Donald Trump. Since 2022, there have been five meetings between the allies, the most recent of which occurred in September with Kim Jong-un's **historic trip** to China. Prior to this visit, none of these bilateral meetings included the Chinese president. Three of the meetings took place in North Korea, with Kim Jong-un meeting with lower-level Chinese officials, suggesting a stagnation in the Chinese-North Korean diplomatic relationship.

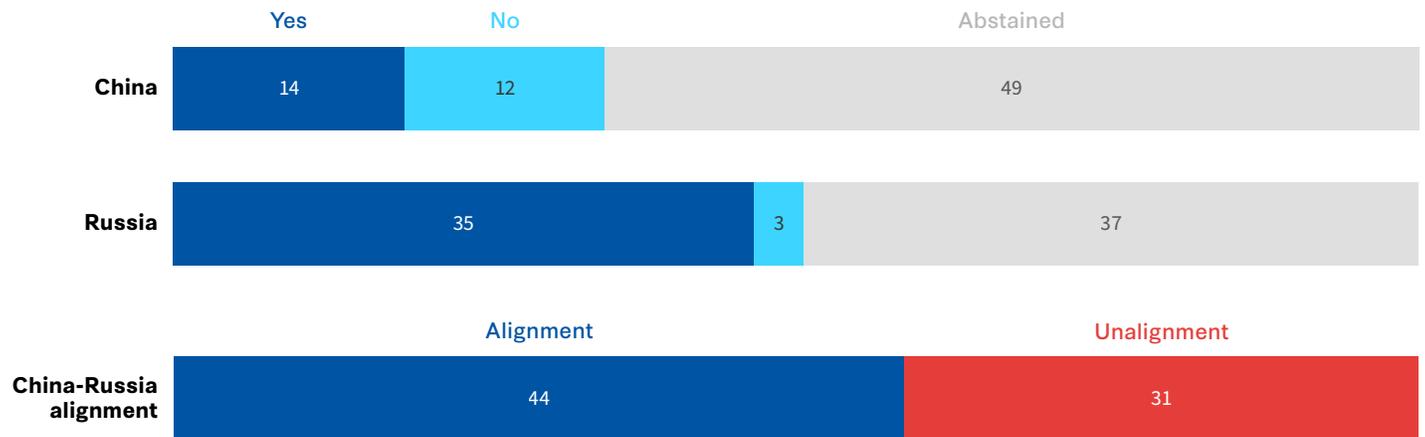
Russia, on the other hand, has made a more concerted effort to expand its bilateral diplomatic ties with China, Iran, and North Korea, especially as it has faced increased isolation due to its war in Ukraine. In 2019, Russia and China **upgraded** their relations for what Xi has coined "a new era," and in early 2022—just weeks prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine—the countries **declared** a "no limits" friendship. With North Korea, Russia even **upgraded** its partnership to a formalized alliance. Despite a recent stagnation in engagements with Iran, Russia's relationship with the country is still stronger than it had been prior to the invasion of Ukraine.

As both China and Russia are permanent members of the UN Security Council, diplomatic alignment between the two can be examined through their voting behavior in the body. At initial glance, there appears to be a high level of cohesion: Since 2022, the UN Security Council has adopted 181 resolutions and vetoed 17, in which China and Russia voted the same way 84.3 percent of the time. Many of these measures, however, passed the council unanimously and reflect a broader consensus rather than a specific alignment between China and Russia.

Divided votes provide much more room for analysis. Since January 2022, there have been 75 resolutions that did not pass unanimously, including 17 vetoed resolutions. With these more contentious measures, voting alignment between China and Russia fell to 58.7 percent.

On UN votes directly related to Russia, Beijing demonstrated some—but not total—alignment with Moscow. China has been careful to abstain from any condemnation of Russian actions in Ukraine, though it never fully aligned with Russia in vetoing these measures, nor has China ever recognized Russian claims to Crimea. Looking at broader trends, Russia has generally shown a greater willingness than China to exercise its veto powers. Since 2022, there have been 17

Figure 2: China-Russia Alignment on Nonunanimous UNSC Votes



Source: United Nations Digital Library; Fabio Murgia/CSIS.

vetoed resolutions in the Security Council, 11 of which were vetoed by Russia. China joined Russia in vetoing three of these measures. Of the draft resolutions vetoed solely by Russia, China abstained on all but one, indicating a degree of alignment despite not voting in tandem.

As often as China and Russia abstain or veto in tandem, just the two of them, they are also frequently joined in opposing Security Council resolutions by other countries from the Global South, including Algeria, India, Mozambique, Pakistan, and others. As was **demonstrated** at the SCO summit, China and Russia are keen to foster an alternative system of global governance that centers around the Global South.

## CONCLUSION

Indeed, this examination of CRINK diplomatic alignments highlights other trends in an emerging multipolar order. It showcases the shifting role of non-Western actors in attempting to shape the global agenda, with the prerogatives of the Global South in the forefront. It also illuminates ways in which this still inchoate grouping of CRINK states may seek to undermine traditional institutions of the international order—with the United Nations at the core—in the name of promoting alternative interests (acknowledging, of course, that these same states accuse the United States of similarly eroding international norms through some of its actions).

Finally, CRINK’s amorphousness could be a harbinger of an emerging order in which blocs and steadfast alliances no longer pertain. Instead, the world may witness continually shifting and evolving groupings, with individual nations choosing to cooperate only as long as it remains in their

interest. In this regard, understanding the influence and limitations of CRINK may provide an important window into future such groupings. ■

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