Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

# "Unpacking the CRINK Axis"

DATE

**Tuesday, October 28, 2025 at 2:00 p.m. ET**

FEATURING

**Andrea Kendall-Taylor**

*Senior Fellow and Director, Transatlantic Security Program, Center for a New American Security*

CSIS EXPERTS

**Bonny Lin**

*Director, China Power Project and Senior Adviser, CSIS*

**Maria Snegovaya**

*Senior Fellow, Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program, CSIS*

**Mona Yacoubian**

*Director and Senior Adviser, Middle East Program, CSIS*

**Henrietta Levin**

*CSIS Senior Fellow, Freeman Chair in China Studies, CSIS*

**Victor Cha**

*President, Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department and Korea Chair, CSIS*

*Transcript By*
*Superior Transcriptions LLC*
*www.superiortranscriptions.com*

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC & INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Victor Cha: Thank you everyone for coming to CSIS this afternoon. And thanks to the CSIS and the Korea Foundation for helping us to host this very important event. I'm Victor Cha. I'm president of geopolitics and foreign policy here at CSIS, and Korea chair, and a professor at Georgetown. Today we are going to present to you a new product of our Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department. This new department includes 13 programs and chairs, which I think will all be listed for you up there. It spans the entire world, from Africa to the Americas to Europe to China to the Middle East and to Southeast Asia. And this group engaged in a 10-month project looking at three dynamics relevant to the world order, or disorder, as it may be today.

The first of these was a study on how to reform our institutions of global governance at a time when our rules-based institutions are under assault. This analysis included a CSIS report, "Bending" the Architecture: Reimagining the G-7, as well as some other works we've done on this topic. The second research focus was work on how U.S. allies and partners are responding to paradigm shifts in U.S. foreign policy. We just released, I think a little over a week ago, a new digital report on this called Navigating Disruption: Ally and Partner Responses to U.S. Foreign Policy. So, you can find that on our website.

And today we're rolling out the third leg of our research, which is looking at the economic, political, and security aspects of the growing relationships between and among China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, which we have affectionately called the CRINKs report. Our scholars, as you will see, have collected some very unique data and performed analysis that is all captured on our geopolitics website, and some of which will be presented to you today by our scholars. For those of you who prefer podcasts, we also do a lot of this analysis, and analysis of breaking world events, on our GFP, geopolitics and foreign policy, podcast, State of Play, which is hosted by Will Todman. So that's enough of the advertisement.

Today's discussion, again, is going to focus on this China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea relationship. It's one of the most significant developments in the disruption of the liberal order. One of the first to identify the danger of this grouping was Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, in a very important piece they wrote in Foreign Affairs. So, we're particularly happy that she's able to join us today. As we will discuss, there is some clear evidence of cooperation among this group inimical to U.S. interests, such as DPRK-Russia cooperation on arms and troops for Putin's war in

Ukraine, but a lot of this is happening in the shadows. It's hard to collect data because the interactions, both diplomatic, military, and trade, are not necessarily all self-reported. But our scholars have been hard at work to try to identify and fill this research gap, and have written three invaluable papers on the diplomatic, economic, and security relationships among the four countries, which they will present today.

So, I will introduce the authors and our discussants. Dr. Bonny Lin is director and senior advisor at CSIS, where she runs the China Power Project. She previously held leadership positions at RAND and as a senior advisor for China at the Pentagon. And she did her Ph.D. at Yale. Dr. Maria Snegovaya is senior fellow in our Europe, Russia, and Eurasia Program. She's also a postdoctoral fellow at Georgetown's School of Foreign Service. She's the author of the book, "When Left Moves Right," published by Oxford last year, looking at the rise of the populist right in post-communist Europe. She did her Ph.D. at Columbia. Mona Yacoubian is director and senior advisor at CSIS and runs our Middle East Program. She was previously vice president of the Middle East and North Africa Center at the U.S. Institute of Peace. She was also deputy assistant administrator at USAID. She holds her graduate and undergraduate degrees from Harvard and Duke.

And we have two discussants in addition to myself today. Dr. Andrea Kendall-Taylor, who I just mentioned, is senior fellow and director of the Transatlantic Security Program at the Center for a New American Security. She's the author of the Foreign Affairs article that I mentioned earlier – co-author – and she previously served in the intelligence community as deputy NIO for Russia and Eurasia and completed her Ph.D. at UCLA. And, last but not least, Henrietta Levin is senior fellow with the Freeman Chair in China studies here at CSIS. She has a wealth of U.S. government experience, having previously served as deputy at China house at the State Department, as well as stints at the NSC, and as director for China and director for Southeast Asia. And she holds her graduate and undergraduate degrees from the University of Southern California. So really a terrific group of scholars today. Looking forward to a great conversation. So, if you could please welcome all our scholars for joining us today. (Applause.)

If I'm correct, we're going to start with Bonny, right? So please, please.

Bonny Lin: Yes. OK. Well, thank you, Victor. I'm really delighted to be here.

So, my team was responsible for the paper on CRINK security ties. So, we looked at the growing cooperation between all four countries. And we really saw the security cooperation being anchored by China and Russia. And what I'll use my time to do is highlight some of the main findings from this paper.

The first finding, next slide, we have is that military and security cooperation among China, Russia, Iran, North Korea really accelerated after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. And my apologies for the size-two font on screen. (Laughter.) But I will walk you through each of those. You don't actually have to read it. So, the first – so in order to analyze this cooperation, we divided the types of – the cooperation by different types. So, we first saw that Iran and North Korea provide a lot of direct support for Russia in terms of military personnel. You may have seen that Iran sent drones, drone trainers and technicians. There were also many mercenaries reported. North Korea sent up to 15,000 troops to Ukraine on behalf of Russia. We also know there were 1,000 engineers and about 5,000 construction workers.

We did not include a line there for China, but it has been reported that there were up to 150 Chinese mercenaries in Ukraine working on behalf of Russia. And I will note that even though the Chinese government says that it has no relationship with these mercenaries, it did not restrict or ban its citizens from being mercenaries in Russia – in Ukraine, the same way that we saw Nepal did. So, I will – that was one error that we probably should add at a later date.

In addition to personnel for – to support Russia in the war, we also saw North Korea and Iran also provide Russia with weapon systems and ammunition, including loitering munitions, artillery shells, drones, antitank missiles, guns, and short- and medium-range missiles. Next slide, please.

So, this graph shows – sorry, these four different figures show the transfer of arms between different countries. What I want you to focus on is, for the first – I guess, the top two and the bottom left, you'll see the transfer of arms to China, North Korea, and Iran. And in those three, you'll see that historically it's been Russia transferring arms to those countries. And the last one, Russia, which is the lower right, you'll see that since the Ukraine war we saw a reversal of this trend, in which Russia was importing quite a bit of arms from both Iran and North Korea. We also saw – we also saw dual-use goods and defense industry – yeah, defense industry cooperation. So, sorry, back to the – next slide, please.

So that's the second – sorry – third row there. And in terms of that, I think my colleague Maria will be showing you a very detailed graph of Chinese high-priority dual-use items for Russia. But we also saw that Iran had developed loitering munitions and drones in Russia, and also shared technology with Russia on AI guidance, anti-jamming systems, and enhanced warheads. The fourth row we have here in our report is we saw new defense cooperation agreements be signed. The first one that we saw signed was in 2024, the Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between North Korea and Russia.

I think it's important to point out that article four in this treaty says that either nation, if put in a state of – put in a state of war by an armed invasion, should provide military and other assistance with all means in its possession without delay. It's not – doesn't have the same language as, for example, the North Atlantic Treaty, in which an attack on one it is an attack on all. But it does have pretty strong language in terms of immediate assistance, though it doesn't specify what that assistance has to be.

And then in January 2025, Russia and Iran signed a similarly named treaty on comprehensive strategic partnership. But I would say this one is a little bit weaker in terms of language in the treaty. And it's about enhanced defense cooperation. And it commits both countries to cooperation on common threats, increased military technical cooperation, joint exercises, and sharing information and security expertise. It does not have a mutual defense clause, and it does not obligate Russia to defend Iran.

So, when you look at overall across these four countries, then you're seeing a defense treaty between Russia and North Korea, a defense treaty between Russia and Iran. And, of course, on top of that, we still have the prior defense treaty between China and North Korea, which was renewed in 2021 for 20 years. Interestingly, this July we saw China do something very rare, which is celebrate its 64th anniversary of the China-North Korea Defense Treaty, both in Pyongyang and Beijing. It's very rare because no one celebrates a 64th anniversary, and usually not the Chinese. (Laughter.) But it showcases again ways in which we're seeing more and more connection between these actors in different ways.

The last item we have on this slide is joint military exercises between the four countries. And here we saw quite a bit of joint military exercise. Next slide, please. So, this table – or, sorry – this graph visualizes the joint military exercises. And the military

exercises in blue are between China and Russia. So, we really see from 2022 an increase in exercise in a way that we haven't seen before across all the different actors, but particularly within China and Russia. I will note that these exercises does not mean China, Russia, or any of these countries are reaching anywhere close to the level of interoperability between the United States and our closest allies. It's mainly about these countries exercising in the same vicinity, either in parallel or in some degree of coordination. So, it's important to see where the trends are, but let's not go too far to say that they're anywhere close to the same level of military cooperation that we have with our allies and partners.

Most of these exercises, as you can see on this figure, are bilateral. We are beginning to see more trilateral. The more consistent trilateral one is China, Russia, and Iran. We did see one case of China, Russia, and North Korea, where North Korea was observing in that military exercise. It wasn't a full participant. And all of this leads to our second main finding in our study, which is that security cooperation or increased ties between these four actors have been mainly through bilateral channels or trilaterally. We actually have not seen any major official cooperation occurring at the quadrilateral level. So, no clear evidence of all four actors acting significantly in the military space.

There are, I guess, maybe one exception of that, but it's not really the actors in the military space, was the September 3rd military parade in China, in which we saw President Xi Jinping flanked by Vladimir Putin on one side and Kim Jong-un on the other, and the Iranian president was in the back. So, this shows you, at least from the Chinese perspective, which two actors are the most important for them, Russia and North Korea, and Iran of secondary importance. But it's one of the few cases where we see these leaders all on the same stage. I will note also that around that time, when Kim Jong-un was in China, he also attended the SCO summit in Tianjin. So, Iran, China, and Russia are all part of the SCO. North Korea is not and has not applied for formal membership. But it would be interesting to watch look moving forward to see if North Korea might be, on an ad hoc basis, participating in more SEO events, where we might see some more military exercise or military activities.

So, beyond this type of, I guess, more obvious participation of all four actors, we are seeing some diffuse levels of participation that we characterize in the paper. And one example of this is North Korean workers being sent to Russia to work on drone factories that rely on Iranian technology and to produce drones made with

Chinese equipment. And so, in other words, we see all four actors contributing to different parts of one outcome to support the war. So, it's a little bit less clear, compared to, for example, military exercises, where you see all four actors, or three actors, acting at the same time. But we should pay attention to these forms of more diffuse participation and cooperation.

And, sorry, one second. Next slide, please. So, having looked at how China, Russia, North Korea and Iran cooperated on the Ukraine conflict, the next question we had was, to what extent was this a model that can be replicated elsewhere, or is this just unique to Ukraine? So, the second part of our paper looked at did we see this in Iran? We didn't make – did not make this table for the Iran conflict, but I'm going to use it here just to walk through the same way. We did not see any of the actors provide military personnel to Iran during the war. We did see this – again, for the second, weapon system and ammunition – we did see quite a bit of weapon transfers from Russia to Iran afterwards. And of course, there were transfers of those weapon systems beforehand too. There were none that occurred during the war but, again, the war was very short.

I think one of the most significant transfers from Russia that has been reported recently was a 6.5 billion deal for 48 Sukhoi-35 jets. So, my understanding is that's the biggest Russian arms transfer since the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We're also seeing that Iran is turning to the Chinese BeiDou navigation system instead of the U.S. GPS system. So, the third category here is dual-use goods and defense industry cooperation. We saw before the war there was quite a bit of Chinese dual use-goods to support Russian missile technology. We haven't seen that same reporting since July, but I assume the same types of transfers are occurring. But Mona may jump in if I'm incorrect on that.

And then we don't see new defense partnerships. But, again, like, you don't – defense partnerships aren't like military exercise. You don't have to sign them every year. And then we did – and we did see slightly – we did see some joint exercises afterwards. But if you go back to the table with the joint military exercise, I will note that it is odd right now. This date is – this graph is updated as of August. But even if you go to October 2025, we oddly see a lot less military exercises among all four actors in 2025. I don't quite have an explanation for that right now, but I just wanted to share with you that finding.

So, in terms of looking at what is driving some of the cooperation, what explains the differences in cooperation for Russia for Ukraine, versus Iran in the Iran-Israel conflict, my team and I, we came up with a couple of factors. The first one I will highlight is transnational calculations plus power asymmetries. We believe that there was a lot provided to Russia for the Ukraine war because Russia was very powerful and could offer a lot to other countries. So, for example, we know that in order to – as part of the offer for China, Russia was willing to provide China with key technology, including for its nuclear submarine – sorry – China's new type 096 nuclear ballistic submarine. And there's leaked documents now that showing Russia is willing to provide substantial equipment that could help in a Chinese invasion of Taiwan.

We know for North Korea, Russia provided quite a bit of Iranian attack drone technology and other technology. And then Victor and his team have done excellent work showcasing that North Korea earned somewhere between 9 to 12 billion (dollars) for what it has provided Russia. Some of the other factors we also mentioned, and was showcased during China's September parade, was geographic distance. So for China, and I think also for Russia, the fact that China and North – so for China, the fact that Russia and North Korea are its neighbors, and for Russia the fact that China and North Korea are its neighbors, will always mean that those two countries would always take precedence over Iran, a country that is in a more distant theater and has less direct implications.

We also found that, at least when looking at the Iran war, we had to take into account that Russia was already in a conflict, and it had limited bandwidth as well as capabilities for supporting. In other words, looking at war simultaneity and fatigue. And the final thing for the Iran conflict, and I think probably explains quite a bit of caution on both China, Russia, and North Korea side, was U.S. involvement in the Iran-Israel conflict. All these actors care very much about its relationship with the United States. And the fact the United States participated in the strikes on Iran probably gives those actors more pause in providing support, compared to the way that the United States has been at more of a distance with the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

The last finding, as I wrap everything up, and goes back to the title of our paper, is that as we look at the cooperation between all four countries, we really see China and Russia as a driver. They form the axis – sorry – the anchor of this relationship. And the more weaker

actors, North Korea and Iran, are contributing to that. So, I'll wrap it up there. Thank you.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thanks very much, Bonny. Terrific.

Maria.

Maria Snegovaya: Thank you so much. Real honor to be here. And I wanted also to flag that this experience of collaborating with our dear colleagues from other teams was very, very enriching.

So, on our side, we looked at the economic side of collaboration. And I will flag that, unlike Bonny's story which looks more specifically on the security side, economic dynamic may or may not be as revealing of the military degree of collaboration because it's largely driven by other factors – such as wartime needs, geographic distance, Bonny flagged, focus on self-sufficiency, mistrust, comparative advantage, and other factors that intervene. We, for example, given as a comparison, the Second World War era axis powers which, while clearly integrated militarily, did not necessarily mirror that dynamic in the economic collaboration.

The second point I want to make is our approach methodology was primarily tracking the customs data over the time extended period since early – since 2010s. And unfortunately, when it comes to North Korea and Iran, the data is quite limited. And even Russia, where we used to actually have quite good customs data access, is increasingly censoring, hiding the data. For example, you know, we cross checked some data that you get on the Chinese side, which that's allegedly sending to Russia. Somehow, Russia is never receiving the sensitive technology, sensitive goods. So that is important to keep in mind. Some of the conclusions of this analysis are based on the data that's, unfortunately, imperfect.

Altogether, what we can see, very much echoing Bonny's story, clearly the collaboration among the four countries is increasing. Russia, North Korea, Iran, and to extent China, share similar incentives in sanctions evasion, trying to cooperate logistically in terms of payments, defense production, given the growing technological financial isolation, and desire to reduce dependence on the dollar and the Western market. However, again, very similar to the conclusion of the security brief, we also find very uneven importance of collaboration. China is absolutely key, crucial, the most economically active member of the group, while the rest of the collaboration is uneven. And the major bulk of their

relationship is driven by growing Russia-China ties, particularly in dual-use goods and energy.

However, there's still a lot of tactical, pragmatic considerations that I will discuss that, while there is definitely growing alignment, also nobody is rushing to support the other party unless it's profitable somehow for a given state. So first I'm going to start with trade and investment. As I said, much of the dynamic is shaped by China's active diplomatic economic engagement. China expands its economic partnership with other three states, even if it's quite asymmetric and uneven. You can look, for example, and the 25-year oil for investment deal with Iran, Belt and Road projects, no limits strategic partnership with Russia, near total dominance on North Korean trade, et cetera. Trade volumes have surged over the period, especially in the post-'22 period, however largely through China.

The trade among the four countries since 2021 increased by almost 50 percent, but 90 percent of that increase is through China-Russia relationship, primarily in the area of the dual-use good and energy. China-Russia trade in particular has grown by about 50 percent since 2021, and China, in particular, instrumental for Russia's war effort, as Bonny has flagged, primarily supplying dual-use goods. If I can please have slide seven shown. Russia is importing from China semiconductors, machine tools, the key components. Just to give you some data, the machine tool parts skyrocketed – imported from China skyrocketed from 32 – to 80 percent. And ball bearings, again Chinese share in Russian imports of ball bearings, up 345 percent since 2021. Quite a notable number.

This appears to be a specialization among the countries. Again, just as Bonny flagged, while dual-use goods, they're, like, less under threat being sanctioned, and China is quite cautious about that, other countries that are more, like, negligent about – care less about sanctions, they supply Russia with munition, missiles, and even laborers, like North Korea. In case of Iran, Shahed drones, ballistic missiles, even if currently Russia is less dependent on Iranian drones. However, as I mentioned, while the major bulk of this relationship is driven by China-Russia bilateral relationship, even there the relationship is quite unequal.

As we describe it, while Russia is just a partner for China, China is the partner for Russia. Just, again, to give you the numbers, Russia now sends about one-third, about 30 percent, of its exports to China, but for China, Russia accounts only for about 6 percent of its

imports. So that's just clear evidence of this inequality. Also, while China is happy to send, for example, goods to Russia to sell, when it comes to direct investment into Russia the pattern is very different. China's foreign direct investment into Russia is modest. That's partly because of sanctions-related risks. Russia does not have particularly good investment climate. And, of course, China is also facing some economic challenges. Altogether, its investment plateaued. We see that China is not, in that sense, prioritizing Russia.

Also, since 2024, we have seen the trade between Russia and China stopped growing. It only grew by 2 percent in 2024. And earlier this year it was actually falling by 9 percent. That is because of market saturation. Russia is also experiencing an economic slowdown. And China is also becoming quite cautious about secondary sanctions. When it comes to Iran and North Korea, their contribution is relatively marginal. However, it's worth mentioning that Iran sells a lot of oil to China, and North Korea heavily depends on China in all sorts of aid and illicit channel trade.

Altogether, beyond just China, we can see that economic collaboration among Russia, Iran, North Korea has also deepened. There is also the strategic partnerships signed between Moscow and Iran. They're developing the north-south trade corridor together. We are tracking that too. I'm happy to discuss that during the Q&A. There is also Russian-North Korean Defense and Trade Pact, which also – and previously there was a debt forgiveness by the two countries. And the coordination has also been strengthened by number of multilateral platforms that Bonny has mentioned and Mona, I'm sure, will discuss in more details, including the SCO, BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative, et cetera. Altogether, China is absolutely crucial, indispensable intermediary in all of these relationships, and the others depend on China far more than China depends on them.

Now, my third point I wanted to make is energy. I have flagged before that much of this increase in trade between the countries is driven by the energy trade. If I may ask for the slide nine, please. Russia has redirected oil exports from Europe to Asia as a result of the economic sanctions. And China and India absorbed the bulk of that dynamic. However, Iran also increased its oil exports to China over the last five years. The exports of Iranian oil to China has surged nearly 400 percent, just to give you the data. However, yet again, China remains quite cautious about this dynamic and is not eager to over-rely on Chinese and Iranian oil supplies. For example, it also continues to use oil from other suppliers, like

Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, Iraq, and Brazil. So, you can see cautious pragmatism on Chinese side here as well.

Nonetheless, the relationship remains quite beneficial for all sides involved. With Russia and Iran, China is getting discounted energy supplies. And Russia and Iran are getting much needed hard currency. There are still limits to these relationships, multiple logistical bottlenecks, competition between Russia and Iran for Asian markets, especially as oil markets become more saturated, supply exceeds demands. Also, when it comes to Russia's role in China's gas supply, we have seen more or less the same dynamic with cautious China.

While altogether China's pipeline imports of Russia's gas increased from 13 to 40 percent, LNG imports from 6 to 11 percent since 2021, when it comes to, for example, the Power of Siberia 2 – the much-needed pipeline that Russia keeps lobbying and pushing forward for a while – we see that China is yet to agree on the price that Russia is offering unless it is more heavily discounted. So, China is nowhere in a rush to sort of satisfy Russia's demand. And this is something that we see consistently. The energy cooperation is strong, but pragmatic. Transactional rather than alliance-like.

There's also yet another area of the collaboration between the countries that we track, primarily in the financial sphere. It is a very interesting new kind of area where the countries try to circumvent using various innovations to go around the Western sanctions. And to do so, they introduce a number of their own alternatives to Western-dominates financial systems, such as domestic card payment platforms, in case of Russia and China, also the new interbank payment systems, alternatives to SWIFT. And, increasingly, try to use them in mutual transactions.

There's also an effort to use digital currencies or at least explore the way to use them creatively in central bank cooperation. The Russian-Chinese banks have developed very interesting mutual schemes. Basically, they sustain trade under sanctions by coordinating its borders and importing currency holdings inside each country. So, they basically, like, don't have – this currency doesn't have to cross borders. And they're also quite innovative about various platforms, such as use of central bank digital currencies. The CBDCs.

However, there's still limits here. Yuan is not fully convertible. China remains very cautious in terms of its exposure to secondary sanctions. And Iran, North Korea have relatively isolated banking

system that, again, creates limits to further collaboration. I will flag that recent sanctions announced by Donald Trump against Russia's energy-producing companies, Lukoil and Rosneft, that together constitute about 50 percent of Russia's crude oil exports, will be a test against which to measure the cautiousness of China and how far it's willing to go to essentially assist Russia in that dynamic.

Altogether, collaboration remains quite uneven. The weight of the participating countries is very unequal. China definitely dominates significantly all of these relationships, even if the growth in the trade and the economic collaboration definitely is driven by Russia and China primarily over the last four years. There are multiple infrastructural deficits with logistical links, poor financing channels. Mistrust remains – especially, for example, when it comes to Russia and Iran. And definite strategic priorities. China continues to seek stable growth, while Russia, Iran, and North Korea prioritize regime survival and increased, essentially, confrontation with the West.

Altogether, what unites them politically, what unites them in terms of security, hasn't yet fully converted into deep economic integration. And I will just flag that data remains a serious concern. We are, unfortunately, facing increased problems accessing the customs data that we used to rely on. However, there's also new channels emerging, like satellite tracking, for example, in the case of North Korea, and other alternatives that we can use to substitute it. But there is an issue. And I will flag that, given that energy flows constitutes such an important, like, foundation of this alliance, this is an opportunity for decision making – for policymakers to develop sanctions designed that would target this relationship going forward.

Altogether, the cooperation in terms of the economy, economic cooperation, among these four powers reflects both necessity and limits. It's an emerging web of convenience, but not yet an alternative economic order. And I'll stop here. Thank you.

Dr. Cha: Great. Terrific. Thank you so much. Thank you so much, Maria.

Now, to Mona on the diplomatic piece.

Mona Yacoubian: OK. Great. Thank you so much, Victor. It's a pleasure to be with all of you this afternoon. Let me start by acknowledging my co-author. Briana Winslow, who's in the audience, did quite a bit of work in coauthoring, researching, and writing the piece.

So, in terms of methodology, I think our – the realm that we were exploring diplomatic ties is probably the least data rich. And we really sort of struggled a bit to figure out how do we measure, you know, diplomatic relations? We ended up looking at U.N. voting patterns in the Security Council, focused, of course, on Russia and China, and then did a series of explorations of various high-level meetings. We have to sort of debate what constitutes high level. Of course, we have no idea what actually happens in those meetings. But looking at both bilateral, trilateral, and the very rare instance of the four CRINK countries meeting together.

Let me start with my bottom line up front, which is, essentially, that diplomatic ties are perhaps the most visible element of the CRINK, but the least consequential in terms of being able to demonstrate measurable, concrete, short-term impacts on the ground. I wanted to start with perhaps what we've seen most recently as of interest, which is we did see a powerful diplomatic alignment between Russia and China in support of Iran, following the reimposition of U.N. sanctions known as the snapback, which was part of the JCPOA. These sanctions, this mechanism was triggered by the E-3, U.K., France, and Germany, citing Iran for noncompliance. This was all sort of happening as we were drafting the paper.

And we flagged, like, watch this space. And I think we did see, and we have seen – since the triggering of snapback in late August, and then their actual coming into force in late September, we absolutely have seen an alignment of China and Russia essentially saying that these sanctions are, you know, not legitimate, and, in essence, declaring them null and void. It is a little bit ironic, since Russia actually played a key role in terms of actually creating the snapback mechanism back in 2015 that they have now completely disavowed it, or disavowed kind of the legitimacy of its triggering.

And I think going forward, what we will see is Russia and China going full force in terms of attempting to obstruct the enforcement and whatever kinds of mechanisms and efforts may come into play to seek to actually enforce this reimposition of U.N. sanctions on Iran. If you could advance the slide, please. And so, this is notable, in the sense that what we found was in general a lower degree of alignment between Russia and China when it comes to contentious issues, when it comes to the decision, for example, to exercise a veto. And here we see Russia typically far more willing to exercise its veto power than China.

By the way, all of this – we chose 2022 as sort of the kind of key point, I think, as already been pointed out by colleagues, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the time when it sounds – when it really felt like this alignment of powers was starting to come into play. And so, we see from this graphic just how much more often typically Russia will exercise the veto – its veto than China. That being said, I think we are potentially entering a period of escalating tensions with Iran again, given everything that's happened. What will be interesting to see is whether this alignment that we're seeing diplomatically actually translates into concrete support on the ground, should there be an escalation and a resumption of conflict, for example, between Israel and Iran.

We did not see much, as Bonny noted, during the actual conflict itself. Yes, it was just 12 days, but I think there are real questions about how the alignment diplomatically translated, or not, into concrete military support in Iran's time of need. Next slide, please. So, what was more interesting, I think, to look at, more dynamic – and I think we're seeing this as well in the other realms – was bilateral ties. And here, what was really interesting to look at are the dyad – is the dyad between Russia and North Korea, where we saw a dramatic increase in engagement in 2024, with 10 meetings between Russia and North Korea. That is as opposed to zero in 2022 and only one in 2023.

This year is already on track to surpass the level of bilateral engagement last year. So as of the writing of our paper, there were 14 high-level meetings between Russia and North Korea as of September of this year. I would note, even yesterday Putin meeting with the North Korean foreign minister. So that is continuing. And clearly, I think the Russians do view the North Koreans in a particularly positive light. They value the relationship. They highlight that this is an ally, not a partner. And I guess in this case we could say that we do see diplomatic ties as an indicator of deeper, more consequential cooperation.

The other interesting bilateral relationship to look at, the one that I look at quite a bit as the Middle East program director, is Iran and Russia. And this one I think is very fulsome in a variety of ways. I think it's born of the long standing 10-year cooperation between Iran and Russia in Syria, that I think really did look to develop those ties. Although it's interesting, with the collapse of the Assad regime, we are seeing, you know, Russia sort of move in a different direction, a more pragmatic direction, working to deepen ties with Ahmad al-Sharaa, while Iran is very much left out in the cold. And

so that, to me, is indicative of that differing power dynamic between the two.

That being said – and, again, I think perhaps related to the resumption of – or, the reimposition of U.N. sanctions, with the escalating tensions between the West and Iran – we do see the Kremlin once again highlighting that Russia is prepared to, you know, expand cooperation ties with Iran in all areas. Just last week, there was a high-level Putin envoy, Lavrentiev, who was in Tehran meeting with Iran's supreme National Security Council secretary, Ali Larijani. That meeting itself came just less than a week after Larijani himself was in Moscow meeting with Putin, carrying a message from the Iran Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. My guess is this has all to do with Syria again. And, again, as we're seeing kind of more movement in the Syrian arena, it's interesting to see Iran and Russia seeking to find ways perhaps to coordinate.

Last example here of Iran-Russia ties that I think is useful to note, has to do with in the nuclear energy realm. And that one, I think, is significant. An Iranian nuclear delegation visited Tehran earlier this month seeking to accelerate plans for the construction of four small nuclear power plants in Iran. This follows on to the signing of a $25 billion agreement the previous month to actually construct those. That's noteworthy. I mean, obviously nuclear energy has resonance here. It is a bit of a poke, to say the least, I think. And I think certainly bears watching as we as the potential for tensions to escalate.

I'll conclude with a final point. And that is, kind of like my colleagues, I think we've seen – it's less often that we see the three out of the four countries, let alone all four countries, meeting. And I think that's notable. I think that really, to my mind, casts doubt on the idea of a of a formal alliance, in the strictest sense of the word. But I do think it is – we're seeing, as these countries meet, important efforts to project, potentially, what I would call an alternate – a power that's seeking to create an alternate order, or at a minimum the disruption of the of the existing order. I think the SCO meeting and the Chinese-hosted military parade in September is certainly the most dramatic example of that. We did – as I think Bonny noted, you had all four countries together at once, witnessing the military parade.

And I think, more importantly – and I'll be curious Andrea's thoughts on this – it's what the parade commemorated, right? Which was the victory of World War II, but essentially a complete upending – (laughs) – of the narrative as we know it, and a

reframing of it to insert China and Russia in the center of that narrative and sort of push the allies off to the side. I think that, to me, is significant. It is notable. And I think it does speak to kind of the soft power elements, the ways in which the CRINK countries, so called, are really able to play a role of seeking to sort of reshape narratives and how we think about the world order.

More specifically, what's really fascinating to me is how we might think of CRINK as what I would call an avatar of the Global South, where I think we're seeing in this emerging multipolar order these countries essentially looking to sort of shift the role of non-Western actors, and shape the global agenda with the imperatives and the priorities of the so-called Global South in the forefront. I also think we could see these CRINK countries perhaps erode, perhaps undermine international institutions of governance created in the post-World War II era. Or maybe, depending on how things go, inhabit them and reshape them from within to more effectively reflect what they would consider their interests.

And then the last point I'll make before closing is something else, I find really interesting, which is if we look at CRINK, it is sort of inchoate. It's a bit amorphous. But that to me raises a bigger question of is this sort of a harbinger of what alliances look like in the emerging multipolar era? Are we – as we watch CRINK, and as we see kind of what I would call this ever-shifting constellation of evolving ties, with countries moving in and out and up and down as dictated by their interests – is this a window into what the emerging multipolar order will look like, and the role that alliances will play?

Dr. Cha: Great. Terrific. Mona, terrific. So Bonny, Maria, Mona, terrific work. Really brought some – on a not easy topic to mine data on, you really brought some good data to these issues.

Now we're going to go to the second part of the program, which are our discussants. So, we have Andrew Kendall-Taylor and Henrietta, who will help us to sort of react to what we've seen in terms of the work thus far. So why don't we start with Andrea?

Andrea Kendall-Taylor: Sure. Well, that was incredibly rich and detailed analysis. And I think, like, really, a tremendous resource for people who are working on this issue. I think maybe I'll pick up where you left off, with this kind of summit in Beijing. That's something obviously – like, if you're looking, to me, for a visual image, like an aha moment for what this is, I really think it was the military parade in Beijing, where you had Xi flanked by Putin and Kim, with the Iranian

president kind of just over the shoulder. It kind of encapsulates everything that you need to understand. And I think Mona's point about this kind of this notion that they're trying to demonstrate and signal to the rest of the world that there is a viable alternative, it was all encapsulated in that moment.

And I think that's one of the things that's most powerful about this axis of upheaval, is they have come together, you know, with a shared interest in undermining the United States and the order it leads, trying to tear it down and create something that they think affords each of them the power and influence that they each believe that they deserve. So, to me, that's what this axis of upheaval is. I mean, Victor started this whole session with the kind of notion that this is one of the most consequential developments of the last, you know, many, many years. And I wholeheartedly agree with that.

And when I think about what it is, my bumper sticker for what this CRINK or axis of upheaval is, is it is increasing the military capabilities of America's adversaries while at the same time diluting the foreign policy tools that we have to confront them. So, it's exactly what they – what they just laid out. Bonny kind of enumerated all of the ways that their military capabilities are improving as a result of cooperation, while the other two presentations talked about now the challenges in the economic and diplomatic realms. They are leading this coalition that's making it harder for the United States to accomplish its aims.

I mean, maybe just to say a couple of, like, bigger picture – and I think it was present throughout all of them – but they do – are shared by – or, they all are motivated by their desire to undermine the United States. But it's also about safeguarding their regimes. When they cooperate, they all understand that they're more resilient, less isolated when they work together than when they don't. And so that's a powerful motivator for each of them. They all have regional ambitions. They want to increase their power and influence in their respective regions. They understand that the United States is their primary long-term obstacle to accomplishing that. And I think they all understand that by working together they can spread U.S. bandwidth and attention thin.

I mean, I think in all of the presentations we also heard a lot about the constraints on the relationship, which are real. A couple of that were mentioned, you know, distrust – historic distrust in the Russia-Iran relationship, in the Russia-China relationship. In all of these ways there is deep wells of historic distrust. But I think what

we have to be mindful of is that through repeated interactions – and you laid it out on the graph – that is the basis of a more deep and durable partnership. They are working together – Russia and Iran in Syria – working together in ways that can help overcome historic distrust. So, these constraints aren't fixed. They're things that, through their repeated interactions, they can work to overcome.

We also heard, I think, a lot about the asymmetry, which is definitely a real thing. It's in all of these relationships. The fact that the Iranian president was over the shoulder like was a visual image of the asymmetry that's present in all of these. You know, for Russia's part, though, and certainly there a lot of concern about being more subservient to China, but there's still a temporal issue with this where the immediate threat of the United States and, you know, the civilizational struggle with the West, is far more important and urgent than this growing asymmetry with China. I think from the Russians' perspective, that's something – they have to deal with the – what is it, the wolf at the hen house? I don't even know what the saying is. (Laughter.) But we're the most immediate threat before they worry about trying to, I think, right-size their relationship with China.

And I think – and it is definitely true – that China is less dependent on all of them. But I do think we have to remember that Beijing finds it quite useful to have Russia destroying norms, distracting from U.S. attention on the Indo Pacific, having the crisis in the Middle East. And my – you know, not being a China expert at all – but my assessment, with my understanding of authoritarian regimes that are increasingly personalized, the appetite for risk tends to grow. And so, I think that China is getting more comfortable with the risk-taking behavior of Russia and others, so long as it's advancing its overall interests of weakening the United States.

And finally, I mean, you know, there is reputational risk for China. It is worried. It doesn't necessarily want to be so closely associated with all of these leaders. I would argue that's one of the reasons that Iran was relegated to second tier, not wanting to upset other Chinese partners in the Middle East. And so, we haven't seen kind of the quadrilateral or the multilateral. So that's definitely true. But I think Bonny's paper made such an important point, that it's increasingly – that multilateral coordination and cooperation is increasingly happening in informal ways.

So, the Iranian drone technology through Russia makes its way to China and North Korea. Sometimes you'll see Russian leaders who visit North Korea, then China, and then Russia – I mean, and then Iran, perhaps providing some of that multilateral connectivity, just not because all of the leaders are in the same room. So, I think, again, it's just testing our assumptions. These things aren't fixed. And looking for more of these informal ways that that multilateral cooperation, or at least the transfusion of know-how and other things is taking place.

And then, final point, I mean, I think of all of these things, the thing that I focused on the most in my work, I think it's the military domain. That's most important for the United States. And so, Bonny laid out what's happening. And so now I think we have to think about how that cooperation could evolve in the future. You know, thinking about, in the case of Russia, will these actors expedite its timeline for the reconstitution of the military? That's things the United States and our European allies need to be aware of. Thinking about power projection. I know Bonny and I have talked a lot about things like the joint bomber patrol, where a Russian and Chinese plane took off from the same base in Russia to get close to the Alaskan airspace, the ADIZ.

That was only possible because of that increasing interoperability, but it's providing opportunities for these countries to project power further and in different ways that wouldn't be possible. In the future, might Russia or China, you know, have basing in Iran to allow them to project power further into the Middle East and North Africa? So, thinking about those type – and the Arctic is and also another really important one for the Russia-China piece. I think we touched on the nonproliferation piece.

And then I think we all know the elephant in the room is kind of the risk of simultaneity. And that's one thing that I've been working on quite a lot, is what would be the implications of U.S. – if we're involved in a crisis in the Indo-Pacific, for European security? I think it would be really quite significant. And it would be, from Russia's perspective, a really golden opportunity to advance many of his aims which go beyond Ukraine. So, there's a lot in all of these papers. I think they do a great job in laying it all out. And really looking forward to further discussion.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thanks so much, Andrea.

Now we'll get the perspective from how China looks at all this. Henrietta.

Henrietta Levin: Great. Well, let me start by echoing Andrea's appreciation for the depth of analysis that Bonny, Maria, and Mona have put forward. I think it really does add a helpful data-driven sense of what is really going on in this relationship.

And so just – for the sake of time, I'll just offer a few brief observations, building on their work. And in looking again at their three pieces in preparation for this conversation, I mean, it's clear from the diplomatic, economic, or security angle, this is not necessarily a multilateral partnership. It's not the anti-Quad. But the power and also ambitions of these four countries are complementary in ways that do present a profound challenge to the interests of the U.S. and our allies. I think it also does come across clearly in each of the pieces that the China-Russia partnership carries a particular strategic depth that is unique among these CRINK relationships.

Of course, there's still transactionalism within the China-Russia relationship. And Maria pointed out, you know, China is still trying to get the very best price on Russian energy, taking advantage of Russian weakness, and recognizing that China does hold the cards. But at the same, time at the leader level President Xi and President Putin have committed to each other and to a strategic partnership in which some key defense capabilities, supply chains, and, importantly, financial pipes are increasingly integrated.

And I think I would just want to echo Andrea's really important point, that part of why Xi and Putin are so committed to each other, part of why this has built – this has moved beyond transactionalism, is because, at least from the Chinese side, I mean, Xi views not just Russia, but Putin's Russia, as critical for domestic stability in China. This is fundamentally not even a foreign policy question. It's that I think Beijing has bought Russia's narrative that they need not just Russia, but Putin's Russia, and a strong Russia led by Putin, to forestall the color revolutions that would otherwise come for China's political system.

And so, you know, there are real irritants between all four of these countries and including between Russia and China. Their interests, as always, are not quite aligned in Central Asia, where they have completing claims to influence, or the Arctic. But there's clearly been a strategic-level decision to put that aside and not allow it to influence the current flow of deepened partnership. And I think that has really unlocked some of the supercharged elements of the

diplomatic, economic, and security partnership that these papers have identified.

And so, if you do look at the connective tissue across all four of these countries, between all four of these countries in their common partnership, of course, it seems like the primary piece of connective tissue is opposition to the United States. And the second seems to be sustaining Russia's war in Ukraine, which is itself conceived as a type of opposition to the U.S. But then we see in the discussion of how the other three countries reacted to the U.S. bombing of Iran earlier this year, that none of these countries are actually willing to take on the U.S. in a serious way on the other's behalf, even though this anti-American spirit does animate the, you could say, affirmative side of the relationship. There's just only so much risk they're willing to take to benefit the others.

One other distinction worth highlighting is, aside from China being, of course, just the most powerful country among these foreign nations, China is also trying to – when we talk about a new world order, and the way in which the partnership among Iran, North Korea, Russia, and China is at least endeavoring to weaken the post-war order, weaken U.S. global leadership, I think how each of those four countries look at what that means is quite distinct. In that, China's trying to build something. China is trying to build a new world order with China at the center, an order that is more friendly to its authoritarian system of governance, that's more friendly to its parochial interests when it comes to things like Taiwan, and which – in which states are the ones with rights, not people, and big states have more rights than the other ones. But this is – so it's antithetical to how, you know, us in Washington would traditionally conceive of a constructive international order. But it's an affirmative program. It's something China is trying to create.

The other three countries seem to have much more of a kind of negative vision of world order. They're all strongly committed, and they all agree that the U.S. should not be allowed to lead anything. But in terms of what should come up in its place, I think when you look at the vision of the other three countries there's either a highly, like, regionalized, parochial perspective of perhaps their own rights among their neighbors, or there's just almost a nihilism to it. And you see this in how the U.N. votes play out, where China is much more hesitant to just shoot down Security Council resolutions, for example, whereas the Russians are happy to say, we just don't want this system to work. China does want it to work, differently. And, of course, you see this as well with China

announcing recently the launch of a Global Governance Initiative that China will lead. So, I'll stop there and look forward to the questions.

Dr. Cha: Great. Terrific. Really wonderful set of comments and discussants.

I'm conscious of the time. Let me just add just three questions to the pile. And some of them have already been touched on by Andrea and Henrietta.

The first is, I think we all agree that this – whatever we call this – and, like, I mean, I think your original formulation was "axis of upheaval," and then, you know, we came up with CRINKs. We don't really know if we like the name yet. (Laughter.) I like the anti-Quad, or you could call it the bad Quad, whatever you want. But I think we all agree on the point that this is – you know, this is a very sort of loosely formulated group that are working together in certain respects, often bilaterally. And where we really see it is in the support of Russia's war in Ukraine, where you have basically three parallel tracks that are operating and supporting different aspects of Russian capabilities. But when you add them together, they're greater than the sum of their parts, right, when it comes to the United States.

So, the first question is – and, again, some of you have touched on this – this is starting out – maybe with the exception of China – this is starting out as largely tactical, right? And how – but if it continues on in these many different areas, economic, political, military, not just in Ukraine but perhaps some other areas, you know, at what point does this become strategic? When does this become strategic? Like, what's interesting about this whole case is how something that starts out as tactical becomes strategic, right? So that's the first question.

And then the second, related to that is, so what – if we think about what the longer-term implications of this cooperation is, like this – like, Andrea mentioned one of them, which is this notion of – whether this remains tactical or becomes strategic, one of the longer-term implications is that now each of the parties has an interest in destabilization happening in another part of the world, that in some way they can take advantage of. So, I mean, Maria and I were talking about it just the other day in a different context. Like, for the war in Ukraine, which doesn't look like it's ending anytime soon, Russia now develops interests in seeing destabilization in other parts of the world, like the Taiwan Straits

or something. So, to what extent – what are the sort of longer-term implications?

And then the third, which is kind of contrary to the first question, is, as these four countries and others work more and more together, and they become more and more intertwined, is there a – what's the right word – is there sort of a – so right now I feel like they're all empowering each other, and they're empowering each other in the worst way, which is they're empowering each other but they're not regulating each other, right? They're empowering each other – like, Russia and North Korea are empowering each other. At the same time, Russia does not care what North Korea does with that empowerment, right? Whereas, arguably, China did, right, because they've had a long-term relationship.

So, to me, the other question is, as these – as these become more intertwined, do they start, like, developing entrapment fears that regulate – they start to regulate each other's behavior? So, like, this is the other side of this thing as it grows. You know, one example of that might have been the relative restraint in response to the U.S. and Israeli attack on Iran, right, where they were – most of them were kind of at arm's length distance. So that's the flipside of the question, is as they become more intertwined, do they develop entrapment fears and actually start to regulate or distance themselves? So, kind of a rubber band sort of effect. So, those were the questions I had.

We'll take maybe two more questions from the audience, and then we'll go back to all of you for final – for final comments. So, we have one question here. If you could identify yourself, that would be great.

Q: Right. Mark Katz at George Mason University. Thank you for this presentation.

I'm just wondering, do you see the CRINK group expanding? Are those – are those now or might be people who want a bandwagon with them? It strikes me that any other possible additions would be much weaker and perhaps sort of absorb resources from the four instead of add to them. But it strikes me that if it really is sort of a serious grouping, it will seek to expand. And it strikes me that there are candidates who might want to do so. But I'm just wondering how you view that. Thank you.

Dr. Cha: All right. Thank you. Yes. We have one other question here.

Q: Yes. Hi. My name is Jack Rapinski, unaffiliated.

How worried should we be about this? If you had to assign, like, a DEFCON level of how big a threat is CRINK to us? Is it just an annoyance? I mean, like Russia's creeping along in the battlefield in Ukraine, so it doesn't feel like it's a really bad thing. But what would you say?

Dr. Cha: OK. Great. Thanks. And then we have one question that came in online from Sri Lanka. And it's – the question is – so, basically, what is the perspective – and I think this was mentioned in discussion, I think in particular Mona mentioned it. What is the perspective of the panel with regard to the appeal to factions in the Global South disillusioned by alleged Western hypocrisy, economic pressures, or historical injustices? To what extent does this grouping provide – is appealing to the Global South? And again, I think also Henrietta raised this point as well. So why don't we take those, and maybe we'll go in reverse order. So, we'll start with Henrietta and work that way. If you could keep your comments relatively short, so we stay within the time constraint.

Ms. Levin: OK, relatively short. So let me just start with Victor's question about entrapment and how restraint does or – is or is not affected by these CRINK ties. And what I've seen, at least from the China perspective, is that the development of CRINK has actually lessened China's willingness, even beyond, like, a pretty tepid status quo. It's lessened China's willingness to try and enforce restraint, at least on North Korea. Because now – so China does want North Korea to behave. It doesn't want North Korea to create problems. It recognizes that when North Korea shoots off missiles, that causes South Korea, Japan, and the U.S. to do more together, right on China's border. So, in China's perfect world, North Korea would be a little more quiet.

And in prior years, maybe prior to this, like, 2022 starting point for some of this research, you would see China often express that displeasure in a pretty clear way. I mean, including when China supported the U.N. sanctions regime responding to earlier North Korean nuclear tests. But now I think China is really concerned about losing its traditional influence over North Korea, which has always been complicated even in the best of times, to Russia. So, they are worried that if they pressure the North Koreans, that will just strengthen the North Korea-Russia relationship, because Russia will give the North Koreans whatever China withholds, and then China at the end of the day achieved nothing and has even less leverage than they started with.

I don't actually think they're doing that math right. I think China could play a more responsible role if it wanted to. But that seems to be how the calculations are playing out. And so, as these ties between the four countries continue to deepen in complex ways, I expect we could continue actually to see the reverse of a trend towards entrapment fears leading to greater pressure towards restraint.

And then, just to briefly address the how big is the threat question, I would just bite off an angle that Bonny highlighted, I think, really well in the paper focusing on security, about what it means for China and Russia to be accelerating their defense ties in the way that we've seen since the war in Ukraine began. Where what we're going to end up with on this path is a Russian military that's backed by the full manufacturing capability of the People's Republic of China, so Russia can regenerate rapidly battlefield losses, creating a much stronger military not just for use, potentially, in Ukraine, but this is a threat to NATO over the longer term as well.

And then in the other direction, you have the Russians as increasingly the junior partner in this relationship feeling like they have no choice but to give China really prized pieces of military technology that will fill key chokepoints or bottlenecks in the PLA's modernization process. And that presents a threat not only to the Indo-Pacific, but to the broader global community as well. So, I guess my answer would be, big.

Dr. Kendall-Taylor: I agree with that, and that also answers your first question on, like, tactical versus strategic. I would argue that it already is strategic. Like, it was born out of necessity on the battlefield in Ukraine, but just as important as what Russia is getting is what it's giving away. And so, I would argue that we've already moved to the more strategic piece. And, like, going back to my bumper sticker, enhance military capabilities and harder to confront through our normal tools of coercion on the economic and diplomatic side. Like, that feels like a strategic problem. And when you think about now what defense planners are having to think about and contemplate, there's a whole set of new scenarios – the simultaneity, other things. So, to me, it already is a strategic problem.

Dr. Cha: And I think the point that both of you made is that those enhanced capabilities actually increase the propensity for risk-acceptant behavior.

Dr. Kendall-Taylor: And so – and so that – I mean, that gets to the entrapment piece. Which is, I mean, I think the relationship between all of them is already emboldening. It's making them more willing to take risks because they can mitigate sanctions, they can work around them. They're more resilient and harder to isolate. So, it makes it – and they have top cover in the U.N. and other places. And so – and they're more militarily capable. And so, you know, think about what you've already seen since the war in Ukraine began, is on the Korean Peninsula, I mean, you can speak all to this about how – you know, the way that they've torn up their aim of peaceful reunification, all of the missile tests, and other things. I would argue that the relationship with Russia and the way that China has been forced to go along with it, has emboldened the North Koreans.

I think you could make a similar argument in the South China Sea, that China, you know, with the way that it's normalizing crossing the lines and all of the kind of military – Taiwan, and all of these kind of – there's a number of things that I think Bonny outlines in her paper. And it is a more assertive, aggressive. And just going – you know, one of the things we've said before that should be an area of tension, between Russia and China at least, is that, you know, Russia is more comfortable with risk that would bother the Chinese. I don't think we've seen that. Like, with the way that Russia was supporting the Houthis and, you know, all of that, I don't think China really put any significant pressure on Russia or the Iranians to knock it off in a really significant way. I think they're more comfortable with risk in those ways.

So, I don't see that – and I agree with what you said. It's, like, the reverse on the entrapment piece, almost. And then are there – could there be other actors in this axis of upheaval? I think, definitely peripheral players. And you see the likes of Belarus. You know, China has increased its cooperation now with Belarus. You see the Venezuelans. I don't know, you know, I haven't been – I don't – haven't confirmed but reports of Russia sending military aid and equipment to Venezuela while the U.S. is increasing its posture in the region. So, I think that over time, and certainly as more countries become convinced that it's a viable alternative, there may be more countries that want to bandwagon.

Final point I'll make, because it gets to the long-term implications, I mean, in a very big picture. To me, when I looked at the axis of upheaval, I think we've moved now from a single-order world to a

world where there's a competing order. And looking back at some of the international relations, when you go from single order to competing order worlds you have more interstate conflict. And we've already seen that, I think, since the war in Ukraine began. And so, to me, I think it's – we're entering a more kind of tumultuous time. And that might be one of the most significant implications of the axis of upheaval.

Dr. Cha: Mona.

Ms. Yacoubian: I'm scribbling furiously trying to figure out where to go. I mean, I'm going to start very quickly by just adding an additional question, which is: Do we run the risk of exaggerating the strength and power of CRINK in ways that end up creating almost self-fulfilling prophecies? I'm thinking about, you know, al-Qaida and ISIS, issues that I worked on earlier in my career, and the real danger of sort of expanding and creating boogies and monsters where they didn't necessarily exist. So, I just put that out there to be a little bit provocative.

I guess, for me, you know, the bigger question as I'm thinking about all of this is, where some of this falls down a bit, I think, is Iran, is the Middle East. Where we're seeing, for example, the Russians themselves, I think, a little bit self-restraining. Not just because of a reluctance to not want to confront the U.S. directly, as in the case of Iran, but also because of their own pursuit of their own equities, which don't always align. So, for example, I think the Russians are now prioritizing their relations with the Gulf in ways that are allowing or having them not be as willing to really step in in a big way with respect to Iran. I also think we did see that with the Houthis. I think there was limits to what the Russians would do. Similarly, the ways in which they are weighing their ties with Israel.

And so, I guess for me it's not yet quite the slam dunk that maybe it might appear. And I'm not – no one's saying it's a slam dunk. But I think it's more complex. And I guess I would add to that, I think, as analysts, like, can we tee up the indicators? What are the indicators that we should be measuring and tracking that would suggest it's moved from tactical to strategic? And at what point do we make that – do we make that determination? And I think I largely agree with you Andrea, but are we – over the long run, are we looking at the creation of enduring institutions that bring all of these actors together in a way? I don't know.

And then just the last comment, just in view of time, I think the question about appeals to the Global South who are disillusioned, I think Gaza is a really interesting and prime example. We actually haven't seen, for example, the Chinese or the Russians, for that matter, really exploit Gaza to the nth degree. But I think we're seeing ways in which the perception of hypocrisy and double standards on the part of the U.S., specifically, and maybe a little bit more broadly the West, with respect to Gaza has been a galvanizing issue that has allowed sort of more coherence of this notion of a Global South, in ways in which CRINK can sort of exploit that and use it, as I said, in a way to become this avatar of the Global South going forward.

Dr. Cha: Great. Thank you. Maria.

Dr. Snegovaya: Maybe I will contribute by giving some case studies that I know about. So, I definitely agree that the intention is there. In that sense, I agree with Andrea. But I agree with Mona, in that I don't think the actual tools on the ground are there. So, this states also, I think it's very important, that they almost by default personality autocratic leadership is highly ambitious. But, for example, tracking the north-south corridor, which potentially is, like, this really lucrative opportunity for Russia to circumvent sanctions, like go for Iran all the way to India, and just not worry about the Western constraints at all, we see that while the intention is there – and on paper it sounds like an absolutely great idea – the reality is they run into, like, really a huge amount of various bottlenecks.

And some of these bottlenecks are from their own suggested allies. Iran, for example, is in no hurry to build the much-needed parts of this corridor. Without it, it's not fully functional. Other countries, we can, like, describe the Global South, there's multiple actors involved in this project, they're not in a hurry. And they also participated – and they also have multiple options. Like, they have the Chinese projects, they have, potentially, like the new Iranian-Azerbaijani corridor and whatnot. So, they have options. And I think from that perspective, we do not really see anybody rushing to, like, take major risks and sacrifice in an effort to help the other side. From that perspective, we're not, from where I come from, in full strategic coordination yet. I will be more confident once that countries demonstrate willingly that they're sacrificing something, taking certain – really risk gambling in order to push forward something that's mutually beneficial. That is something I would argue we haven't fully yet seen.

Putin remains, by the way, to your point, Victor, about the

entrapment, perhaps slightly different story. I see Russia being quite constrained by the position of its allies, right? China, for example, arguably played a huge role in the fact that Russia restrained from active use, thank God, of any nuclear tools at its disposal. Also, one of the problems with the sanctions, every time the administration recently has been threatening Russia with sanctions, we've seen a lot of activity on the Kremlin side – like most notably Kirill Dmitriev, Putin's representative, just traveled to D.C. instantly after the new sanctions have been announced.

Why? Economically, Russia is more or less resilient for the couple of years. It's not in great shape, but it is resilient. The issue, arguably, is the cooperation of the Global South with their partners. If the U.S. administration is able to convince India or China to restrain from certain purchases of Russian oil, this will be a real, serious blow for Putin. So, I would argue the constraints are there. But, again, I would not claim that there are as much evidence of reshaping their minds. For that to happen, I would like to see joint financial infrastructure evolving more – in a more pronounced way. They're working in that area, but certainly not as – it hasn't yet fully delivered. Perhaps more operational interoperability and technology co-production, with Chinese perhaps taking more of the coordination role.

(Phone rings, laughter.)

Dr. Cha: That's my timer. (Laughter.)

Dr. Kendall-Taylor: Make it quick, Bonny. (Laughter.)

Dr. Lin: OK. I'll try to make three main points. I guess the first one is, responding to the question of who else could be in the CRINK grouping if it expands, I very much agree with all the names that Andrea mentioned. I'll just add one more country to that list, maybe Pakistan. And I would say that when we look at the actors, I don't think we're – I don't think any of us are saying all actors are the same and they have equal influence. At least from my team's perspective, we really see China-Russia at the core, and then North Korea. So, these three are much closer tied. And then Iran as more of a secondary to these three.

And then if you have these other actors, I think they will have closer relations, it seems like, more either with China or with Russia. So, there will be very different relationships as the CRINK groups expand out. So I don't think it's that useful to think about it

only in terms of, like, you know, if it expands, if, like, five or six actors are doing the exact same thing all at the same time, but understanding what are the core countries that are driving this and what other countries are playing more supporting roles.

The other question I'll tack on is, like, is this strategic, and how much can it transform? Mona, I really like your question about what are the indicators we should be looking at? And I guess the way I would look at this is, if we go back to 2020 or 2021, could any of us have predicted how much the Russian invasion of Ukraine transformed this entire relationship? I know, Andrea, you spend lots of time on this. I don't think any leading Chinese thinkers predicted this. And I think there were probably no Russian thinkers that predicted this. So, I think it's interesting to look at indicators during peacetime, but we should also know that war will fundamentally transform the opportunities, the risks at stake, and can really transform relations in a different way.

So, for example, I'm most worried about a potential U.S.-China conflict over Taiwan. I think in that situation there's so much at stake, from China's perspective, that whatever was the prior status quo, China will be willing to give significantly more to Russia, to North Korea, to Iran, or to other actors, in the way that we've seen Russia do. So, I think as we look at indicators and warning, I think it's important to look at what's happening now but also realize that war is incredibly disruptive. It's incredibly transformative. And there could be things that we can't imagine now, but there are found – there are signs of growing relationships that China could really start leveraging in the event of a war.

The last thing I'll point out is we talked quite a bit about September 3rd parade this year, which was the 80th anniversary of, I guess, the victory over World War II. And I think it's very informative to look at 10 years ago during the 70th anniversary what happened. And at that anniversary it was not Kim Jong-un flanking Xi Jinping. It was President Park from South Korea. And the United States was there, and a lot of European countries are there. So, we had completely different actors at the front that China is promoting. And we have – just looking at the actors there, we see this difference in alignment in just 10 years.

Dr. Cha: Really. So excellent, excellent conversation. Please give our scholars a round of applause. (Applause.) You can access all of the reports and the data on the CSIS Geopolitics and Foreign Policy website. And please feel free to speak with our scholars afterwards. Thank you, audience, also for staying for the entire

thing. That's so unlike D.C., right? Like, half the audience is gone by the Q&A. So, thank you all for staying. Thank you all very much.

(END.)