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Policy Recommendations from the George W. Bush Institute

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COUNTERING THE CHINA, RUSSIA, IRAN, NORTH KOREA CHALLENGE



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COUNTERING THE CHINA, RUSSIA, IRAN, NORTH KOREA CHALLENGE

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The axis of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea is undermining the liberal democratic order that has contributed to nearly a century of relative global peace and stability. Washington and its allies can't be complacent as these regimes, collectively known as CRINK, mobilize against democratic nations.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS:

- The Trump Administration and Congress should ensure that human rights are part of an integrated strategy to address the comprehensive challenge posed by CRINK
- The Trump Administration and Congress should enforce strategic tools that penalize human rights abusers
- The Trump Administration should strengthen America's democratic alliances around the vision of integrating human rights and security in the fight against CRINK
- The Trump Administration and Congress should empower democratic advocates from CRINK to unite around their shared struggle for freedom

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, a wave of democratic movements contributed to the Soviet Union's collapse and inspired hope for an enduring global shift toward democracy. However, authoritarian regimes like CRINK have struck back in recent years against democracy, which is an existential threat to them because of its emphasis on limited government, checks and balances, and individual rights. These autocracies regrettably have regained momentum, as evidenced by an 18th consecutive year of [decline in global freedom](#), according to Freedom House.

In addition to undermining democracy, the goal of CRINK is to weaken the U.S.-led global order, and, by extension, free societies. A 2023 [report](#) by the George W. Bush Institute and the Center for Strategic and International Studies examines how China, North Korea, and Russia have grown closer through facilitating human rights abuses and other strategic efforts.

Moscow's illegal invasion of Ukraine represents the most brazen demonstration of this collaboration, opening a literal battleground to challenge the free world's security.

Since the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, North Korea has voiced approval for Russia's actions and engaged in high-level meetings with Moscow. This culminated in 2024 with a North Korea-Russia mutual defense pact. Pyongyang has contributed critical ammunition and even troops to Vladimir Putin's war effort. In return, Kim Jong Un's regime has received political and material support, very likely including high-end military technology, that bolsters its ability to threaten American allies like South Korea and Japan.

Meanwhile, Beijing and Moscow declared their own “no limits” partnership in February 2022, immediately before the full-scale Ukraine invasion. Many experts fear that Western inability to deter Putin’s ambitions will embolden China’s Xi Jinping to invade Taiwan.

As Washington assesses these threats, it must learn from unenforced [red lines](#): when Syria’s Bashar al-Assad used chemical weapons against his own people in 2013; the response to Putin’s 2014 illegal annexation of Crimea; and the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021. It must demonstrate that democracies won’t fold in the face of provocation. Failing to do so creates a world that is hostile to U.S. economic, security, and political interests.

Washington should enhance its global deterrence posture by adopting a peace through strength approach. The United States can accomplish this by employing diplomatic and economic pressure, boosting its military capabilities as a credible deterrent, and providing financial and material support for allies – specifically Ukraine, where victory would deliver a tangible blow to CRINK ambitions.

To effectively counter the CRINK threat over the long term, however, the United States should prioritize human rights in its foreign policy, strengthen democratic alliances, and support freedom advocates.

The Trump Administration and Congress should ensure that human rights are part of an integrated strategy to address the comprehensive challenge posed by CRINK

Achieving this goal requires consistent communication with Americans to articulate how human rights and security are linked and why integrating these elements into a comprehensive global strategy will make the United States safer and more prosperous. Rallying domestic support should be paired with policy actions:

The State Department should issue atrocity determinations on CRINK countries to officially recognize their crimes against humanity and provide moral clarity on the regimes’ nature and the threat they pose. This flag-planting effort could inspire action that increases external pressure on these governments, including legislation or similar determinations by allies. Successes since 2016 have focused on [the Islamic State group, China’s Uyghurs, and Burma’s Rohingya](#). North Korea’s crimes against humanity – as detailed in the 2014 United Nations [Commission of Inquiry report](#) – would be a logical place to start. And any determination should describe China’s and Russia’s complicity in these crimes, which include exploiting forced North Korean labor, repatriating refugees, and supporting Moscow’s war effort.

The White House, Congress, and the departments of State, Defense, and Justice should elevate the issue of transnational repression, in which authoritarian governments physically and psychologically attack dissidents beyond their borders. Prominent examples include American citizens such as Iranian dissident [Masih Alinejad](#) and Hong Kong democracy activist [Joey Siu](#). As lawmakers publicize the issue through various platforms, federal and local law enforcement officials should coordinate to protect targets and prosecute perpetrators. And the State Department should consider designating countries responsible for transnational repression, especially CRINK, as state sponsors of terror. While North Korea and Iran are currently designated as state sponsors of terror, redesignating them along with Russia and China for transnational repression would send a powerful message.

As the new administration develops its national security strategy, it should prominently integrate human rights and democracy as core to its foreign policy. It also should emphasize the competition between democracies and autocracies and the importance of strengthening values-based alliances that make America safer and more prosperous. Importantly, it should lay out detailed strategies for supporting democracy advocates and addressing transnational repression.

Congress should also ensure that organizations that support democracy globally are adequately funded for the critical work they do strengthening good governance, accountable political institutions, and civil society. These organizations include the National Endowment

for Democracy and its core institutes, which are powerful instruments of American foreign assistance that engage openly and transparently in other countries. Such work empowers citizens worldwide and strengthens institutions that counter authoritarian rule by making governments more accountable to their people.

The Trump Administration and Congress should enforce strategic tools that penalize human rights abusers

CRINK regimes crave the appearance of legitimacy. When world powers place targeted sanctions on individual leaders (and their families), businesses, or government entities for human rights abuses, these sanctions can discredit and destabilize the regimes. They may also deny autocrats access to desired luxuries, recreation, travel, or personal financial gain.

Leaders in Washington should craft a comprehensive policy that counters CRINK, punishes bad behavior, and protects human rights using underutilized tools like the North Korean Sanctions and Policy Enforcement Act (NKSPEA), the Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) and the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act (UFLPA). All were signed into law by either President Trump or President Obama. The Global Magnitsky Act, which President Trump invoked through his 2017 [executive order](#) blocking all American-property interests of the listed human rights abusers, should also be leveraged when possible.

NKSPEA could be used to consistently designate Russian and Chinese entities involved in or complicit with practices related to North Korean human rights abuses, including cyber and cryptocurrency theft, or to impose secondary sanctions on their enablers.

CAATSA could be better enforced to impose sanctions on Russia, Iran, North Korea, and their enablers. For example, regulators could ban imports of any North Korean-made goods to the United States under CAATSA's "rebuttable presumption" tenet, which assumes the items were crafted with forced labor. Implementers should also look to UFLPA as a model of more consistent enforcement.

The Trump Administration should strengthen America's democratic alliances around the vision of integrating human rights and security in the fight against CRINK

If CRINK countries believe they can attack democracies with impunity – including their institutions and citizens – they will become bolder, as exemplified by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. This requires a multilateral response from democracies anchored by U.S. leadership and power.

Continued U.S. leadership in NATO will be critical to regional security and the collective defense of its members – particularly in containing Russian aggression. And Washington should encourage member states to reciprocate that commitment by urgently fulfilling their obligations to the alliance to spend at least 2% of their national budgets for their own defense efforts. NATO [estimates](#) that 23 of its 32 members currently meet this threshold.

NATO can be a significant aspirational counterweight to CRINK by championing liberty, democracy, and free enterprise, which foster international peace. It is largely an alliance of liberal democracies, so it should coordinate its response to CRINK aggression with platforms supporting democratic movements, condemning human rights abuses, and countering transnational repression.

In the Indo-Pacific, the United States should be the indispensable nation for bridging democracies across Europe and Asia and coordinating responses to mutual CRINK threats such as Russian-North Korean military cooperation. South Korea and Japan, which are strategically located near China, North Korea, and Russia, should be points of emphasis.

Washington, Seoul, and Tokyo should seek new opportunities to collaborate bilaterally, trilaterally, and within international organizations to elevate human rights as part of a

comprehensive security policy. This would build on promises these nations [made](#) during their August 2023 Camp David summit to strengthen cooperation on North Korean human rights “and reaffirm a shared commitment to the immediate resolution of the issues of abductees, detainees, and unrepatriated prisoners of war.”

A potential framework could be the State Department’s United States-South Korea-Japan trilateral dialogue in October 2024 that focused on North Korean human rights. The gathering convened stakeholders to affirm the importance of integrating human rights into effective policy and offered strategies for doing so. The gathering also created a network of nonprofits supporting refugees.

This could be a model for broader efforts to elevate democracy advocates in CRINK, as well as publicly prioritizing human rights as part of a multilateral response to authoritarian collaboration.

Washington should also encourage South Korea and Japan (and other democracies) to create permanent foundations to promote democracy regionally or globally. These could resemble America’s National Endowment for Democracy and the European Endowment for Democracy.

The Trump Administration and Congress should empower democratic advocates from CRINK to unite around their shared struggle for freedom

Achieving this goal requires regular platforms to spotlight and convey solidarity with CRINK democracy advocates.

The White House should welcome more advocates for publicized meetings with the president, as well as key diplomatic and national security officials, to boost the advocates’ profiles, humanize their struggle for audiences in free societies, and show solidarity with the fight for freedom worldwide. Importantly, the administration should strategically host groups that simultaneously include CRINK advocates to better illustrate how they are engaged in the same fight for liberty.

For example, a photo of the American president locking arms with Russian dissident Vladimir Kara-Murza, Uyghur advocate Rushan Abbas, and North Korean escapee Ji Seong-ho would send a strong message that the United States supports the people of these countries. That single image would also be a powerful rebuke of CRINK.

Through relevant committees and special bodies, Congress should also elevate democracy advocates from CRINK. These bodies should convene hearings with advocates that examine how these regimes oppress their people while supporting each other politically, economically, and militarily.

Lastly, the State Department should foster partnerships with nonprofits, universities, and private companies that develop networks of future CRINK democratic leaders. Given that CRINK countries are notoriously closed societies, domestically based diaspora and exiles with potential to influence or support democratic movements in their home countries should be the target audience. Programming should focus on creating a shared vision for advancing democracy in CRINK and leadership development.

CRINK poses a serious challenge to the U.S.-led liberal world order. These countries seek a world controlled by despots that repress their own people and make Americans less safe and less prosperous. Holding authoritarian governments accountable to their people by fostering conditions for democracy and supporting human rights is the best long-term strategy for protecting American interests and ensuring peace. The Trump Administration, working together with Congress, must prioritize these fundamental values as part of a pragmatic national security policy.



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