

THE CLOCK TOWER SECURITY SERIES



FY24 SCSS #10, July 24, 2024

“Russia End State: BRINK (Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea) Links?”

*By Mr. Jahangir E. Arasli, Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg,
Dr. David Lewis, and Dr. Graeme P. Herd*

Introduction

This seminar addresses the notion of a BRINK Quartet (Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea), a grouping spatially distributed yet strategically connected. Unlike classical alliances, hitherto BRINK relations represent a model of strategic coordination based on informal agreements and personal relations between the regimes’ leaders. Where there is institutionalization, this takes place bilaterally: the 1999 Russia-Belarus Union State; the June 2024 Russia-Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK) strategic treaty; and the pending Russia-Iran strategic treaty of October 2024. BRINK represents an anti-Western revisionist coalition, with Russia its cornerstone and center of gravity. Although the origins and drivers of BRINK can be found in global dynamics over the last two decades, Russia’s 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine proved to be the catalyzing factor able to bind this diverse group of states, each with different histories, cultures, and development models.

Let us first identify seven common denominators that unite BRINK states, noting that BRINK actors observe a principle of noninterference in each other’s domestic affairs, and ideological uniformity is not a prerequisite. We can then examine the Russia-North Korea relationship in light of Putin’s June 19, 2024 state visit that resulted in the signing of the “Treaty on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.” Do the results of this visit represent a qualitative shift to strategic partnership with a major regional impact and global implications? Or, by contrast, does the pact highlight a hard-nosed transactional bilateral opportunistic deal based on mutual temporal needs and interests but lacking trust, with Moscow prepared to give Pyongyang no more than necessary? With regard to Russia-Iran, is the traditional cooperation, competition, and suspicion mix that characterizes the bilateral relationship under revision? We conclude with reflections on how BRINK relations may be subject to future stresses and tensions.

BRINK's Seven Common Denominators

- The most obvious commonality uniting this quartet is a shared mindset based on anti-Western revisionism. BRINK states consider themselves “at war” with the US-led values- and a rules-based international order--Russia and Belarus for over a decade, Iran since 1979, and the DPRK from as early as 1950.
- Each of the ruling regimes are authoritarian and personalist in nature. Backed by robust security apparatus, they manage through similar ideologized mobilization models that substitute for democracy, a functioning state, a viable economy, and a vision of the future.
- BRINK states have militarized public consciousness, allowing leaders to maintain control over their respective societies. A perpetual protracted conflict with the West, based on propagandist narratives of encirclement that inculcate a “besieged fortress” mentality, allows BRINK leaders to instrumentalize fabricated external conflicts as a societal safety-valve as a means to explain and mitigate domestic crises.
- Each system seeks to preserve its systemic status-quo.
- The nuclear dimension is a perpetual deterrence concern. Russia has the largest weapons of mass destruction (WMD) arsenal in the world; North Korea continues to develop its embryonic nuclear capabilities; Iran is a nuclear-inspired threshold state; and Belarus hosts Russian nuclear weapons and delivery means.
- Each have similar patterns of strategic performance. They all adopt a zero-sum game approach and have militarized their international behavior (e.g., show of force, threat of use, or the use of force). They apply hybrid warfare tools such as disruption, disinformation, use of “weaponized” energy, food, and migration, support of violent nonstate actors, and deconstruction of WMD nonproliferation regimes. They target the political will, unity and cohesion of their adversaries through cognitive warfare and by activating influence networks and supporters located in Western societies and politics. Importantly, they synchronize strategic interaction worldwide to deliver effects that are harmful to the West. Active flashpoints divert attention from and disperse pro-Ukrainian efforts to counter what Moscow believes is a West-led proxy war against it.
- The quartet has a close alignment with China; as the Ukraine war continues, their dependence on Beijing increases. BRINK thus serves as Beijing’s “icebreaker” rather than a proxy force--China is clearly the net beneficiary of a distracted United States and divided political West.

BRINK members bring with them a secondary ring of part-timer spoilers—ideologically close regimes to Russia that are not directly involved in the war in Ukraine, including Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Cuba, Myanmar, Eritrea, the African Sahel regional cluster of military juntas (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso); post-Soviet parastate “black holes” (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria) and the empowered violent nonstate actors such as Hezbollah or Hamas. In strategic terms, BRINK aims to exploit western weakness and entangle the Western camp in a series of crises by applying a 5D track: divide the cohesion of Western allies, friends and partners; destabilize Western societies by exacerbating domestic tensions; drain Western resources by dispersing them to horizontally proliferating conflict zones; divert Western attention from supporting Ukraine; and deplete Western political will through nuclear blackmail and the projection of other threats.

Russia views the BRINK grouping as an essential element of its strategy to prevail in Ukraine: if Russia through BRINK can coordinate disruptive actions that saturate and overburden the West, it can prevail. We can discern Moscow's preferred emergent division of responsibilities between quartet members. Iran represents the Middle Eastern pillar of BRINK, able to wage proxy wars in the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen, project a belligerent posture toward Israel, and display a subverting show of force in the Persian Gulf and the South Caucasus. North Korea represents the Far Eastern pillar. It is able to continuously confront the United States and its regional allies (South Korea and Japan) and develops WMD and its delivery means, spotlighting the possibility of war in NE Asia. Belarus is the mainstay of the Eastern European pillar, able to generate tensions on NATO's eastern flank/EU's border. Russia, as the central pillar of BRINK, progressively tries to encroach into the African continent via outsourced expeditionary paramilitary outfits that provide hybrid security services to several anti-Western military regimes.

Russia-North Korea

President Putin's June 19, 2024 state visit to North Korea was marked by an opinion piece in *Rodong Sinmun*, the Central Committee of North Korea's ruling Workers' Party newspaper, titled: "Russia and the DPRK: Traditions of Friendship and Cooperation Through the Years." In this article, Putin emphasized that the "friendly and neighborly relationship . . . based on the principles of equality, mutual respect, and trust, goes back more than seven decades and is rich in glorious historical traditions." He noted the USSR was the first country in the world to establish diplomatic relations with North Korea and stated, "We highly value North Korea's unwavering support for Russia's special military operation in Ukraine, its solidarity with us on key international issues, and its willingness to uphold our shared priorities and views at the United Nations." Putin characterizes both states as two persecuted but resilient victims of an aggressive United States: "Our adversaries continue to supply the neo-Nazi Kyiv regime with money, weapons, and intelligence, allowing and effectively encouraging the use of modern Western weapons and equipment to strike Russian territory, and often striking clearly civilian targets. They're threatening to send their own troops to Ukraine. At the same time, they're trying to wear down our economy with ever-new sanctions and cause an increase in socio-political tensions within our country." Putin praised Pyongyang's "unwavering support" for its opposition to the United States, which Putin branded a "global neo-colonial dictatorship based on double standards." He stated: "Pyongyang has always been our committed and like-minded supporter, ready to confront the collective ambition of the West to prevent the emergence of a multipolar world order."

Just as with the 1961 "Soviet-North Korean Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance," signed between North Korea's dynastic founder Kim Il-sung and Premier Nikita Khrushchev, the 2024 treaty, resulting from this visit and introduced earlier, revived a provision that triggers automatic military intervention in emergency situations. Article 4 states: "In the event that either party is in a state of war as a result of armed aggression by individual or multiple states, the other side shall provide military and other assistance without delay by all means at its disposal in accordance with Article 51 of the UN Charter and the laws of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea and the Russian Union." Some ambiguity is apparent. The treaty does not specify whether "aggression" requires mutual assistance or whether the "Special Military Operation" is, in fact, a "war." In the case of Ukraine where Russia the

aggressor, Putin stated in his June 20 Hanoi press conference: “Furthermore, regarding mutual military assistance, it is written there that it will be provided in the event of an aggression, a military aggression. As for Ukraine, the Ukrainian regime began aggression against Russia, it started aggression against the Lugansk and Donetsk People's Republics before they became part of the Russian Federation.” Indeed, in February 2022, North Korea was one of only three states to recognize these two People’s Republics. Putin characterized the new treaty as a “breakthrough document,” as it reflects the desire of the two countries to “raise relations to a new qualitative level,” while DPRK state media agency described Russia–North Korea ties as based on “militant unity” – communist party-speak often reserved for military allies.

In theory Russia complies with United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolutions banning Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programs and international sanctions imposed on North Korea after its first nuclear tests in 2003 and again in 2017. These sanctions prohibit the export to the DPRK of weapons, military equipment, dual-use technologies, aviation and rocket fuel, natural gas, metals, industrial equipment, vehicles and luxury goods. However, in March 2024 Russia vetoed the annual renewal of the North Korea Panel of Experts in the UN Security Council, which then expired in April 2024, undermining the monitoring regime for sanctions and indicating Russia’s shift away from a multilateral response to contain North Korea’s nuclear program. In practice, it is almost certain that Russia violates sanctions by providing North Korea with oil and oil products and by purchasing munitions from North Korea. On June 14, 2024 South Korean Defense Minister Shin Won-sik reported that North Korea had sent at least 6,700 containers of munitions to Russia, able to hold up to 3 million artillery shells. US officials have reported even larger numbers of shipments. In practice, therefore, Russia does not enforce sanctions on the Russian–North Korean land border. This represents a shift from Soviet and prior Russian policy which supported nonproliferation.

North Korea receives fuel, grain and debt relief from Russia, as well as technological help to launch its military spy satellites. If further cooperation on space development programs are announced, cooperative relations are likely long term. There is also discussion of whether Russia offers North Korea assistance to build its own nuclear-powered submarine. In turn, Russia receives munitions, artillery shells, and 122-mm rockets for its BM-21 Grad multiple launch rocket system (MLRS). Additionally, debris from the Hwasong-11 ballistic missile--similar to the Russian Iskander-M but with a longer reported range (700 kilometers versus 500 kilometers) has been found in five regions of Ukraine, including Kyiv and Kharkiv. Russia also receives anti-tank missiles, portable anti-aircraft missile systems, grenade launchers, mortars and accompanying ammunition, and small arms. The treaty allows for North Korean nuclear physicists and ballistic missiles engineers to work in Russia, but it is unlikely Pyongyang will send troops or members of its military engineer corps to the Donbas. There have been reports of some workers being used in construction projects in the Donbas, although it is difficult to corroborate these claims. Despite it being illegal under UN sanctions to host North Korean workers, there is evidence Russia has continued to evade this restriction and host said workers.

The more willing Moscow is to act against the global consensus regarding Pyongyang and move into space cooperation and joint military production, the more important this bilateral relationship will become. Russia can use this relationship to symbolically signal it has access to levers of influence over the United States/the West outside of Ukraine--North Korea in this instance, but also in the Sahel, Cuba and Gaza. As a demonstration of power, Russia seeks to

signal it can escalate or de-escalate tension in NE Asia and generate further influence by linking Ukraine war to tensions in NE Asia (horizontal spillover from one theatre to another).

Moscow-Tehran

Just as it has with North Korea, following its full-scale multi-axis attack on Ukraine in February 2022, Russia has intensified its ties with Iran, moving from cautious engagement to full collaboration across a range of issue areas. The drivers include partnership in support for President Bashar al-Assad of Syria from 2015, the collapse of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the impact of Western sanctions on both states, and the fallout from the October 7, 2023 Hamas terrorist attack on Israel. Geopolitical alignment is solidified by "state-civilizational" assertions, anti-Western rhetoric, a sense of encirclement and a narrative that celebrates being part of an axis of resistance to the West. Collaboration includes high-level military exchanges and visits and arms transfers across the Caspian from Iran to Russia, including drones and missiles. The two countries have also established a joint production facility in Tatarstan that uses Chinese components either smuggled or commercially freely available, for example.

However, economic relations appear relatively underdeveloped compared to the military, although banking sector ties, cross-border trade, and investment in strategic sectors have increased. Because Iran was sanctioned earlier and heavier than Russia, Tehran can share sanctions evasion know-how with Moscow. Yet due to the very sanctions on Iran that isolate it from the global economy, Tehran can never be as economically important to Moscow as Ankara or Beijing. This limits the long-term economic potential of the relationship. In addition, although Russia and Iran look to sign a treaty in October 2024, Iran's new president, Mashoud Pezeshkian, may want to keep the option of strategic realignment with, if not strategic reorientation toward, the West, though on Iran's terms.

Conclusions

The ability of the West to contain and marginalize the BRINK coalition should be based acknowledging the existence and potential existentiality of the challenge; assessing the situation and the available strategic options; and acting to deter the named threat. To that end, the inherent intra-BRINK tensions can be exploited, particularly in financial and economic terms where the West has the advantage, as well as in recognizing the inherent limitation of intra-BRINK cooperation. Both Russia and Iran enjoy good relations with China, but this is unlikely to create the impetus for a trilateralism. The Iran case demonstrates that BRINK consists of a series of nested interlocking partnerships based on separate bilateral arrangements that allow for broad alignment and cooperation within the Eurasian-focused Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the now-10-nation-strong BRICS+ groupings. Also, all BRINK states share the same strategic center of gravity, namely the divergent generational aspirations between society and the elites; in the case of Iran this is particularly notable. Mutual misunderstandings between BRINK states are all too likely. What Moscow understands as sophisticated strategic signaling, Pyongyang may mistake for real entangling commitment. Beijing itself walks a tightrope between North and South Korea. Beijing's support of the Belt and Road Initiative suggests a stable international environment at odds with Russia's arsonist and firefighter approach to maintain strategic relevance. Is it in China's interests to strengthen the northern triangle (China-Russia-North Korea) if this encourages closer US-Japan-South Korea collaboration (the "southern triangle")?

GCMC, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, July 24, 2024.

About the Authors

Mr. Jahangir Arasli is a senior research fellow in the Institute for Development and Diplomacy at the ADA University (Baku) since 2022. His research interests include, but are not limited to, military and security establishment and civil-military relations in Russia, war studies, violent nonstate actors, Iran and the Middle East; and maritime security. Mr. Arasli is a George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies alumnus. Recent publications include: “On the ‘BRINK’ The Anti-Western Coalition Opts for Long, Open-Ended War,” Institute for Development and Diplomacy, *Working Paper*, October 2, 2023.

Dr. Dmitry Gorenburg is a senior research scientist in the Strategy, Policy, Plans, and Programs division of the Center for Naval Analysis, where he has worked since 2000. Dr. Gorenburg is an associate at the Harvard University Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies and previously served as executive director of the American Association of the Advancement of Slavic Studies (AAASS). His research interests include security issues in the former Soviet Union, Russian military reform, Russian foreign policy, and ethnic politics and identity. He currently serves as the editor of *Problems of Post-Communism*.

Dr. David Lewis is a professor of International Relations at the University of Exeter. His research interests include international peace and conflict studies, with a regional focus on Russia and other post-Soviet states. Dr. Lewis is the author of numerous articles and books on Russia and Eurasia, including most recently *Russia’s New Authoritarianism: Putin and the Politics of Order* (Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

Dr. Graeme P. Herd is a professor of Transnational Security Studies in the Research and Policy Analysis Department at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. His latest books include *Understanding Russia’s Strategic Behavior: Imperial Strategic Culture and Putin’s Operational Code* (London and New York, Routledge, 2022) and *Russia’s Global Reach: A Security and Statecraft Assessment*, ed. Graeme P. Herd (Garmisch-Partenkirchen: George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies, 2021).

The George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany is a German-American partnership and trusted global network promoting common values and advancing collaborative geostrategic solutions. The Marshall Center’s mission to educate, engage, and empower security partners to collectively affect regional, transnational, and global challenges is achieved through programs designed to promote peaceful, whole of government approaches to address today’s most pressing security challenges. Since its creation in 1993, the Marshall Center’s alumni network has grown to include over 16,000 professionals from 160 countries. More information on the Marshall Center can be found online at www.marshallcenter.org.

The Clock Tower Security Series provides short summaries of Seminar Series hosted by the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies. These summaries capture key analytical points from the events and serve as a useful tool for policy makers, practitioners, and academics.

The articles in the *The Clock Tower Security Series* reflect the views of the authors (Jahangir E. Arasli, Dmitry Gorenburg, David Lewis, and Graeme P. Herd) and are not necessarily the official policy of the United States, Germany, or any other governments