

A space quad: Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran



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PERSPECTIVE

The US has flagged as a growing threat to global security an increasingly deepening four-way quadrilateral quasi-alliance that's deepening space collaboration among

Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran. This month, Air & Space Forces Magazine reports that General Stephen Whiting, commander of the United

States Space Command (USSPACECOM), expressed concern over those four countries' increasing cooperation in space. Whiting highlighted in particular

the workings of bilateral ties between Russia and each of the other three nations as Russia seeks assistance for its war in Ukraine, the magazine says.



In this photo released on February 29, 2024, the Soyuz-2.1b rocket blasts off at the Vostochny Cosmodrome outside the city of Tsiolkovsky, Russia. The Russian Soyuz rocket put an Iranian satellite into orbit along with 18 Russian satellites.
● ROSCOSMOS SPACE CORPORATION

Air & Space Forces notes multiple examples of space cooperation among the four, citing

- a Russian rocket launching an Iranian satellite;
- plans for a Russo-Chinese lunar nuclear power plant; and
- a defense pact between Russia and North Korea, which could benefit North Korea's space and missile capabilities.

The magazine mentions that US officials have also noted that this growing partnership adds complexity to the already contested space domain, where the US has observed Russia deploying a counter-space weapon co-planar to a US national security satellite, indicating operational intent.

Air & Space Forces mentions that the US has compared Russian activities to "nesting doll" satellites capable of deploying kinetic weapons. Meanwhile, it says, US Space Force (USSF) leaders have described China's rapid expansion in space capabilities — including counter-space technologies and support for terrestrial forces — as "breathhtakingly fast".

Space cooperation adds another element to a sophisticated four-way pragmatic relationship connecting Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran, a relationship that now covers weapons sales, energy, and finance.

While Russia and Iran have vastly different systems of governance, the ongoing Ukraine War has put Russia in the same sanctions boat as Iran, giving

rise to a partnership of convenience between the two.

In August 2022, Asia Times reported that Iran launched the Khayyam satellite from Kazakhstan's Baikonur Cosmodrome using a Russian Soyuz rocket, marking a significant step in its space-based military capabilities and deepening its strategic partnership with Russia.

Khayyam can be used for military purposes, such as surveillance and reconnaissance, which could enhance Iran's deterrence against adversaries like the US and Israel.

The launch reflects Iran's growing self-sufficiency in space technology and its collaboration with Russia, which seeks new clients for its space program amid Western sanctions.

At the same time, Iran sees the situation as a chance to gain support from a leading nuclear technology and energy powerhouse.

Iran may have seen an opportunity in the Ukraine War to become indispensable to Russia's war effort. This opportunity could give Iran more influence over Russia, potentially allowing Iran to seek assistance for its nuclear and missile programs, upgrade its military, and secure Russian support for the International North-South Transport Corridor (INSTC), a multi-mode freight-moving network that is viewed as one way for Iran and Russia to evade sanctions.

Likewise, the Ukraine War has brought

Russia and North Korea closer in a pragmatic partnership. Asia Times reported in January 2024 that Russia had used North Korean ballistic missiles against Ukraine.

Declassified US intelligence indicates that Russia launched North Korean short-range ballistic missiles (SRBM) in December 2023 and January 2024 and plans to continue using them. The missiles in question, likely the KN-23 and KN-24, are comparable to Russia's Iskander-M and the US MGM-140 Army Tactical Missile System (ATACMS). North Korea may be supporting Russia's war effort because it believes that

a Russian victory in Ukraine would set a precedent for easing the effects of US sanctions on its struggling economy. Russian support could lessen its heavy dependence on China for economic and political support.

Moreover, Russia and North Korea have revived a Cold War-era mutual defense agreement. The pact, announced during Russian President Vladimir Putin's visit to North Korea this month, commits both nations to providing military assistance to each other in the event of war.

An account by the New York Times mentions that the pact has negative implications for international efforts to hinder North Korea's missile and nuclear weapons programs. The newspaper says that Putin's and North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's agreement is seen as a strategic alignment against the democratic partnership of the US, South Korea, and Japan. It also notes that the pact raises the prospects that Japan and South Korea will seek nuclear weapons.

In addition, increasingly deep ties with Russia can enable Iran and North Korea to advance their missile technologies independently. In January 2024, Asia Times pointed out that while the world had been focused on North Korean and Iranian support for Russia's war efforts in Ukraine, the Tehran-Pyongyang collaboration had slipped under the radar. In 2020, a confidential UN report indicated that North Korea and Iran had restarted their collaboration on the development of long-range missiles. The report mentioned that this renewed cooperation involved the transfer of essential components, which took place during that year.

Iran's Khorramshahr missile, first launched in 2017, is similar to North Korea's missile known alternatively as Musudan or Hwasong-10. Reports of Iran purchasing those missiles date

back to 2005. US intelligence has been tracking Iran's search for a high-performance North Korean propulsion system since 2010.

Additionally, Iran's Shahab-3 missile may be based on North Korea's Nodong missile, and Iran's space launch vehicles show similarities with North Korea's Hwasong-14 missiles.

While China's economic and industrial capacity has been crucial in keeping Russia in the fight in Ukraine and keeping the heavily sanctioned Russian economy afloat, its support for Moscow is more nuanced, possibly neither wanting to see Russia win or lose.

In September 2023, Asia Times noted that a scenario in which Russia wins, causing Western backing for Ukraine to collapse, could lead to a deal that fully allows Russian energy exports to resume in Europe. Lifting Western sanctions would free Russia from relying on China for economic and diplomatic support. If Ukraine were to achieve a victory over Russia and retake a significant portion of its territories while causing considerable losses to the Russian military, it would showcase the impact of Western military assistance and sanctions, establishing a precedent that China would find unfavorable in the case of Taiwan.

A Korean War-style armistice freezing the Ukraine War is probably the most favorable scenario for China. It would secure China's ongoing influence over Russia by maintaining Russia's reliance on China. This scenario would give China continued leverage over Russia's energy exports, disputed territories in the Russian Far East, competition for influence in Central Asia, and weapons sales.

The full article first appeared on Asia Times.

Head of the Iranian Space Agency Hassan Salarieh (R) and his Russian counterpart, Yuri Borisov, sign a cooperation document on the sidelines of Iran Airshow 2022 in Kish Island, southern Iran, on December 14, 2022. The document included cooperation on the construction of remote-sensing and communication satellites, creating laboratory infrastructure, assembling, launching bases, and satellite tests.
● IRNA

