

China and CRINK

Implications for Japan and the United States

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*This report is part of **Strategic Japan**, a CSIS Japan Chair initiative featuring analysis by Japan's leading foreign policy scholars on key regional and global challenges and the implications for the U.S.-Japan alliance.*

Introduction

There is growing concern among security elites in the United States and Japan about cooperation among autocratic states China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, a grouping sometimes referred to as “CRINK.” Japan, for example, has come to see the security of Europe and Asia as **inseparable** since the start of the war in Ukraine, and there are concerns that China's cooperation with other CRINK countries may change the global balance of power and embolden China. Japanese security elites question whether China expects support from Russia and North Korea, if Russia and North Korea would act to assist China in a Taiwan contingency, if China will increase its conventional or nuclear capabilities with Russian support, and if there will be simultaneous multiple conflicts in Asia.

Within CRINK, China is clearly the most important player because it has the most resources. Studies show that China has been assisting Russia in the war against Ukraine, albeit in a limited and covert way. Does China see CRINK as an important strategic tool? Will CRINK cooperation change China's decisions and behavior? What are the implications for Japan and the United States?

This report argues that the CRINK alliance is still in the making. There is no clear evidence to suggest that China regards CRINK as a group or a strategic asset to be used for its own security. Seeing it as a geopolitical group could result in an inadvertent consolidation of the four countries. However, the wars in Ukraine and Iran have revealed some potential problems that could arise for the United States and Japan if they fail to coordinate their efforts toward these countries and prevent future conflicts in general.

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This analysis will first review the cooperation among CRINK, particularly China's support for Russia, North Korea, and Iran. It will then look at China's cooperation with non-CRINK countries. The report will then examine Japan's threat perception and concerns regarding CRINK, as well as the possibility of multiple simultaneous conflicts in the Indo-Pacific region, before reflecting on takeaways from the war with Iran. The report concludes by examining takeaways for the United States and Japan with recommendations for future policy.

China's Cooperation with Other CRINK Countries

China has long maintained close relationships with Russia, Iran, and North Korea. In the 2000s, Japan and the United States hoped that China's influence over these countries would moderate their behavior, including by encouraging North Korea to denuclearize. This changed in the late 2010s as the U.S. government increasingly began to see China and Russia as strategic threats. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, there has been growing concern among U.S. security elites about the alignment of these four autocracies. Some have called this group the **axis of upheaval** or the **axis of autocracy**, and others have simply called it **CRINK**.

China's cooperation with Russia, Iran, and North Korea occurs bilaterally. There is no clear evidence to suggest that China thinks of CRINK as a group or plans to support or be supported by the other CRINK countries for its security. Of the three bilateral relationships, cooperation between China and Russia is the most consequential, with several notable developments in recent years. For example, **studies** have found that China has been providing Russia with dual-use technologies that could help Russia in its war efforts. However, there are no reports that China has provided Russia with military assets. China's support for Russia's war against Ukraine has not been overt. China has maintained a position of pro-Russian neutrality, although it criticizes sanctions against Russia led by the United States and its allies.

Operationally, China and Russia have recently increased **joint exercises**. This has raised concerns among Japanese policymakers. For example, in 2019, four strategic bombers flew over the Sea of Japan and the East China Sea. Again in 2022, four Chinese H-6K long-range bombers and two Russian Tu-95 strategic bombers flew from the Sea of Japan and East China Sea to the Western Pacific. In July 2024, two H-6K bombers and two Tu-95 bombers **flew** near the Alaska Air Defense Identification Zone. The objective of the flight exercise was unclear.

While some view this incident as China merely joining Russia's regular patrol exercises, others view it as a sign of China-Russia nuclear cooperation because both H-6K bombers and Tu-95 bombers are nuclear capable. Although China's conventional capabilities and technologies surpass those of Russia today, Russia has experience and expertise in nuclear weapons design. As China seeks to strengthen its nuclear deterrent vis-à-vis the United States, it may seek Russian support. However, given China's

limited support of Russia in the Russia-Ukraine War, China may not be seeking Russia's help, and Russia may not be willing to cooperate.

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China's relations with North Korea have traditionally been close, and China has supported the North Korean regime. **Xi Jinping's visit to Pyongyang** in June 2026 provides an example of this closeness. North Korea is the only country with which China has a **mutual defense treaty**, but the two countries do not seem to have a joint operational plan and have not held a joint military exercise.

More recently, North Korea has been strengthening its military ties with Russia through its **support** of the war in Ukraine. However, this new North Korea-Russia relationship has not developed into trilateral cooperation. China's position on Russia-North Korea cooperation seems cold or lukewarm at best, with some indications that Beijing is distancing itself from the relationship. For example, when President Vladimir Putin visited Pyongyang in June 2024, where the **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty** was signed, the Chinese foreign ministry **dismissed its significance**. China was **reported** to have opposed a China-Russia-North Korea **trilateral exercise** proposed by Russian Minister of Defense Sergei Shoigu in July 2023. China has also denied involvement in North Korean satellite development, which Russia has assisted. It may be that China prefers relations to be bilateral, allowing it to exert direct influence over North Korea.

China's position on Iran shows a similar pattern to its support of Russia. China is indirectly supporting Iran in the war against Israel and the United States. It advocates a **diplomatic solution** but has been reported to provide satellite information to Iran. In the past, when China behaved covertly or made excuses for its actions, it often reflected its ambivalence about the legitimacy of its own actions or its expectations of maintaining good relations with the United States and Japan. When China was certain of its objectives and its legitimacy, its actions became more overt and declaratory. Judging by this standard, China's position on Russia and Iran is not yet certain.

There has not been a CRINK military exercise to date. China has not conducted bilateral military exercises with North Korea or Iran. China did participate in the joint maritime exercise "**Will for Peace 2026**" in January 2026 with Russia, Iran, South Africa, and the United Arab Emirates, while Brazil, Egypt, Indonesia, and Ethiopia acted as observers. Some saw this as an expansion of the BRICS grouping into a military coalition. **Others** disagreed, as there were only two additional countries since the previous exercise in 2019, when China, Russia, and South Africa participated.

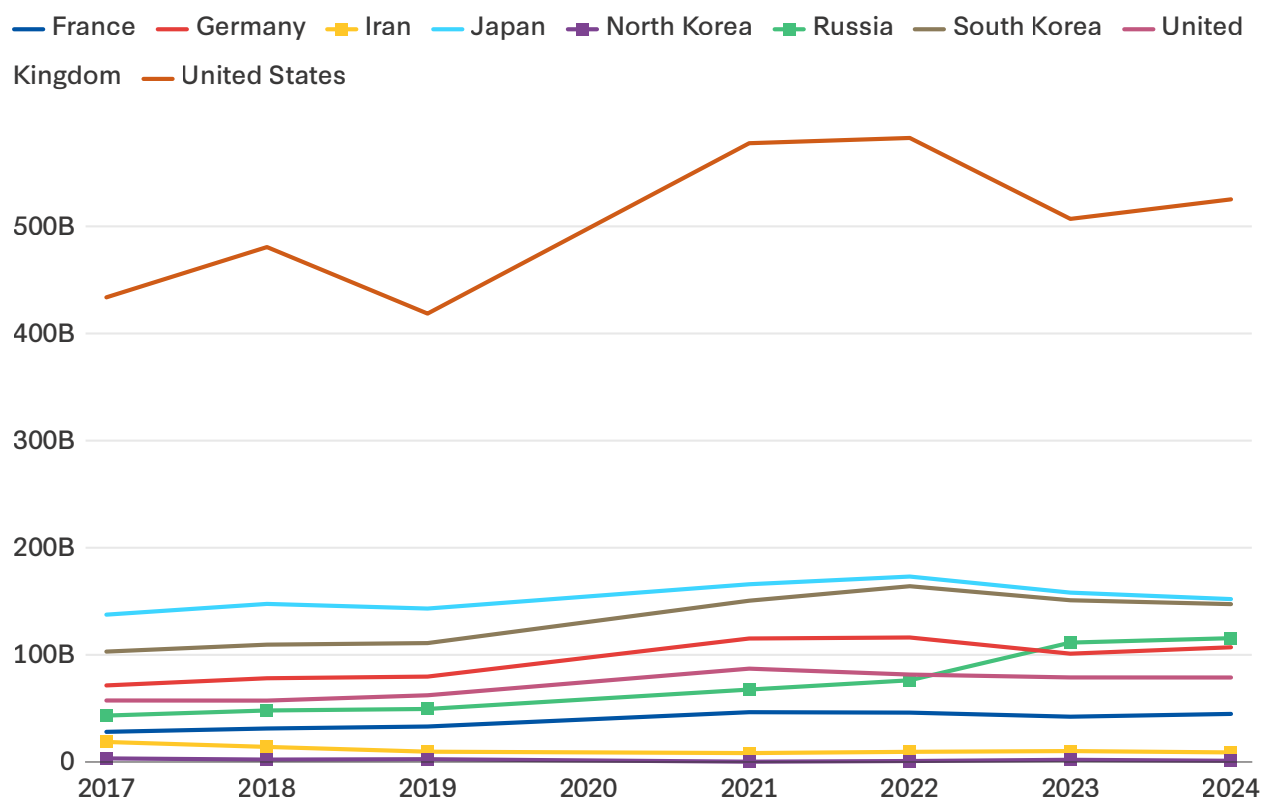
China's ambivalent position toward the other CRINK countries seems to stem from its competing strategic objectives. China sees them as partners in strategic competition against the United States, and

the four countries are indeed bound by their antagonism toward the United States. However, China also seeks to be the champion of the Global South and a global power on par with the United States. Being a member of a coalition of upheaval is suboptimal to achieving recognition as a global power. China also seeks **continued economic growth**, which is still important for the regime and the nation. For this, China needs good relations with advanced economies like the United States and Japan, as well as a stable international environment.

China's Cooperation with Non-CRINK Countries

When assessing China's relationships with the other CRINK countries, it is important to note that its relationships with non-CRINK countries are much stronger and have also been growing in recent years. China's economic relations with non-CRINK countries are indeed much more significant. China's exports to the United States far outweigh those to Russia, North Korea, and Iran (Figure 1). China's exports to Russia increased after the war in Ukraine started, rising by 40 percent from 2022 to 2023 (Figure 2). Even with the increase, however, they amount to only about 20 percent of exports to the United States. This shows that Russia's dependence on China has increased, but not the other way around. China's exports to Iran and North Korea, meanwhile, are small and have decreased.

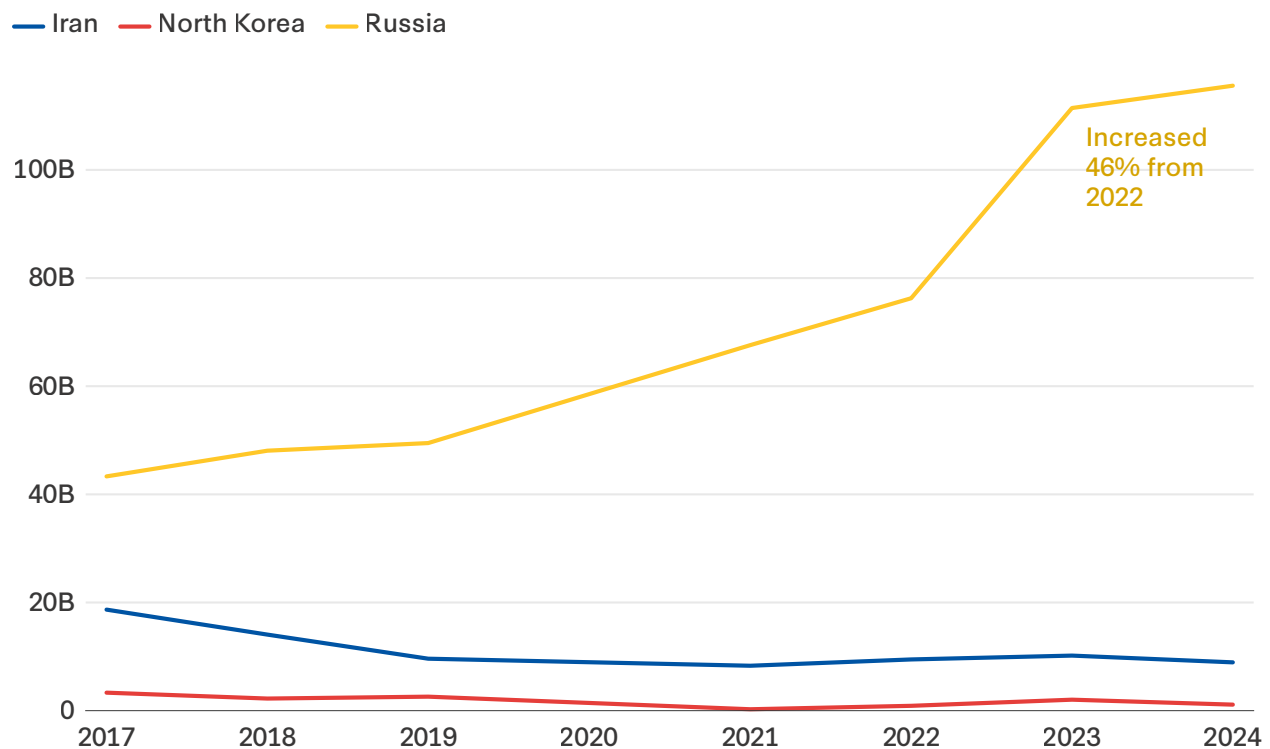
Figure 1: China's Exports to CRINK and Non-CRINK Countries, 2017-2024



Source: IMF International Trade in Goods dataset.

Note: Shows goods exports measured on a free-on-board basis in U.S. dollars.

Figure 2: China's Exports to Other CRINK Countries, 2017-2024



Source: IMF International Trade in Goods dataset.

Note: Shows goods exports measured on a free-on-board basis in U.S. dollars.

China has been strengthening relations with non-CRINK countries in recent months. Since August 2025, China has formed or reaffirmed strategic partnerships and relationships with countries and organizations such as the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Japan, South Korea, France, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Canada. In August 2025, China and ASEAN adopted a plan of action for 2026-2030 to implement a **comprehensive strategic partnership**. On October 31, 2025, President Xi Jinping met with Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi and **reaffirmed** the “Mutually Beneficial Relationship Based on Common Strategic Interests” focused on building “constructive and stable Japan-China relations.” Japan-China relations **deteriorated** after Takaichi’s remarks about Taiwan in the National Diet in November 2025 and China’s aggressive reactions, but it is noteworthy that China initially sought good relations with Japan.

In December 2025, Xi met with French President Emmanuel Macron and sought to strengthen trust between the two countries, **stating**, “No matter how the external environment changes, the two sides will always demonstrate both independence and the strategic vision expected of major countries, and understand and support each other on matters involving each other’s core interests and major concerns.” In January 2026, Prime Minister Keir Starmer of the United Kingdom **visited Beijing** and expressed his desire for a “more sophisticated” relationship. South Korean President Lee Jae Myung also visited Beijing in January 2026 and began normalization of the relationship after China used economic coercion when South Korea deployed Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) missiles in 2016. The two countries signed 14 memoranda of understanding on **economic cooperation**. In February 2026, Germany and China **agreed** to work on an “all-around strategic partnership.” That

same month, China and Canada established a **new strategic partnership**, and Canada reaffirmed its long-standing commitment to its One China policy. And in May 2026, President **Donald Trump** met **Xi Jinping** in Beijing, and they agreed that the two countries should build a “constructive relationship of strategic stability.”

Japan's Perception of CRINK

Japan's threat perception centers on the dangers of a physical attack against Japan. This is reinforced by its exclusively defense-oriented policy (*Senshu Boei*), which follows from Article 9 of Japan's constitution and was the centerpiece of Japanese defense policy for decades. This means there is a strong emphasis on territorial and homeland defense. Japan's decision in 2022 to develop counterstrike capabilities and thereby strengthen deterrence against regional threats was also to strengthen homeland defense. Japan has been sensitive to the balance of power and threats in geographical proximity to the homeland. Second to this territorial security, the safety of Japan's shipping lanes is a vital national interest as an island nation. Differences in political systems (democracy versus autocracy) have not been a strong source of threat perception in Japan.

Iran is not Japan's traditional adversary. Over the years, Japan sought to maintain good relations with Iran, an important oil supplier, and Iran has been friendly to Japan. In 2018 Japan imported about **5 percent** of its crude oil from Iran. Since the U.S. sanction in 2019, Japan has not imported any oil from Iran. Japan depends on the Middle East for about **95 percent** of its oil, so the safe passage of the Strait of Hormuz is of critical importance.

Few security elites in Japan see CRINK as one group. Commentaries in **Japan** on the subject are mostly about U.S. views of CRINK. Some **studies** have examined the potential cooperation among China, Russia, and North Korea but remain skeptical about coordination among CRINK countries and CRINK's utility for China. As mentioned, autocratic governance alone was traditionally not considered a threat. However, since 2005, the Japanese government has emphasized value-based diplomacy. Concepts like the **Arc of Freedom and Prosperity** and **Free and Open Indo-Pacific** have become important pillars of Japanese diplomacy. Starting in 2013, the Japanese government began to frequently use the phrase “no unilateral change to the status quo by use or threat of force.” This concept encompasses the problems in the East and South China Seas, Ukraine, and Taiwan and has led to a growing debate since 2022 about whether Europe and Asia are one theater.

Japan opposes actions by authoritarian regimes that seek unilateral changes to the status quo but does not oppose the regimes themselves. An example of this is Japan's strategy toward Russia before the Ukraine war in February 2022. The Japanese government had been seeking to increase cooperation with Russia. Prime Minister Shinzo Abe met with President Putin **27 times**. Abe flew to Russia in February 2014 to attend the Opening Ceremony of the **Sochi Winter Olympic Games**, when President Barack Obama and leaders of the United Kingdom, Germany, and France were absent in opposition to Russia's human rights violations. Abe invited **Putin to Japan** in 2016. One of the objectives for Japan was to improve relations with Russia and prevent the deepening of China-Russia cooperation. This attempt ended with Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

To the extent that the Japanese government is concerned about CRINK countries individually, it sees China as its primary threat, followed by North Korea, Russia, and then Iran. In 2022, Japan identified

China as its most consequential threat. Its **2025 Defense White Paper** identifies China as a “serious concern” that presents “an unprecedented . . . strategic challenge [to] which Japan should respond with its comprehensive national power.” The changing balance of power in the Western Pacific, and the growing missile threats to Japan’s bases, both qualitatively and quantitatively, contributed to this assessment. Japan perceives China as having aggressive intentions targeting Japan. Many Japanese security elites think China is willing to pay the cost to hurt Japan. The leverage Japan had over China in the past has decreased since China surpassed Japan as an economic power, and Japan has fewer viable means to shape China’s behavior.

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Japanese security elites and the public are also increasingly concerned about a possible **Taiwan contingency** and its impacts on Japan. A Kyodo News public opinion survey in March 2023 found that 89 percent of respondents were concerned about a Taiwan contingency. Even without Japan’s direct involvement, a Taiwan conflict would cause great damage to regional security and the global economy. As U.S. treaty allies, Japan and South Korea face a similar risk of entrapment in the Taiwan contingency. With the increase in China’s missile capabilities, U.S. bases in Japan could be under threat. The proximity of Taiwan to Japan increases the perceived threat. **Shinzo Abe**, after his resignation as prime minister, said in December 2021 that a **Taiwan contingency is a Japanese contingency**. There is also some **concern** about the possibility of Russian and North Korean support in a Taiwan contingency and whether China hopes for Russian support.

Multiple Conflicts in the Indo-Pacific?

One of the concerns for Japanese security elites is the possibility of multiple conflicts in the region. From the above analysis, it seems unlikely that China sees CRINK as a group and does not expect the military support of CRINK countries in a coordinated action. Another reason China may not seek assistance from these other powers in a Taiwan contingency is because China sees Taiwan as a domestic problem. China may prefer not to involve other countries as it may delegitimize China’s claim that Taiwan is a domestic problem, and thus other countries should not interfere in the matter.

Opportunistic action, however, is more likely. As the 2026 U.S. **National Defense Strategy** notes, there is a “possibility that one or more potential opponents might act together in a coordinated or opportunistic fashion across multiple theaters.” One possibility is for an extraregional conflict to open a window of opportunity for a Taiwan contingency. A second is for a conflict on the Korean Peninsula to lead to a Taiwan contingency. A third is for a Taiwan contingency to lead to a conflict on the Korean Peninsula. China assesses that the chances of **U.S. intervention** in a Taiwan contingency are high. Although the possibility of a Taiwan contingency is still low, miscalculation could occur if the United States is seen to be tied down in other conflicts. China may assess that its chances of victory would

increase if U.S. forces are occupied elsewhere. There is a precedent. In June 1950, when the Korean War broke out, China had a plan to **attack Taiwan**. President Harry Truman sent the Seventh Fleet to Taiwan to prevent the invasion. The situation today is very different from the 1950s, but there is a possibility.

Security specialists in South Korea are worried about the opposite scenario of North Korea taking advantage of a Taiwan contingency. For some time, they sought to avoid **entanglement** in a potential Taiwan conflict. More recently, they have been concerned that United States Forces Korea (USFK) may be deployed in a Taiwan conflict, leaving **a void on the Korean Peninsula**. This could weaken deterrence against North Korea.

The coordination of countries in CRINK is still in the making and does not exist currently. However, opportunistic aggression cannot be ruled out and has become a source of concern for Japanese and U.S. security elites. The wars in Ukraine and Iran have shown the challenges that multiple conflicts can cause, as will be examined in the next section.

Lessons for the Indo-Pacific from the Iran War

There are several important takeaways from the war in Iran for Japan and the United States to consider when preparing for future conflicts. First, the biggest concern for many Indo-Pacific countries is the disruption of shipping traffic and supplies. Japan has already been strongly affected by such disruptions since the start of the conflict. The Indo-Pacific is a maritime theater, and such disruption could occur due to conflicts in the South China Sea, East China Sea, and Taiwan.

Second, there is concern about the potential relocation of U.S. forces and weapons from the Indo-Pacific theater to the Middle East. Radar components and munitions have already been sent from USFK to the Middle East. When there was a media report that the Pentagon was moving parts of the THAAD system from South Korea to the Middle East, President Lee Jae Myung **objected** to the move because it could weaken deterrence against North Korea. Commander of the USFK Army General Xavier Brunson testified in the Senate that **THAAD never left Korea**. Further, 2,500 Marines and three warships were deployed to the Middle East from the region. The **31st Marine Expeditionary Unit** and amphibious warship USS *Tripoli* were sent from United States Forces Japan to the Middle East. Marine Commandant General Eric Smith **testified** before the House Armed Services Committee that the gap in the Marine Corps' ability to deter adversaries in the Indo-Pacific remains unfilled. This prompted concerns in Japan among the public and lawmakers. The Pentagon argues that the deployment will give the forces valuable combat experience that adversaries cannot gain, but concerns exist among the regional powers as to whether there is sufficient force to deter potential adversaries in the region.

A third concern is related to the depletion of interceptors and drones. In the 39 days of the air and missile campaign against Iran, the United States is estimated to have used about half of its key **munitions**. More than half may have been used for **interceptor missiles** like THAAD, Patriot, and SM-3. There have been **reports** that the U.S. government informed Japan of delays of up to four years in Tomahawk missile deliveries due to the use of such munitions in the Iran war. Defense Minister Shinjiro **Koizumi** did not confirm the report but emphasized the need to increase domestic production to avoid risks of depending on foreign supplies.

The source of the problem is limited production capacity and asymmetry in the offense-defense balance in terms of cost. Put simply, it is a competition between cheap drones and expensive interceptors.

Japan **bought** 400 Tomahawk missiles from the United States to develop its counterstrike capabilities. The Tomahawks will be the main component of Japan's strike force. Japan's initial plan was to buy 400 Block V Tomahawks starting delivery in 2026. In October 2023, the Japanese government changed the plan to buy 200 Block IV and 200 Block V Tomahawks to achieve an early delivery starting in 2025. The delay in the delivery impedes Japan's plans to rapidly strengthen deterrence.

The source of the problem is limited production capacity and asymmetry in the offense-defense balance in terms of cost. Put simply, it is a competition between cheap drones and expensive interceptors. According to **one estimate**, 1900 to 3000 interceptors, Patriot and THAAD, were used in less than two weeks during the Iran war. The U.S. production capacity of **Patriot Advanced Capability** missile interceptors is 600 per year or 50 per month, and the production cost is about 4 million dollars per Patriot. In contrast, China dominates production of drones. One company alone, SZ DJI Technology, is reported to have more than **70 percent** of the world market share of civilian drones. Drones are much cheaper and easier to make than interceptors. The gap in the offense-defense balance is expected to be greater in a war of attrition. Potential conflicts in the Indo-Pacific may require compellence (i.e., coercion) to restore the status quo. In general, compellence is harder than deterrence or defense. Wars of compellence can take longer to achieve their objective, and success often relies on the future prospects of continued use of force. This means that without a sizable stockpile of munitions, compellence is difficult to achieve.

The United States and Japan are aware of this problem and are cooperating to solve it. Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth met with Minister Koizumi in Singapore on May 30, 2026, and agreed to cooperate on missile production. Koizumi proposed **Operation Supercharge**, an initiative to accelerate codevelopment and coproduction of missiles such as SM-3 Block IIA and AMRAAM. The U.S. government has also launched a plan to seek **drone dominance**. China's rapid production of drones and the dependence on China for drones are posing new challenges to the United States and its allies.

Implications for the United States and Japan

This report has argued that cooperation among CRINK states is still in the making and that the limited and indirect support China gives to these countries suggests that China is not willing to cultivate a CRINK coalition as a strategic asset. This has several implications for the United States and Japan.

First, the United States and Japan are important partners for China and therefore have opportunities to promote stability. China's most important bilateral relationship is with the United States. In May 2026, President Trump visited Beijing, where he and President Xi agreed to **build** a "constructive relationship of strategic stability on the basis of fairness and reciprocity." As long as China's relationship with the United States is stable, there is less need for China to cultivate its cooperation with CRINK countries, but a deterioration in U.S.-China relations could prompt China to seek closer relations within CRINK.

Similarly, improving the Japan-China bilateral relationship is key to maintaining stability, though Japan-China relations have soured since November 2025 and show little prospect of improvement. China's policy seems to single out and target Japan. China has been criticizing Japan's defense policies in bilateral summit meetings with other leaders and in multilateral settings with references to Japan's "neo-militarism." Defense Minister Koizumi **refuted such a claim** at the Shangri-La Dialogue in May 2026. The Japanese government has publicly expressed interest in dialogue with China, but China is unwilling to meet, **claiming that** Japan's gesture "shows no sincerity at all." However, following the above logic, negative relations with Japan will drive China to further seek closer cooperation within CRINK.

[CRINK] does not exist yet as a strategic coalition. Treating it as one could drive the four countries toward closer and more coordinated cooperation. Instead, the United States and Japan should have a joint strategy for each country.

Second, aside from managing their relationships with China bilaterally to foster stability, the United States and Japan should avoid treating CRINK as one group. The group does not exist yet as a strategic coalition. Treating it as one could drive the four countries toward closer and more coordinated cooperation. Instead, the United States and Japan should have a joint strategy for each country. Each strategy should be based on each individual country's interests and circumstances. The United States and Japan should prepare for possible multiple conflicts in the Indo-Pacific without provoking China, Russia, or North Korea.

Third, the United States and Japan should revisit Japan's past China strategy, a **liberal deterrence** strategy that combines elements of military deterrence and economic engagement. The strategy seeks to increase the cost of aggression by increasing the opportunity cost of reneging. The engagement part of the strategy has been more recently discredited, or almost abandoned, based on the perception that it is no longer viable to shape China's choices. China still benefits greatly from economic relations with advanced economies, including Japan and the United States. Revitalization of the liberal deterrence strategy is needed even as Japan and the United States put efforts into creating more resilient and stable supply chains.

Fourth, the United States and Japan should be mindful that the current situation is quite volatile and requires extra efforts to avoid miscalculations and misreading of intent. With the introduction of drones on the battlefield, the offense-defense balance is seen to favor the offense. The military use of artificial intelligence will speed up war decisions and may force states to jump the gun. The competition between the United States and China will make political concessions harder. Based on theories of international relations, these conditions suggest that the likelihood of war is higher than usual and thus demand greater efforts to prevent it.

Fifth, the United States and Japan should set strategic priorities and focus on the long-term picture. The United States is the most important country for Japan bar none; a strong relationship with the United

States is the means and ends of Japan's foreign policy. Therefore, the two countries, together with other allies and partners, should decide on clear strategic priorities. The United States and its allies are in a strategic competition with China, but the strategic goal of this competition should be clear: What kind of a region and a world do we want to achieve?

Detering wars is important, but it cannot be the strategic goal. It is a minimum requirement. Neither the United States, Japan, nor China seem to have a long-term strategy for how they want to live together after the competition is over. Similarly, many countries have made efforts to increase resilience to economic coercion by increasing domestic production and cultivating new supply chains, but it is not clear what they believe the optimal state of international trade should be in the long run. The **United States** and **Japan** seek to create and maintain a free and open Indo-Pacific. This is a lofty objective that should be pursued, and it will require a well-calibrated, long-term strategy to incorporate China in the region. ■

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This report is made possible with support from the government of Japan. In addition, the author's research was supported in part by a grant from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (KAKENHI grant number JP23K01292).

This report is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

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