

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*Axis of Aggressors: Countering the Cooperation of China, Russia, Iran & North Korea (Foundation for Defense of Democracies, July 2026)*

The United States now confronts one of the most dangerous geostrategic environments since 1945. The emergence of an Axis of Aggressors, consisting of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, helps explain why. These four countries are cooperating across economic, cyber, technology, and military domains in ways that threaten U.S. security and raise the odds of simultaneous major wars.

In June 2025, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Dan Caine warned Congress that Beijing, Moscow, Tehran, and Pyongyang are “pursuing unprecedented levels of cooperation.” Yet, many Americans do not know what that means. *Axis of Aggressors* delivers the most rigorous, comprehensive analysis to date of how America’s authoritarian adversaries are cooperating; why that cooperation matters; and how Americans should respond.

Authors Bradley L. Bowman, Elaine K. Dezenski, and Rear Admiral (Ret.) Mark Montgomery, all senior leaders at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, demonstrate how the cooperation between America’s adversaries is multifaceted, growing, and increasingly consequential. They warn that Axis cooperation is already undermining American security and heightening the probability that the United States will find itself in simultaneous, major conflicts for which Americans are not prepared. Many current policies and longstanding assumptions in Washington, they argue, are dangerously outdated. This book is a wake-up call, essential to understanding shifting geopolitical threats, their implications, and the grand strategy Washington must adopt to strengthen the United States, bolster allies and partners, and weaken the Axis of Aggressors.

## PART 1: AXIS ECONOMIC, CYBER, AND TECHNOLOGY COOPERATION

**Chapter 1: The Fractured Alignment: Economic Cooperation.** Economic collaboration helps Axis governments build military capabilities, wage aggression, and better withstand Western economic pressure. Underwriting these dynamics is self-interested necessity: China’s need for energy, Russia and Iran’s need for oil and gas revenues, and North Korea’s need for economic support. Current cooperation should not be overstated and is complicated by systematic incompatibilities and fundamental asymmetries. However, relatively nascent Axis-led economic and financial networks could increasingly enable members to insulate themselves from Western sanctions. Should these financial networks mature and grow, the consequences for American power and security could be serious. This chapter includes sections on China’s demand for energy; how Chinese goods are penetrating other markets; the gap between talk and action on Axis investment and infrastructure; North Korea’s model; an emerging Axis financial architecture; the axis of enablers; limitations and constraints on cooperation; and known unknowns.

**Chapter 2: The Hidden Hand: Axis Cyber and Technology Cooperation.** China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are cooperating in the cyber and technology domains to further solidify power at home, better employ offensive cyberattacks and information operations abroad, and increase technological capabilities through growing research and development (R&D) collaboration. By sharing surveillance and censorship technologies, Axis regimes increase their ability to control their respective populations and stay in power. Abroad, cyber cooperation blends cybercriminal and state actions, enabling Axis members to more effectively attack the United States and its allies and partners with plausibly deniable cyber and information operations. In R&D, Axis members increasingly share advanced technology, including dual-use technologies. This chapter includes sections on offensive cyber operations; technology R&D collaboration; nuclear technology cooperation; leading indicators of greater cooperation; the “sovereign internet;” and proliferating censorship technology.

## PART 2: AXIS MILITARY COOPERATION

**Chapter 3: The Muscle: Security Cooperation.** Axis members are conducting extraordinary and increasingly consequential security cooperation. Researchers developed a dataset documenting 616 instances of Axis state security cooperation from January 1, 2019, to December 31, 2025, across five categories: weapons development, arms transfers, military exercises and deployments, intelligence sharing, and military exchanges. The data presents compelling evidence for the existence of an Axis and the implementation of a long-articulated Chinese- and Russian-led geostrategy for Eurasia that has consequences for vital U.S. interests at home and abroad. The chapter previews more detailed assessments in the subsequent chapters that Axis security cooperation has improved the readiness, capability, capacity, and/or resilience of all four Axis militaries, undermining longstanding U.S. assumptions regarding defense spending, industrial capacity, war plans, and combat capacity.

**Chapter 4: The Center of Gravity: China-Russia Security Cooperation.** The breadth, depth, and nature of Sino-Russian cooperation make it the most consequential bilateral relationship in the Axis of Aggressors. China and Russia have engaged in security cooperation for decades, but their partnership deepened, expanded, and intensified after Putin's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This collaboration is materially increasing the capability, capacity, readiness, and resilience of both militaries and has resulted in at least modest gains in interoperability. The effects have negatively impacted both ends of Eurasia. On the western end, China's dual-use support for Russia's defense industrial base has made Moscow's war in Ukraine more effective and its military more resilient, lengthening the war, increasing Ukrainian casualties, and imposing additional costs on the West. On the eastern end of Eurasia, Russian military support has helped Beijing modernize and improve the People's Liberation Army (PLA) and prepare for aggression in the Pacific. Moscow is sharing operational and technological lessons from Ukraine, proliferating battlefield know-how across the Axis and potentially reducing the disadvantages associated with the PLA's lack of combat experience. In short, Sino-Russian security cooperation is making both adversaries more militarily formidable, perpetuating a brutal war in Europe, and increasing the chances for a potentially even worse war in the Pacific. The likelihood that the United States could confront simultaneous major wars in Eastern Europe and the Pacific is growing. This chapter provides a chronological review of Sino-Russian security cooperation. The chapter also includes sections on undersea warfare cooperation and dual-use components, the significance of Axis military exercises, and why a "reverse Kissinger" U.S. strategy toward Russia and China would fail.

**Chapter 5: The Patron and Beneficiary: Iran.** The Islamic Republic of Iran is down but not out. Tehran's nuclear program and tools of aggression were severely degraded in the 12-Day War in June 2025 and the 2026 war with the United States and Israel. Nonetheless, after murdering tens of thousands of its own citizens and enduring weeks of military strikes by the United States and Israel, the regime retains its grip on power. Security assistance from other members of the Axis has contributed to Tehran's resilience and may play a pivotal role in increasing the lifespan of the regime, its ability to launch further aggression, and its lethality in the next war. Iran was a major provider and beneficiary of Axis military support well before 2026 war. When Putin invaded Ukraine in 2022, Tehran abetted his aggression and provided large quantities of drones and munitions. Moscow reciprocated, augmenting its past support for Iran's air and missile defenses and nuclear program by helping Tehran launch satellites, and sending captured U.S. and British weapons to Iran for examination, among other steps. China has sent several shipments of chemical precursors needed for Iran's ballistic missiles; it also launched a surveillance satellite and transferred control of it to Tehran, which reportedly used it to target U.S. bases during the 2026 war.

Axis support for Iran's ballistic missile supply chain and air defenses is central to Tehran's political-military strategy. That strategy proved insufficient, however, in 2025 and 2026 when the United States and Israel inflicted extensive damage. Washington and Jerusalem should still avoid overconfidence because Russian and Chinese security assistance for Iran is growing. If Russia or China were to provide Iran with advanced fighter jets and air defense systems, in addition to more

Chinese support for Iran's ballistic missile program, the regime in Tehran would be able to recover from the 2026 conflict more quickly and effectively. That could mean a more aggressive effort by Iran to export terrorism, attack U.S. forces, Arab partners, and Israel, and even pursue nuclear weapons anew.

These dynamics will likely expand, deepen, and accelerate until the Iranian people finally have a representative government interested in their welfare, rather than a radical regime dedicated to domestic oppression, the export of terrorism, and growing collaboration with Russia and China. A representative government in Tehran would be a victory for the Iranian people, welcome news for America and its partners, and a disaster for its authoritarian backers in Moscow and Beijing.

**Chapter 6: The Pariah Power: North Korea.** A U.S. military leader recently testified that “North Korea is in its strongest position in decades.” A leading reason is the support Pyongyang has received from other Axis members, especially Russia. North Korea-Russia security cooperation is among the most consequential developments in the Axis, centering on arms transfers and, increasingly, weapons development. Military support between the two countries grew with explosive speed as Moscow realized it would need extensive support to sustain its war effort in Ukraine. When Moscow needed large quantities of munitions to support the invasion, Pyongyang stepped forward with millions of artillery rounds as well as ballistic missiles, towed and self-propelled artillery pieces, and multiple-launch rocket systems. Then, in an extraordinary step that undercuts suggestions that the Axis is more rhetorical than substantive, Pyongyang sent thousands of troops to fight alongside Russian forces when the Kremlin's material and manpower resources were stretched by Ukraine's Kursk offensive in August 2024. Among Putin's greatest needs were large numbers of munitions and soldiers; North Korea provided both, playing a vital role in increasing the capacity and resilience of Russian forces. In short, North Korea is a direct accomplice in Putin's invasion. Moscow has reciprocated with some of the military assistance Pyongyang most covets, including support for its space, nuclear, missile, and drone programs. This cooperation has improved the combat preparedness of the North Korean military and eroded the balance of power on the Korean Peninsula. The result is heightened threats to South Korea, Japan, and the United States, reduced willingness on the part of Kim Jong Un's to negotiate, and potentially a greater chance of war. While China provides North Korea dual-use support for its defense industrial base, Beijing's security assistance to Pyongyang pales in comparison to Moscow's. Fearing that Moscow's growing support could overtake Beijing's influence in Pyongyang, China may be tempted to increase its own military assistance in the future.

## **PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Chapter 7: Denying the Enemy: Economic, Cyber, and Technology Recommendations.** While cooperation between Axis members is strengthening, there are weaknesses and fissures. To exploit them, the United States must quickly develop and implement a grand strategy that musters, coordinates, and employs all tools of national power, strengthening the United States and its partners and weakening the Axis.

The economic component of this grand strategy should include both defensive and offensive elements. To defend its economic security, the United States should focus on corporate transparency requirements to prevent Axis members from using layers of shell corporations to operate inside the U.S. economy, enabling them to evade sanctions and acquire sensitive technology. It is also imperative to secure U.S. and allied supply chains, in large part through ally-shoring, that is, relocating key manufacturing sites from hostile countries to friendly ones. This will help preserve American economic and technological advantages and ensure that the United States has access to the critical minerals, semiconductors, batteries, and other advanced manufacturing inputs it needs. Offensive measures should include: the development and employment of an interagency U.S. sanctions strategy that coordinates with allies and partners and enables preemptive, synchronized actions to deter and punish both Axis aggression and other actions that undermine American interests; measures to hamper sanctions evasion; disruption of the illicit oil economy and supply of dual-use goods; and the prevention of the development of alternative Axis payment and financial messaging systems. Cyber measures should include actions to better protect U.S.

critical infrastructure; the creation of a U.S. Cyber Force; the empowerment of allies and partners in the cyber domain; the use of sanctions to counter totalitarian censorship; and maximum support to those who challenge Axis oppression.

When it comes to emerging technology, Washington must redouble efforts to stay ahead of China in the AI race; implement export controls that make it more difficult for Axis members to acquire cutting-edge technologies; and limit U.S. exposure to Chinese variants of technologies such as light detection and ranging (LiDAR), drones, and cellular modules. The United States should go on the offensive in the information domain, counter Axis efforts to export totalitarian surveillance capabilities, penalize any Chinese or Russian support for the Iranian or North Korean nuclear programs, and strengthen U.S. and allied nuclear energy supply chains and next-generation technologies.

**Chapter 8: The Counterpunch: Military Recommendations.** To meet the threat posed by the Axis of Aggressors, the United States should pursue five lines of effort in the military domain. First, the administration and Congress should properly fund and equip the U.S. military so that it remains capable of deterring and defeating threats from the Axis. That will require dramatically increased defense spending and updated military requirements that reflect both growing threats and the near-term prospect of simultaneous wars in different theaters. Second, the United States must reinvigorate its defense industrial base to increase America's overall military capacity and deliver weapons and munitions to U.S. forces more quickly and in greater quantities. Third, Washington must bolster American deterrence, both at home and in key regions vital to American interests. That requires a fully modernized strategic nuclear deterrent and substantial improvements in homeland missile defense. It also requires retaining a robust and capable U.S. military force posture in Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Fourth, the United States must empower its allies and partners to deter and weaken the Axis. That will require robust security cooperation with beleaguered democracies, including Taiwan, Ukraine, Israel, South Korea, and others. Washington should also systematically collect, analyze, and disseminate the hard-won combat lessons of Ukraine and Israel, sharing them with U.S. forces, allies and partners, including through a new Frontiers of Freedom Forum. The United States should adopt reforms that streamline its foreign military sales processes. Finally, Washington must better track, deter, and disrupt Axis security cooperation. That necessitates updated and new congressional reporting requirements to ensure the American public and policymakers understand evolving Axis threats. It also requires deterring and disrupting areas of current or potential Axis security cooperation that most threaten U.S. security.

**Final Thoughts.** The growing cooperation among the Axis of Aggressors represents a significant challenge to American interests and national security. Some of that cooperation is deeply concerning, and some is little more than lofty rhetoric. Nonetheless, as this book demonstrates, Axis cooperation is both significant and growing, compounding the threat already posed by individual Axis members. The future may depend on the degree to which Americans take the Axis of Aggressors seriously — and act accordingly.

Learn more about *Axis of Aggressors* here: <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/axis-of-aggressors>

## SELECT ENDORSEMENTS

“This book provides a clear understanding of this Axis of Aggressors, as well as the urgent steps our nation must take to deter our adversaries.”

— SEN. ROGER WICKER (R-MS),  
*chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee*

“The authors have pulled back the curtain on the Axis of Aggressors ... impeccable research ... a book to be read and, most importantly, acted upon.”

— LT. GEN. (RET.) H.R. MCMASTER,  
*chairman of FDD’s Center on Military and Political Power and former U.S. national security advisor*

The authors “make clear that there are four adversaries — China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea — cooperating around shared domestic and foreign policy goals, united in shared hostility toward the United States, its interests, and its allies ... Washington must develop a grand strategy that coordinates and deploys all tools of national power to respond to the gravity of this new axis threat.”

— LEON PANETTA,  
*former secretary of defense and director of the CIA for President Barack Obama*

“This book is a must-read as policymakers seek to make America more secure and ensure the 21st century belongs to America and its allies.”

— SEN. TODD YOUNG (R-IN)

“Required reading for anyone who wants to understand what is at stake.”

— JIM LANGEVIN,  
*chairman of FDD’s Center on Cyber and Technology Innovation and former U.S. Representative (D-RI)*

“The history of great power conflict demonstrates the price paid for failing to recognize emerging alignments among revisionist powers.”

— CELESTE WALLANDER,  
*former assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs for President Joe Biden*

“a clear, detailed, and urgent blueprint for deterring or defeating the Axis of Aggressors ... If Washington had heeded a book like this in the 1930s, we might have forestalled much of the bloodshed of the 1940s. This book is a gift to concerned citizens, strategists, and lawmakers.”

— MATT POTTINGER,  
*former deputy national security advisor to President Donald Trump*

