

The Global Threat of Russia's International Partnerships

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Thousands of North Korean troops have begun to engage Ukrainian forces in Russia's Kursk region, and may soon enter Ukraine. This astonishing development amplifies an alarming wider trend: Russia's war needs are driving it to depend on revisionist states around the world. This has far-reaching implications for Western security and international stability.

When President Putin invaded Ukraine in February 2022, he expected a short victorious war and did not prepare Russia's economy or society for the long uncertain one that it unleashed. Belated mobilization, though significant, is inadequate. To fill the gap, Russia has procured dozens of ballistic missiles, thousands of military drones and millions of artillery shells from North Korea and Iran. China is providing military intelligence and dual-use military goods and hosts a joint production facility for long-range attack drones.

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There are three ways in which these developments are destabilizing.

First, by providing Russia with materiel – and, in the case of North Korea, men – these countries prolong Europe’s biggest war since 1945 and make a Russian victory more likely. This would not only be disastrous for Western security but would embolden its adversaries to seek and exploit other areas of weakness.

Second, Russia is providing quid pro quos that enhance the capabilities of its partners. It has vetoed UN monitoring of sanctions on North Korea and supports its long-range missile development. Western intelligence officials fear Russia is providing nuclear technology to Iran. Russia is conducting increasingly aggressive joint air and naval patrols with China – and has begun to violate Japanese air space. Russia’s support will shift regional balances of power in favor of Western adversaries.

Third, such cooperation is not only destabilizing three volatile theatres – Europe, the Middle East and East Asia – but is binding them together. Ties that were once pragmatic, transactional and limited are hardening into alignments of deep common interest that are being formalized in treaties. In June Russia signed a mutual defence agreement with North Korea. It is preparing to sign a major new partnership treaty with Iran. Two Sino-Russian state visits in two years appear to have quelled much of China's unease about the war. NATO has declared it a “decisive enabler” of the conflict.

A new form of global confrontation is taking shape between two very different alliance systems, one shaped by American power and the other by Russian weakness. American power protects smaller states through long-established commitments to Europe, Israel, South Korea and Taiwan. Russian weakness is forging close ties with states – two of them, North Korea and Iran, much smaller than Russia – that are hostile to America’s allies and share a broader revisionist agenda.

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The West urgently needs a strategy to meet this challenge. It must shed its illusions of a compromise peace in Ukraine, and its reluctance to mobilise its huge latent power and do three things.

First, the West must reframe its understanding of this new geopolitics. In the past four years several European states, and the EU itself, have enshrined an “[Indo-Pacific tilt](#)” in strategies that sometimes amount to little more than greater trade opportunities and a few port visits. This is now being dwarfed by Asia’s lethal “Europe tilt”, at Russia’s behest, that threatens continental security.

Second, the West must confront, this threat, not ignore it. Countries that arm Russia for war have faced no real consequences. That must change. This means mounting a far more assertive campaign of sanctions and other instruments to stem the flow of support to Russia.

The key will be China which is both Russia's most important partner and – given its interdependence with the West – still the least committed. This cries out for a firm and creative diplomacy to press China to rethink its support for Russia.

Third, the West must scale up its support for Ukraine. This is not only because Russia, with foreign support, is gaining the upper hand on the battlefield, but because the longer the war continues the closer these ties will become. In the worst case, a single serious incident – a Franz Ferdinand moment – could trigger mutual commitments in rival alliance systems that unite three theatres of conflict into one. The clearest way to avert this is to defeat Russia.

The risks grow as Russia and its partners strengthen each other without fear of consequences. There are no clear limits to how much further this will go. But nor is there any sign that the West has the leadership to respond.

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