

## Session Sketch

Asan Plenum 2026

*“Modernizing Alliances”*

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**Session:** Concurrent Session 2-1: Responding to the Rise of CRINK

**Date/Time:** April 8, 2026 / 13:10-14:30

**Moderator:** Victor Cha, CSIS

**Speakers:**

Justyna Gotkowska, Centre for Eastern Studies

Jia Qingguo, Peking University

Igor Khrestin, George W. Bush Institute

Lim Sungnam, Bae, Kim & Lee

Alexander Nikitin, Moscow State Institute of International Relations

Okano Masataka, Former National Security Advisor, Japan

Randall Schriver, Institute for Indo-Pacific Security

Victor Cha, CSIS (moderator)

**Rapporteur:** Andy Lim, CSIS

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Dr. Victor Cha, the president of the Geopolitics and Foreign Policy Department and Korea Chair at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), opened the session by introducing the “CRINK” framework of China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea, noting that these four countries together represent roughly 20 to 21 percent of the global population, approximately 25 percent of global GDP, 18 percent of global military expenditures, and 51 percent of the world’s nuclear weapons stockpile. He distinguished between alliance and alignment, arguing that while CRINK does not constitute a formal alliance, its consequences are entirely real, as demonstrated by the combined contributions of Iranian drones, North Korean troops and missiles, and Chinese microelectronics to Russia’s war effort in Ukraine. He framed the panel’s central question as whether the tactical and transactional nature of these relationships might develop, over time, into something with longer-term strategic resilience. He noted that autocratic alliances historically tend to be opportunistic and transactional, often built around specific shared interests rather than durable strategic visions, but raised the question of whether particular elements of the CRINK relationships might prove more enduring.

Ms. Justyna Gotkowska, the Deputy Director and Head of the Security and Defence Department at the Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), focused her remarks on Russia, which she characterized as the central challenge to European security and the primary disruptor of the international rules-based order. She described Russia as a declining power politically, economically, and demographically but one armed with a neo-imperial mindset and an outsized investment in its military. She assessed Russia’s core objectives as threefold: to rebuild its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, to establish a buffer zone across Central and Eastern Europe by limiting the sovereignty of neighboring states, and to press for a great power concert arrangement on the European continent that would effectively restore Russian veto power over regional security. The 2022 annexation of Ukrainian territory, she argued, was a prime illustration of how Russia uses military force to achieve political goals and that pattern

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has continued through hybrid activities, cyberattacks, and interference in critical infrastructure across Europe.

Ms. Gotkowska also addressed Russia's strategic alignment with China, which she described as a significant complicating factor for European and allied strategy. She assessed Russia's cooperation with North Korea, including the deployment of North Korean soldiers to Russian territory and the deepening of military-technical cooperation as driven both by the necessities of the war in Ukraine and by Russia's deliberate use of these relationships as political instruments to pressure other countries. On allied response, she called for a strategy built on denying Russia a military victory in Ukraine, maintaining political and economic pressure on Moscow, and sustaining support for Ukrainian sovereignty. She emphasized that European allies - with Poland leading on the Eastern flank as the largest country in that position – must take on substantially greater responsibility for conventional defense, while also exploring alternative nuclear security arrangements as questions arise about the reliability of the U.S. nuclear guarantee.

Prof. Jia Qingguo, a professor and former dean at the School of International Studies and the director of the Institute for Global Cooperation and Understanding at Peking University, opened by challenging the foundational premise of the session, arguing that the term "CRINK" contains two questionable assumptions. The first is that CRINK constitutes a real alliance or even a quasi-alliance. Jia argued that what drives China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea toward one another is primarily shared pressure from the United States and its allies— whether economic, ideological, or military and that proximity born of external pressure does not make a grouping an alliance. He noted that the four countries share no common ideology, religion, culture, political system, or security strategy. Their divergences are significant: China and Russia support the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) regime, while Iran and North Korea do not; China has not endorsed Russia's annexation of Ukrainian territory; China embraces economic globalization while North Korea rejects it; and China and Russia oppose terrorism while Iran has supported militant groups operating against Israel. The only meaningful bond among the four, Jia argued, is the shared perception of facing an existential threat from the U.S. and Western pressure.

The second false assumption, Jia contended, is that CRINK is on the rise as a unified force. He noted that between 2014 and 2024, only China's GDP and defense spending have increased substantially. Russia, Iran, and North Korea have not seen comparable growth, with any increases in North Korean expenditure driven by the wartime context rather than structural economic development. He suggested that the more accurate framing is not the "rise of CRINK" but the rise of China, and that lumping the four together distorts both the analysis and the policy response. Treating them as a monolithic hostile entity, he warned, is likely to force these countries into a closer relationship and foreclose cooperation on issues where they might otherwise share interests with the West. The appropriate approach, he argued, is to engage each country individually, managing differences and pursuing shared interests case by case, as one would with any other major power.

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Mr. Igor Khrestin, the Senior Advisor for Global Policy at the George W. Bush Institute of the George W. Bush Presidential Center, acknowledged the ideological dimension of the CRINK challenge, observing that the most fundamental shift in recent years has been Russia's willingness to accept North Korean soldiers on its territory and to deepen military-technical cooperation with Pyongyang, a transformation that reflects how far Moscow has been willing to go in pursuit of its war aims in Ukraine. He called for the United States to reaffirm the centrality of human freedom and democracy as the animating values of its foreign policy, arguing that these values, not merely military or economic power - are what sustain American alliances and give the United States its comparative advantage over authoritarian competitors. He also emphasized the scale of the challenge, characterizing the current strategic environment as one in which the United States faces two near-peer competitors simultaneously, a situation without precedent in modern American statecraft.

Khrestin stressed that the role of the U.S. Congress will be critical in shaping a durable multi-administration response to the CRINK challenge. He noted that disagreements between branches of government and between political parties complicate the effort to build a sustained policy response and that allies may not have the luxury of waiting for Washington to resolve those internal disagreements. On costs and consequences, he argued that the United States and its allies must impose penalties even for below-threshold activities that sustain the CRINK grouping. He pointed specifically to China's continued purchase of the large majority of Iranian oil, while taking deliberate steps to remain just below clearly sanctionable thresholds as an area where far greater pressure is warranted. He acknowledged that differences among CRINK countries present opportunities for wedge strategies, particularly around China's growing influence in areas of traditional Russian interest - but cautioned that this requires a precision the United States has not always demonstrated, and that attempts to force the parties apart risk accelerating the opposite result.

Amb. Lim Sungnam, a Global Advisor at Bae, Kim & Lee, offered a perspective shaped by diplomatic experience and the observation that the CRINK concept is not widely understood in Korea—where it may function more as an analytical framework than as a reflection of operational reality. He assessed the grouping as lacking any institutional framework or formal trigger mechanism that would compel collective action among its members. As evidence, he pointed to the recent conflict involving Iran: when Iran came under direct military attack, there was no observable material support from the other three members of the CRINK grouping. While some reporting suggested that Russia may have shared intelligence about potential targets in the region, Lim found no subsequent evidence of critical military assistance flowing from CRINK partners to Tehran. On this basis, he cautioned against overstating the depth and operability of the grouping's practical cooperation, and that after what is happening in Iran, there may be more utility in looking at a CRUNK grouping of China, Russia and North Korea.

Looking ahead, Lim identified two variables as most likely to shape the future trajectory of CRINK. The first is the outcome of the war in Ukraine: a negotiated settlement could significantly diminish the intensity of Russia-North Korea cooperation, which has been driven primarily by Russia's wartime requirements. The second is the outcome of an anticipated

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meeting between President Trump and President Xi, the results of which he suggested would carry significant implications for the bilateral relationships within the grouping. Within the CRINK framework, he assessed the Russia-North Korea relationship as the most active and consequential bilateral pairing at present, while characterizing China's posture toward the grouping as lukewarm. As illustration, he noted that at the Victory Day military parade in September 2025, where leaders from Russia, China, and North Korea were all present, no formal trilateral meeting among all three took place, suggesting China was not actively promoting deeper trilateral cooperation.

Dr. Alexander Nikitin, a professor in the Political Theory Department at the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO), concurred with the panel's consensus that CRINK does not constitute a formal alliance. He noted the absence of any shared legal framework binding the four countries: no formal multilateral treaty structure, no mutual defense obligations extending across the group. What exists, he argued, is a set of distinct and not particularly interconnected bilateral arrangements of varying character. He drew an explicit distinction between the original Soviet-era alliance with North Korea, which carried an ideological component rooted in shared communist identity alongside its military obligations - and the current Russia-North Korea cooperation, which he characterized as having no ideological component, resting purely on geopolitical interest. On the specific question of whether North Korea is now covered by a Russian nuclear umbrella, Nikitin was direct, hardly: there is no contractual framework to support such an interpretation, and the question remains legally and strategically unresolved

He characterized the Russia-China alignment as one in which the two countries share a broad orientation toward limiting U.S. influence but are not aligned on every question — and in which Russia's dependence on China has grown substantially as a consequence of the war in Ukraine and Western sanctions. The Russia-China strategic partnership has no military alignment, and no military treaty. He acknowledged that Beijing is not ready to fight in Ukraine, nor is Moscow ready to fight in Taiwan.

Mr. Okano Masataka, previously served as Japan's National Security Advisor, advising the Prime Minister and overseeing national security policy across various domains, situated Japan's response to CRINK and the broader deterioration of the regional security environment within the context of alliance modernization, and specifically within the challenge of sustaining U.S. commitment to the Indo-Pacific at a moment when the definition of American national interest has, in his assessment, become narrower and more short-term than the strategic situation demands. He noted that Japan's defense buildup is continuing and that Tokyo remains committed to shouldering its share of the alliance burden. But he emphasized that no single country can adequately address the challenges posed by an assertive China, an active Russia, or the combined pressures of the CRINK grouping, and that the strategic case for sustained U.S. engagement in the region remains as strong as ever, even if the political will to make that case in Washington has grown more complicated.

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Mr. Okano called for a sustained effort to persuade the United States that its long-term national interests are served by continued commitment to the Indo-Pacific, not as an act of alliance management, but because U.S. power and influence in the Indo-Pacific depends on the stability and dynamism of the region itself. He identified a need to broaden the U.S. definition of national interest to account for longer-term challenges: China's expanding activities in the region, economic security, and the erosion of global governance structures. He called for Japan to continue deepening cooperation with a broad coalition of partners, including Quad members Australia and India, as well as Canada and European countries, and closed by underscoring the acute risk of miscalculation in a high-tension environment, arguing that dialogue and diplomatic engagement at all levels have a larger and more urgent role to play than at any recent point.

Mr. Randall Schriver, the Chairman of the Board at the Institute for Indo-Pacific Security and a partner at Pacific Solutions LLC, argued that while CRINK is not a formal alliance, characterizing it primarily through the lens of its informality misses several critical points. His first point was that Beijing's preference for alignments that do not encumber it with formal obligations or trigger mechanisms is not a structural weakness but a deliberate strategic preference: China seeks alignment that preserves its room for maneuver while still advancing a common orientation against the U.S.-led order. His second point was that the grouping's cohesion rests not on shared positive ambitions but on what he called an "alignment of aversions" - a shared opposition to U.S. leadership, the U.S. alliance system, and the free and open order in the Indo-Pacific. He noted that this opposition predates recent events: as far back as the 1990s, the existence of the U.S. alliance structure was already being characterized as a threat by each of these countries in their strategic documents.

Mr. Schriver's subsequent points focused on the strategic consequences of even limited CRINK cooperation. He argued that what Russia has received from North Korea, Iran, and China in the Ukraine war should be understood as a proof of concept, and that if China were to face a contingency over Taiwan and received comparable support from the other three parties, the implications for U.S. and allied planning would be severe. He characterized CRINK as a China-centric grouping in which Beijing acts as the hub: driving sanctions evasion, coordinating positions in multilateral institutions, and sustaining the other members in ways that complicate Western strategy. He also identified the grouping as a self-reinforcing protection mechanism for autocracies, spreading the authoritarian model through information operations, diplomatic support, security assistance, and technology transfer. On policy, Schriver called for imposing costs on China even for below-threshold activities, including its role in sustaining the Iranian economy, endorsed opportunistic wedge strategies where genuine differences among CRINK members could be exploited and argued that modernizing the alliance must incorporate a comprehensive, multi-theater view of how any Indo-Pacific contingency would actually unfold.

During this session, Asan Institute Founder and Honorary Chairman Dr. M.J. Chung expressed relief at the panel's assessment that CRINK does not constitute an institutionalized framework, but he raised Jia Qingguo four questions on the implications of China's position within the CRINK grouping: (1) If China genuinely does not view CRINK as a meaningful coalition,

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what concrete steps would Beijing take to demonstrate to the world that it is different from Russia, Iran, and North Korea?; (2) South Korea's foremost concern remains North Korean nuclear armament, and asked directly whether China has the will to pressure Pyongyang toward denuclearization; (3) A hypothetical where if an anti-American country in Latin America were to request nuclear assistance from China, how would China respond?; and (4) ordinary people around the world still tend to understand global affairs through the lens of communism versus capitalism, and therefore whether it is still appropriate to perceive China as a communist state today.

In response, Jia argued that China is different and it doesn't need to show the world, and that it has its own set of priorities and preferences. On denuclearization, he maintained that China's stated policy remains the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula and that Beijing does not want a nuclear crisis in the region. Jia rejected the possibility that China would support another country's nuclear development to counter the United States. On the ideology question of whether China is still a Communist state, Jia argued that whether China is communist depends on how one defines communism and characterized China as a socialist state with a market economy.