



# The Axis of Upheaval? China's Limits in an Anti-Western Bloc

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## **The Axis of Upheaval? China's Limits in an Anti-Western Bloc**

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### **KEY TAKEAWAYS**

- China's 2025 Victory Day Parade demonstrated growing military strength and solidarity with major revisionist powers, sparking concerns of a re-energised anti-Western alliance. Yet, the show of defiance was more symbolic than a substantive change in China's security approach.
- China's dependence on global trade, cautious strategic culture, preference for low-intensity conflicts, and American policy missteps make an adventurist shift in its current security posture unlikely in the near term.

### **COMMENTARY**

China's 2025 Victory Day Parade, held on 3 September, conveyed several important messages to the world. The spectacles demonstrated the state's enormous mobilisation capacity and the leadership's firm grip on power. The unveiling of new weapons – particularly unmanned systems, directed-energy arms, and previously unseen missile variants – showcased the People's Liberation Army's newfound capabilities. Just as striking was the display of camaraderie between the Chinese, Russian, and North Korean leaders, [appearing in public together for the first time](#). The organisers sought to project defiance towards the United States and its allies amid rising global tensions.

The apparent warmth between Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, and Kim Jong-un fuelled speculation of a reinvigorated anti-Western bloc previously dubbed the "[Axis of Upheaval](#)", encompassing China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, or CRINK. (The Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian attended the parade, but his placement was less prominent than that of Putin and Kim.) While Xi emphasised China's commitment

to “[peaceful development](#)” in his pre-parade speech, Beijing’s deepening ties with revisionist powers are difficult to ignore. This raises the question of whether China may adopt a more assertive security posture along with its CRINK partners, thereby disrupting the existing international system. Yet several factors render this scenario unlikely.

### **Constraints on China’s Security Posture Shift**

China’s approach to international security differs from that of other CRINK states due to economic constraints, divergent security traditions, and a preference for the low-intensity grey-zone conflict strategy.



Given its reliance on global trade and a cautious strategic culture, China prefers to engage in low-intensity conflicts along its periphery and use calibrated coercion, making large-scale military adventurism unlikely. *Image source: President.az, [CC BY 4.0](#), via Wikimedia Commons.*

Unlike its CRINK counterparts, China relies heavily on the international trade system, with exports making up [20% of its GDP](#). The United States and its allies are [leading importers](#) of China’s manufactured products, making access to the global market and cooperative links with the West vital to an economy that has slowed in recent years. A more aggressive security policy could trigger Western sanctions, inflicting serious harm on China’s economy, fuelling domestic discontent, and ultimately threatening regime security.

In contrast, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are already under heavy sanctions and largely cut off from Western markets, with North Korea functioning as a near-autarky. These conditions mean they have less to lose when disrupting the international status quo, whereas China would face far greater repercussions for similar behaviour.

Furthermore, unlike Russia, Iran, and North Korea, China exhibits less inclination towards large-scale military adventurism. During the Mao era, China supported revolutionary movements worldwide and intervened repeatedly in regional conflicts. However, its recent military record pales in comparison to that of its CRINK counterparts.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, [Russia](#) has supported separatist movements in former Soviet republics, intervened militarily in sovereign states, annexed territories, and invaded neighbouring countries. For decades, Iran has been locked in a protracted rivalry with Israel and Saudi Arabia, [training and equipping proxies](#) across the Middle East to advance its interests. North Korea, besides posing a persistent

threat to South Korea and East Asian regional stability, has taken on a significant role in supporting Russia's war in Ukraine, supplying ammunition, labourers, and [deploying 15,000 troops to fight on Russia's frontlines](#).

China's foreign military footprint, by contrast, remains limited. It rarely projects military power in the same way as Russia, Iran, or North Korea. Moreover, Beijing has demonstrated reluctance to be directly involved in their wars. It supported Russia primarily through trade – [purchasing resources and exporting dual-use products](#) – rather than providing direct military aid, as North Korea and Iran did, that could have an immediate effect on Russia's war fortunes. Similarly, China has avoided entangling itself in the Iran-Israel conflict, which could severely weaken its position in the Middle East.

Instead, China prefers to engage in [low-intensity grey-zone conflicts](#) in its immediate neighbourhood. Today, the primary flashpoints lie in its island disputes with the Philippines and military manoeuvres around Taiwan. These conflicts are carefully kept below the threshold of war, allowing Beijing to dial up or down tensions as circumstances dictate. Essentially, Beijing uses these conflicts as tools to exert pressure on neighbouring countries, escalating disputes to coerce adversarial governments or de-escalating to benefit greater foreign policy goals. These grey-zone conflicts are far easier to manage than outright wars, satisfying Beijing's strategy of tightly controlling escalation to serve political objectives.

## Conclusion

The 2025 Victory Day Parade sent a clear message of defiance to the United States and its allies by emphasising the close ties among CRINK leaders. However, this display is unlikely to translate into a fundamental shift in China's overall security posture.

As the most powerful member of CRINK, China calculates risks and costs differently from Russia, Iran, and North Korea. Its prosperity depends on continued integration with the international trade system. A more assertive security posture would jeopardise China's access to this system, undermining economic wellbeing and heightening domestic pressures on a government that prioritises internal stability. Unlike its partners – each with extensive experience in military intervention – China's interest in foreign military adventures is limited by a strategic culture that favours deliberation and has provided only fragmented support to the wars of its CRINK partners. This strategy is unlikely to change as Beijing perceives few tangible benefits from greater commitment. Rather, it prefers to engage in low-intensity conflicts along its periphery, using calibrated coercion as a tool to manage bilateral relations.

In short, China has more to lose and less to gain from taking up an adventurist security posture following that of Russia, Iran, or North Korea. As the Trump administration continues to [alienate allies with policy missteps](#), Beijing has even less incentive to assume an aggressive stance. The security environment is turning in China's favour, and prior geopolitical conundrums that once seemed intractable – such as [relations with India](#) – are being solved through diplomacy. Ultimately, the united front at the Victory Day Parade constitutes a show of defiance rather than a real turning point in Chinese strategy. While countries within the so-called "Axis of Upheaval" may cause

disruption individually, internal differences will prevent them from mounting a collective challenge capable of seriously upsetting the established international order.

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