

# China–Russia–North Korea Solidarity Poses Risk to the U.S. and Its Allies

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

Russia's invasion of Ukraine led to international condemnation and sanctions, but China and North Korea responded with diplomatic, economic, and military support.

Russian, Chinese, and North Korean threatening behavior triggered a resurgence in U.S., South Korean, and Japanese security cooperation.

Indo-Pacific and European nations should enhance their security defenses and reduce their energy and financial reliance on Russia and China.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 caused Moscow to be condemned, punished, and shunned by other nations, but China and North Korea responded with a surge in support for Russia's heinous actions. Misery loves company and serves as a strong incentive to enhance economic, diplomatic, and security ties, particularly as each country suffers greater isolation.

Beijing and Pyongyang differed in their support, but both benefitted from their engagement with their increasingly isolated and beleaguered Russian partner. All three nations share perceived grievances against the United States as well as the deleterious effects of international sanctions. The three nations' finding greater common cause with each other is deeply troubling to the United States and its like-minded allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3823>

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The China–North Korea–Russia relationship appears to be a series of mutually beneficial *bilateral* transactions rather than a solid *trilateral* partnership or alliance. Russian President Vladimir Putin vows to stay the course of Moscow’s brutal invasion of Ukraine, sustained to some degree by North Korean munitions support.

Beijing seeks to dominate the Indo-Pacific through a rapid, massive military buildup and a strategy of intimidation in the East and South China Seas. Fears of a Chinese attack on Taiwan have skyrocketed as Chinese foreign policy has assumed a more assertive and nationalist character and its military has acquired capabilities for an amphibious assault and denial of outside access to the Taiwan Strait.

Yet China is suffering escalating economic problems as well as greater international pushback against its predatory business practices. China’s trading partners are increasingly trying to distance themselves by forging new partnerships among themselves to secure alternative supply sources and reduce their vulnerability to Beijing’s weaponization of trade.

North Korea continues to threaten the United States and its allies by relentlessly expanding and improving its nuclear and missile forces. Pyongyang has gained more swagger in its step by parlaying its huge stocks of old artillery ammunition into Russian economic and potentially military payoffs but remains an economic basket case.

Despite the depressing deterioration in the Indo-Pacific security environment, however, there is also great reason for hope. The threatening actions of Russia, China, and North Korea led to an epiphany for the Indo-Pacific nations, causing them to recognize the need for enhanced security steps and greater collaboration to defend themselves. To paraphrase Charles Dickens’ *A Tale of Two Cities*, it has been the worst of times but has also been the best of times in responding to them.

## Growing Chinese–Russian Solidarity

China and Russia have a long history of rivalry, distrust, and conflict—but also of cooperation. The recent solidification in bilateral relations began in part as a response to the strong international condemnation of Russia’s invasion of Crimea in 2014 and subsequent invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

China did not formally recognize Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian land, but it also refrained from criticizing or sanctioning Russia. Moscow relied on China’s increasing bilateral trade to offset the impact of international sanctions, departure of foreign business partners, and freezing of Russian financial assets. China’s economic lifeline enabled Russia to mitigate the

impact of international punitive measures. Russia is now very much the junior partner, more isolated from the international community and weaker than China economically, diplomatically, and militarily.

Beijing and Moscow now have strong diplomatic, economic, and military ties. Putin described Chinese–Russian relations as at their “highest point in history,”<sup>1</sup> and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov praised China as a “true strategic partner and like-minded friend.”<sup>2</sup> Chinese Communist Party General Secretary Xi Jinping characterized the relationship as “mature and resilient” and referred to Putin as his “best, most intimate friend.”<sup>3</sup> The two leaders have met with each other more than 40 times since 2012.<sup>4</sup> During their February 2022 summit, Xi and Putin declared that bilateral relations “are superior to political and military alliances of the Cold War era,” the “[f]riendship between the two States has no limits,” and “there are no forbidden areas of cooperation.”<sup>5</sup>

**Increasing Military Cooperation.** Despite Putin’s and Xi’s laudatory descriptions, the “no limits” bilateral relationship is not a formal alliance, and the two countries do not have a mutual defense commitment to respond militarily if one or the other is attacked by a third party. China eschews military alliances, instead emphasizing its “independent foreign policy of peace” under which, it claims, it “does not enter into alliances with big powers or groups of countries, nor does it join military blocs, participate in the arms race or engage in military expansion.”<sup>6</sup>

Neither country would provide extensive military assistance or armed forces to the other’s military initiatives in their respective spheres of influence. China has not given direct military aid to Russia for its invasion of Ukraine, instead providing only limited transfers of dual-use equipment in stark contrast to North Korea’s sending of massive amounts of munitions.

Instead, China and Russia have a mutually beneficial marriage of convenience based on a converging alignment of strategic interests and objectives. It is a partnership of interconnected independence. That said, China and Russia have forged stronger military cooperation during the past decade, including an increasing number of exercises of greater size, complexity, and range of scenarios and in more geographic regions. The exercises have improved the proficiency of both forces by exposing them to novel tactics, techniques, and procedures; encouraged arms sales and defense industry collaboration; and provided a means of signaling the U.S. or its allies.<sup>7</sup> Joint naval exercises and air patrols with bombers have been meant to intimidate the United States, Japan, and South Korea.

In 2021, Russia and China signed a Road Map for Military Cooperation to enhance military ties and augment strategic military exercises and joint

patrols of warplanes and naval ships from 2021–2025.<sup>8</sup> In an April 2023 meeting with Putin, Chinese Defense Minister Li Shangfu commented that China was willing to “further enhance strategic communication between the two militaries, strengthen multilateral coordination and cooperation, and make new contributions to maintaining world and regional security and stability.” Li also boasted that the bilateral military and political ties “outperformed” Cold War–era unions.”<sup>9</sup>

However, the Chinese–Russian military exercises displayed parallel military operations rather than indications of intent or ability to conduct combined military campaigns. The drills did not include the unified operations or command structure that would be required for integrated military operations, in sharp contrast with the increasingly interoperable capabilities of the United States with allies South Korea and Japan. It is therefore more likely that China and Russia would engage in separate military campaigns, perhaps each in its own zone of influence, rather than collective security across regions.

**Escalating Economic Ties.** Hit with strong sanctions, departure of foreign business partners, and freezing of Russian funds overseas after its 2014 and 2022 invasions of Ukraine, Russia turned to China for economic help. Bilateral trade expanded, giving Moscow an alternative supplier of goods, equipment, and technologies as well as an export market for its vast resources of oil and natural gas.

In 2023, China–Russia trade reached a record high of more than \$240 billion, an increase of 26 percent from the previous year. The trade volume surpassed a goal set in 2019 of reaching \$200 billion in annual trade by the end of 2024.<sup>10</sup> Russian Deputy Prime Minister Andrei Belusov stated that 95 percent of bilateral trade in 2023 used the Russian ruble and Chinese yuan.<sup>11</sup> Using alternative currency instead of dollar-denominated transactions enables circumvention of the SWIFT (Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications) international bank messaging system.

Russian energy resources play a key role in fulfilling China’s voracious energy needs. In 2023, Russia surpassed Saudi Arabia to become China’s largest oil supplier. The volume of Russian crude exported to China increased to 107 million metric tons, a 24 percent increase from 2022. Russia now accounts for 19 percent of China’s oil imports, and Saudi Arabia now accounts for 15 percent.<sup>12</sup>

Beijing was able to purchase the Russian oil at discounted prices as Moscow sought alternative buyers because of international sanctions imposed after its invasion of Ukraine. China purchased \$60 billion worth of Russian crude oil at a price of \$566 per metric ton—10 percent less than the price of Saudi crude oil.

China, as the world's second largest economy, is far more important to Russia than Russia is to China. China is Russia's largest trading partner, but Russia is only China's 16th largest trading partner. Trade with China is 18 percent of Russia's total trade, but trade with Russia is only 2 percent of China's total trade.<sup>13</sup>

**Further Expansion Expected.** Bilateral trade will likely continue to grow. In 2022, Russian energy supplier Gazprom signed a natural gas deal to provide an additional 10 billion cubic meters (bcm), making it possible for Russia to export as much as 48 bcm to China. Russia is also building pipeline networks from Siberia through Mongolia to China that would be able to supply an additional 50 bcm of natural gas, doubling Russia's export capacity to China.<sup>14</sup>

Russian agricultural products, the second largest category of exports to China after energy, will also continue to rise. During the first 10 months of 2023, Russian agricultural deliveries to China increased by 63 percent to \$6.2 billion.<sup>15</sup>

**Factors Driving China and Russia Together.** In addition to mutual economic and security interests, China and Russia are united in their sense of grievance and humiliation for their perceived treatment by the United States and its partners. They share antipathy toward the U.S. and the existing U.S.-led post-World War II system of liberal democracy. In their 2022 summit, Putin and Xi criticized “[c]ertain States attempts to impose their own ‘democratic standards’ on other countries, to monopolize the right to assess the level of compliance with democratic criteria, [and] to draw dividing lines based on the grounds of ideology, including by establishing exclusive blocs and alliances of convenience.”<sup>16</sup>

Each country has tacitly supported the other's justifications of domestic authoritarianism and expansionist claims of territorial sovereignty. China did not criticize Russia's invasion of Ukraine and declared that because of Moscow's “legitimate security concerns,” it opposed the further enlargement of NATO. In return, Russia supported China's brutal crackdown in Hong Kong<sup>17</sup> and was not critical of Chinese actions in Xinjiang. Putin affirmed Russia's “support for the One-China principle and confirmed that Taiwan is an inalienable part of China. Russia aligned itself with China's opposition to “closed bloc structures and opposing camps in the Asia-Pacific region” such as the Australia, U.S., and United Kingdom (AUKUS) security relationship, and both countries jointly warned of the negative impact of the U.S. Indo-Pacific strategy on peace and stability in the region.<sup>18</sup>

China and Russia seek to disrupt and alter the existing order, which both feel constrains their objectives. Beijing and Moscow use their authority in the U.N. Security Council to impede international actions that are counter to their objectives, including being more obstructionist against any additional U.N. punishment of North Korea for its repeated violations of U.N. resolutions.

**Factors Driving Them Apart.** China and Russia currently are strategically aligned, but they may have diverging interests in the future, especially if Beijing's support of Moscow's actions leads to international actions against Chinese banks and businesses.

While Russia seems determined to blow up its relations with the U.S. and the European Union, China strives to continue its economic trade and diplomatic engagement both to overcome its growing economic problems at home and to expand its influence overseas. In the end, Beijing's support of the Russian invasion of Ukraine could strain relations with China's trading partners, cause secondary sanctions to be imposed on Chinese banks and businesses, and undermine the regime's attempts to divide its Western opponents.

As the second largest global economy, China has a greater long-term incentive to improve relations with the strong trading partners than it has to align itself with a steadily plummeting Russian economy. China's decision not to provide weapons to Russia may be due partly to a desire to maintain economic relations with the U.S., the European Union, and other trading partners. Beijing remains dependent on engagement with the global economy, and Washington has emphasized that Chinese weapons sales to Russia would be a catalyst for strong international action against China.<sup>19</sup> China's slowing economy and high unemployment make it more vulnerable to punitive measures.

Russia's increasing international isolation and volatile foreign policy decisions will make it an increasingly less valuable partner for China. Beijing would see little benefit to establishing a more formal trilateral alliance because being too closely linked to Russian and North Korean provocative behavior could trigger secondary sanctions against China.

The European Union is reportedly considering sanctioning several Chinese companies for supporting the Russian military. Despite Chinese objections to international sanctions, some Chinese banks have either ceased operations or tightened regulations around transactions with Russia.<sup>20</sup> Some members of the U.S. Congress have commented that they are also considering imposing sanctions on Chinese companies that are deemed to be assisting Russian military actions in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup>



## Resumption of Russian–North Korean Engagement

Russia’s invasion of Ukraine led to a resurgence of ties between Moscow and Pyongyang that had largely languished after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In July 2022, North Korea supported Russia’s invasion of Ukraine by diplomatically recognizing the “independence” of the Russian-backed separatist regions of Donetsk and Luhansk in the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine.<sup>22</sup>

In September 2022, the U.S. announced that North Korea had sold “millions of artillery shells and rockets” to Russia.<sup>23</sup> However, exports of that quantity were unlikely to have taken place because no shipments had yet been observed on commercial satellite imagery. Washington subsequently confirmed that North Korea had completed an arms delivery, which included the delivery of rockets and missiles, to the Wagner Group in November 2022 for use in Ukraine.<sup>24</sup>

In July 2023, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu traveled to North Korea in the first visit by a Russian defense minister since 1991. North Korean leader Kim Jong-un escorted Shoigu to an exhibition of North Korean weapons systems. Shoigu asked Pyongyang to sell more artillery ammunition to Russia.<sup>25</sup> The following month, Washington warned that North Korea and Russia were “actively advancing” negotiations for a new arms deal following an exchange of letters by the two leaders “pledging to increase their bilateral cooperation.”<sup>26</sup>

Ongoing statements by U.S. and South Korean officials reflected growing estimates of the amount of North Korean munitions provided to Russia. By December 2023, South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik said North Korea had sent around 5,000 containers to Russia that could accommodate 2.3 million rounds of 152 mm artillery shells. Pyongyang had also sent tens of missiles—most likely the KN-23 tactical guided missile and KN-25 600 mm multiple rocket system—to Russia.<sup>27</sup>

However, there are questions about the ammunition’s reliability. During its 2010 attack on South Korea’s Yeonpyeong Island, North Korea fired 170 artillery shells, but only 80 hit the island, and 20 of them were duds.<sup>28</sup> Both Russian and Ukrainian soldiers have commented on the inferior quality of North Korean munitions provided to Russian forces. North Korean shells suffered from unreliability and inaccuracy due to poor quality control that included having varying amounts of powder in the shells. Some shells have exploded in the barrel, damaging or destroying the weapons and injuring Russian soldiers.<sup>29</sup> Inaccurate shells mean that more ammunition must be expended to achieve a mission, which in turn means greater wear on gun tubes and greater exposure to counter-battery fire.

**Details of Russian Payment Uncertain.** Kim Jong-un's September 2023 trip to Russia and summit meeting with Putin was a breakthrough in bilateral relations and confirmed the growing military and diplomatic entente between the two countries. Kim doubled down on his support for Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, depicting it as a fight to "punish the evil forces that ambitiously pursue hegemony and expansion."<sup>30</sup> In January 2024, the North Korean Foreign Ministry announced that the two countries had agreed to further strategic and tactical cooperation to defend their core interests and establish a "new multi-polarized international order."<sup>31</sup> However, neither North Korea nor Russia has revealed the details of the mutual agreement.

During an October 2023 trip to Pyongyang, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov pledged that the two sides would "significantly increase trade and economic exchanges."<sup>32</sup> Moscow could provide financial, economic, or energy benefits, including by allowing more North Korean workers to live in Russia and gain wages on behalf of the Kim regime, but any increase in economic engagement would start from a very low base. Moscow wants to increase trade with North Korea in order to reach the 2006 level of \$230 million annually.<sup>33</sup>

Putin has hinted that Russia would provide military and technological support to North Korea. Some experts speculate that Russia might provide the crown jewels of cutting-edge military technology, such as designs for nuclear warheads, reentry vehicles, or assistance on intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), but that appears to be too high a price for old, unreliable North Korean artillery ammunition, particularly as Russia ramps up its own production capability. Pyongyang has not provided and could not provide any weapons or technology that are better than Russia can produce itself.

Instead, Russia may provide technology for military reconnaissance satellites, advanced conventional weapon designs, or assistance in improving aircraft or naval weapons production. Russia is unlikely to provide weapons to North Korea when it has such a desperate need for them in Ukraine. In October 2023, White House spokesperson John Kirby commented that the U.S. assessed that Pyongyang was seeking Russian military assistance on "fighter aircraft, surface-to-air missiles, armored vehicles, ballistic missile production equipment or other materials and other advanced technologies."<sup>34</sup>

Strengthened military ties between the two despotic regimes will pose significant challenges to U.S. strategic interests in Europe and Asia. North Korean munitions enable Moscow to continue its aggression



against Ukraine. If Russia remains desperate for North Korean munitions, Moscow may eventually be willing to provide more sensitive technology, including for Pyongyang's nuclear or missile programs. Any improvement in North Korean military capabilities is worrisome because it increases the threat to the United States and its South Korean and Japanese allies.

**Successful Launch of North Korean Satellite.** In November 2023, Pyongyang successfully launched its first military reconnaissance satellite after two previous failures. North Korea had developed a robust missile arsenal but had lacked a remote intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capability to identify, track, and attack U.S., South Korean, and Japanese military targets. The satellite's capabilities are unknown, but it is speculated that it has a three-meter resolution. While rudimentary compared to Western classified or even commercial electro-optical satellite imagery, it could provide targeting as well as indications and warning capabilities.

One reconnaissance satellite would have limited military utility. However, North Korea vowed to launch several additional reconnaissance satellites "in a short span of time."<sup>35</sup> Kim has underscored the importance of having "several reconnaissance satellites on different orbits [for] securing real-time information about the hostile forces' military scenario and moves."<sup>36</sup> In December 2023, he declared that North Korea would launch three additional reconnaissance satellites in 2024.<sup>37</sup>

Kim had declared the regime's intention to develop a military reconnaissance satellite in his January 2021 directive to the regime's defense industry. Other delineated military projects included a solid-fuel ICBM, tactical nuclear warheads, hypersonic gliding flight warheads, and a nuclear-powered submarine.<sup>38</sup>

**Did Russia Help North Korean Satellite Program?** It is possible that Russia provided technology to improve North Korea's satellite launch capabilities in return for Pyongyang's shipments of massive amounts of artillery ammunition to Moscow. During Kim's visit to the Vostochny Cosmodrome in Russia, reporters asked Putin whether Moscow would help the North Korean leader to build satellites, and Putin replied, "That's why we came here. [Kim] shows great interest in rocket engineering."<sup>39</sup>

Secretary of State Antony Blinken has warned that Russia was providing "technology and support" for North Korea's military programs, though without elaborating on details.<sup>40</sup> South Korea's National Intelligence Service assessed that Russia had provided blueprints and data related to the first and second stages of the launch vehicle.<sup>41</sup>

It is more likely, however, that North Korea's long-planned launch occurred too quickly after the Kim–Putin summit to have incorporated new Russian technology. Pyongyang announced that it had developed the satellite and launcher “by its own efforts and technologies.”<sup>42</sup> Pyongyang's initial tests of new missile systems have frequently failed before eventually succeeding. Russia may provide technical assistance to refine the satellite camera's capabilities.

## North Korean–Chinese Economic Relations Slowly Resuming

After years of pandemic isolation, North Korea is gradually reopening its border to trade with China. Bilateral trade in 2021 was \$320 million, down 90 percent from pre-pandemic levels.<sup>43</sup> In 2023, North Korean trade with China increased to \$2.3 billion, rebounding to 82 percent of its 2019 pre-Covid level.<sup>44</sup>

Despite imports from China, North Korea's food crisis remains grim. North Korean internal food prices have stabilized to some degree, but there have been reports of widespread famine and deaths from starvation.<sup>45</sup> Despite the dire food situation, North Korea has rejected offers of food from Russia, South Korea, and the United States.

While North Korea's relationship with Russia has provided significant benefits, China remains Pyongyang's priority economic partner. Senior-level North Korean–Chinese meetings in December 2023 may presage a further increase in trade and bilateral relations during 2024, which is the 75th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic ties. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi has vowed to ramp up comprehensive cooperation with North Korea, to include the holding of multiple events to celebrate the anniversary. There is speculation that the first Kim–Xi summit since June 2019 might be held.<sup>46</sup>

## Threatening Actions Trigger Strong Allied Response

Russia's aggressive actions and China's and North Korea's rapidly escalating military capabilities and threatening behavior have triggered strong global responses. In the Indo-Pacific, the United States had long urged Japan and South Korea to resolve or sufficiently downplay sensitive historical issues to enable prioritization of the current millennium's threats and challenges.

**Resurrecting Trilateral Cooperation.** The election of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol in 2022 was the most significant catalyst for rapid

rapprochement between Seoul and Tokyo, which in turn enabled greater direct trilateral security cooperation with the United States. In March 2023, Yoon undertook a bold move to resolve the lingering dispute with Japan regarding compensation for South Koreans who had been forced to labor for Japanese companies during the 1910–1945 occupation. His willingness to endure vociferous domestic criticism to forge coordinated policies with Tokyo with a view to meeting common threats was commendable.

Trilateral meetings blossomed among security and foreign policy officials, and the three countries resumed military exercises in 2022 after a five-year hiatus. In December 2022, South Korea and Japan published national security documents that closely mirrored those of the United States, setting the stage for greater policy alignment and cooperation.

**Japan's Defense Transformation.** In December 2022, after decades of sluggish decision-making and resistance to expanding its military missions, Japan announced sweeping reforms in its national security strategy and defense posture. The scope of the proposed changes is stunning and is consistent with long-standing U.S. requests and security objectives.

The biggest catalyst for the sea change in Japanese defense policy was Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine, which led the Japanese public to abandon its long-standing pacifist resistance to expanding the role of Japan's Self-Defense Forces. Now realizing that the world does not exist in a post-war era and that similar Chinese action against Taiwan had become far more tenable, Japanese public opinion surged in favor of a stronger defense posture.

**Camp David Summit Success.** The August 2023 U.S.–Japan–South Korea Camp David summit achieved unprecedented progress on solidifying trilateral policy coordination. The three leaders agreed to a structured multiyear plan of annual, named, large-scale multidomain combined military exercises near the Korean Peninsula.

The leaders also committed to greater intelligence sharing; greater cooperation to combat Pyongyang's cyberthreats, through which North Korea funds its prohibited arsenals; and operationalization of the earlier commitment on real-time exchange of North Korean missile launch data. The leaders' commitment to consulting and coordinating responses to common security threats was a major step forward in trilateral military cooperation but stopped far short of formal alliance.

The multifaceted China threat received only a cursory mention in one of the three Camp David documents and was limited to a reference to the Chinese navy's recent confrontation with the Philippines. This may have been in deference to Seoul's reluctance, even during the Yoon administration, to criticize Beijing directly for its transgressions.

Nevertheless, China is clearly an underlying current driving recent trilateral discussions and documents. Though typically limited to generic public expressions of concern about “unilateral attempts to change the status quo” in the Taiwan Strait or South China Sea, the allies have engaged in more extensive discussions and planning to address Chinese security and economic challenges.

A senior South Korean official depicted the summit as establishing a “key framework” for a Northeast Asia security cooperative body that in turn will strengthen policy coordination with Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Pacific Island countries.<sup>47</sup> The leaders pledged to develop a maritime security mechanism to synchronize trilateral capacity building in southeast Asia and Pacific Island nations.

But concerns about whether the progress is sustainable past 2024 elections in South Korea and the United States, as well as about periodic flareups in South Korean nationalism over historic and sovereignty disputes with Japan, persist. Supporters of the trilateral partnership hope the stars remain in alignment long enough for advancement to become self-sustaining regardless of political leadership.

## How Washington Can Lead the Response

Washington and its allies have limited options for directly curtailing growing relations among China, North Korea, and China. It is impossible to prevent North Korean shipments of munitions to Russia by rail. Nor does the Proliferation Security Initiative provide any authority for intercepting shipments on the high seas. Similarly, all U.N. resolutions imposed on North Korea were passed with U.N. Charter Article 41 authority, which does not authorize maritime interception. Nor do the shipments transit a third-party port or airfield or utilize foreign-flagged vessels, which could provide a legal basis for intervention.

However, there are several steps the U.S. can take in coordination with Japan and South Korea.

- **Affirm America’s commitment to defend its allies.** The U.S. should make absolutely clear to friend and foe alike that it will defend its allies by continually reaffirming its extended deterrence guarantee to use all necessary force, potentially up to and including nuclear weapons, in response to a North Korean attack. Washington must maintain the current presidentially and congressionally pledged level of U.S. forces on the Korean Peninsula as well as sufficient forces in

the western Pacific to deter and, if necessary, defeat the Chinese and North Korean threats. Concurrently, the U.S. should work closely with South Korea and Japan to ensure that they are developing and fielding sufficient indigenous military capabilities.

- **Continue U.S. measures to strengthen extended deterrence.**

The credibility of the U.S. extended-deterrence guarantee requires that capabilities are effective, commitment is consistent, and both opponents and allies are convinced of America's resolve. To deter the growing regional threats and reassure America's allies, Washington should maintain the high levels of rotational deployments of strategic assets to the Korean Theater of Operations that have existed since their resumption in 2022 after a four-year hiatus.

The U.S. should also continue efforts with South Korea to implement the April 2023 Washington Declaration on extended deterrence, including the Nuclear Consultative Group to coordinate on nuclear planning, options, contingencies, combined exercises, and development of procedures for including South Korea in crisis decision-making related to the potential use of U.S. nuclear weapons.

- **Augment the scope and frequency of combined U.S., South Korean, and Japanese military exercises.** Having resumed large-scale military exercises in 2022, the three nations should consider a return to pre-2018 training levels as a minimum requirement for future training schedules. Washington should confer with Seoul and Tokyo on a training regimen that includes all military services and goes beyond ballistic missile defense and anti-submarine exercises to include air and ground forces.
- **Enlarge South Korea's and Japan's regional security roles.** Both Seoul and Tokyo pledged to augment their regional security role in security documents released in December 2022. However, none of the documents clearly define new roles and responsibilities. Seoul and Tokyo should define their expanded regional role, which could include increased participation in regional multilateral military training and exercises in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Islands; assisting regional partners' security capacity-building, particularly for maritime domain awareness and security; and protecting freedom of navigation and sea lanes of communication.

Multilateral security initiatives would complement the U.S. “hub and spoke” alliance system to improve coordination and collaboration among partners across the Indo-Pacific. The U.S. concept of “integrated deterrence” is a latticework of strong and mutually reinforcing coalitions and flexible groupings that enables allies and partners to take on regional leadership roles themselves. The strategy strives to foster security ties among countries to deepen interoperability, link defense industrial bases, integrate defense supply chains, co-produce key military technologies, and deploy advanced warfighting capabilities.<sup>48</sup>

- **Diminish the value of Russia as China’s partner.** The international community can best weaken the link between Moscow and Beijing by taking firm action against both. The U.S. must remain militarily strong and agile in both the European and Indo-Pacific theaters, but sufficient deterrence requires greater burden-sharing with European and Indo-Pacific partners. NATO allies tend to lag behind Asian allies in military expenditures and must all achieve the pledge to devote at least 2 percent of gross domestic product (GDP) to defense spending, field effective and credible combat power, and increase their provision of civilian and military aid to Ukraine to combat the Russian invasion.

The Biden Administration should step up its enforcement of U.S. and U.N. sanctions and work systematically with the international community to target North Korean, Russian, and Chinese violators, as well as banks, businesses, and shipping companies that assist illicit actions. While China and Russia will veto approval of any new U.N. resolutions, the United States and partners can more fully implement existing measures, including the extensive sanctions imposed on Russia after its invasion of Ukraine.

The President’s December 22, 2023, Executive Order on “Taking Additional Steps with Respect to the Russian Federation’s Harmful Activities”<sup>49</sup> is a useful new tool to target Russia’s reliance on the international financial system for the procurement of dual-use and other critical items from third countries. The U.S. can impose secondary sanctions, including exclusion from the U.S. financial system, on any financial institution that is supporting Russia’s defense industry.



## Conclusion

China, North Korea, and Russia all pose a significant threat to regional stability, cybersecurity, and the international financial system. For that reason alone, Indo-Pacific and European nations should be enhancing their own defenses as well as coalescing with other allies to develop more effective multilateral responses. The growing solidarity among the three rogue nations only adds impetus to the need for a rapid and coordinated counterstrategy.

A firm military and security response is the most immediate need, but Indo-Pacific and European nations should also accelerate efforts to reduce their energy and financial reliance on Russia and China in order to minimize either nation's ability to coerce and intimidate its trading partners. This requires long-term multilateral efforts to develop alternative suppliers of raw materials and producers of manufactured goods.

The United States does not need to be a part of every multilateral initiative by partners that share its objectives and values, as shown by the newly created Asian-Pacific Four coalition of Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea. Indeed, Washington will be looking to its friends, partners, and allies to assume an increasingly significant role and responsibilities for responding to global challenges.

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