



# PROCEEDINGS

## **EMERGENCE OF A NEW 'QUAD': THE GROWING ENTENTE BETWEEN CHINA, RUSSIA, NORTH KOREA, AND IRAN**

*The remarks below were delivered at a symposium on “Emergence of A New ‘Quad’: The Growing Entente Between China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran” hosted by the National Institute for Public Policy on July 23, 2024. The symposium examined the implications of this growing military entente for U.S. and allied security and the challenges posed by what some have called the “Axis of Authoritarians.”*

### **David J. Trachtenberg (moderator)**

***David J. Trachtenberg is Vice President of the National Institute for Public Policy. Previously, he served as Deputy Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.***

In recent years, the military threats to the United States, its allies, and strategic partners have grown significantly. These threats originate from both peer nuclear states such as China and Russia as well as lesser powers including North Korea and Iran. Importantly, a military entente appears to be forming among U.S. adversaries, who are seeking to displace the United States as the dominant power on the international stage and recast the world order to their own liking.

Since Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping declared their mutual friendship of “no limits” in February 2022, both nations have developed closer ties and have collaborated militarily to improve their respective abilities to hold the United States and its allies at risk and to threaten U.S. interests abroad. Each has supported the other’s military aggressions and activities in tangible ways.

In addition, the ties between these two nuclear peer states and North Korea and Iran have grown tighter in what has been termed an “Axis of Upheaval.”<sup>1</sup> Former NATO Secretary General George Robertson recently called it “a deadly quartet.”<sup>2</sup>

Notwithstanding historical disagreements and areas of competition between them, this new “axis” or “quartet” represents a coordinated and substantial threat, not only to U.S. security, but to the international community of liberal, democratic states. It is arguably the most consequential foreign and national security challenge facing the United States today, driven by a common desire to overturn a world order that they see as unfairly dominated by the United States and decidedly prejudicial to their interests.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Richard Fontaine, “The Axis of Upheaval,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2024, available at <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine>.

<sup>2</sup> Dan Sabbagh, “UK and its allies face ‘deadly quartet’ of nations, says defence expert,” *The Guardian*, July 15, 2024, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/article/2024/jul/16/uk-and-its-allies-face-deadly-quartet-of-nations-says-defence-expert#:~:text=Britain%20and%20its%20allies%20are,head%20of%20Labour's%20defence%20review>.



Both China and Russia have supported North Korean missile tests in violation of UN resolutions and sanctions. North Korean missiles have been shipped to and used by Russia in its war of aggression against Ukraine. And Iran and its proxies in the Middle East have moved aggressively to undermine the security of U.S. allies and partners in the region, including Israel, supported by Moscow, Beijing, and Pyongyang.

In addition, China has become Russia's largest trading partner, building and expanding economic ties with Russian financial institutions. China has also supplied Russia with the microchips necessary to develop advanced weaponry. And Russia has provided China with technology for an early warning missile defense system. Joint Sino-Russian military exercises have also become increasingly common, with their fourth joint naval patrol occurring just over a week ago.<sup>3</sup>

Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran independently pose significant threats to American security and interests abroad. But what makes them even more dangerous is that they are acting in a deliberate and coordinated way to overturn the liberal world order created and nurtured by the United States since the end of the second World War—a system that has allowed freedom, democracy, and economic prosperity to flourish.

This emerging anti-American and anti-Western “Quad of instability” represents a serious new challenge, not only for the United States but for U.S. allies, friends, and strategic partners who have come to rely on the United States to help deter aggression against them. As Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran continue to develop and expand their military relationships and work together more closely to upset the established world order, America's allies and partners will be watching carefully to see how the United States seeks to counter this dangerous new entente.

If the United States fails to take the actions necessary to strengthen deterrence against the combined efforts of these adversaries, extended deterrence and assurance of allies will be dangerously weakened. Moreover, adversary leaders are likely to draw the conclusion that the United States is indeed a waning power and that their efforts to overturn U.S. dominance will inevitably be successful. This will only increase the risk of opportunistic aggression, undermine global stability, and weaken international nonproliferation norms as other countries seek alternate means of ensuring their own security—potentially to include the acquisition of nuclear weapons.

The threats to the global order posed by the emerging entente of Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran are unique. The dangers they pose are unlike any previous epochs in history. Three of the four new “Quad” members possess nuclear weapons and have made veiled and not-so-veiled threats to employ them against the United States and the West. The fourth reportedly may be on the verge of acquiring nuclear weapons. Accordingly, it will take a serious and coordinated effort among freedom-loving democracies to reinforce deterrence

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<sup>3</sup> Albee Zhang and Ryan Woo, “China, Russia navies conduct joint patrol in parts of Pacific, China media says,” *Reuters*, July 14, 2024, available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/china-russia-navies-conduct-joint-patrol-parts-pacific-china-media-says-2024-07-14/>.

and the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence commitments. Anything less is likely to lead to chaos, conflict, and potential catastrophe.

Finally, I would suggest that the political events of this past weekend cannot but factor into the calculations of U.S. adversaries as they implement a strategy to diminish U.S. global influence and build a new world order more to their liking. Transfers of presidential power in the United States usually occur over a period of less than three months—from November’s election to January’s swearing-in. And they are often considered periods of potential volatility and foreign challenges. But we are now faced with a lame-duck presidency for the next six months. How adversaries—and allies—will react during this unusual and potentially dangerous time remains to be seen.

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### **Christopher A. Ford**

***Christopher A. Ford is a Visiting Fellow with Stanford University’s Hoover Institution. Previously, he served as Assistant Secretary of State for International Security and Nonproliferation and Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for WMD and Counterproliferation at the National Security Council.***

Thanks for inviting me to participate in this webinar on the “New Quad” of the brutal dictatorships of China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. I myself prefer to think of these four as the “Dark Quad,” for in a sense they do form the perfect malevolently antithetical counterpoint to the valuable work of the *real* Quad—that is, the important quadrilateral dialogue between the developed democracies of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India.

It would probably be difficult to overstate the potential challenges that the “Dark Quad” presents to international peace and security—not to mention to our own country’s national security interests and those of our allies and partners, and indeed all who prize peace and wish to preserve their political autonomy as sovereign peoples. Time being short, I’ll mention just four big ones.

These remarks offer only my personal opinions, of course, and don’t necessarily represent the views of anyone else. They’re also pretty depressing, I suppose. But let me offer what insights I can.

My four warnings are all related to the fact that the military quasi-alliance of the Dark Quad includes both the world’s only two nuclear-armed revisionist great powers and the world’s two most prominent nuclear proliferators.

- Of the two proliferators, North Korea, of course, pursued nuclear weapons for years, signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) in bad faith, immediately violated it, got caught, obtained a concessionary deal with the West in return for supposedly freezing its nuclear weapons work, violated *that* promise too, then pulled out of the NPT, and has since built itself a rapidly-growing and ever more sophisticated nuclear arsenal.

- For its part, Iran pursued nuclear weapons for years, got caught, faced international sanctions, obtained a concessionary deal with the West in return for temporarily delaying its nuclear progress, but is today busily at work enriching uranium and cementing its status as a so-called “latent” or “virtual” nuclear weapons possessor able to sprint toward weaponization at the drop of a hat.
- And the great power members of the Dark Quad are currently involved in their *own* nuclear build-ups. This means not just modernizing legacy systems, but more importantly also building entire new *categories* of delivery systems, and apparently conducting secret low-yield nuclear testing. In Beijing’s case, it also means expanding the size and scope of the Chinese Communist Party’s nuclear arsenal at a truly shocking pace despite China *already* being, in relative terms, the most powerful it has ever been vis-à-vis any potential adversary power since at least the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.
- But the problem doesn’t lie just in the *capabilities* of these four Dark Quad authoritarian dictatorships. They also exhibit grave *behavioral* pathologies far beyond just the internal brutalities of their ruling regime’s domestic repression.
  - One of them, (Russia) is actively involved in a vicious war of aggression to capture and annex a neighboring democracy.
  - Another (China) has been preparing itself for years to invade and destroy one of East Asia’s most vibrant democracies in Taiwan, even while also grabbing at bits and pieces of territory from other neighbors to the south.
  - A third (Iran) continues to nurse destabilizing dreams of theocratic hegemony in the Middle East, and expresses this by actively subverting and attacking other countries in its region.
  - And the fourth (North Korea) is ruled by a dynasty of reclusive dictatorial sociopaths who periodically lash out in violent affronts to the sovereignty and security of *another* vibrant East Asian democracy to their south.

So what, as the saying goes, could possibly go wrong? (A lot, obviously!) So, as a starting point, let me offer four warnings.

### **The Death Knell for Nonproliferation?**

First, as a longtime nonproliferation diplomat, I should point out that the advent of the Dark Quad may sound a death knell for the nuclear nonproliferation regime. By that I don’t mean that it’s impossible for some rump, denuded shell of that regime to stumble along for a while. I hope it does, and there’s certainly still lots of important nonproliferation work that can still be done.

But with two veto-wielding Permanent Members of the U.N. Security Council and regional aggressors now in a *de facto* military alliance with the world’s two worst nuclear

proliferators, it's hard to see much real hope for the global nonproliferation regime being effective going forward. After all, the international community did a notably *bad* job of handling the challenges presented by the two proliferators of North Korea and Iran even back when there appeared to be a consensus among the great powers on the importance of nonproliferation. And now that Russia and China are putting the “pro” back into “proliferation”? You can probably forget it.

### Pooled Adversary Capabilities

My second warning has to do with the implications of the fact that the four members of the Dark Quad now increasingly have the opportunity to pool their capabilities in various ways against the three things they hate most: the United States, the other countries of the West, and the current rules-based international order.

Part of the Dark Quad threat comes from the possibility of what might in some respects turn into a “pooled” adversary defense industrial base. We have seen from the Ukraine conflict that the requirements of modern, high-intensity conventional war in terms of equipment, materiel, and manpower are simply *enormous*. After decades of post-Cold War complacency and strategic myopia, however—years in which we assumed that our former strategic adversaries would “cooperate with us in diplomacy and global problem solving”<sup>4</sup> and in which we built our national security strategy around the assumption that those powers were indeed “no longer strategic adversaries” at all<sup>5</sup>—such productive capabilities are far beyond our current capacity to supply them.

Yet already China is helping equip and bankroll Russia's war in Ukraine with financial support, technology, and other aid—thus recently eliciting a rare NATO rebuke of Beijing as a “decisive enabler” of Putin's war of aggression<sup>6</sup>—while North Korea supplies Russia with munitions with which to kill Ukrainians, and Iran likewise supplies drones. Russia, meanwhile, has promised to help North Korea with unspecified assistance<sup>7</sup>, China and Russia have both helped Pyongyang evade U.N. sanctions for years<sup>8</sup>, and China is also funding Iran's regional destabilization and aggressive missile program by buying Iranian oil.

We need, therefore, to be keenly aware of—and, if we can, move to counter—the threat that the Dark Quad will increasingly “pool” industrial and military capabilities in ways

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<sup>4</sup> The White House, *A National Security Strategy of Engagement and Enlargement*, February 1995, p. 1, available at <https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss1995.pdf?ver=pzgo9pkDsWmIQqTYTC60-Q%3d%3d>.

<sup>5</sup> The White House, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, September 2002, p. 26, available at [https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=oyVN99aEnrAWijAc\\_05eiQ%3d%3d](https://history.defense.gov/Portals/70/Documents/nss/nss2002.pdf?ver=oyVN99aEnrAWijAc_05eiQ%3d%3d).

<sup>6</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Washington Summit Declaration,” July 10, 2024, available at [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_227678.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_227678.htm).

<sup>7</sup> “Putin vows to support North Korea against the United States,” *The Straits Times*, June 18, 2024, available at <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/putin-vows-to-take-north-korea-ties-to-higher-level>.

<sup>8</sup> David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, Bernadette Gostelow, Maximilian Lim, and Andrea Stricker, “56 countries involved in violating UNSC Resolutions on North Korea during the last reporting period,” Institute for Science and International Security, June 6, 2019, available at [https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/DPRK\\_Report\\_June\\_6%2C\\_2019\\_Final.pdf](https://isis-online.org/uploads/isis-reports/documents/DPRK_Report_June_6%2C_2019_Final.pdf).

profoundly dangerous to the United States, our allies and partners, and indeed to any country with the bad fortune to have one or more of these predatory powers as a neighbor. This certainly doesn't necessarily mean that I foresee some kind of quadripartite analogue to China's own domestic "Military Civil Fusion" (MCF) strategy<sup>9</sup> of trying in effect to *erase* all distinctions between the military and civilian sectors, for I can't see anything that elaborate or ambitious being possible among the Dark Quad powers.

At the very least, however, the Dark Quad will likely do *more* in this regard than it ever has before—and potentially a great deal more. We in the United States are no strangers to seeing each of the Dark Quad powers as a threatening problem state in its own right, of course. Nevertheless, we haven't yet gotten our minds around the possibility that their various different strengths as international malefactors could complement each other and become mutually reinforcing in a deliberately coordinated way.

From a deterrence and nuclear force posture planning perspective, U.S. planners are already struggling with the implications of the unprecedented challenge of facing *two* nuclear-armed near-peer adversaries at the same time. But the problem is bigger than that, also encompassing broader issues of Defense Industrial Base (DIB) capacity, critical supply chains, military-technological development, and even mobilizable manpower. (Already, for instance, Russian media have claimed that North Korean "volunteers" are being readied to be sent to Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> How close might Dark Quad cooperation become in the future?)

It is not for nothing, after all, that the great 19<sup>th</sup> Century Prussian and then German statesman Otto von Bismarck referred in his memoirs to the "nightmare of coalitions" ("*le cauchemar des coalitions*") when contemplating the possibility that his country's potential enemies—and at that point he had Russia and Austria particularly in mind—might *coordinate* against it.<sup>11</sup> As American strategists contemplate a Dark Quad world, we need to keep an analogous *cauchemar* always in mind.

## The Challenge of Coordinated Aggression

But this modern "nightmare of coalitions" goes well beyond simply the problem of aggregate—and potentially "pooled"—*capability*. Growing Dark Quad cooperation also raises the potential problem of coordinated *activity*.

U.S. officials have long been worried about the possibility of opportunistic aggression by one or more problem powers if the United States were to end up in hostilities with another of them. (China, for instance, might move against Taiwan in an attempt to take advantage of the Americans being distracted by a campaign against Iran.) Needless to say, from a force

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<sup>9</sup> Department of State, "The Chinese Communist Party's Military-Civil Fusion Policy," (undated), available at <https://2017-2021.state.gov/military-civil-fusion/#:~:text=What%20is%20Military%2DCivil%20Fusion,world%20class%20military>.

<sup>10</sup> "North Korea offers Russia '100,000 volunteers' to fight Ukraine: state media," *South China Morning Post*, August 8, 2022, available at <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/east-asia/article/3188052/north-korea-offers-russia-100000-volunteers-fight-ukraine-state>.

<sup>11</sup> German History in Documents and Images (GHDI), "The Nightmare of Coalitions': Bismarck on the Other Great Powers (1879/1898)," (undated), available at [https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub\\_document.cfm?document\\_id=1855](https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_document.cfm?document_id=1855).

posture, asset-allocation, and logistics perspective, this is already a formidable problem for defense planners. There are certainly sound reasons for concern, as my Missouri State University colleague Dave Trachtenberg has pointed out, that the U.S. Defense Department's traditional "two-war" policy—namely, of being prepared to handle two simultaneous conflicts in different parts of the world—has been allowed to atrophy.<sup>12</sup>

But the "nightmare of coalitions" raised by the Dark Quad goes beyond merely opportunistic aggression. What if there were active *coordination*? In a merely opportunistic aggression scenario, our various adversaries would implement military plans that had presumably been prepared independently, each according to its own logics. Even worse than that, however, would be a scenario in which our adversaries implement military plans that have been deliberately *coordinated*, and do this in a *synchronized* way and with capabilities deliberately chosen in order to present us with the most horrendous challenge possible. That, needless to say, would be a very great threat indeed, and Trachtenberg is clearly right that we are today "ill-prepared to prosecute a two-war scenario, especially one involving Sino-Russian collaboration."<sup>13</sup> Things would be even worse with "three-bad guy" or "four-bad guy" scenarios. We've got a lot of work to do.

## The Challenge to American Nuclear Weapons Posture

Not incidentally, I'll also add—and this is my fourth warning—this *cauchemar des coalitions* also puts paid to some of the more persistent shibboleths of post-Cold War U.S. nuclear weapons policy. For decades, since the beginning of the post-Cold War era, U.S. defense planners have relied upon our country's unparalleled conventional military prowess as our first and best answer to adversary aggression, and president after president has promised to "reduce reliance upon nuclear weapons."

The possibility of opportunistic aggression by members of the Dark Quad, however—let alone that of coordinated aggression—suggests the conceptual bankruptcy of this longstanding ambition by signaling the possibility that even our vaunted conventional strength might be unequal to the operational demands of multi-theater conflict against the Dark Quad.

Already, the coercive nuclear threats Russia has been making over Ukraine, grounded in the Kremlin's huge superiority over NATO in lower-yield, theater-range nuclear delivery systems, have made clear our need to restore some loosely analogous capability of our own. This is why we in the Trump Administration developed the lower-yield W76-2 nuclear warhead and began to build the Submarine Launched Cruise Missile-Nuclear (SLCM-N), and it's why Congress has very sensibly prevented the Biden-Harris Administration from foolishly canceling the latter program. And it may well be—especially as China follows

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<sup>12</sup> David J. Trachtenberg, "How the Lack of a 'Two-War Strategy' Erodes Extended Deterrence and Assurance, *Information Series*, No. 590 (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, June 17, 2024), available at <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/IS-590.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Putin's footsteps in developing ways to use its rapidly-expanding arsenal as an "offensive nuclear umbrella" under which to conduct regional aggression<sup>14</sup>—that even *these* U.S. plans are not enough to restore deterrent stability.

But that's a *nuclear*-centric threat. The Dark Quad "nightmare of coalitions" also raises the threat that—for the first time in a *long* while—the United States may be unable to rely purely upon its conventional military power even vis-à-vis *conventional* threats. We may not necessarily be there quite yet, but the day may be coming in which we might need theater nuclear weaponry to make up for potential conventional overmatch by a Dark Quad coalition.

Despite this, Biden-Harris Administration officials continue to mouth shopworn platitudes about our aim of "reducing reliance upon nuclear weapons." Not to put too fine a point on it, but such statements are at this point, tragically, dangerous nonsense.

We saw some of this as recently as last month [June 2024], when National Security Council (NSC) Senior Director Pranay Vaddi told the Arms Control Association that the Biden Administration remains "committed to seeking ... a world without nuclear weapons" and to "reducing the global salience of nuclear weapons."<sup>15</sup> His speech made headlines for his comment that if other powers are "unwilling to follow" our lead in reducing reliance upon nuclear weapons—and they "instead take steps to increase the salience of nuclear weapons—we will have no choice but to adjust our posture and capabilities to preserve deterrence and stability." We "may reach a point in the coming years," he said, "where an increase from current deployed numbers is required."<sup>16</sup>

Now, Pranay is a friend whom I've known for years from his previous service working on arms control issues as a career official at the State Department, and I like him personally. I also appreciate the importance of him giving notice to the Arms Control Association that the disarmament-focused framework around which they have constructed their conceptual universe is falling down around their collective ears.

Yet you may have noted Pranay's careful conditionalities and his effort still to distance the Biden Administration from the real point. He said that "*if*" our adversaries don't follow our lead, we "*may*" at some point need more nuclear weapons. But what he's carefully *not* saying is what is, in fact, unfortunately all too true. Namely: (a) we've been trying that for many years, and our adversaries *have not* followed our lead in reducing reliance upon nuclear weapons; (b) our effort to "lead" a path toward disarmament has been at best wildly unsuccessful and perhaps even counterproductive; and (c) if we are to restore deterrent stability, we need—not "in the coming years," but in fact *now*—more nuclear capabilities than we presently have.

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher A. Ford, "Offensive Nuclear Umbrellas and the Modern Challenge of Strategic Thinking," February 11, 2016, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2007>.

<sup>15</sup> Remarks from Pranay Vaddi, Special Assistant to the President and Senior Director for Arms Control, Disarmament, and Nonproliferation at the National Security Council, "Adapting the U.S. Approach to Arms Control and Nonproliferation to a New Era," Arms Control Association, June 7, 2024, available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/2024AnnualMeeting/Pranay-Vaddi-remarks>.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*



These truths have, alas, been apparent for some while. Indeed, when I myself had Pranay's current role in the Trump Administration NSC in 2017, I spoke to a nuclear disarmament group called the Ploughshares Foundation to roll out the findings of an internal NSC review of U.S. disarmament policy I had led, which concluded that the United States' post-Cold War approach to disarmament had not produced the results it intended, that it had "run out of steam," and that new thinking was therefore necessary.<sup>17</sup> All that is even more true today, and the advent of the Dark Quad is simply driving this point home with painful acuteness.

I desperately wish this weren't the case, but putting our heads in the sand about this during an election year is no way to meet the challenges with which our adversaries confront us.

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### **Ilan Berman**

***Ilan Berman is Senior Vice President of the American Foreign Policy Council.***

Today, we are witnessing growing coordination among Russia, China, Iran and North Korea in what some officials have termed to be an "axis of chaos."

This alignment is visible on the political front, including in the context of disinformation. In recent years, and in particular during the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw significant coordination between Moscow, Tehran and Beijing on anti-Western narratives—so much so that researchers from the Washington Institute of Near East Policy termed it to be an "axis of disinformation." Coordination can also be seen in the military domain, with increasingly frequent joint or trilateral exercises representing growing coordination of defense postures and strategic objectives on the part of the Kremlin, the Islamic Republic, and the People's Republic of China (PRC). And China, Iran and North Korea have all emerged as significant contributors to Russia's ongoing war on Ukraine.

The participation of Iran's clerical regime in this burgeoning axis is informed by a number of concrete considerations. A year ago, the Islamic Republic was grappling with three levels of crisis. At home, the regime was facing a growing challenge to its legitimacy as a result of the "women, life, freedom" movement that emerged after the September 2022 death of Kurdish-Iranian activist Mahsa Amini. In the region, Iran found itself marginalized amid Israel's growing ties to the Arab Gulf states—and the prospect of still more to come. And internationally, there was a growing consensus that Iran's increasingly mature nuclear program needed to be dealt with resolutely, including potentially through direct military action.

Today, the Iranian regime's strategic position has improved significantly, thanks to the brutal terror campaign carried out by its Palestinian proxy Hamas against Israel on Oct. 7th,

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<sup>17</sup> Christopher A. Ford, "NPT Wisdom for a New Disarmament Discourse," October 28, 2017, available at <https://www.newparadigmsforum.com/p2041>.

as well as to a timid administration in Washington that has taken great pains to avoid regional conflict at all costs. Nevertheless, as a result of its past political and economic difficulties, the Islamic Republic has sought the assistance and support of other rogues.

- With China, it concluded a massive \$400 billion, quarter century framework deal back in 2021 as a means of mitigating the economic pressure of Trump-era economic sanctions;
- With Russia, it has forged a new strategic balance, becoming an indispensable supplier of drones and military materiel for Moscow's ongoing war effort against Ukraine; and
- With North Korea, it has collaborated for years on the development of strategic systems. While a significant amount is known about this cooperative work on ballistic missiles, there are also telltale signs that Iran has benefited from North Korean assistance to its nuclear program as well.

This convergence creates a new, and daunting, challenge for the United States. For the first time in its history, America is facing not one but three former empires seeking to recreate their respective spheres of influence. Successfully confronting the resulting union requires the United States to think differently not only about the requirements of deterrence and defense. Policymakers in Washington also need to focus on competitive strategies by which the United States can work to pry apart this new anti-American partnership.

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### **Joseph DeTrani**

***Joseph DeTrani is former Special Envoy for the Six Party Talks with North Korea and Special Adviser to the Director of National Intelligence. He also served in the Central Intelligence Agency and was Director of the National Counter Proliferation Center.***

The Axis of Authoritarian States—Russia, China, Iran, and North Korea—has developed into a formidable alliance of autocracies/dictatorships that have two things in common: repressive regimes that threaten their neighbors. Witness Russia's invasion of Ukraine, China's actions in the South China Sea, Iran's support to Hamas and other proxies, and North Korea's conventional and nuclear threats to South Korea.

Unfortunately, this new Quad has generated greater interest in international organizations like the BRICS—Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa, Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)—China, India, Iran, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, Russia, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan and Belarus, with Afghanistan and Mongolia as Observer States and dialogue partners with fifteen countries. Some in the Global South—developing countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Oceania—seem to be more attracted to Russia and China and their authoritarian forms of governance.

Indeed, it was the United States that defeated Nazism and ended the Second World War; the United States that established the Marshall Plan to rebuild a devastated Europe after World War II; the United States that normalized relations with China and aided in its economic development; and the United States that defeated the Soviet Union that led to its implosion in 1991; and currently it is the United States that is providing leadership and support to Ukraine in its war of resistance against a Russian war of aggression.

The question, then, is why is this new Quad more confident and aggressive and viewed favorably by a growing number of nations?

The short answer: U.S. policy toward the countries comprising the New Quad has been weak and inconsistent. Russia, China, Iran and North Korea are now more confident and determined in their pursuits, and aligned against the United States. Let's briefly look at each of these countries.

## **Russia**

Literally got away with its invasion of Georgia in 2008, while ensuring Georgia does not join NATO. Russia also got away with its invasion and occupation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014. And once knowing Putin was planning an invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the United States and NATO were unable to deter Russia from invading.

Going back a few years: Russia's September 2015 military support to the Assad regime in Syria, after Assad used chemical weapons (the Intelligence Community in June 2013 said, with high confidence, that Assad had used chemical weapons against his own people), defying a red line Assad was told not to cross by the Obama Administration. Assad crossed the red line with no meaningful consequences. Indeed, Russia continues to provide military support to the Assad government.

Most strikingly, Vladimir Putin's June 19, 2024, meeting in North Korea with Kim Jong Un and the establishment of a comprehensive strategic partnership between North Korea and Russia, with North Korea providing artillery shells and ballistic missiles for Russia's war in Ukraine, while Russia is likely to provide North Korea with nuclear, missile, satellite and conventional weapons assistance. This, despite 30 years of U.S. negotiations with North Korea.

In short, the United States has not deterred a revanchist Russian Federation. Rather, an emboldened Russia is a threat to peace and stability throughout Eurasia.

## **Iran**

The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was meant to be transformative—changing Iran's domestic and international behavior, moderating the domestic excesses of a theocracy that uses the IRGC and its proxies— Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis—to foment dissension throughout the Middle East, with the goal of eventually destroying Israel.

The JCPOA was not transformational. It did, however, provide Iran with billions of dollars, the lifting of sanctions, and unfreezing of a significant amount of money held abroad due to their terrorist activities. Despite the JCPOA, Iran persisted with its ballistic missile programs and continues to be a “threshold” nuclear weapons state, initially enriching uranium at the 20 percent purity level and now at the 60 percent purity level, according to the IAEA. And according to the IAEA, Iran continues to deny IAEA monitors access to suspected nuclear weapons sites.

## **North Korea**

After 30 years of negotiations with North Korea, and hearing from Kim il-Sung, Kim Jong il and now Kim Jong Un that North Korea wants normal relations with the United States, albeit while accepting them as a nuclear weapons state, as we did with Pakistan, North Korea is now aligned with a revanchist Russian Federation and providing artillery shells and ballistic missiles to Russia for their war of aggression in Ukraine. In return, North Korea most likely will receive sophisticated nuclear, missile, satellite, and conventional weapons assistance from Russia. This new relationship with Russia emboldens North Korea and could lead to greater instability on the Korean Peninsula with spill over instability in Northeast Asia.

A U.S. policy of “strategic patience” has been an abject failure. North Korea has developed an impressive nuclear weapons arsenal and the ballistic missiles to deliver them, to include the Hwasong-18, a solid fuel ICBM capable of targeting the entire United States. This, with North Korea’s new first use of nuclear weapons policy and codifying a nuclear doctrine of the preemptive use of nuclear weapons.

In short, North Korea, during the last three and one-half years, has evolved from a country seeking normal relations with the United States to an ally of a revanchist Russian Federation. And our policy of “containment and deterrence” toward North Korea failed. They are not contained and deterred from building more nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles.

## **China**

It was the United States that Deng Xiaoping, when he took over from Mao and Hua Guofeng in 1978, looked to for economic development assistance. And the United States did not disappoint, providing billions in foreign direct investments, with hundreds of thousands of Chinese students attending U.S. universities and colleges; Most-Favored-Nation status for China was granted and the United States got China into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001. This, while working with China to defeat the Soviet Union in Afghanistan and to monitor their strategic nuclear forces. Indeed, in 1969 the Soviet Union was prepared to use their nuclear weapons to destroy China’s nuclear infrastructure.

Xi Jinping threw out the Deng Xiaoping playbook -- bide your time, hide your strength and embrace collective leadership—with an assertive foreign policy in the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait and enshrined himself as a dictator for life.

In February 2022, Xi met with Vladimir Putin, before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and spoke of a "no limits" partnership with Russia.

In short, the perception of U.S. weakness and policy mistakes contributed to the establishment of this New Quad.

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