



PRIMER: The Other Superpower in Action

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Unlike the Cold War, today the United States is confronting not just one great power adversary, but a dangerous and growing coalition made up of China, Iran, Russia, North Korea, and other actors—The Other Superpower. While some of these relationships may not be formalized by actual treaties, as was the case for the Axis powers of World War II, their cooperation is rapidly growing, emboldening them to further ignite an already volatile national security environment.

In our limited podcast series “[The Other Superpower](#),” The Vandenberg Coalition spoke with leading national security experts about these relationships between American adversaries spanning multiple domains across the globe. Our experts underscored the value of deterrence by detection; it is imperative that the United States connect activities across the various members of The Other Superpower to better safeguard our own vulnerabilities and exploit theirs. In this spirit, we have compiled key areas of cooperation among our adversaries to illustrate the depth and scope of their collaboration in recent years. Below are the key facts and policy recommendations provided by our experts, and you can listen to the whole series on our [website](#).

Overarching Policy Recommendations:

- *Deterrence by detection:* Policymakers often treat these countries in isolation. We must expose these partnerships to the public to draw attention to them and illuminate their contradictions.
- *Enforce sanctions:* President Trump and Congress have already tightened sanctions against The Other Superpower, particularly [Russian](#) and [Iranian](#) energy exports. It is critical that these sanctions continue to be vigilantly enforced to hinder The Other Superpower’s cooperation and cut off critical revenue streams.
- *Bolster American resilience:* The Other Superpower works to exploit perceived U.S. vulnerabilities in areas such as critical minerals, technologies, pharmaceuticals, and the information warfare and cyber domains. Implementing tools of economic statecraft like export controls within these domains will shield ourselves from their predation.
- *Strengthen our own partnerships:* Strong partnerships with countries who demonstrate mutual effort—through defense spending, trade deals, sanctions enforcement, and following U.S. initiatives on the international stage—will empower any U.S. drive to thwart The Other Superpower.

Military Cooperation:

- Russia builds and uses thousands of Iranian-designed Shahed drones per month, while Iran has also supplied Russia with considerable ammunition, launchers, and Fath 360 close-range ballistic missiles.
- As of June 2025, China provided 80 percent of Russian drone components and 70 percent of the machine tools Russia uses to make tanks and aircraft. In return, Russia has given China access to advance air defense systems and technologies for China’s quiet submarines.

- North Korea has sent at least 13,000–15,000 troops to Russia to fight against Ukraine, along with between 6–12 million artillery shells, 120–240 long range M1991 Multiple Launch Rocket Systems, 120–240 M1989 self-propelled artillery guns, RPG Launchers, and other missile systems.
- China and Russia have given Iran plutonium, technology, and technicians for its nuclear program, while China also supplies Iran with anti-ship cruise missiles, fast attack craft, and ballistic missile technology.
- North Korea has supplied Iranian proxies like Hamas with Scud-C and Burkan-1 missiles, and multiple 122mm rocket launchers.

Economic Cooperation:

- China is investing upwards of \$400 billion in Iran over 25 years in exchange for discounted oil. Chinese exports to Iran account for 15 percent of Iran’s \$65 billion total imports in 2023, and sanctioned Chinese firms frequently use Iran as a market for Chinese goods to evade sanctions.
- In 2023, China’s trade with North Korea totaled \$2.3 billion, representing almost the entirety of North Korea’s international trade, while North Korean workers in China sent back an estimated \$500 million.
- Chinese banks have made substantial investments in Russia’s energy and telecommunications infrastructure, and in return, China imports significant quantities of Russian oil and agricultural products, and gains access to critical minerals through Russian joint ventures.
- Russia has given North Korea upwards of \$20 billion in total assets—including around \$10 billion in hard currency—for its military support against Ukraine.

Energy Cooperation:

- China is the largest importer of Iranian crude, purchasing over 90 percent of Iran’s oil exports—between 700,000 to 1 million barrels of oil per day as of June 2025. Chinese banks facilitate these transactions.
- Nearly half (47%) of Russia’s oil exports go to China, making it the largest buyer globally and funding a significant amount of Russia’s defense budget.
- China and Russia illegally transfer millions of barrels of oil to North Korea through ship-to-ship transfers.

Technological Cooperation:

- Iran uses Chinese facial recognition technology to identify and arrest protesters and dissidents.
- Iran used a Russian rocket to launch its first low-earth orbit satellite into space.
- Russia has given North Korea advanced technologies related to satellites and nuclear weapons.

Diplomatic Cooperation:

- China and Russia provide crucial diplomatic support for Iran, including leading an unsuccessful United Nations resolution to delay snapback sanctions against Iran.
- Iran and Russia often promote Chinese disinformation on subjects like China’s Xinjiang genocide in multilateral fora.
- Russia, Iran, and North Korea have publicly opposed U.S. efforts to investigate the World Health Organization and China’s role in spreading the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Beijing protects North Korea in international organizations, vetoing resolutions that would tighten sanctions.

