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Revisionists Rising: An Analysis of Behaviour, Strategies, and Consequences

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Introduction

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Most contemporary analysts appear to agree that the United States' (US) 'unipolar moment' has passed.[1] There are differing opinions, however, as to whether another bipolarity is emerging, such as between the US and China, or some other variant of a multipolar order.[2] The different configurations of global power brings challenges of varying degrees and character, which in turn raise the risk of wars and other crises. This creates issues for the US-led liberal international order (LIO) and sets the stage for a shift in the balance of power and its distribution among state actors in the international system.[a]

a The international system is concerned largely with how states behave and interact with each other, primarily defined by the lack of a central authority. The system is thus anarchic in nature. The international structure primarily includes organising principles and the distribution of power based on configurations resulting in polarity (unipolarity, bipolarity or multipolarity). The international order is about the rules, norms, and institutions shaped by the existing structure which helps consolidate a wide legitimacy in behaviour and, therefore, predictability among states.

Four states commonly described at present as 'revisionist'—i.e., China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK)—represent four varied (sub)geographies; among them, two (China and Russia) are in strategic alignment. The observed behaviour of the CRINK states, either on their own or in convergence with each other, carries serious implications for the evolution and maintenance of the LIO.

In the past decade, the China-Russia alignment as a fulcrum of the CRINK-centred network has materialised. Chinese President Xi Jinping has consolidated the broad contours of an alternative worldview of a mutually beneficial cooperation to conceptualise a different model for the conduct of international relations.[3] This sowed the seeds of the 21st-century revisionism which gradually became a loose nexus among the CRINK states. Beginning in 2022, Russia's war against Ukraine served as an inflection point for the revisionist states to undertake policies with more consequential outcomes against the already challenged position of the US in the post-unipolarity phase.

Against this backdrop, this special report scrutinises the question: How do revisionist states behave during times of crisis? Indeed, amidst the uncertainty brought about by crises, states can create opportunities for themselves, too. Among the revisionist actors, it is *ambition* that fundamentally drives their behaviour—i.e., their quest for change in the current global order.

The articles in this report are guided by the framework of 'systems theory',[b] which views a particular system as having its own sub-elements that also, on their own, influence the entire system—i.e., a "system of systems". An international order is thus a constituent product of different functions constituting an "order of orders". These numerous functions result in sub-orders—namely, military order, information order, political order, economic order, nuclear order, maritime order, and technological order. Certain analysts posit that an order and its analysis encompasses "an order's creation, consolidation and decline."[4]

b The Systems approach is the study of inter-related variables forming one system, a unit, a whole which is composed of many facts, a set of elements standing in interaction. This approach assumes that the system consists of discernible, regular and internally consistent patterns, each interacting with another, and giving, on the whole, the picture of a self-regulating order. It is, thus, the study of a set of interactions occurring within, and yet analytically distinct from, the larger system.

An international order is therefore subject to influence due to changes in the policies and approaches of the key actors, with implications for the equilibrium of power and the structure of the international system. The analyses presented in this report encompass the activities, threats, opportunities, and challenges either being created or exploited by the revisionist states to pursue their respective and collective ambitions.

The world thus faces a dilemma: while a more effective international order is urgently needed, it is becoming more difficult to come to an agreement on the basic principles, norms, and rules that will guide such cooperation. Indeed, all concepts of international order, regardless of who promotes them, are contested as a result of power shifts and power diffusion.[5]

This report studies the behaviour of the CRINK states by analysing not the actors, but the processes and functions. It is divided in eight chapters.

Chapter 1 identifies the ideological convergence that forms the basis for a growing alignment among the CRINK states. This new alignment is centred around the political understanding among the leaders of the CRINK states that is also manifesting in the military domain. The political alignment also shapes the contours of their economic and governance-related convergence.

Chapter 2 delves into the logic of economic cooperation flowing from the political understanding among the CRINK states—that of creating alternative mechanisms against the trade wars and tariffs from the US to reconfigure global geoeconomics. Platforms like BRICS, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) exemplify the concerted efforts of these revisionist states to challenge the dominance of the decades-old Bretton Woods framework.

Chapter 3 underscores how military power—generally the last resort and ultimate arbiter in international politics—is undergoing a transition. The consolidation of military power by revisionist states—challenging the regional order in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia—is having the effect of normalising the threat or use of force in the nuclear environment. This behaviour raises the risk of escalation and challenges regional peace and order across geographies.

Chapter 4 decodes how the nuclear order is moving towards a state of disorder. State postures, including Russia's TNW-based sabre-rattling and policies more inclined towards brinkmanship and warfighting, bring a massive challenge for escalation management and deterrence. The idea of arms control amidst lack of trust in the US-Russia dyad has has come to an end. China's modernising arsenal, North Korean brinkmanship, and the Iranian challenge to the non-proliferation regime comprise the structural challenges to the existing nuclear order.

Chapter 5 unpacks how the CRINK nexus is disrupting the information order, particularly in cyberspace, due to the lack of institutionalisation of norms for managing technological advances. Cyberspace has thus become a zone of operations for the revisionist states to target and manipulate democratic processes to undermine these countries' institutions and weaken cohesion within societies. Such deliberate "cyber (dis)order" erodes trust and risks fragmenting the global information order. Both normative and institutionalised efforts are required to mitigate this challenge.

Chapter 6 underscores how the great-power competition in the 21st-century has increasingly shifted to the high seas. The revisionist states, especially China, have adopted an assertive maritime posture underpinned by A2/AD technological capabilities. Through sustained naval signalling, large-scale exercises, and strategic access to overseas ports, Beijing and others are aiming to consolidate influence and secure control over critical sea lanes. Consequently, long-standing norms of freedom of navigation and open connectivity have become targets of coercive, infrastructure-linked policies, reflecting a broader contest over access, mobility, and maritime governance.

Chapter 7 focuses on institutions that form the bedrock of the liberal international order. However, the ideational contestations of the CRINK front on issues of global governance, marked by the quest for change in the institutional frameworks and coordinated measures to bypass norms and processes, have become the new reality. Since the war in Ukraine, these revisionist states have defied UN sanctions, thereby undermining institutional mechanisms.

Chapter 8 outlines how high-end technological leaps in Artificial Intelligence (AI) and quantum, and their associated supply chains, have become a new arena of inter-state contestations. The CRINK states have formed an alignment to support R&D and innovation measures in the domain of critical technologies to achieve autonomy and simultaneously challenge the historical tech dominance of the West. This has implications for export controls, regulation, as well as governance frameworks related to technology.

This report finds, overall, that there remains an element of ambiguity among CRINK states, impeding a complete convergence against the prevailing international order. It argues that there are limits to the multi-dimensional front that the revisionist states are attempting to create, due to both structural constraints and capability differentials. At the same time, however, mitigating the new and more complex challenges facing the liberal international order will not be an easy task. The US, its allies, and like-minded partners are under more pressure than ever to find effective and inclusive solutions to the current elements of disorder.

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1

Between Alignment and Alliances: The Rise of CRINK States

Vivek Mishra and Kalpit Mankikar

The global order has moved more rapidly towards flux and fragmentation in the last five years than it has in the first two decades of this century. Perhaps the single most prominent feature of this emerging shift is the escalating nature of conflicts that have broken out in the last decade. While the conflicts in Eastern Europe and the Middle East have dominated the re-ordering of geopolitics, the shrinking of the 'Overton window'[a] on China's potential takeover of the Taiwan Strait could invert the equations of power and dominance between the Global North and Global South. Other than growing individual assertions of sovereignty and power by states, the rise of coordinated revisionist behaviour by China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK)[1] marks an inflection point for the liberal international order. As such, the strategic trajectories of the CRINK states merit attention, especially focusing on how the Russia-Ukraine war catalysed these countries' convergence not as a formal alliance but as a loose partnership united by shared ideological discontent[2] and galvanised further by other conflicts and crises.

a The 'Overton window' is a model for understanding how ideas in society change over time and influence politics. It is meant to describe the range of policies considered acceptable by the majority of a population at a particular time. In this particular usage, it refers to the definitive change in the Chinese discourse on Taiwan and the seemingly acceptable reckoning of it by the rest of the world.

Among the most noticeable trends are the political realignments underway, revealing how the geopolitical shock of war and Western sanctions have accelerated informal cooperation among the CRINK states in ways that disrupt traditional alliance frameworks. The ideological undercurrents animating CRINK, which represent alternative forms of governance compared to Western democracies, are the second factor dictating this shift. The West refers to it as the growing authoritarian pushback against liberal norms and institutions. This ideological contest is not only eroding consensus within global governance frameworks but also pushing alternative models of global order rooted in state control, regime security, and strategic autonomy.

The third factor is related to the shifting economic logic that binds CRINK, depicting how these countries are increasingly leveraging sanctions evasion, strategic decoupling, and parallel institutions to reassert economic sovereignty while undermining existing economic hierarchies.[3] As such, it may be useful to assess the systemic consequences of CRINK's rise, not merely as a coalition of revisionist states but as a structural force reshaping the rules, norms, and authority of the prevailing international order, both in the short and the long term. Three metrics are important in any such evaluation: political, technological, and nuclear/strategic.

Realignments and Bandwagoning

The liberal international order, which emerged in the aftermath of the Second World War and was consolidated in the subsequent decades, now faces what is perhaps its most profound test yet.[4] Unlike earlier phases of contestation, where ideological blocs were clearly demarcated, the ongoing fragmentation is multipolar, asymmetric, and opportunistic, intensified by US President Donald Trump's unmeasured decisions and choices. The prolonged nature of the Russia-Ukraine war has catalysed this shift by cracking open long-standing alliances and forcing countries to reposition their diplomatic and strategic bearings.[5]

While Western powers have moved to economically and militarily isolate Russia, North Korea, and Iran by varied means, a substantial segment of the Global South, including India, has charted a different course, combining hedging with other strategies such as economic diversification and a recalibration of complete reliance on the West to circumvent the sanctions regime. The isolation of China by the West has been the most difficult. The consequent repositioning by a vast number of countries from the Global South has engendered a divergence, revealing an emergent order within the order where pragmatic interests outweigh ideological coalitions.

Russia, sensing both its own battlefield stagnation and diplomatic exhaustion in American diplomacy, has doubled-down on a long game, absorbing incremental territorial gains while building a countervailing coalition that dilutes the West's diplomatic heft. The return of Trump to the White House was initially interpreted in Moscow and Beijing as a geopolitical opportunity, when Washington's transatlantic commitments seemed highly uncertain and its Indo-Pacific strategy lacked resolute commitments. Some of those expectations have dissipated in the light of Trump's transactional foreign policy, which has vacillated between cutting slack for Russia and increasing frustration with it. Trump's blanket targeting of most of the economies of the world and disdain for multilateralism provide fertile ground for the CRINK states to reframe global governance around state sovereignty and regime survival. In the latest instance, Trump's military targeting of Iran alongside Israel[6] has further fuelled Iran's intransigence on nuclear enrichment.

This bandwagoning is visible not only in military terms but also in how diplomatic formats are evolving. Whether it is through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), BRICS-plus,[b] or ad-hoc alignments around Middle Eastern conflicts, the CRINK states are amplifying their political reach by exploiting the contradictions within the West's own alliances and partners. The Israel-Hamas conflict, for instance, has deeply polarised Arab states, some of which have embraced normalisation with Israel through the Abraham Accords.

b Here BRICS Plus refers to the original five BRICS members (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and six new full members: Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

Saudi Arabia, once a linchpin of US strategy in the region, now finds itself recalibrating based on both domestic sensitivities and broader connectivity projects like the India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC), whose success may be contingent on the outcome of the Gaza war. This ambiguity provides an opening for China and Russia to position themselves as balancers and beneficiaries of disorder.

The CRINK Imprint

The trajectory of the CRINK axis is increasingly assuming a definitive shape, one that suggests the consolidation of this grouping will only deepen with time. What the world is witnessing is not merely ad-hoc coordination, but the gradual crystallisation of a bloc that finds coherence across ideology, strategy, and necessity. The final imprint of CRINK is taking hold for three interrelated reasons.

First, there is the cultural and political outlook that binds these states together. The CRINK group represents a club of non-democracies that distinguish themselves from the West on both ideological and strategic grounds. Their political systems privilege regime security over individual freedoms, creating a natural point of convergence. This conservative orientation in interstate relations reinforces the narrative that liberal democratic frameworks are intrusive, destabilising, and ill-suited for their societies. By positioning themselves against Western democracy promotion, human rights rhetoric, and open-market prescriptions, CRINK states cultivate a sense of solidarity rooted in defending sovereignty and preserving political control. For leaders of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the ideological convergence has as much to do with political survival at home as with projecting an alternative vision of global order abroad.

Second, the policies coming from Washington under Trump 2.0 have catalysed deeper CRINK consolidation. Trump's sweeping economic tariffs and aggressive military posturing toward one or more of these states have created a shared sense of vulnerability and common cause. Instead of dividing them, such coercive policies have nudged these countries into greater coordination, with China emerging as anchor. Beijing's economic and technological weight provides a gravitational pull that allows weaker states like Iran and North Korea to tether themselves to a more stable partner.

Russia, bogged down in its protracted war with Ukraine and burdened by Western sanctions, increasingly views alignment with China as the only viable path to sustaining its long-term strategic ambitions. In this sense, Trump's strategy of mixing pressure, isolation, and baiting has paradoxically strengthened the logic of bandwagoning among the CRINK states.

Third, China's economic rise provides the material backbone for this grouping. Much as Europe relies on the US for its security guarantee, the weaker members of CRINK increasingly depend on China for both economic sustenance and political assurance. Beijing's ability to extend loans, provide energy alternatives, supply food and critical goods, and shield allies diplomatically in multilateral fora gives it disproportionate influence. For Xi Jinping, this fits seamlessly into his broader project of consolidating power at home while projecting China abroad as the nucleus of an emerging non-Western order. It allows Beijing to cultivate an ecosystem where alternative state systems can pool strength, resist Western coercion, and negotiate with greater confidence.

Yet this consolidation, while visible, is not without limits. Historical precedent shows that China has often stopped short of fully underwriting its partners' risks. Its vocal criticism of Washington's use of bunker-busting bombs against Iran,[7] for example, did not translate into direct intervention. Similarly, Beijing provides essential lifelines to North Korea in terms of food and basic supplies but remains cautious about overcommitting, particularly given concerns about Pyongyang's nuclear proliferation activities. Even with Russia, the partnership is asymmetrical. Moscow recognises that its future is tied to Beijing, but also that it cannot match China in technological innovation, financial heft, or military-industrial capacity. These asymmetries are tolerated for now because of necessity, but they may also be seen as carrying the seeds of potential friction in the long run.

The SCO summit in Tianjin in 2025[8] illustrated how CRINK members are using multilateral formats to amplify their influence and resist Western isolation. With Washington escalating trade restrictions against China, pressing Russian President Vladimir Putin for concessions in Ukraine, and threatening Iran with further strikes, the incentives for CRINK states to coordinate only multiply. Their collective posture resonates particularly with parts of the Global South, which in many ways also resent Western prescriptions and interference.

Indeed, Finnish Prime Minister Alexander Stubb's warning that the West must engage with the Global South more courteously[9] is both timely and pertinent to the evolving geopolitical context. As the liberal order falters under the weight of conflict, sanctions, and selective interventions, the CRINK states and their aligned actors are shaping agendas of their own. The imprint of this axis is not limited to hard power or economic arrangements; it is also about narrative dominance, particularly in presenting sovereignty, regime security, and multipolarity as legitimate alternatives to liberal universalism.

In sum, while CRINK may not be a formal alliance, it no longer remains a loose alignment either. Its consolidation rests on a powerful combination of ideological defiance, strategic necessity, and economic dependence on China. While internal frictions remain and asymmetries could constrain its coherence, CRINK's evolution into a structural force with the capacity to redefine the norms, rules, and balances of the international system may be getting stronger. The final imprint of this consolidation is not merely about the four countries themselves, but about the emerging cleavage in global politics: one between a US-led West struggling to uphold its dominance and an authoritarian axis determined to create a parallel order.

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2

The Logic of New (Geo) Economics

Jhanvi Tripathi and Soumya Bhowmick

The economic order cannot be read without considering its larger geopolitical context. Recent developments show that the 'free hand' of the market remains an ideal of liberal capitalist thought, even as economies like the United States (US), erstwhile champions of capitalism, are adopting protectionist policies to maintain economic supremacy. At the other end are the so-called 'revisionist' states—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—with differing levels of economic strength but a shared purpose forged by the West-led order.

All these countries have faced, or continue to face, economic sanctions, uniting them in a unique manner. The persistence of Cold War rivalries proves that the "End of History" was merely an intermission. This is evident in the trajectory of economic policies over the last decade alone. Whereas Francis Fukuyama's[1] assertion on the victory of the Western Liberal Democratic system at the end of the Cold War was proven premature, his thesis that economics and politics cannot be separated is becoming increasingly clear.

The Decade of Trade Wars

Trade wars are not new in the policy arsenal of rival countries. However, those of the past decade have been especially remarkable, as the impact of such disruptions in a globalised world system are being felt for the first time.

US President Donald Trump's first term (2017-2021) triggered a domino effect across trade policy circles, leading to two realisations: (i) the economic overdependence on China for products essential for modern life (from critical raw materials, to chemicals used in the pharmaceuticals sector); and (ii) the vulnerability of the international system once it ceased to serve the interests of the Global North.

This disillusionment deepened during the COVID-19 pandemic, when border closures triggered critical shortages, followed by the chip crisis of 2020 to 2023,[2] and later the second Trump administration, where sweeping tariffs and continued uncertainty in US trade policies have caused renewed turmoil.[3]

Russia, meanwhile, faced a fresh wave of sanctions following its military incursion into Ukraine in late 2022, reviving Cold War tensions.[4] The sanctions on using the SWIFT system[5] were not just a shock to Russia but to other countries that have been at the receiving end of sanctions from the West. Iran and North Korea have endured similar bans for even longer periods. North Korea, under heavy sanctions since the 1950s, has seen its economic growth and integration into global markets constrained. Notably, it has also faced economic sanctions from both China and Russia—its supposed allies—though these measures were later diluted or lifted. North Korea, for instance, was banned from using the system in 2017, and Iran in phases in 2012 and 2018.[6] The US, meanwhile, has effectively weaponised the dollar as a store of value.[7] North Korea remains dependent on Russia and China to sustain its limited participation in international trade.

With its trading ability curtailed, Russia turned to allies like China to build a consensus for an alternative financial system, exemplifying how politics directly implicates economics and, thus, geoeconomics.

Geoeconomic Reconfiguration

A number of countries, including India, see value in preserving multilateral systems in a fragmenting multipolar world. This has led to a renewed focus on reforming multilateral systems while also exploring new means of cooperation. There are two factors implicating this cooperation in the short term.

The first is the reconfiguration of supply chains. In the race to friend-shore, near-shore, or onshore critical sectors of the economy, countries are rethinking long-term economic strategies. China is at the forefront, with its 'Made in China 2025' policies reporting success.[8] Russia and Iran have managed the economic fallout from sanctions through resilient economic policies and in large part due to the sale of petroleum products. Russia also remains one of the world's largest producers of enriched uranium, which has implications for nuclear energy production and, therefore, the green transition.[9] Despite lacking in economic strength, North Korea holds substantial reserves of critical minerals and rare-earths,[10] much of which fall under Chinese control due to Beijing's strategic investments in the country. Given the recent trajectory of geopolitics—with conflict-prone actors along the Red Sea route and growing impatience over trade disruptions—it is unsurprising that these four powers are aligning to preserve their dominance in critical sectors of the world economy and, therefore, critical supply chains.

The second factor, linked to access to critical minerals, is the rise of digital technology and artificial intelligence. These minerals are essential for producing high-end semiconductor chips used in an array of commodities, from advanced machinery to electric vehicle batteries. This has also contributed to the advantage held by these revisionist states, mainly due to China's competitive and comparative edge in high-technology sectors and its dominance across the Electronic System Design and Manufacturing (ESDM) value chain.

That Russia, China, and now Iran, through BRICS, are negotiating alternatives to dollar trade to boost economic exchanges will also contribute to further multipolar fragmentation, even as it ironically creates a more democratised global order.

Shaping Spheres of Influence

As global power balances shift, four revisionist states—China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—are leveraging economic, institutional, and geopolitical tools to consolidate their spheres of influence. These actors share a resolve to challenge the US-led status quo and create a more multipolar, "post-Western" order.[11] Through massive investments in technology, new international frameworks, and hard-power manoeuvres, they seek to rewrite regional rules in their favour, complicating Western efforts to maintain a unipolar system.

BRICS, initially an economic consortium of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, has evolved into a platform for geopolitical cooperation. Its 2024 expansion to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), with Saudi Arabia as an observer, underscores a strategic pivot towards the Global South, aiming to amplify voices that advocate for a multipolar world order. This expansion diversifies the group's economic base and enhances its collective bargaining power, particularly as it now includes some of the world's largest energy producers and consumers.[12]

The BRICS group maintains that it is a *non*-Western and not an *anti*-Western platform. It is likely to remain as such given the presence of a few members interested in maintaining close ties with the US. Parallel to BRICS, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) has transitioned from a regional security alliance to a broader geopolitical entity. Iran's accession as a full member in 2023 marked a notable expansion of the SCO's influence in the Middle East.[13] This move facilitates deeper economic and security cooperation among member states, counterbalancing Western-led regional initiatives.

The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), led by Russia, exemplifies efforts to consolidate economic integration among post-Soviet states. While its economic impact remains modest, the EAEU serves as a vehicle for Russia to maintain influence over its near-abroad, promoting policies that align with its strategic interests.[14] The union's focus on harmonising regulations and reducing trade barriers reflects a desire to create a cohesive economic bloc that can operate independently of Western financial systems.

While excluded from most formal economic groupings, North Korea is being incrementally drawn into this alternate architecture through its deepening reliance on China and a renewed strategic embrace with Russia. Moscow has sought to integrate Pyongyang through security and economic partnerships, including discussions on transport and energy corridors that would bypass Western restrictions. China, meanwhile, sustains North Korea's financial viability through cross-border trade and strategic investment in its untapped reserves of critical minerals.[15]

China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) exemplifies the use of infrastructure development as a tool for geopolitical influence. With investments exceeding US$1 trillion, the BRI extends China's influence across Asia, Africa, and Europe, fostering economic interdependencies through large-scale projects.[16] While these investments have spurred development in participating countries, they have also raised concerns about debt sustainability and the potential expansion of Chinese leverage in domestic affairs.

Collectively, these initiatives represent not only a reaction to Western dominance but also a deliberate effort to construct a parallel global order reflecting the priorities of revisionist powers. The consequences are evident: financial systems are slowly bifurcating, supply chains are being rewired to reduce dependence on Western markets, and new forums are emerging to set rules outside the traditional Bretton Woods architecture.

In this evolving context, countries like India, Indonesia, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Türkiye have become pivotal "swing states". Their choices on energy security, digital finance, and trade standards will influence whether multipolarity evolves into fragmentation or a form of balanced pluralism. By actively shaping their spheres of influence, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea signal not mere resistance but a redefinition of the existing order—one that challenges the durability of the US-led system and compels others to recalibrate their strategies for autonomy and alignment.

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3

Military Power and Order: Cooperation, Coercion, and Use of Force

Kartik Bommakanti

Military power in international politics is fundamentally about how organised violence is used by the state. The state, being the repository of power, has a monopoly on the use of force within its territory. The capacity of the state to monopolise power is also a function of the nature of its institutions and who rules within the state. Between states, it is about relative power. This chapter evaluates how military power has been used to undermine unipolarity and the Liberal International Order (LIO) led by the West.

All interstate relations are conducted in the backdrop of war or its shadow. War is the *Ultima Ratio Regum* ("the final arbiter of kings") of international politics. Even if some states deem force not to have utility in international politics, the opposite can be true for others, especially the states analysed in this report—namely, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK). These states can be classified as revisionist because they are dissatisfied with the status-quo LIO. If these states preserve and develop their military capabilities, the consequences can be dire for those that do not maintain at least consequential military establishments. This is a reality that, today, the European members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and Japan are discovering vis-à-vis Russia and China, respectively.

More importantly, when all other conflict resolution measures fail, war becomes the supreme arbiter. Military power, specifically, is a product of the centralised state, especially in the contemporary era. The modern state underwent three phases starting roughly from the 18th and into the 19th and 20th centuries: first, centralisation; second, revolution and then nationalism; and third, industrialisation and then population growth, which accelerated the development of novel techniques for the use of force.[1]

The latter is important because coercion can involve deterrence and 'compellence'. Deterrence, which is passive coercion and dissuasive in nature, became the basis of the superpower competition between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. It regulated the superpower competition during the Cold War by preventing the conflict getting out of control due to offsetting nuclear capabilities. This condition, known as Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), continues to play a prominent role in contemporary conflict dyads such as those between the US and China, and India and Pakistan. In contrast to deterrence, "compellence" (the positive or persuasive side of coercion), as Thomas Schelling put it, "is inducing his withdrawal, or his acquiescence, or his collaboration by an action that threatens to hurt, often one that could not forcibly accomplish its aim but that, nevertheless, can hurt enough to induce compliance."[2] Third, the use of force can involve seizing either small or massive chunks of territory: a recurring fear and challenge throughout the Cold War and which has increasingly become a reality in the post-Cold War era.[3]

A Revisionist Assault and the Demise of Unipolarity

The CRINK states cooperate in various ways, defying the LIO. First, Sino-Russian collusion has emerged as a revisionist bulwark against the power of America and its allies in Europe and Asia. The surge in China's economic and military power has made Russia a 'junior' player in their bilateral relationship. This has occurred through energy partnerships and defence-industrial cooperation between the two countries. China's purchase of Russian oil and gas has helped underwrite and finance the war in Ukraine.[4]

In return, Russia has supplied China with weapons systems, such as sonars, nuclear submarine ballistic missile quieting technology, and advanced missile warning systems, even if China's dependence on aggregate has declined since 2020.[5] Beijing, in turn, has exported dual-use items to Russia amidst Western sanctions against Moscow.[6] Sino-Russian cooperation has also manifested itself in the form of Russian support for Chinese positions in the ECS (East China Sea), SCS (South China Sea), the Arctic, and West Asia.

Beyond its regional ambitions, Tehran has assisted Russia's war effort in Ukraine with the supply of drones and the establishment of production facilities.[7] Pyongyang and Moscow concluded a defence treaty in June 2024, whose Article 4 permits that if either country "falls into a state of war due to an armed invasion from an individual and multiple states" then [either party] "shall immediately provide military and other assistance [to the other]."[8]

Consequently, North Korea also joined the war effort on behalf of Russia by supplying artillery munitions and deploying its forces to fight the Ukrainian forces occupying Russia's Kursk region, whose eviction has been achieved. It can be safely concluded that a Sino-Russia-North Korea-Iran entente has emerged.

Coercion by CRINK States

China aggressively demands Taiwan's unification with the mainland and has resorted to the use of coercion at sea through its extraordinary territorial claims and artificial island building in the SCS and ECS. The latter tactic has been used to coerce other claimants in Southeast Asia, in addition to Taipei, to secure Beijing's claims through coercion, especially in the SCS. In 2016, Beijing also defied and rejected the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling in favour of the Philippines and against China's island claims in the SCS.[9]

China has also weaponised trade as a means to coerce its neighbours. For example, following an altercation between Beijing and Tokyo over fishing rights in the ECS in 2010, China banned the export of rare-earth metals to Japan, directly impacting the latter's automobile industry.[10] This episode set the stage for the monopolisation and the weaponisation of rare-earth minerals by China: a predicament that plays out today, and whose coercive effects are being felt by multiple countries including India and the US.

In other forms of defiance and contestation, North Korea withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003[11] and has conducted multiple nuclear tests since 2006.[12] Since then, it has conducted several highly provocative missile tests as well,[13] impacting the stability of the Korean Peninsula and the Indo-Pacific. This has greatly undermined the rules-based international order, particularly the nuclear non-proliferation regime, and could become a template for others, such as Tehran, to follow.

The Use of Force by CRINK States

China nullified long-standing agreements with India when it seized territory in Western Ladakh by crossing the Line of Actual Control (LAC). This fuelled animosity between the two countries in 2020, leading to bloody clashes between their forces in the Galwan Valley that claimed several soldiers' lives on both sides. The tension has since eased partially, with both sides agreeing to mutually coordinated patrols in some contested areas and establishing "buffer zones" in others.[14]

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represents a major step towards revisionism: it marked a massive escalation in the use of force, violating Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Russia's revisionist aims were already evident in the 2000s, as it invaded Georgia in 2008 and recognised the separatist Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as sovereign.[15] In 2014, it occupied Crimea and two oblasts in Luhansk and Donetsk in eastern Ukraine. Eventually, the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered a full-blown war between Kyiv and Moscow, with the former receiving support from the American-led West and China, at least tacitly, supporting Moscow. Russian expansionism is also a product of a combination of factors: reclaiming the power it had when the Soviet Union existed and undermining NATO's expansion eastward to Russia's borders.

Similarly, Iran has defied international pressure and sanctions to curb its nuclear enrichment programme that would help it build a bomb, making it a nuclear-threshold state. Its revisionist aims, born out of its revolutionary impulses, seek to destabilise regional order and use force through the active sponsorship of militant and terrorist proxies such as the Houthis, Hamas, and Hezbollah—the 'Axis of Resistance'—to fight Israel and undermine the Arab states, which is likely to worsen under the cover of nuclear weapons.[16] Matters escalated in April 2024 when Iran retaliated with direct drone and missile attacks on Israeli soil.[17] A few months later, in October 2024, the latter launched air strikes on Iran targeting the country's air defence systems and missile production facilities. Tehran retaliated through missile attacks, which paled in comparison to its own missile barrage against Israel in June 2025.[18] This culminated in the US launching air and missile strikes on Tehran's nuclear facilities. The strikes between Israel and Iran marked an escalation in Tehran's aggression and went beyond the use of proxies. Tehran's revisionism is meant to project and cement Iranian power across the Middle East, and the creeping weaponisation of its nuclear programme is intended to reinforce it.

Conclusion

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of communist satellite states in Europe, the United States became the dominant global power, bequeathing it the 'unipolar moment'.[19] It enjoyed such dominant position for two decades. This period of unipolarity ceased with the 2008 financial crisis. The two-decade-long intervening phase between 1989 and 2008-09 witnessed US intervention in the Balkans twice, followed by the September 2001 terror attacks that precipitated the "Global War on Terror", which led to the US invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and lasted at least formally until the American exit from the former in 2021.

The unipolar moment has given way to increasing bipolarity between the US and China, and the CRINK states are reinforcing Chinese power. Conventional wars could and have been fought below the nuclear threshold, but they are also likely to create dangers for miscalculations in the form of unintended escalation, and avoiding them will be a test. The CRINK states have resorted to various forms of coercion and the use of force within their respective regions, in a quest to undercut the Western, and specifically, the American-led international order.

Cooperation through international commerce is seen as a means to enhance comity and stability among states in the international system. However, even the density of international commerce, notwithstanding current tariffs and trade wars, has not and is unlikely to prevent future wars. Yet trade itself has coercive value as it has been weaponised, as was visibly demonstrated by China. To that extent, the debates and discussions on coercion can be somewhat widened to include economic and trade-related pressures and threats. Coercion today has taken the form of weaponised interdependence. China's curbs on rare-earth exports have adversely impacted the American defence industry, compelling Washington to seek a negotiated settlement. The US has sought to punish, but cannot impose countervailing costs without suffering reciprocal pain.

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4

Revisionism and the Erosion of the Global Nuclear Order

Rahul Rawat

International politics is witnessing intensified competition among states, leading to changes in the nuclear order.[a] As 'order' is what states make of it, the idea of nuclear order rests upon the sustained efforts of states, in the words of McGeorge Bundy, "to cap the volcano".[1] In this context, the nuclear order consists of three pillars: deterrence and mutual stability, arms control, and non-proliferation. This article assesses the state of these pillars to understand the influence of revisionist actors on the global nuclear order.

The Making of the Nuclear Order

Understanding the making and consolidation of the nuclear order is required to explain how it evolved and reached the current trajectory marked by elements of disorder. In the early decades of the Cold War era, states were unconstrained by any arms control frameworks. This unregulated period, from 1945-1970, was guided by "the logic of nuclear stalemate" as "each arsenal cancelled out the other."[2] The logic of mutually assured destruction (MAD) and mutual survivability became the core elements in this phase.

a This includes the following key developments: three nuclear powers, namely the US, Russia and China, with growing nuclear arsenals; regional conflicts influencing the strategic interests of these three actors; and technological developments in conventional military capabilities enhancing precision, lethality, and countermeasures shaping the contours of escalation and deterrence among states.

During the 1970s, the idea of negotiations to constrain and reduce nuclear threats became prevalent. The Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), and the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) became the hallmarks of cooperation and danger reduction between the United States (US) and the Soviet Union. Thus, the non-proliferation regime and arms control were institutionalised. Indeed, the Cold War era saw two major crises—the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis and the 1983 Able Archer incident—which led to the Limited Test Ban Treaty (LTBT) in 1963 and the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) treaty. The post-Cold war period came with its own shocks in the form of proliferation specifically in Iran, Iraq, and Libya in the Middle East, and North Korea's withdrawal from the NPT regime. The end of bipolarity also created more complexity to the task of regulating the order.

The strategic environment marked by the US unipolarity changed in the 21st century with China's rise. In terms of the nuclear order, the US withdrawal from the ABM treaty in 2002 prompted Russia to withdraw from the START II nuclear arms reduction agreement.[3] Further, the continuation of the Cold War era-based arms control framework, reliant upon the idea of bilateralism between the US and Russia, came under scrutiny. The proliferation of the Chinese nuclear arsenal and conventional military power, North Korea's missile threat, and a latent Iranian challenge form a new front of challenges to the nuclear order in the contemporary era.

The Emerging Nuclear (Dis)Order

The logic of nuclear deterrence remains central to the nuclear order. Since the war in Ukraine, a fundamental difference in US and Russian approaches of nuclear signalling captures the crisis of deterrence. Russia, on the one hand, employed nuclear threats to limit any direct Western intervention, whereas the US's nuclear signalling aimed to avoid escalation and signal reassurance among its allies in Europe and beyond. The war has also weakened the long-standing nuclear taboo, lowering the threshold for nuclear use and enabling violations of the proscription on territorial conquest under the cover of nuclear coercion.[4]

The frequent signalling in the form of nuclear sabre-rattling opens future avenues for lowered thresholds for nuclear use through plausible use of tactical nuclear weapons (TNWs) to stop the adversary from making territorial gains. There is a role reversal of TNWs in the European theatre from the Cold War period.

Simultaneously, China is consolidating its missile-defence architecture with Russian technical support, moving towards a launch-on-warning (L-O-W) posture.[5] As a consequence, China may intend to pursue serious conventional options against Taiwan in the near future. It may also draw lessons from Russia's use of nuclear threats, which constrained Western support to Ukraine and slowed the delivery of military equipment.[6] For the US, the North Korean missile threat amidst qualitative progress in the arsenal poses a challenge to fulfilling commitments to South Korean defence. Iran's ambiguity on nuclear proliferation is likely to remain a challenge for the Middle East as well as US interests. Overall, the revisionist actors are shaping their strategy to be more inclined towards warfighting, creating a dangerous precedent and a fragile foundation for future deterrence.

The second element, comprising the idea of arms control for strategic stability[b] has also seen a serious setback, especially since the war in Ukraine. The arms control architecture emerged during the Cold War to institutionalise constraints on the behaviour of nuclear powers, and it remained largely confined to the US and the Soviet Union (later Russia). As a tool for managing great-power relations, arms control proved effective for decades but became static, relying too much on a Cold War-era bilateral framework until Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The reluctance on the part of China to become part of a trilateral framework with the US and Russia is a structural reason for this end. The US withdrawal from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 2019 followed Russia's "sustained and repeated violations".[7] The sole existing instrument of arms control in the form of START, limiting the US's and Russia's strategic nuclear arsenals, is expiring in 2026. The shadow of the war in Ukraine looms over arms control and will likely influence both parties in the revival of diplomatic channels for bilateral cooperation.

b Arms control as a pathway to strategic stability is meant to reduce the incentives for states to engage in arms races during peacetime and thus the incentives for a first strike. See Thomas C Schelling and Horton H Halperin, *Strategy and Arms Control* (New York: The Twentieth Century Fund, 1961).

The war in Ukraine has left open the debate about the efficacy of extended deterrence and the non-proliferation bargain guarantees during a crisis. Both Russia and China are in pursuit of modernising their respective nuclear forces while expanding strategic non-nuclear capabilities and developing "exotic" systems such as advanced delivery platforms and direct-ascent satellite weapons. The non-proliferation pillar, defined largely by the NPT framework, is under strain as it approaches the limits of its own success. The current non-cooperative environment among nuclear powers limits the verification and control measures on increasing stockpiles of nuclear arsenals. Owing to the nuclear multipolarity, the modernisation efforts of China, Russia, and North Korea are central concerns. The diffusion of advanced technology and related advancements in the means of delivery among these revisionist actors becomes another impediment to non-proliferation efforts.

The receding idea of non-proliferation also brings an additional challenge for the US's engagement with its allies and partners abroad. The setbacks to non-proliferation in the post-Ukraine era have raised questions about the US's extended deterrence and reassurance to its allies in Europe as well as the Indo-Pacific. Within the alliance network, states have become inclined to actively debate the idea of proliferation to ensure their security in an environment marked by the stability-instability paradox created by China, Russia, and North Korean nuclear capabilities and posture. Non-proliferation may result in disarmament, which has now become a utopian dream.

Further, North Korea's expanding nuclear weapons programme,[8] along with reported Russian assistance in developing its nuclear submarines,[9] represents a major development against the non-proliferation regime in the 21st century. Iran, meanwhile, is leveraging its latent nuclear capability to extract new concessions in the post-JCPOA phase, particularly after the US strikes on its nuclear sites. Thus, from a long-term perspective, Iran has only become more emboldened about its nuclear ambitions. A political arrangement may or may not help the country's total adherence to non-proliferation.

Consequences and Postscript for a Nuclear Order

Though the US created the nuclear order to serve its self-interest, the consolidation of order over the decades has also advanced broader international interests, primarily the avoidance of nuclear war and the promotion of peaceful uses of nuclear energy. The nuclear order, in its current shape and form, has undergone both evolution and transformation, especially since the end of the Cold War. It has absorbed some serious shocks, with the war in Ukraine coming close to rupturing it. In the post-Ukraine environment, the nuclear order has become a prisoner of wider international politics. Amidst this reality, the future of nuclear order is contingent on two factors: first, how the US develops a robust long-term response to its assurance-related challenges vis-à-vis allies and manages the two near-peer nuclear competitions with Russia and China; and second, to what extent both Russia and China integrate and accommodate their ambitions.

The nuclear postures of revisionist actors—mainly, the CRINK states of China, Russia, nuclear-armed North Korea, and latent-nuclear Iran—challenge long-standing norms of non-proliferation, escalation control, and arms control. At present, there exists a two near-peer competitions alongside the North Korean nuclear escalation challenging the US and its allies in Europe as well as the Indo-Pacific region. However, if the negotiations in Ukraine lead to a bargain of territories, it may embolden other states, including allies, to pursue nuclear proliferation or at least seek a nuclear umbrella. The above scenarios will create excessive pressure on the US, especially as China and Russia may attempt territorial *fait accompli* under a nuclear shadow. The coercive logic of nuclear weapons also risks driving future proliferation and could become a factor in revisionist brinkmanship over Taiwan and South Korea.

Finally, the decay of the global nuclear order is evident, though it is certainly not a favourable outcome for the US. There is still hope if the US, its allies, and like-minded partners collectively frame solutions to plug the gaps, especially in the deterrence and non-proliferation pillars of the nuclear order. In this regard, US President Donald Trump's resumption of nuclear testing[10] signals a resolve for nuclear buildup against China and the Russian modernisation programme. Such an announcement may also open the door for a cooperative arrangement to manage nuclear arsenals among the US, Russia, and China.

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5

(Dis)order in the Information Age: Geopolitical Contestations Spill Over to Cyberspace

Soumya Awasthi and Abhishek Sharma

The geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between revisionist and status-quo powers is becoming increasingly difficult to manage in the physical world, whether in maritime spaces or across complex global supply chains. Yet, these contestations are not confined to traditional domains; they have become visible in cyberspace, too—where the boundaries between war and peace, influence and interference, have dangerously blurred.[1]

Cyberspace is no longer a neutral space for information exchange; it has become a contested domain of strategic importance. The liberal international information order (LIIO)—once envisioned as a substructure of the broader liberal international order, premised on openness, free expression, and decentralised governance—is facing a systematic challenge from authoritarian regimes.[2] Countries like China and Russia are leading this band, with North Korea and Iran actively supplementing their efforts.[3] These regimes do not only oppose the liberal order but are actively weaponising its openness to undermine the norms, values, and institutions it seeks to uphold.[4]

'(Dis)order' in Cyberspace, Defined

(Dis)order in cyberspace does not imply an absence of rules but the deliberate erosion of normative coherence and institutional trust. It is a form of strategic ambiguity, where rules are bent, ignored, or rewritten under the guise of sovereignty, security, or cultural relativism.[5] The disorder is both structural and ideational—it shapes how truth is constructed, institutions function, and societies perceive themselves.[6] Cyber intrusions, espionage, ransomware attacks, election interference, and disinformation and propaganda campaigns collectively disrupt order within the cyberspace domain.

The LIIO once promised to promote digital liberalism through transparency, open networks, and multilateral institutions. However, it has failed to anticipate how closed societies could adapt and challenge its core assumptions. Authoritarian regimes such as China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (or the CRINK states) have since built resilient alternative cyber ecosystems.[7] Instead of resisting from the outside, these actors have penetrated the liberal system and weaponised its architecture.[8]

These regimes deploy cyber tools not merely to steal data or disrupt services but to erode trust in democratic institutions, malign information spaces, and manipulate public perception.[9] Disinformation, propaganda, and cyberattacks are coordinated elements of a broader strategy to delegitimise liberal norms and institutions.[10] The result is a systemic erosion of order—a calculated effort to secure relative advantages while fostering long-lasting instability within adversarial systems.[11]

Table 1: Manifestations of Cyber (Dis)order

Country	Type of Cyber (Dis) order	Years	Details
China	Election/Political Interference	2023[12]/ 2024[13]/ 2025[14]/ 2024[15]	Chinese hackers' election interference in Canadian, US and Philippine elections. Chinese hackers target the US Republican presidential nominee's phones.
	Disinformation/ Propaganda Campaign	2020[16]/2018[17]/2024	Chinese COVID-19 and worldwide propaganda campaigns
	Cyber espionage	2024[18]	Chinese hacker group Salt Typhoon penetrates the US telecom networks.
	Cyberattacks	2024[19]/2025[20]	Chinese hackers attack the Taiwanese government and the Taiwanese military, disrupting the drone supply chain.
Russia	Election/Political Interference	2018,[21] 2016[22]	Russian attempt to hack 2018 midterm elections/Attempts to attack German Chancellor Angela Merkel's Christian Democratic Union Party
	Disinformation Campaigns	2007-2017[23]	Russian campaign against Estonia in 2007, Georgia in 2008, and Ukraine from 2014 to 2017.
	Cyberattack	2020/2023[24]	Russian cyberattacks against the Norwegian Parliament in 2020 and an attack against government ministries in 2023.
	Cyber espionage	2024[25]	Russian and Belarusian cyber espionage attempt against the Polish state news agency PAP.

Country	Type of Cyber (Dis) order	Years	Details
North Korea	Election Interference	2022[26]/2023[27]	North Korea attempts to interfere in South Korean elections/North Korea and hacks the South Korean Election watchdog.
	Cyberattack	2024[28]	North Korean hackers breach the personal emails of South Korean presidential staff.
	Cyber espionage	2009-2012[29]	North Korea's Denial-of-service attack against the Korean government, called Operation Troy.
Iran	Disinformation Campaign	2021[30]	The Iranian government launches a widespread disinformation campaign targeting WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, and messaging apps used by Israeli activists.
	Election Interference	2024[31]	Iranian hackers share stolen Trump campaign information with the Biden campaign.
	Cyber espionage	2021[32]/2024[33]	Iran spies on US military personnel and the UAE.
	Cyberattack	2023[34]	Iran's cyberattack against Israel's railroad network.

Source: Authors' own, using various open sources.

Mechanisms of Geopolitical Contestation in Cyberspace

Influence-Operations and Economic Warfare

Cyberspace has become an arena where the CRINK states exert influence to weaken opponents and promote their strategic narratives. Among the most effective tools of digital (dis)order are influence operations, which aim not to convert audiences to a particular worldview but to flood the information space with conflicting, polarising, and emotionally charged narratives.

Russia, for example, has perfected large-scale disinformation campaigns, particularly around Western elections, leveraging social media to amplify divisive content and erode trust in democratic institutions. Its use of *RT* (*Russia Today*) illustrates how media can be repurposed for epistemic warfare.[35] Rather than broadcasting outright falsehoods, RT promotes emotionally reverberating half-truths and selective framings intended to exaggerate societal divisions.[36] According to Hutchings et al., Russia's strategic communication techniques exploit populist sentiments and disaffection with elites.[37] The objective is to proliferate narratives that weaken people's trust in democratic processes. These strategies were evident in the 2016 and 2020 US presidential elections, the Brexit referendum, and multiple elections across Europe and Southeast Asia, where Russian "troll farms" were deployed to influence outcomes.[38]

China's approach, meanwhile, is a more structured model of information manipulation, combining censorship, state-backed media, and synchronised online activity to shape public opinion on its policies, corner the opposition, and influence its diasporic communities. It employs a model of "networked authoritarianism",[39] combining digital surveillance with platform governance.[40] China uses state media campaigns to spread disinformation against Taiwan and the US elections, while its diplomats engage in "wolf warrior" diplomacy through platforms like X.[41] Through projects like the Digital Silk Road, China exports surveillance technologies and institutional norms to the Global South, challenging the liberal vision of decentralised and pluralistic digital governance.[42]

For its part, Iran has run clandestine networks that push anti-Western messaging while targeting regional rivals such as Israel and Saudi Arabia with disinformation and psychological operations. Its cyber actors have also spread propaganda against people of colour during the US elections through fake media outlets.[43] Similarly, North Korea, although less sophisticated, employs manipulation to conceal its cyber heists and ransomware campaigns, thereby creating uncertainty that dissuades collective responses from its victims.[44]

Coordinated bot networks, AI-generated personas, and state-sponsored media campaigns further amplify these influence operations. Together, these cyber and informational tactics form a software-to-hardware model rooted in illiberal values. Whether in Taiwan's 2024 elections, the Philippines' 2025 vote, or across Western democracies, revisionist states pursue not outright victory but confusion—a sustained informational fog that incapacitates democratic debate and corrodes institutional legitimacy.[45]

In parallel, economic warfare is waged through economic coercion, trade restrictions, and debt diplomacy, as seen in initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative. This exploitation of energy dependency is achieved by weaponising oil and gas, destabilising markets, or using cyber intrusions to attack financial institutions and engage in cyber theft, as seen with the Lazarus Group.[46] Such operations erode the boundary between cybercrime and economic competition, blurring legal and strategic distinctions.

They reveal how CRINK actors leverage the openness of digital spaces to weaken adversaries at low cost while expanding their geopolitical reach.

Cyberattacks and Epistemic Destabilisation

Cyberattacks have become an important instrument of modern conflict that not only creates technical disruption but also have cognitive consequences. In this context, epistemic destabilisation refers to the erosion of society's shared frameworks for truth, trust, and authority.

CRINK cyber operations extend beyond information manipulation to direct attacks on infrastructure, finance, and governance systems. Russia's NotPetya attack in 2017, initially aimed at Ukraine, spread globally, causing massive economic costs and revealing the systemic risks of state-linked malware.[47] China has been implicated in the 2015 breach at the US Office of Personnel Management, which compromised sensitive data on millions of government employees, alongside industrial-scale intellectual property theft that undermines economic competitiveness.[48] Iran's record includes the 2012 Shamoon malware attack that wiped out data across 30,000 Saudi Aramco computers,[49] the 2012-2013 denial-of-service operations against US banks, and more recent intrusions into Albanian government networks.[50] North Korea has carried out at least a dozen attacks, including the 2014 Sony Pictures breach, the 2016 Bangladesh Bank heist, the 2017 WannaCry ransomware outbreak, and repeated cryptocurrency exchange hacks worth billions.[51] Collectively, these attacks destabilise the foundations of the digital ecosystem by undermining data integrity, corroding trust in financial and governance institutions, and blurring the line between criminal activity and statecraft.

Global Governance Vacuum and Institutional Gaps

The LIIO remains primarily under-institutionalised. Unlike conservative security architectures, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the information order has lax enforcement mechanisms, legal clarity, or even consensus on basic norms.[52]

Platforms such as the International Telecommunication Union and the UN Human Rights Council have become battlegrounds over digital governance. Authoritarian regimes argue for "normative pluralism", reframing censorship as a culturally relative right while jeopardising commitments to transparency and freedom.[53]

Despite fragmented efforts, such as the Budapest Convention, the Tallinn Manual, or the UN's OEWG and GGE processes, there is little agreement on the rules of engagement in cyberspace.[54] In the meantime, private technology firms, rather than states, are forced to act as the de-facto regulators of global cyberspace—an unsustainable model in the long run.[55]

Towards a Fragile or Pluralistic Cyber Order?

The present disorder does not indicate an absence of order but rather the coexistence of competing visions. The liberal model advocates openness, decentralisation, and individual freedom, while the authoritarian model promotes control, sovereignty, and state primacy. What is unfolding is a global competition over digital values.

As strategic mistrust deepens and normative convergence appears unlikely, the world risks entering an era of fragmented internet regimes. Digital balkanisation, where states increasingly create digital firewalls, promote indigenous technologies, and retreat from multilateral cooperation, may become the default setting.[56]

Yet opportunities remain for regional and regime-level cooperation. The EU's regulatory leadership in protecting digital rights, India's data sovereignty debates asserting state authority over Big Tech, and ASEAN's normative dialogues collectively offer avenues for a pluralistic, albeit fragile, cyber order.[57]

The Future of Geopolitical Contestation in the Information Age

Cyberspace is no longer just a communications platform; it is a geopolitical arena. The (dis)order being observed is not accidental but orchestrated. Revisionist powers are pursuing a multi-domain campaign that challenges the intellectual, normative, and institutional underpinnings of liberal democracy.

This disorder is not arbitrary; it is calculated, adaptive, and systematic. Defending the liberal international information order will require more than technical resilience; it needs a normative commitment to transparency, truth, and diversity in the digital realm.

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6

Maritime Chessboard: Revisionists, Grey Zones, and Global Sea Lanes

Pratnashree Basu and Sayantan Haldar

The maritime domain is increasingly being characterised by the assertive actions of revisionist powers that utilise grey-zone tactics, such as maritime patrols with legal posturing, jurisdictional lawfare, and infrastructure sabotage. These approaches are reinforced by advanced military technologies that enable Anti-Access/Area-Denial (A2/AD) strategies. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea—or the CRINK states—are employing diverse methods to assert control over strategic waterways and undermine established norms.

China, for example, employs coast guard vessels under what it calls "rights protection law enforcement" to reinforce territorial claims.[1] North Korea flouts United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions through shadow fleets.[a],[2] Russia, meanwhile, leverages Arctic threats and Russian-North Korean oil exchanges to erode norms by projecting military power, weaponising energy routes, and using its vast icebreaker fleet to assert dominance over emerging sea lanes. This not only raises the risks of militarisation in a fragile environment but also creates leverage over global shipping and energy markets, challenging the freedom of navigation and strategic balance in the High North.[3] And Iran's persistent paradiplomatic naval activism invokes legal pretext while destabilising shipping in the Gulf region.[4]

a Since 2016, when the UNSC imposed sanctions on North Korea following its development of nuclear weapons, it has used shadow fleets for activities such as importing food items and luxury goods.

All four nations use coercive action that remains below the threshold of armed conflict to achieve strategic objectives without provoking direct military responses. Their legal warfare, or 'lawfare,' involves the manipulation of international legal frameworks to legitimise contentious actions, such as China's reinterpretation of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) to support its maritime claims. These strategies complicate international responses and challenge the efficacy of existing legal and diplomatic mechanisms.

Flashpoints

South China Sea, East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait

China's assertive maritime posturing in the South and East China Seas has escalated tensions with neighbouring countries. It has militarised artificial islands it built in these seas, expanded coast guard operations beyond its jurisdiction, and engaged in provocative actions near Philippines-held areas like Thitu Island—part of the Spratly group of islands—and the Second Thomas Shoal, both of them in the South China Sea.[5]

In May 2025, for instance, China deployed large naval and coast guard fleets near Taiwan, southern Japan, and throughout the East and South China Seas to conduct live-fire drills and simulate attacks on foreign ships and aircraft.[6] The activities were clearly aimed at asserting its dominance in the 'first island chain'—a chain of islands encompassing territories of Japan, Taiwan, portions of the Philippines, and Indonesia—and expanding operational capabilities, challenging the maritime claims of other regional actors. Satellite imagery shows ongoing dredging and island-building at Scarborough Shoal (also in the South China Sea) and other reef zones, transforming open sea into fortified zones and defying the 2016 UNCLOS tribunal's ruling against the nine-dash line,[b] which declared Chinese territorial claims and land reclamation activities as unlawful.

b The nine-dash line is a cartographic outline asserted by China to demarcate its sovereign claims across the South China Sea.

The Taiwan Strait remains a flashpoint: Chinese vessels in the strait have been implicated in damaging submarine internet cables, thereby disrupting communications. It is part of a systematic effort by Beijing to continue sustained grey-zone activities, testing the resolve and response of littorals and risking a collapse of the UN's rules-based order.

North Korea conducts covert ship-to-ship (STS) transfers in the East China Sea to smuggle oil and other sanctioned goods, often using vessels with deactivated automatic identification system (AIS) transponders and flags of convenience to evade detection.[7]

Black Sea and Baltic Sea

Russia is intensifying its military presence in the Arctic, establishing new bases and deploying advanced weaponry to secure the Northern Sea Route, a vital maritime corridor that is emerging amid the melting of ice due to global warming.[8] Its increasing cooperation with China to conduct military drills in the Arctic runs the risk of turning the region into a new flashpoint in the contest between the liberal order and revisionist powers. Moscow is also expanding its maritime footprint by leveraging its position in the Black Sea to control sea lanes, raising concerns about the security of undersea infrastructure. It covertly supports North Korea's evasion of sanctions by supplying it with sanctioned oil—satellite data from March 2024 onwards has shown North Korea-flagged tankers loading at Vostochny Port. In December 2024, the Estlink 2 submarine power cable between Estonia and Finland suffered an unplanned failure, suspected to have been caused by a Russian shadow fleet vessel dragging its anchor.[9] These moves are part of a broader strategy to project power and challenge the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) influence in the region.

Strait of Hormuz and Red Sea

In West Asia, the Strait of Hormuz and the Red Sea have become focal points for maritime security operations. The US-led 'Operation Prosperity Guardian' and the European Union's 'Operation Aspides' have been operating in the area to protect commercial shipping from threats posed by the Houthi rebels fighting the government in Yemen. The US Fifth Fleet has

also enhanced maritime security in these waters by integrating unmanned capabilities, combining unmanned platforms with traditionally crewed ships to monitor Iranian naval activities. Iran continues to employ its navy and maritime militias to disrupt commercial traffic, and leverages legal ambiguity to mount low-cost, high-impact coercive tactics against its neighbours, choking vital energy and shipping corridors.

Convergences and Coordination Among the Revisionists

The maritime collaboration among China, Russia, and Iran has evolved into a strategic alignment aimed at challenging the existing maritime order, promoting alternative security architectures, opposing Western sanctions, and pursuing greater autonomy in global affairs.

China and Russia have launched joint naval exercises and patrols in Arctic waters, including mixed fleets in the Bering Strait and coordinated bomber flights near Alaska throughout 2024 and 2025—activities officially framed as non-provocative but clearly signalling opposition to the US's and NATO's presence there. In late 2024, a Russian vessel called Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky joined Chinese coastguard ships in their patrols across the Sea of Japan into the Chukchi Sea—the first ever such joint coast guard patrol in the northern Pacific—underlining Russian support of China's 'Polar Silk Road'[c] ambitions.[10] They have coordinated long-range naval drills near Japan and the Philippines to reinforce a disruptive maritime posture in areas held by US allies.

At the same time, North Korea's growing military cooperation with Russia, including selling it ammunition in exchange for energy and food, suggests that Pyongyang could eventually serve as an auxiliary partner in both Russia's and China's Pacific maritime posturing.[11] Its strategic location facing the East Sea/Sea of Japan makes it a natural node in a China–Russia–North Korea alignment against US and Japanese forces.

c Polar Silk Road emerged as a concept in Chinese strategy to initiate connectivity architectures across the world. The emergence of the Polar Silk Road stems from China's growing interests in the Arctic and its calibrated efforts to expand cooperation with Russia.

China, Russia, and Iran have also been holding 'Maritime Security Belt' drills in the Gulf of Oman around the Strait of Hormuz since 2019, the most recent one in March 2025. Featuring corvettes, destroyers, and tankers, the exercise included electronic navigation interference—likely GPS jamming—to blind surveillance assets, thus testing shared doctrine at contested chokepoints. It underscores their growing effort to challenge US naval dominance in West Asia and project power across vital sea lanes. While naval operations between Russia and Iran alone are fewer, they have held joint exercises with countries such as Oman too—this was part of 'IMEX 2024'—reinforcing their shared interest in securing Indian Ocean routes.[12] Though less visible, Pyongyang is also increasingly entwined in this network and may be invited into future trilateral naval exercises, aligning against US security interests.

The maritime strategies of China, Russia, and Iran extend to developing and utilising strategic ports. China's first overseas military base in Djibouti is a logistical hub of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) and underscores its expanding reach into the Indian Ocean. Until early-2025, Russia maintained a naval facility in Tartus, ensuring its presence in the Mediterranean, but the change of regime in Syria, following the fall of Bashar al-Assad, has forced it to depart. Iran's Chabahar port, developed with international investments, including from India, offers strategic access to the Arabian Sea, facilitating not only trade but also military logistics, as evidenced by joint exercises among naval forces from Russia, Iran, and China in March 2025.

Responses of the Liberal Order

The liberal order led by the West has confronted the growing challenges posed by the revisionist states in the maritime domain. Much effort is underway in various maritime theatres to safeguard a rules-based maritime order where core tenets such as freedom of navigation, the open use of the maritime domain, and free sea-lines of communications, are protected. These efforts have been multifaceted, anchored in cooperation at various levels and scales, involving a multitude of stakeholders. They include strengthening maritime security partnerships by cooperating in maritime patrolling as well as in raising maritime domain awareness, and pursuing naval diplomacy and capacity building.

The Indo-Pacific remains at the heart of maritime cooperation. Given its vastness, imperatives such as freedom of navigation and overall respect for international law in its waters are crucial. China, with its belligerence in the East and South China Seas and the Taiwan Strait, seeks to advance the challenge of revisionism against the liberal order. To counter it, various countries, minilateral groups, and other stakeholders have been cooperating through platforms such as the Quad[d] and the Squad,[e] and activities like the Malabar naval exercises.[f] Washington has also bolstered security initiatives in the Strait of Hormuz, initiating 'Operation Sentinel' to ensure maritime trade routes remain open and free.[13] Similarly, Russia's advances in the Arctic region, Baltic Sea, and the Black Sea regions, have led to greater involvement of NATO and countries aligned with it to ensure freedom of navigation and protect maritime assets. In January 2025, NATO launched its flagship initiative, 'Operation Baltic Sentry', involving heightened naval patrolling of the Baltic, alongside establishing the Maritime Centre for the Security of Critical Undersea Infrastructure in Northwood, United Kingdom, in May 2024.

It is imperative for the liberal order to craft strategies that can effectively deter the advance of revisionist powers. The maritime domain remains a critical interface driving global growth and connectivity. A calibrated approach is needed; strengthening multilateral and regional institutions and including every stakeholder in the effort remains vital.

d A strategic partnership of the US, India, Japan, and Australia.
e Another informal alliance formed by the US, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.
f A maritime drill involving the navies of the Quad members.

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7

The Revisionist Threat to Multilateral Institutions and Global Governance

Heena Makhija

Rising military conflicts are posing unprecedented challenges to the postwar international order, causing a discernible transformation in global power dynamics. As the United Nations (UN), still 'unreformed', turns 80, its inability to maintain international peace, as well as its failure to address the challenges of global governance, have become more obvious. The UN no longer represents contemporary geopolitical power realities and continues to enable the domination of Western liberal ideas. This, in turn, has led to the rapid normative rise of authoritarian nuclear-armed states within the existing international institutions.

A 'revisionist state' is generally defined as one that seeks to change the established order, pursuing an equilibrium or superiority of power, sometimes using force to achieve such change.[1] In today's world, China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (or the CRINK states), are seen as revisionist powers, engaging aggressively with the existing international system to build structures that could potentially redefine the global institutional order.

Ideational Contestation: Revisionists in Global Governance

International institutions—even those that are informal—have long been governed by Western liberal ideas. These norms might be meritorious, but the partisan tilt they enable, especially in decision-making, has faced severe criticism from rising powers. The lack of institutional reforms, especially in the UN and its related bodies, combined with evolving global geopolitical contestations, have led to a resurgence of the revisionist powers within these institutions. Be it the showdown between the European Union (EU) and Russia over Ukraine, the intensifying trade war between China and the US, or the positions taken by various countries in the developing conflict in West Asia—all of them show that revisionist powers are resisting the post-war political arrangement.[2]

As far as global governance is concerned, revisionist powers typically pursue their strategic ambition by non-violent and diplomatic means.[3] However, it is critical to recognise the inherent 'ideational contest' between these revisionists and the existing hegemons: both aspire for a new order, but their concept of such an order is often at odds. Three perspectives are key to understanding the rising influence of the CRINK states in the UN and other related international regimes:

First: The CRINK states have been pulled together as a unit for analysis on the basis of certain ideational similarities. All of them are authoritarian states with questionable records on issues such as civil liberties, human rights, and gender equality. Analysts observe that their domestic political status and belief systems impact the kind of institutions and normative changes they support.[4]

Second: These states are not equal in power. Russia and China are at par with the United States, the United Kingdom and France, all five holding a permanent seat in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). Meanwhile, Iran and North Korea have been at the receiving end of the UN's sanctions regime.

Third: These revisionist states are members of, or seeking to build, alternative international institutions such as BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Yet, given its universal membership, the UN remains the primary multilateral institution where these states aspire to reconfigure existing global norms. Even with ideational differences over certain political principles, the struggle of revisionist powers is to gain more authority and leadership within the existing order.[5]

Strategies of Change in International Institutions

While 'realism' has been the dominant theoretical lens used to explain the behaviour of states in an anarchic international order, 'constructivism' helps to understand the reasons and tactics behind such social normative changes. The normative behaviour of states and the rules of global governance are not static. Constructivists recognise that ideational factors, apart from material ones, play a crucial role in shaping international norms.[6] To bring about the changes they seek, revisionist states often use tactics such as socialisation, bargaining, back-channel negotiations, and lobbying.

They also deploy political, economic, diplomatic, and technological strategies to gain influence within international institutions. In theory, they should be presenting an ideational opposition and denouncing existing norms. In practice, they often showcase 'norm signalling'—appearing to play by the existing rules of the game as a means of furthering influence.[7]

Perhaps the most useful example is China's engagement with international institutions—it has moved from negligible to aggressive participation in almost all major international regimes.[8] In a 2021 report, Human Rights Watch flagged human rights violations in China, especially the persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang province.[9] Yet, at the UN, China appears a follower of the human rights regime, recognising the Universal Declaration on Human Rights (UDHR) in principle. It is a signatory to most other international conventions as well. With the US receding from international institutions under the presidency of Donald Trump, China is filling the void by providing additional funding in areas such as climate change and global health. Indeed, China is currently the second largest contributor to the UN's budget and four of its nationals head specialised UN agencies—providing it with economic and diplomatic leverage to structure the discourse in regional as well as global institutions.[10]

Similarly, despite its reputation of being a 'rogue nuclear state', North Korea complies with multilateral entities such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).[11] Iran—another norm 'deviant' revisionist—has been proactive in the UN in its support for victims of chemical weapons and in its advocacy of the right to uranium enrichment. In the ongoing Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) negotiations, Iran has been critical of nuclear-weapon states for depriving others of their 'legal right' to technological cooperation in the peaceful use of nuclear energy.[12] Thus, even as 'rogues', both countries are engaging with the nuclear non-proliferation regime.

Of the four CRINK states, Russia, despite being a permanent UNSC member, has been the most focused on shaping alternative institutions, especially since the Ukraine conflict. It has positioned itself as defender of the non–Western order, viewing itself as the linchpin of the former Soviet republics. It seeks to further initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)—an economic union and free trade zone for Central Asia and Eastern Europe—as a counterweight to the European Union (EU).

CRINK in the UNSC: An Aligned Group?

Despite the commonalities, China and Russia's approach in the UNSC has leaned towards upholding the strategic status quo on the nuclear regime. Both voted in favour of UNSC sanctions against North Korea and Iran on nuclear weapons. Lately, however, they have also displayed an affinity for weakening the sanctions regime, have been complicit in sanctions' evasion, and opposed the US in denuclearisation negotiations.[13] Their informal alliance was visible in their voting pattern on resolutions dealing with war and conflict as well: Russia used its veto 13 times on proposed resolutions on Syria, and China joined Russia on seven.[14]

More recently, with respect to the Russia–Ukraine conflict in 2022, China has repeatedly abstained from the votes on, and Russia has vetoed, resolutions that denounced the 'annexation' of parts of Ukraine or termed Russia as the 'aggressor'. In the case of the Israel–Palestine conflict, Russia and China have tabled a number of resolutions for a humanitarian ceasefire in Gaza and put up a united front by vetoing US-led resolutions.[15]

Iran and North Korea exercise limited sway in the UNSC—they are not even non-permanent members at present, and have been at the receiving end of sanctions. But both countries support the Russian position militarily as well as diplomatically. Even in the case of the recent conflict between Iran and Israel, revisionists were huddled together—Russia and China did call for an emergency UNSC meeting backing Iran, even though the US eventually brokered a ceasefire between the two.[16]

Conclusion

The revisionist states have been strengthening their positions through strategic engagement in regional and international organisations. But the intensification of conflict the world over has brought international institutions to a crossroads. These states, especially Russia and China, occupy a crucial position in the UN and possess the normative capability to redirect the institutional values and the military prowess of the UN to support their allies. However, institutionally, the liberal ideology has permeated deep into UN discourse—the CRINK states have failed in institutionalising their normative values to build an alternative system.

Even from a power-centric approach, other rising powers, especially the developing countries, would prefer an 'egalitarian' democratic system over the CRINK replacing the Western powers; they view the revisionists as a security threat, too. For instance, many countries have resisted China's efforts to push the Renminbi as a global alternative to the US dollar. Even so, though restrained by ideational factors, the CRINKs are targeting the realignment of existing institutions and seeking to strengthen their sphere of influence within the UN and other organisations through economic and diplomatic measures. As the US recluses itself from international agreements, global governance faces the tough challenge of recalibration.

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8

From Dependency to Challengers: The Rise of CRINK States' Tech Ecosystems

Sameer Patil

The Western liberal technology international order that dominated the 20th century and the first two decades of the 21st century has come to an end.[1] In its place, a parallel tech empire driven by a group of revisionist powers led by China is mounting a coordinated challenge to Western hegemony. Beijing has embarked on a path to seek tech supremacy and deepened collaboration with other revisionist actors—namely, Russia, Iran, and North Korea. This China-led counter-architecture mirrors the Western liberal bloc, operating as a strategic counterweight. These states are ambitious and keen to expand their influence among countries not just in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and South America, but also on the periphery of the West.

What are the key strategies executed by this revisionist bloc in its quest to upend the Western liberal tech order? What is fundamentally driving this quest? What are the implications for the international system? This chapter unpacks these issues by examining the behaviour of China, Russia, Iran and North Korea (also referred to as the CRINK states). It will analyse three key strategies adopted by this bloc: seeking technological self-reliance, strengthening tech exports and parallel supply chains, and shaping alternative governance frameworks for critical and emerging technologies. Together, they showcase a technological sovereignty approach in their systematic endeavour to reduce dependency on Western tech and consequently disrupt its dominance.

Seeking Technological De- and Re-alignment

The key factor driving the CRINK countries to pursue tech self-reliance is to insulate themselves from the West, which routinely weaponises its tech dominance, primarily through the strategy of sanctions. These unilateral Western sanctions have targeted the CRINK countries' key government entities and strategic industries, denying them access to Western technologies and companies.[2] Consequently, much of the CRINK effort is aimed at circumventing these sanctions to pursue research and development (R&D) in key technologies. China and Russia, which are the primary targets of these sanctions, have developed countermeasures to safeguard themselves from these coercive measures and divest from the Western tech ecosystem.

Through centrally directed economic planning and state funding, Beijing has pushed its industries and research establishments to develop and commercialise advanced technologies, including artificial intelligence (AI), robotics, cybersecurity, and quantum computing.[3] These efforts are fructifying, as documented by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute's Critical Technology Tracker. Between 2003 and 2007, China led the way in three out of 64 critical technologies, while the United States (US) led in 60.[4] However, from 2019 to 2023, this trend reversed, with China leading in 57 technologies (and the US in seven), demonstrating the shift in the tech landscape over the last two decades through initiatives such as 'Made in China' that focused on advanced tech and civil-military fusion.[5]

Similarly, Moscow's technology strategy emphasises autonomy from the West. Its official documents have called for "independence from foreign critical technologies" and stressed self-reliance as integral to national power.[6] In practice, this includes import substitutions[7] and building domestic capacities through initiatives such as the National Technology Initiative and the GPV-2027 armament programme, which aim to stimulate R&D in AI, microelectronics, quantum, semiconductors, and dual-use fields.[8] Admittedly, these have fallen short, and Russia has become more dependent on Chinese technological imports.[9]

For North Korea, this approach has manifested in the ideology of '*juche*' (self-reliance), which explicitly promotes indigenous innovation in science and technology (S&T) to offset isolation.[10] State media and education emphasise "self-developed science" and set national standards, including ISO-aligned AI terminology.[11] Iran's policies too, are driven by sanctions-induced self-reliance. Since at least 2014, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has championed a "knowledge-based economy" focused on innovation that reduces dependence on imports and strengthens national security.[12] In a 2014 speech, he called for a "scientific jihad" to make Iran a "scientific power" in the Islamic world.[13] Under this vision, a parallel innovation ecosystem has emerged, where state entities pour resources into military-technology fields and "knowledge-based" startups. However, this emphasis often prioritises regime stability over market efficiency.[14]

Strengthening Tech Exports and Parallel Supply Chains

The longitudinal trajectory of the Chinese technological advancement is complemented by Beijing's persistent efforts to bring like-minded partners into its tech fold. With Russia, for instance, China has forged cooperation in dual-use technologies, spanning not just R&D efforts but also linkages between their innovation ecosystems.[15] Meanwhile, Western analysts suspect that China condones North Korea's malicious cyber activities against the US, South Korea and Japan, even providing the country with Chinese servers[16] and territory[17] to execute attacks.[18] Likewise, Chinese tech companies have expanded their presence in the Iranian market[19] even as Tehran and Beijing seek to explore deeper cooperation in AI and surveillance systems.[20]

Additionally, China has consolidated its technological influence through the Digital Silk Road (DSR) programme, implemented as part of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Under the DSR, China has added building blocks of digital infrastructure, including undersea cables, digital payments, CCTV networks, 5G telecom networks and smart-city projects in several countries in the Indo-Pacific, Africa, and Latin America.[21] It has also actively encouraged its tech corporations to secure overseas contacts and access new markets.[22] This has generated substantial foreign revenues, which are then reinvested to advance domestic technological capabilities.

Meanwhile, tech black markets have also flourished in all CRINK countries, exploring parallel supply chains to access Western technology that will enable them to sustain their domestic tech undertakings. A number of nondescript corporations have proliferated around the world, offering strategies to the CRINK states to evade curbs and continue importing sensitive technology from the 'trusted' pool of suppliers.[23] In 2022, one such Russian company, Novelco LLC, came to light for offering such services to Moscow.[24] Similarly, the semiconductor black market has flourished, with many companies offering to clandestinely supply American chips to China.[25] North Korea, meanwhile, has deployed its citizens to forge fake identities and secure various Information Technology (IT) and digital services-related jobs and projects in Europe and the US, to steal corporate data and information related to military technology.[26] Pyongyang has also established transnational smuggling networks to generate revenues for the regime.[27]

Shaping Alternative Technological Governance Frameworks

Beyond technological autonomy and smuggling, reshaping the standards ecosystem is another strategy that CRINK countries—especially China—are exploring. Beijing has adopted a state-centric approach to standardisation, leveraging its influence to reshape international norms in alignment with its technological and political objectives in the fields of 5G, AI, and the Internet of Things. Its China Standards 2035 initiative seeks to wrest control of the process of setting international standards from Western nations.[28]

The DSR complements this approach, whereby Chinese firms like Huawei execute telecommunication and infrastructure projects in other countries and implement Chinese standards. It has also sought to enlist BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) countries to hold standards-related dialogues.[29] This push for standardisation is also about challenging the Western liberal tech order.[30]

The Emerging Multipolar Technological Order

The above account makes it clear that the West's previously near-universal rules and standards are now just one among many. China has consistently and systematically diluted the inevitability and universality of Western tech by prioritising the R&D of critical and emerging technologies over the past two decades. Other revisionist actors have also sought technological autonomy in the pursuit of decoupling from the West, while also seeking access to Western technology.

As a result, they have created parallel supply chains to circumvent the Western barriers to accessing American and European technology.

This authoritarian technological alignment has fragmented the global tech ecosystem between the Western and Eastern blocs, with each seeking to expand its influence by enlisting more countries and gaining a lead in the 21st-century tech race. The result is the advent of a multipolar, contested, and ideologically polarised order, where parallel and fragmented technology supply chains thrive and consensual global governance frameworks appear to be a chimera.

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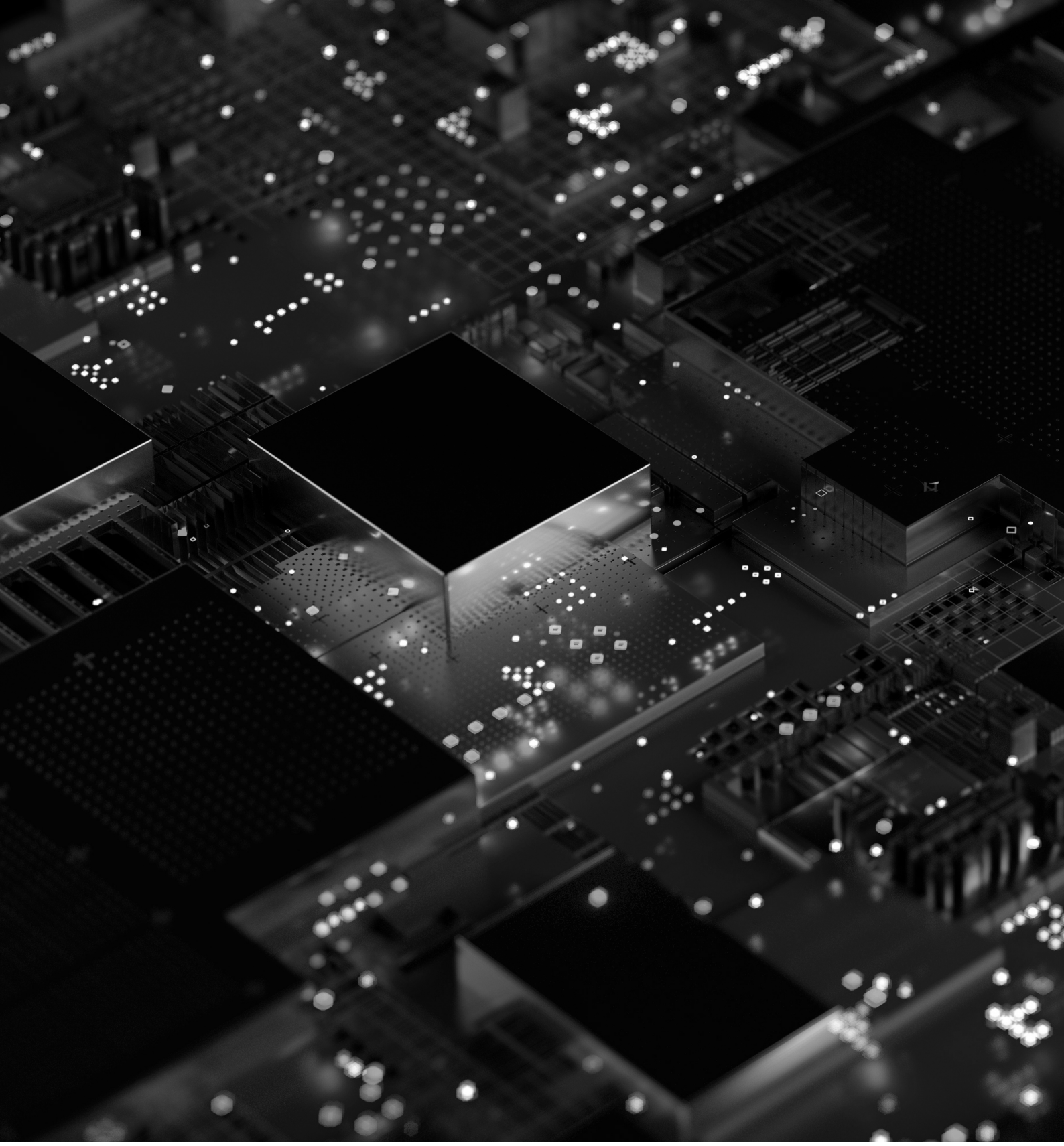

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