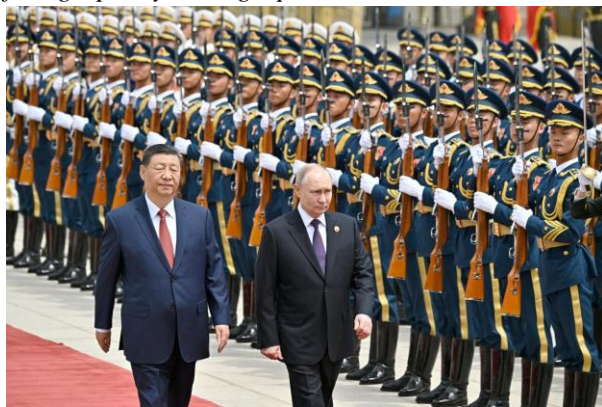




EMERGING COALITIONS AND THE NEXT GENERATION: RETHINKING STRATEGY FOR A COMPLEX FUTURE

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Chinese President Xi Jinping (left) and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin attend an official welcoming ceremony on May 16, 2024, in Beijing. In a joint press conference, Putin called for a political solution to Ukraine while Xi proposed a two-state solution to the war in Gaza. Source: Pool via Reuters/Sergei Bobylev

Introduction

The Center for Global Security Research (CGSR) recently hosted the workshop [*"A New Axis? Bloc Rivalry and the Future of Conflict"*](#), where panel-led sessions discussed the resilience and stability of contemporary geopolitical alliances, the evolving

dynamics of global security, and the implications of an emerging coalition comprising Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. One discussion referred to this informal alliance as the "New Axis," though the term was contested for invoking historical comparisons to the Axis Powers of World War II and potentially oversimplifying contemporary geopolitical relationships, especially where there are significant differences in strategic objectives and degrees of cooperation. Given the nuances of the topics covered by the panels, the perspectives presented in this summary are mine alone and not representative of the views of CGSR.

While the "New Axis" label risks overstating the cohesion among Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, their increased collaboration against the security interests of the United States and its allies highlights a significant shift in the geopolitical landscape. This growing alignment presents multifaceted challenges for U.S. security strategy, necessitating innovative approaches to navigating a changing global order.

As a Young Leader, I attended these discussions with particular interest in their future-oriented focus. I find that addressing these geopolitical uncertainties and concerns cannot be the responsibility of current policymakers alone. Rather, this effort must be transgenerational, requiring inclusive dialogue and investment in the training and education of emerging professionals. Proactively investing in next-generation leaders, by developing their strategic thinking, technological skills, and innovative capabilities, will be critical for ensuring a stable international order in an increasingly kaleidoscopic geopolitical environment.

What is the "New Axis"?

At its core, a geopolitical bloc describes a group of states informally or formally aligned due to shared strategic interests, threats, ideologies, or competition against other global powers. Unlike traditional military alliances such as NATO, which have explicit, formal agreements and clearly defined defense commitments, these geopolitical blocs often rely on informal collaboration, mutual convenience, shared narratives, and parallel objectives. The bloc examined in this workshop specifically comprised Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. Beyond its continued offense in Ukraine, Russia remains adept in gray zone tactics, or operations short of open warfare designed to destabilize opponents and leverage advantage without triggering conventional conflict. Russia employs hybrid warfare, electoral interference, economic

coercion, and information manipulation as core tools in its strategic arsenal. China, ambitious and increasingly assertive in the Indo-Pacific region, engages in economic coercion, military intimidation, and sophisticated information operations. China views the U.S. as its primary geopolitical rival and actively seeks to reshape global rules to reflect Chinese interests. North Korea continues to deploy its extensive cyber operations, missile threats, and military provocations. The security of the Korean Peninsula is a critical pressure point against U.S. alliances in East Asia, and the Kim regime does not shy away from exploiting opportunities to complicate U.S. regional commitments and alliances. Finally, Iran's asymmetric warfare through proxy groups, cyber operations, and regional influence campaigns creates challenges for U.S. interests, particularly in the Middle East while undermining confidence in American security assurances among partners in that region. Together, these nations form an informal but meaningful alignment bound by mutual opposition to American geopolitical primacy, a shared narrative of American decline, and a desire to challenge or remake existing international norms and systems.

How Effective Is Their Cooperation?

An overarching agreement among the panelists was that, while Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran each have distinct approaches and methods, their combined efforts effectively challenge U.S. policy. Panelists argued there is a spectrum of cooperation, ranging from minimal political alignment to substantial military involvement. In June 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un signed "The Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership" between the Russian Federation and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, a security treaty which included a mutual defense clause. Following this agreement, North Korea has supplied Russia with significant military aid to support Russia's war efforts in Ukraine. While China has not provided direct military support to Russia, it has offered economic assistance and diplomatic backing. Notably, China and Russia declared a "no limits" partnership in February 2022, days before Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Iran has also reportedly provided Russia with drones and other military equipment used in Ukraine.

Though the alignment may not be deeply formalized, it is opportunistic, predatory, and strategic enough to amplify each nation's individual impacts. They also learn from each other's successes and failures. As one example, China learns from Russia's experiences in

Ukraine about the dangers of military overreach, international isolation, and severe Western sanctions. Meanwhile, Russia draws insights from China's incremental, economically-driven assertiveness in the South China Sea, appreciating the value of strategic patience, economic leverage, diplomatic nuance, and technological power as effective alternatives to direct confrontation with the United States. Particularly concerning is the potential for deeper military and strategic cooperation among the bloc, pressuring the U.S. and its allies into reactive rather than proactive postures, creating a perception of U.S. vulnerability, indecisiveness, or declining power.

Whether consciously coordinated or not, it is plausible that cooperation among Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran is likely to expand or at least persist. However, although the bloc may collaborate based on shared opposition to the U.S. and its allies, the prospect of deep strategic coordination or extensive military integration continues to be limited by mutual mistrust and diverging long-term interests. For instance, advanced weaponry transfers might be avoided due to concerns of technology being compromised or reverse-engineered. Additionally, while cooperation often depends on transactional exchanges, such as Iran or Russia exchanging oil discounts for military technology from China or North Korea, strategic confidence and mutual reliability remain tenuous.

Nevertheless, panelists presented several scenarios on how the bloc might evolve. One scenario considered Russia intensifying conflicts within Europe, potentially prompting China, North Korea, and Iran to exploit the distraction by escalating tensions in the Indo-Pacific or the Middle East. Another scenario envisions simultaneous conflicts across multiple regions, placing severe strain on the combined military capabilities, economic capacity, industrial production, supply chains, diplomatic cohesion, and political will of the United States and its allies, potentially limiting their ability to effectively respond across multiple theaters. The session also raised critical questions about how the nuclear capabilities of the bloc could substantially complicate strategic responses from the United States and its allies. For instance, the possibility that China could extend a nuclear deterrent to cover Russia in the event of a major escalation in Europe, or conversely, that Russia could do the same for China during a conflict involving Taiwan.

What Can the U.S. and Its Allies Do?

In response, panelists called for greater clarity, determination, and cohesion from the United States and its partners. Specifically, panelists highlighted the need to improve strategic messaging and develop effective counter-narratives to resist disinformation, propaganda, and influence campaigns dispatched by adversarial blocs. Additionally, they emphasized enhancing resilience among allies and partners, empowering them to better withstand economic coercion, cyber attacks, and gray-zone provocations. Finally, experts stressed the importance of articulating a coherent geopolitical strategy that clearly outlines objectives, commitments, and boundaries, aiming to dissuade adversarial aggression while reassuring allies and partners of sustained support and reliability. Notably, one conversation acknowledged that while these recommendations were valuable, the reality remains that implementation would require considerable time. As we move forward, policymakers, analysts, and strategists must closely monitor these adversarial blocs, not just in response to immediate provocations, but as part of a sustained, collective effort to manage global security challenges.

This emphasis on future-oriented, long-term proactive measures returns me to my argument on emphasizing educational preparedness, innovative thinking, inclusive strategic dialogue, and building long-term resilience in the next generation. The responsibility to sustain geopolitical stability will be maintained by incoming generations of policymakers, diplomats, politicians, business leaders, and other global figures. The concluding session of the workshop specifically addressed the critical role that education and engagement of younger generations will play in preparing for and prevailing in future conflicts. Firstly, there is the necessity of better education for both military personnel and the broader public, especially younger generations, about current and future security threats. One example highlighted was the “Harding Project,” initiated in 2023 as a grassroots effort to revitalize professional military writing within the U.S. Army. This ongoing initiative encourages junior officers and non-commissioned officers to engage in scholarly writing and discourse, providing a platform to share field experiences, insights, and lessons learned. The Harding Project seeks to rejuvenate professional military discourse and support the integration of emerging leaders into strategic conversations, better preparing them to navigate future operational challenges.

Younger generations, who are often more familiar with emerging technologies and innovative platforms, will play pivotal roles in developing creative and

responsive strategies to future threats. Innovative thinking, technological proficiency, and adaptability, especially in a rapidly evolving security environment, will require continuous investment, cultivation, and support. Panelists additionally advocated for inclusive strategic dialogues that involve new-generation insights. An intentional inclusion of younger stakeholders in strategic conversations will not only broaden perspectives but also help prepare the next generation of leaders to understand complexities and effectively manage future crises. Finally, there was an acknowledgment that preparing societies for long-term, sustained conflicts and crises involves generational engagement. Through their participation in educational initiatives, public awareness campaigns, and interdisciplinary collaboration, emerging leaders will significantly influence societal resilience, shaping public perceptions while reinforcing national unity and determination.

The question on the future of geopolitical stability remains open, but the path toward stability and security will undoubtedly continue to demand expanded dialogue, deeper cooperation, and a commitment to inclusive and multigenerational leadership. By actively involving future generations in strategic dialogues, fostering their analytical and technological skills, and leveraging their innovative capabilities, we enhance national security preparedness and resilience against emerging geopolitical threats. Such deliberate inclusivity sends a clear message that the United States and its allies are committed not only to addressing immediate security challenges but also to nurturing future leaders equipped to uphold a stable global order.

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