mokry@ifsh.de

Advancing authoritarian alignment? Concept note for a pilot study mapping security ties between China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran

Sabine Mokry, Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy at the University of Hamburg

In late 2024, the heated debate about the possibility of an emerging alliance between China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran, which had started among U.S. think tankers, reached European policymakers and the public. At first sight, cooperation between these countries appears predominantly bilateral and largely focused on support for Russia's war in Ukraine. We are, however, lacking systematic empirical research about emerging security ties between these four authoritarian powers. This paper develops an approach to systematically map security ties among authoritarian states by considering activities across five dimensions: contacts, support for regime security, preparations for war, military missions outside of war, and wartime support. Contacts capture meetings between officials at different levels, the appointment of defense attachés, military education programs, and interactions among experts. Support for regime security encompasses law enforcement cooperation, cooperation in fighting terrorism and organized crime, and technology transfer and knowledge exchange to enhance the state's surveillance capacities. Preparations for war encompass military training exercises, arms sales, joint development of weapons and military equipment, as well as interoperability and force capability cataloging. In addition, I examine whether militaries collaborate in military missions outside of war, such as counter-piracy operations, non-combatant evacuations, search and rescue missions, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief efforts, and peacekeeping operations. Finally, wartime support encompasses the delivery of weapons and equipment, intelligence gathering and analysis, as well as joint security operations. Since the paper's operationalization of security ties draws heavily on the concept of defense diplomacy developed in the Western, post-Cold War context, the paper examines whether it applies to today's cooperation among authoritarian powers.

mokry@ifsh.de

Dear readers,

Please allow me to share some context information. This paper is intended to serve as a pilot study/proof of concept for a larger project I am developing. In this project, I aim to uncover the origins of autocracies' security ties, map and explain variations in such ties, and assess the effects of autocracies' deepening security ties on international security.

The primary objective of this paper is to determine whether my conceptualization of security ties can be operationalized. I further outline what data needs to be collected and which existing datasets can be leveraged.

To date, I cannot yet offer an empirically substantiated answer on the degree and scope of alignment between China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran. Instead, I hope to provide some ideas on how to approach this question systematically.

The following questions are top of mind right now:

- *Is my conceptualization of security ties convincing?*
- *Does the outlined operationalization capture the most important aspects? Am I overlooking something?*
- *I welcome any suggestions for data sources, especially beyond the Chinese context.*

Thanks for engaging with my work! I look forward to your comments.

Best regards,

Sabine

mokry@ifsh.de

Introduction

Increased cooperation among the four autocracies — China, Russia, North Korea, and Iran — has recently garnered significant attention. Observers describe them as an "axis of upheaval" (Kendall-Taylor and Fontaine, 2024), the "quartet of chaos" (The Economist, 2024; van Rij, 2024), and a "legion of doom" (Byman and Jones, 2024). At the same time, sustained cooperation between the four countries is still limited: an alliance has yet to be declared, substantial tri- or quadrilateral cooperation between these countries is rare (Mahadzir, Dzirhan, 2024), while cooperation largely seems to unfold in a web of dissociated bilateral relations (Chivvis, Christopher S. and Keating, Jack, 2024; DePetris, Daniel R. and Kavanagh, Jennifer, 2024). This raises the question of how closely the four states cooperate and how deep their alignment is in practice.

To answer this question, systematic empirical research into the emerging security ties among these four authoritarian powers is necessary but currently lacking. Through examining security-related interactions between the four states, this paper starts to fill this gap. It explores the extent to which these states engage in defense diplomacy activities across five areas: contacts, support for regime security, preparations for war, other military missions, and wartime support. Contacts capture meetings between officials at different levels, the appointment of defense attachés, military education programs, and interactions among experts. Support for regime security encompasses law enforcement cooperation, cooperation in fighting terrorism and organized crime, and technology transfer and knowledge exchange to enhance the state's surveillance capacities. Preparations for war encompass military training exercises, arms sales, joint development of weapons and military equipment, as well as interoperability and force capability cataloging. In addition, I examine whether militaries collaborate in military missions outside of war, such as counter-piracy operations, non-combatant evacuations, search and rescue missions, humanitarian assistance, disaster relief efforts, and peacekeeping operations. Finally, wartime support encompasses the delivery of weapons and equipment, intelligence gathering and analysis, as well as joint security operations.

mokry@ifsh.de

This paper offers a new conceptualization to account for autocracies' security ties. Since cooperation among authoritarian states tends to be more fluid and informal, an identification strategy based on empirical observations rather than relying on formal agreements is necessary. In addition, security cooperation between autocracies differs from such cooperation among democracies because it is primarily motivated by the need to ensure regime survival (Debre, 2021, 2022; Cottiero and Haggard, 2023). The new conceptualization enables us to uncover security ties among autocracies, whether they unfold bilaterally or in multilateral settings, and to map variations. By drawing on the concept of defense diplomacy developed in the Western post-Cold War context for the operationalization of security ties, the paper examines to what extent the idea applies to cooperation between authoritarian powers today.

The next section introduces a systematic approach for mapping security ties between authoritarian states by conceptualizing and operationalizing these ties, drawing on the concept of defense diplomacy. After providing an overview of the data sources to be drawn upon for systematically mapping security ties between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, the final section illustrates how this data will be analyzed.

A systematic approach for mapping security ties between authoritarian states

In the context of this paper, "security ties" are understood as being formed through sustained security-related interactions between actors from at least two states, which are intended to help the respective leaders to guarantee regime survival, through co-opting elites, generating support among the population, and/or enhancing their abilities to repress opposing views. These actors include heads of state or government, foreign and defense ministers, lower-level officials, military personnel, experts, intelligence officials, and representatives of defense industries. Security ties encompass a wide range of activities across up to five functional areas, including contacts, support for regime security, preparations for war, joint operations outside of war, and wartime support. Motivated by regime survival strategies, particularly co-optation, legitimation, and repression, these

mokry@ifsh.de

ties differ from similar behaviors in democracies and require a new conceptual toolbox for analyzing their evolution.

This conceptualization starts from the common understanding of a "tie" as a "connection or relationship between people, organizations, and countries" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2025). I add a state-focused understanding of security, which involves security for states from threats identified by state leaders (Baldwin, 1997). The authoritarian governance literature brings in the purpose of guaranteeing regime survival. Security ties are often laid out in defense cooperation agreements, but a sustained, mutual connection between domestic actors from at least two states can also take other forms. For example, if heads of state meet once and discuss the implications of an ongoing war for their countries, this would not qualify as a security tie. However, it would be a significant security tie if they not only had the meeting but also suggested that other parts of their governments discuss these issues further, or if they agreed to meet again and publicized their shared threat assessments, highlighting cooperation as the only solution.

To operationalize security ties, I draw on the concept of defense diplomacy, especially the activities that constitute it. I understand these activities as the security-related interactions through which security ties are formed. Defense diplomacy emerged in post-Cold War Europe with an initial focus on building trust between former rivals and socializing communist nations into adopting democratic civil-military relations (Chang and Jenne, 2020; Charillon, Frédéric, Balzacq, Thierry, and Ramel, Frédéric, 2020). Accordingly, Cottey and Forster (2014) describe the goal of defense diplomacy as "building cooperative relations with other states that help them transform their militaries" (Cottey and Forster, 2004, p. 6). While their definition is frequently referred to, their extensive list of activities that encompass defense diplomacy makes their work highly relevant for my operationalization of security ties. They list bilateral and multilateral contacts between senior military and civilian defense officials, appointment of defense attachés, bilateral defence cooperation agreements, training of foreign military and civilian defence personnel, provision of expertise and advice, contacts and exchanges between military personnel units and ship visits,

mokry@ifsh.de

placement of military/civilian personnel in partner countries' defense ministries and armed forces, deployment of training teams, provision of military equipment and other material aid, as well as bilateral and multilateral training exercises (Cottey and Forster, 2004, p. 7). Other scholars also list joint exercises, participation in peacekeeping and humanitarian operations, port visits, dialogues at different levels, arms sales, as well as military training programmes as components of defense diplomacy (Baldino and Carr, 2016; Chang and Jenne, 2020; Wenas Inkiriwang, 2021; Oelsner, Solmirano and Tasselkraut, 2024; Pham Thi, 2024; Grgić, 2025). For operationalizing security ties, I group these activities into four functional areas: contacts, preparations for war, military missions outside of war, and wartime support. Accounting for the specificities of authoritarian regimes, I add support for regime security as a fifth area of consideration. Table 1 provides an overview of the observable activities.

Table 1: Operationalization of security ties between authoritarian states

Area	Activity	Example
Contacts	Bilateral meetings or interactions in multilateral settings between heads of state/government with security-related discussions	May 2025: Xi Jinping Attends the Celebrations Marking the 80th Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War of the Soviet Union, China and Russia issue a joint statement on Global Strategic Stability
	Bilateral meetings or interactions in multilateral settings between Defense and Foreign Ministers with security-related discussions	In April 2025, Iranian Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi visits China and meets with Wang Yi, the Chinese Foreign Minister.
	Bilateral meetings or interactions in multilateral settings between lower-level officials from the Foreign and Defense Ministries with security-related discussions	In May 2025, Deputy Foreign Minister Ma Zhaoxu chairs a meeting with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov Sergey Alexeevich and Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Kazem Gharibabad on the Iranian nuclear issue.
	Interactions between representatives from parliamentary organs	*Data not yet collected*

mokry@ifsh.de

	Deployment of defense attachés	In June 2025, Senior Lieutenant General Hoang Xuan Chien, Deputy Defense Minister, met with the Chinese Defense Attaché to Vietnam, Senior Colonel Jiangbo, and the Russian Defense Attaché to Vietnam, Colonel Alexey Arkadievich Govorov.
	Discussions among experts on security issues	*Data not yet collected*
Support for regime security	Law-enforcement cooperation	*Data not yet collected*
	Cooperation in anti-terrorism or organized crime	*Data not yet collected*
	Technology transfer and knowledge exchange in surveillance	*Data not yet collected*
Preparations for war	Military training exercises	In August 2023, China and Russia conducted a joint naval patrol in the Sea of Japan and the Sea of Okhotsk, near the Aleutian Islands, off the coast of Alaska.
	Military education programmes	*Data not yet collected*
	Arms sales	In 2021, China ordered 36 Ka-52K ship-borne heavy attack helicopters.
	Joint development of weapons and military equipment	*Data not yet collected*
	Interoperability/force capability cataloging	*Most likely not applicable yet.*
Military missions outside of war	Militaries work together in counter-piracy, non-combatant evacuations, coordinated patrols, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance, and disaster relief missions.	*Data not yet collected*
War-time support	Delivery of weapons and equipment	In 2022, Iran supplied Russia with 6600 Shahed-136 attack drones
	Intelligence gathering and analysis	*Data not yet collected*
	Joint security operations	*Most likely not applicable yet.*

mokry@ifsh.de

Overview of data sources

This pilot study draws on various data sources to document security-related interactions among China, Russia, and North Korea. I am still in the early stages of data collection. Since my previous work has primarily focused on China, I began my data collection efforts in this country. For collecting data in the "Contacts" area, the primary sources included the official websites of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of National Defense, which provide searchable records of speeches, diplomatic schedules, and press releases. Searches for information on defense attachés rely on public search engines (such as Google), media databases (like LexisNexis), and embassy websites, utilizing multilingual keywords. Data on arms sales are primarily drawn from the SIPRI Arms Transfer Database, supplemented by reports from the U.S. Department of Defense. Secondary sources—such as CNA and China Maritime Reports—help identify additional instances of military diplomacy, especially military training exercises. It is crucial to note that in certain areas, such as joint weapons development, interoperability, and intelligence cooperation, obtaining data can be more challenging.

Preliminary insights into security ties between China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea

Contacts

Caveat: Insights generated from patterns of interactions between Heads of State, Foreign and Defense Ministers, as well as lower-level officials, can only be preliminary because the time frame for collecting primary data only covered January–May 2025. However, the fact that I collected information on as many as 22 instances across different levels demonstrates that reviewing official meeting records is worthwhile. Rather than offering a comprehensive analysis, the presentation of empirical evidence below will illustrate how I will approach such an analysis.

Key dimensions to analyze information on Contacts are whether interactions were bilateral or multilateral, and on which political level they occurred. At the level of Heads of State and the

mokry@ifsh.de

ministerial level, I primarily recorded bilateral interactions, mostly between Chinese and Russian counterparts. Mid-level interactions consisted of a combination of bilateral and multilateral meetings. The 2025 data recorded numerous interactions between Chinese and Russian officials, as well as meetings between officials from these two countries and India and Vietnam, respectively.

In addition to expanding the time frame of my data collection, my next steps will focus on collecting data on parliamentary meetings, military education programmes, and discussions among security experts. I will collect information on international meetings involving members of parliament, determine whether there is any publicly available information on military education programs that is not aggregated, and review the meetings listed on the websites of the most important think tanks that focus on security issues.

Support for regime security

So far, I have found that this is the most challenging area among the five to collect data on. My planned next steps are to review official statements on planned activities, identify exercises and meetings recorded in the areas of Contacts and Preparations for War that focus on the fight against terrorism and organized crime. Finally, I need to develop some background knowledge on the exchange of technology and expertise in surveillance technologies through interviews with experts. This will hopefully allow me to point to concrete instances of such transfers.

Preparations for war

Military exercises

When analyzing military exercises, it is also beneficial to distinguish between bilateral and multilateral exercises. My dataset so far includes several multilateral exercises, primarily within the context of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). The most important one is Peace Mission, which focuses on counter-terrorism. Trilateral naval exercises between China, Russia, and

mokry@ifsh.de

Iran in the Gulf of Oman are a relatively new phenomenon that started in 2019 and were continued in 2022 and 2023.

Bilateral exercises have been a mainstay of China-Russia relations over the past twenty years. A notable event is Joint Seas, which is held annually. A noteworthy recent development in this context is an expansion of the geographical scope of joint aerial patrols into the Sea of Japan, the Western Pacific, and waters just off Alaska.

Arms sales

Data from the SIPRI Arms Trade Database allows tracking arms sales between different bilateral constellations.

In the 1990s, Russia supplied Iran with anti-tank missiles and infantry fighting vehicles. Until 2022, it provided an air-search system, SAM system, an air-search radar, as well as trainer and combat aircraft.

China supplies to Iran mostly anti-ship missiles, portable SAMs, and armoured personnel carriers. Orders date back to 1992, with the last order placed in 2005. Deliveries started in 2011 and continued until 2015. Iran did not supply any weapons to China.

In terms of arms sales, the relationship between Russia and China was most extensive. Between 1997 and 2019, Russia supplied China with various types of weapons and equipment, including missiles, radars, turbofans, transport helicopters, SAM systems, and other aircraft. Deliveries will occur until 2024.

China supplied Russia with ship engines. In addition, Russia ordered eight armoured personnel carriers from China in 2022, which were delivered in 2023.

Joint weapons development

This is another area where it is challenging to find information. The secondary literature and reports mention that China and Russia are jointly developing a heavy-lift helicopter, a new conventional

submarine, and an early-warning system for China. However, little concrete information is provided, and I need to figure out if and how it is possible to obtain defense industry contracts.

War-time support

Iran supplies Russia with mostly one-way attack drones (Shahed) and also with armed UAVs and surface-to-surface missiles. The drones, which were bought for use against Ukraine, were ordered in 2022 and 2023 and delivered a year later. North Korea supplied Russia with surface-to-surface missiles and self-propelled guns. They were ordered and delivered in 2023 and 2024.

References

Baldwin, D.A. (1997) 'The concept of security', *Review of International Studies*, 23(1), pp. 5–26. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0260210597000053.

Byman, D. and Jones, S.G. (2024) 'Legion of Doom? China, Russia, Iran and North Korea', *Survival*, 66(4), pp. 29–50. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2024.2380195.

Cambridge Dictionary (2025) *Definition for 'tie'*. Available at: https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tie (Accessed: 29 April 2025).

Cottiero, C. and Haggard, S. (2023) 'Stabilizing Authoritarian Rule: The Role of International Organizations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67(2), p. sqad031. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqad031.

Debre, M.J. (2021) 'The dark side of regionalism: how regional organizations help authoritarian regimes to boost survival', *Democratization*, 28(2), pp. 394–413. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2020.1823970.

Debre, M.J. (2022) 'Clubs of autocrats: Regional organizations and authoritarian survival', *The Review of International Organizations*, 17(3), pp. 485–511. Available at: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-021-09428-y.

Kendall-Taylor, A. and Fontaine, R. (2024) 'The Axis of Upheaval: How America's Adversaries Are Uniting to Overturn the Global Order', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June. Available at: https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/axis-upheaval-russia-iran-north-korea-taylor-fontaine.

van Rij, A. (2024) 'Can Europe stop the "quartet of chaos"?', *Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank*, 9 December. Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2024-12/can-europe-stop-quartet-chaos (Accessed: 17 February 2025).

The Economist (2024) 'A new "quartet of chaos" threatens America', *The Economist*, 22 September. Available at: https://www.economist.com/international/2024/09/22/a-new-quartet-of-chaos-threatens-america.