

### THE CRINK AXIS

*Four Authoritarians.  
China · Russia · Iran · North Korea  
A Situation Point,*

### THE FRAME

*An Alignment Assembled From Spare Parts.*

The West has a habit of naming its anxieties, and “CRINK” (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea) is the latest entry in a crowded genre that already boasts the “Axis of Upheaval,” the “Quartet of Chaos,” and, for nostalgists, a tribute act to the 2002 “Axis of Evil.”

The acronym has the unfortunate ring of a kitchen gadget, which is apt, because the thing it describes was assembled from spare parts.

There is no treaty. No headquarters, no founding charter, no shared anthem: only a shared list of grievances and a common enemy.

The four are united less by what they want than by what they refuse to tolerate, namely a world still keeping its receipts in Washington.

It is an alignment, anchored by Beijing and Moscow, accelerated by a war in Ukraine that turned sanctions evasion into a team sport.

***Call it an alliance and you flatter them; call it nothing and you miss the point.***



### THE FOUR

*One Anchor, One Catalyst, One Survivor, One Climber.*

#### China:

**The anchor**, and the member with the most to lose, being the only one still invited to the global economy's dinner parties. A revisionist with a controlling stake in the system he claims to resent; the revolutionary who still needs the shipping lanes open.

#### Russia:

**The catalyst**. Having achieved pariah status in 2022, Moscow discovered the upside of isolation: it forces you to make friends. It is the connective tissue of the group, largely because it now needs everyone else's ammunition.

#### Iran:

**The battle-tested flank**. Having absorbed a twelve-day war with Israel and American strikes on its nuclear sites in 2025,

Tehran offers the one credential that impresses this crowd: it took a hit from the United States and is still standing. Battered but unbowed, with its hand on the Strait of Hormuz, the valve for a fifth of the world's oil, it brings the axis a southern front and a faucet.

#### North Korea:

**The rising beneficiary**. For Pyongyang, the war in Ukraine has been the most successful jobs program in decades: shells and soldiers out; cash, legitimacy, and missile technology in. Kim has spent the conflict quietly upgrading from regional nuisance to indispensable supplier.

# THE CRINK AXIS

CHINA | RUSSIA | IRAN | NORTH KOREA



PEOPLE

**1.7**  
BILLION

21% of global population



GDP

**21.3**  
TRILLION USD

25% of global GDP



MILITARY SPENDING

**472**  
BILLION USD

18% of global expenditure



NUCLEAR WARHEADS

**4,959**

51% of global stockpiles

Source: CIA World Factbook; Federation of American Scientists; SIPRI; Janes • Graphic: Fabio Margia/CSIS

CSIS

### The Top Dog Moves: Xi in Pyongyang

*When the Emperor Leaves the Palace.*

***And then, in June, the senior partner got on a plane.***

This is the part worth dwelling on. Xi Jinping does not, as a rule, travel. The world comes to him (the 47th and VVP both made the pilgrimage to Beijing within weeks of each other), and he receives them with the serene confidence of a man who knows the venue is his.

So when he flew to Pyongyang on 8 June 2026, his first foreign trip of the year and his first visit to North Korea since 2019, the destination was the message.

You can stage a 21-gun salute and march children with balloons across a square; you cannot manufacture the symbolism of the emperor leaving the palace.

The flattering reading, the one Pyongyang will frame and hang on the wall, is a coronation: North Korea welcomed to the head table on something close to equal terms, no longer the junior client but a peer worth visiting in person. The less flattering reading is that this is precisely why Xi came.

Beijing has watched Kim drift into Moscow's orbit (troops in Ukraine, a mutual-defense pact, the warm glow of a patron who pays in nuclear know-how) and concluded that the cheapest way to keep an ally is to remind him who his oldest creditor is.



China still accounts for the overwhelming bulk of North Korean trade. It would prefer Pyongyang not forget.

So the coronation is really a tribute, in both senses of the word. Xi crowns Kim because Kim, for the first time in years, has somewhere else to go. Each brought a wish list. Pyongyang wants economic relief and, more ambitiously, Beijing's quiet acknowledgement of what it already is: a nuclear state. China wants alignment on Taiwan, a united front against a re-arming Japan, a lid on escalation along its border, and the standing to play indispensable broker should anyone (say, the 47th, ever fond of summitry) wish to talk to Kim. The road to Pyongyang, Beijing would like understood, runs through Beijing.

### **Dynasty vs Democracy: The Women at the Top**

*Ballots, Boardrooms, and Bloodlines.*

History, with its usual sense of comic timing, has arranged a neat tableau across Northeast Asia. Consider the three flags.

**In Tokyo, Sanae Takaichi runs the government outright. Japan's first female prime minister**, she was installed in October 2025 and confirmed by a February 2026 landslide so emphatic it handed her party its largest majority in seventy years.

**In Seoul, Han Seong-sook, a former internet-company chief executive drafted to haul the country into its AI future, has just been nominated as prime minister**, on course to become South Korea's first woman in the post in two decades, pending the tiresome



formality of a parliamentary vote. Two women reaching high office in two democracies the hard way: through ballots, party knives, confirmation hearings, and the indignity of having to be popular.

And then there is Pyongyang, where succession is handled rather differently.

There, the coming woman of the hour is Kim Ju Ae, Kim Jong Un's daughter, around thirteen years old, whom South Korea's intelligence service now delicately files under the "successor-designate stage. She did not run for anything. She will not. Her qualifications are genealogical. Where Takaichi worked the room and Han worked her way up a corporate ladder,

***Kim Ju Ae's route to power ran through her father's chromosomes, and her portfolio consists largely of being photographed beside very large objects designed to flatten cities.***

This is, in its grim way, a tender story. The autocrat's oldest fear is mortality, specifically the dread that an unscheduled exit leaves the throne up for grabs, and the classic remedy is to parade the heir early and often, until the line of succession sets like concrete and the elite stop entertaining alternatives

So Kim has been taking his daughter to work. She debuted in 2022 beside an intercontinental ballistic missile; since then she has turned up at launch sites and a test firing, fired a rifle alongside the generals, and, in March, posed at the controls of a battle tank. Bring-your-daughter-to-work day, Pyongyang edition, where the office is a nuclear arsenal and the bonding exercise involves throw-weight.

### The Final Assessment

*The Axis Holds. For Now.*

Whether any of this hardens into something resembling a bloc, or stays four states triangulating in the dark, depends on the seams.

Watch three of them: whether China matches Russia and grants Pyongyang the nuclear recognition it craves; whether the 47th reopens his channel to Pyongyang, and who ends up brokering it;

***And, above all, whether Beijing and Moscow can keep sharing an ally without resenting each other for it.***

CRINK's strength was always its members' shared list of enemies. Its limit is that they have never agreed on much else, including, increasingly, who gets to be North Korea's best friend. The axis, for now, holds.

***Axes usually do. Right up until they don't.***

**F R A N K**

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