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# Nuclear Cooperation Among U.S. Adversaries Advancing But Still Limited

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Russia is deepening nuclear cooperation with China, but residual mistrust and unaligned interests still limit how far this can translate into deeper military integration.
- Moscow is increasingly weaponizing civilian nuclear energy deals as geopolitical leverage—using its state-run Rosatom and long-term fuel-cycle dependencies to extend influence and Russian soft power across U.S. adversaries and states like India, Turkey and other middle powers.
- China and Russia are strengthening their nuclear cooperation but direct cooperation with Iran or North Korea is unlikely as such transfers would risk blowback and crisis entanglement for both Moscow and Beijing.
- Arms-control erosion, driven by uncertainty over New START, which places ceilings on Russia's and the United States' strategic nuclear forces, renewed United States debate over nuclear testing, and Russian nuclear threats linked to the Ukraine war, has thrust nuclear issues back to the center of strategic competition among U.S. adversaries.[1]
- Even incremental coordination among U.S. adversaries on nuclear issues could complicate escalation dynamics for the U.S. Army, raise their risk tolerance, and shape future multidomain operations conducted under an implicit—or explicit—nuclear shadow.

**CRINK Alliance Project**

*This periodic report assesses the contours of the emerging alliance of the United States' four primary adversaries: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK). Based on open-source research, this 'CRINK Alliance Project' offers analysis of how this axis is disrupting or reshaping the Operational Environment. Its purpose is to help military leaders and policymakers discern whether, how, and when these countries' interests align and diverge; anticipate potential friction points; and seize opportunities to counter their joint efforts to threaten the United States and its interests.*



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## INTRODUCTION

With global energy prices on the rise amid renewed conflict in the Middle East, U.S. adversaries China and Russia are among the nuclear powers looking to modernize their arsenals. These adversaries are also expanding cooperation across nuclear and nuclear-adjacent domains, although each state's national interests impose limits on how far such collaboration can go. China and Russia are leveraging civilian nuclear energy projects, fuel-cycle partnerships and nuclear technology transfers to deepen relationships with their allies and partners, as well as to shape regional security environments, and challenge elements of the U.S.-led international order. These relationships create long-term dependencies that can endure for decades, extending influence well beyond the military domain. Yet even among strategic partners, competing national interests, concerns over proliferation, and differing regional priorities impose limits on how far this collaboration can extend. This increased cooperation all comes against the backdrop of a surge in nuclear rhetoric over Ukraine from the Kremlin, escalating tensions between Brussels and Moscow, and renewed accusations on Russian state-run news of Kyiv developing a "dirty nuclear bomb."[2]

## DESPITE COOPERATION, CHINA CHARTS ITS OWN NUCLEAR PATH

***Nuclear energy and weapon collaboration between China and Russia is accelerating but still governed by China's core interests.*** In November 2025, China and Russia held "department level" consultations in Moscow on "antimissile and strategic missile" collaboration and "strategic risks to global and regional security."[3] The annual Russia-China Energy Business Forum held in November 2025 highlighted bilateral nuclear energy ties."[4] Militarily, new modernized weapons platforms, along with recent air and sea joint exercises with Russia, demonstrate China continues to develop a credible nuclear strategic reach based on the trinity nuclear strike concept—air-, land-, and sea-based nuclear weapon platforms. In a November 2024 air exercise with Russia, China showcased its newly refurbished H-6N bomber—flanked by a Russian fighter escort—with extended range partly due to new refueling technology. The bomber can launch China's nuclear-capable JL-1 hypersonic ballistic missile.[5]

***Increased nuclear cooperation will have strategic deterrence implications for the U.S. military in the Pacific and other theaters.*** Currently China frames its nuclear ambitions and collaboration with Russia as a response to the aggressive policy statements from the United States.[6] While it has not revealed how many nuclear weapons it has, China claims no first use of nuclear weapons.[7] China has also not engaged the United States and Russia in previous nuclear disarmament initiatives.[8] Still, China will likely continue to build up its nuclear capabilities and collaborate with Russia in areas of mutual interest such as the building of the hulls for Russian floating nuclear reactors used in Russia's Arctic waters and elsewhere.[9] China and Russia will continue to share antimissile intelligence and possibly collaborate on the integration of this capability. A Chinese military expert recently noted that "China's antimissile network mainly targets potential attacks from the Pacific while Russia's antimissile systems focus on Europe."[10]

***Chinese nuclear cooperation with North Korea and Iran has not been noteworthy.*** If China wanted these two states to have nuclear weapons technology, it has had decades to have provided critical material support and expertise. It is far more likely that while Beijing may seek greater nuclear assets to gain parity with the United States and Russia, it is less sure that a nuclear North Korea and Iran would increase the presumed stability of mutual deterrence between nuclear states.[11]

## RUSSIA EXPANDS COOPERATION, THOUGH DISTRUST REMAINS

***Russia is expanding nuclear cooperation with China despite lingering distrust between the long-time geostrategic rivals.*** Russian space agency Roscosmos' Telegram posts have discussed plans for Moscow and Beijing to collaborate on placing a nuclear power plant on the moon in a decade, according to data from the China Aerospace Studies Institute, notably in fast-reactor technology, fuel-cycle management, and spent-fuel reprocessing—all areas with latent military relevance.[12] Interestingly, it is one of the few sectors in bilateral relations where Moscow holds the dominant hand. While formally civilian, this cooperation signals growing strategic trust—sorely lacking in the past—as well as greater technological interdependence. Still, most analysts believe the speed of nuclear integration does not match other areas of cooperation, such as early warning systems and missile defense.[13]

***Russia is leveraging nuclear energy cooperation with non-Western states.*** As documented by the Jamestown Foundation, Russian nuclear outreach, largely driven by the state-run energy conglomerate Rosatom, is peaking among non-Western states.[14, 15] Russia increasingly employs nuclear energy cooperation as a tool of soft power, as evidenced by its outreach to members of the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Moscow tends to offer these states reactor construction, fuel supply, training, and long-term servicing packages. This model not only locks partners into decades-long dependency but also enables Moscow to shape norms across the global nuclear order outside Western institutional frameworks. A case in point is Russia's growing tolerance for North Korean nuclear status, blurring the line between civilian nuclear cooperation and strategic alignment across revisionist states.

***Russia is willing to cooperate with Iran and North Korea on nuclear capabilities.*** In September 2025, Rosatom signed a roughly $25 billion deal with Iran to build four third-generation reactors in southern Iran.[16] While framed as civilian, these projects may expand technical expertise, infrastructure, and strategic alignment with a nuclear-threshold state in a volatile theater. Viewed alongside the normalization of Pyongyang's nuclear posture in Russian discourse, a broader pattern emerges: Russia is increasingly willing to tolerate, legitimize, or indirectly shield nuclear-armed or nuclear-aspirant partners. This diffusion of nuclear leverage could complicate extended deterrence, strain nonproliferation efforts, and raise the risk that localized crises involving U.S. adversaries escalate under the shadow of implicit or explicit nuclear backing.



*Figure 1: Novovoronezh Nuclear Power Plant, 27 April 2023 (Source: Ria666aiR, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:*НововоронежскаяАЭС_старые_градирни*.jpg)*




*Figure 2: International Atomic Energy Agency Director General Rafael Mariano Grossi meets envoys from China, Iran, and Russia in Vienna to discuss a joint note on Iran's nuclear program. (Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/iaea_imagebank/54474933006, Attribution: Dean Calma / IAEA, Sharealike 4.0 International)*

## A COMPLICATED NUCLEAR PICTURE IN IRAN

***Since the advent of Operation EPIC FURY in February 2026, Iran's nuclear program remains in flux given the turnover of power within the Iranian regime.*** Both China and Russia have condemned the attacks but have stopped short of directly providing the regime with material or military support. After the 12-Day War in June 2025, Iran and Russia signed a series of cooperation agreements, including in the nuclear sector, which may suggest a similar package of agreements following Operation EPIC FURY, though Moscow has not signaled anything specific.[17]

***Iran relies heavily on Russia for nuclear cooperation, but the relationship is not robust elsewhere.*** Russia is Iran's most important partner when it comes to nuclear energy, having built its largest civilian nuclear reactor in Bushehr. Dmitry Medvedev, the former Russian president who is currently deputy head of Russia's Security Council, has reportedly even acknowledged a willingness to supply Iran with nuclear weapons. In September, Tehran and Moscow signed a $25 billion deal to build four new nuclear reactors in the south of the country.[18, 19] But relations between the two have been rocky since signing the January 2025 Iranian–Russian Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, especially given Moscow's perceived lack of support for Tehran during the latter's 12-Day War with Israel over the summer.[20, 21] Mohammad Sadr, a member of Iran's Expediency Discernment Council, noted, "The strategic agreement with Russia has proven to be a farce." Still, Russia attempted unsuccessfully to delay the E3's—Britain, France, and Germany—snapback mechanism for the return of United Nations sanctions on Iran by six months.[22, 23] Russia and China also signaled tacit support for the end of the International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) mandate allowing Iran flexibility to develop its nuclear program for civilian or for military purposes.[24] Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, during a 17 December meeting in Moscow with his Russian counterpart, said that Tehran is counting on its consultations with Russia "to prevent a repeat of the Israeli attack", despite some frustration due to the lack of support during the recent war.[25]

***A new nuclear deal with Iran may indirectly involve Russia.*** Russia and Iran are aligned in their resistance to U.S. influence in the Middle East, Europe, and the South Caucasus. But in the event that Washington and Tehran end hostilities and renegotiate a new nuclear deal, the United States may need Russia to accept Iran's spent nuclear fuel—as it had under the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—given that other countries are unwilling and lack the technical capacity of doing so. It's important to note that Moscow initially didn't support the JCPOA, but given the isolation and sanctions Moscow is experiencing as a result of the Ukraine war, it has deepened ties with Tehran, including through the 2025 strategic partnership treaty.[26] Over the summer, President Putin had indicated his support for a "zero-enrichment" nuclear deal, something Iran's *Tasnim News*, which is close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has denied.[27]

## LESS ISOLATED, NORTH KOREA SEEKS STRONGER NUCLEAR TIES

***Iran and North Korea continue to defy United States with increased nuclear cooperation.*** Going back to the 1980s, when North Korea was one of the few countries willing to supply Iran with conventional weapons during its war with Iraq, Tehran and Pyongyang have had a strong partnership in the exchange of advanced ballistic missiles (Iran's Shahab-3, Emad, and Ghadr missiles are similar to North Korean designs).[28] But despite evidence of missile cooperation, there is only limited and largely circumstantial evidence of direct nuclear weapons cooperation. Iranian scientists, for example, helped design an 80-ton rocket booster that Pyongyang used for a 2016 space launch.[29] Intelligence reporting and media accounts have also alleged joint scientific delegations or technical exchanges related to nuclear weapons design, while some analysts speculate that North Korea may have provided advice on warhead miniaturization, weaponization, or uranium enrichment.[30] It remains uncertain whether this relationship will endure after the latest war in Iran.

***Nuclear cooperation, including nuclear-adjacent transfers, is the hardest to discern but also less likely between China/Russia and North Korea.*** North Korea's defense industrial cooperation, to include transfers in technology, material, and knowledge, with other CRINK states is the subject of widespread official and independent monitoring. This arises from North Korea being one of the most heavily sanctioned states on the planet and directing critical state resources to evading sanctions to fund the regime's illicit goals.[31] Additionally, North Korea is not situated for the kind of joint nuclear signaling that China and Russia conducted off Alaska in July 2024.[32] This is because North Korea lacks strategic bombers and prefers road-mobile, easily dispersed nuclear delivery systems that it believes can survive American and South Korean targeting. North Korea seems to believe that parading its systems at semiannual military demonstrations is sufficient messaging.

***Direct support to North Korea's nuclear weapons program would violate a longstanding taboo in both Moscow and Beijing against assisting Pyongyang due to the latter's unpredictability.*** Article *X* of the Russia-North Korea friendship treaty of July 2024 covers "peaceful nuclear energy" cooperation, though it is likely that most of the treaty is meant for external signaling rather than as a guide for bilateral behavior. Media stories of direct nuclear technology transfers should be viewed with some skepticism. This kind of transfer would represent a major change in longstanding Russian and Chinese practice toward North Korea which both Moscow and Beijing likely view as an unpredictable and dangerous ally more likely to draw them into unwanted conflict than provide strategic benefit.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

***Taken together, these trends suggest that the U.S. Army will increasingly operate in an environment shaped by nuclear-enabled ambiguity rather than overt nuclear coordination among U.S. adversaries.*** This means future operations against U.S. adversaries may unfold under a more complex deterrence backdrop, where nuclear signaling, energy infrastructure, and strategic partnerships intersect with conventional and irregular warfare.

- ***Incremental nuclear cooperation among U.S. adversaries could raise their risk tolerance at the conventional level.*** Even absent direct nuclear weapons transfers, Russia's willingness to legitimize nuclear ambitions of partners like Iran and North Korea—and China's coordination with Russia on early warning and missile defense—may embolden adversaries to operate more aggressively below the nuclear threshold, including attacks on U.S. military installations, among other examples.
- ***Russia's weaponization of civilian nuclear energy expands the battlespace beyond traditional military domains.*** Long-term fuel-cycle dependencies, reactor servicing agreements, and training pipelines provide Moscow with leverage that can be activated during crises short of armed conflict. For the U.S. Army, this underscores the opportunity to integrate assessments of nuclear energy infrastructure, foreign technical personnel, and host-nation dependencies into Operational Environment analysis.
- ***Greater nuclear cooperation gives certain U.S. adversaries new forms of leverage over their partners.*** For example, Vladimir Putin's support in 2025 for a "zero-enrichment" nuclear deal between Washington and Tehran gives Moscow key leverage over its partners like Iran, but also to an extent over the United States.[33]
- ***The erosion of arms-control frameworks heightens the salience of nuclear considerations for land forces.*** Uncertainty surrounding New START, renewed debates over nuclear testing, and Russia's explicit nuclear rhetoric linked to the Ukraine war signal a return to nuclear issues as a central feature of great-power competition. For the U.S. Army, this reinforces the importance of integrating nuclear deterrence awareness into multidomain operations, wargaming, and professional military education.

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