



**FRAGILE BONDS, STRATEGIC
NECESSITIES: RETHINKING THE
LANGUAGE OF “NATURAL ALLIES”**

BY LINA CHANG

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[China](#), [Iran](#), and North Korea’s support of Russia’s war efforts through military technology [supply](#) has understandably exacerbated [Western](#) fears of an emerging bloc.

Russia has signed agreements dedicated to increased defense cooperation with [Iran](#) and [North Korea](#) and continuously reaffirmed its “[no-limits](#)” partnership with China, notably through increased joint military and logistical developments in the [Arctic](#). Beyond defense, the four countries are crucial to each other’s [economies](#) and work together in [money-laundering schemes](#) and [cyberattacks](#). Cooperation from what [experts](#) label as “[natural allies](#)” has earned them the title of “[Axis of Upheaval](#).”

[Politicians](#) and [pundits](#) more often use the vague term “natural allies” to bolster a potential South Korean-Japan alliance. On the surface, this label makes sense—the two neighboring countries [value human rights](#), [rule of law](#), [democracy](#), and [free and open trade](#). Just like this liberal democratic duo, [CRINK](#) (China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) is like-minded, carrying the same goal to pose a united front against the US-led international order.

However, these alliances are more superficial than natural, and liberally using the term “natural allies” is

an oversimplification of the complexities of cooperation. Underneath South Korea and Japan’s [celebration](#) of 60 years of diplomatic normalization lies long-standing [resentment](#) regarding [historical disputes](#). [Promises](#) of “future-oriented cooperation” between “inseparable” partners seem less credible, remembering Japanese prime ministers’ continued [visits](#) to the Yasukuni shrine, which honors class-A war criminals from the imperial period when Japan colonized the Korean Peninsula, and South Korea’s fickle attitude toward Japan, from [striking down](#) the supposedly [irreversible](#) 2015 comfort women agreement to President Lee Jae Myung [backtracking](#) his previous anti-Japan [posture](#). Although such historical issues have previously dampened [economic relations](#), [resolved](#) tensions only show that the pair’s growing closeness is not a product of nature, but a conscious decision of pragmatic diplomacy over reactionary impulse.

Past contentions have also sown seeds of distrust in CRINK. Iran’s suspicion of Russia stems from its painful [historical](#) memory of the Russian Empire’s capturing Persian territories in the 18th and 19th centuries and the Soviet invasion of Iran in World War II. This legacy continues as the two engage in an [espionage war](#), with Iran allegedly stealing military-technological information and spreading religious propaganda in Russian communities and Russia taking measures to suppress such efforts. Like Iran, China is also victim to [territorial losses](#) at the hands of Russia, and this historical resentment dating back to the Qing Dynasty fuels young, well-educated Chinese citizens’ cautious attitude toward Russia. These deep insecurities are double-sided, with a recent leaked Russian [memo](#) labeling China as an enemy and raising flags about Chinese spies and reclamation of Vladivostok and other former Qing territories. These worries are not unfounded, as the Chinese government has in fact [launched](#) a hacking campaign since the beginning of the war in Ukraine for Russian military secrets despite the two [pledging](#) to not hack each other. North Korea has a [history](#) of [switching alignment](#) between Russia and China, depending on their strategic needs. Its relationship with China is particularly hot and cold, with Kim Jong Un previously [describing](#) China’s attempt to reform the North Korean economy as a “filthy wind of bourgeois

liberty.” In recent history, Russia and China have both [supported sanctions](#) against North Korea over its nuclear programs, showing the limits to friendship when North Korea [proves](#) to be a strategic liability.

Beyond history, both of these so-called natural alliances have diverging strategic interests that hinder smooth cooperation. Japan and South Korea, for one, have different [threat perceptions](#) of China—Japan has had a more antagonistic approach since the 2010s due to the escalation of the Senkaku/Diaoyu islands dispute, while South Korea has fluctuating alignment with China based on Beijing’s approach to North Korea. South Korea’s dependence on both China and the US for economic and security purposes and its bandwagoning tendencies between its two rival partners has created a recipe for disaster. The [THAAD](#) incident, in which South Korea’s deployment of a US missile defense system prompted economic retaliation from China, highlights South Korea’s vulnerable position in balancing its alliances with the US and China. The fact that South Korea’s alliance with Japan has strengthened despite such varying interests is less natural and more proof of hard diplomatic work of maintaining multilateral partnerships and preventing the emergence of adversarial coalitions.

Strategic interests also often clash between Russia and the other members of CRINK. Russia competes with Iran for oil markets, maintains ties with Iran’s enemies, [Israel](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#), and aims to [contain](#) Iran’s growing influence in the South Caucasus. Contrary to popular belief, it is in China’s best interest for Russia to not come out as the winner of the Ukraine war, as Russia will become an immediate threat to China and prevent China from building influence in Europe. In fact, China is already preparing for a post-war Ukraine, signaling its interest in Ukrainian [reconstruction](#) efforts and [signing](#) agricultural cooperation agreements. Russia and China also [differ](#) on North Korean nuclear capability, with China finding North Korea’s nuclear program a threat to stability on the Korean Peninsula, while Russia aims to leverage North Korea’s nuclear program to distract the US.

Terming countries as “natural allies” acts as a band-aid of convenience that covers up the possibility of interrogating the nuances and deep scars of such

partnerships. The term also burdens Japan and Korea with the responsibility of fixing their relationship rather than getting mutual partners like the US to mediate and help the pair navigate their relationship.

This label can hinder international progress by closing up opportunities to cooperate with unconventional allies. Alienating and grouping countries together, terming them as the “Axis of Upheaval” and laying sanctions, only strengthens external and internal perceptions that these countries are a bloc. Although evidence suggests otherwise, this grouping enables an oppositional framework for these countries to operate in instead of creating opportunities for engagement. This misalignment in perceptions can, in turn, prompt other illiberal countries to side with the “Axis of Upheaval” in a fight against a liberal democratic order. Lastly, this isolating term treats China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea as lost causes, when the US can instead find ways to exercise its soft power to drive wedges into adversarial partnerships.

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