

On the ‘BRINK’

The Anti-Western Coalition Opts for Long, Open-Ended War

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“Nonetheless, these outcasts, driven by desperation, are introducing new risks to regional stability and the global order.”

– Carl Bildt, “The Axis of Outcasts,” 18 September 2023

At the onset, the Russian war against Ukraine in February 2022 was perceived worldwide as merely a Russo-Ukrainian armed confrontation that would end rather quickly. Nineteen months on, the scenario is different. Alongside other manifold impacts, the war caused the emergence and structuring of two factual opposing coalitions. The West’s political and material support for Ukraine gives the impression that Russia faces them on its own. But that is a misconception. The advent of a continental, Russia-centered *ad hoc* coalition involved in the war in Ukraine is a sobering reality. Given its composition, I tentatively call it “BRINK” (Belarus, Russia, Iran, and North Korea).

This geopolitical grouping is knit together by the akin nature of regimes, coincident interests, revisionist aspirations, a shared perception of their competitors (seen as adversaries), and other common denominators. Together, these factors induce strategic cooperation and coordination between the associates. The materialization of the BRINK coalition that is defiant of the existing, West-led rules-based international order *a fortiori* provides the war in Ukraine with a truly spatial dimension and amplifies its upsetting effects on global security.

Therefore, this IDD Analytical Policy Brief evaluates drivers, common denominators, and patterns of strategic behavior pertinent to the states that make up the BRINK

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coalition. It also focuses on the grouping's destabilizing geopolitical effects in relation to the conflict over Ukraine and beyond it, as well as the factor of China and the prospects of the onset of a long, open-ended conflict directed against the West and its interests.

Accomplice Triad: Supporting Russia

Belarus, Iran, and North Korea are directly involved in the conflict on the Russian side through different forms of alignment and support for the Kremlin's war energy.

Moscow sees Belarus, which is strategically bound to Russia by treaty, as a strategic buffer zone against NATO. Minsk's profound and longstanding dependence on Russia's financial-economic aid and security guarantees made Belarus an accomplice of the invasion of Ukraine from its first day. The Russian plan to take Kiev relied on a combination of the armored blitz and the airborne assault launched in part from Belarusian territory. Air and missile attacks against Ukraine were also conducted from Belarus.

When the changing character of the war altered Russian strategic planning, Belarus ceased to be the staging ground for direct Russian attacks. However, the remaining Russian army units and their Belarusian allies placed under Moscow's joint command continue their threat projection towards Ukraine's northern border, distracting its forces from the "hot" southern theatre of operations. Minsk has opened its huge weapons stockpiles to satisfy the Russian army's "ammunition hunger" and provides military proving grounds for the training of Russian reserves. After the Wagner Corps' summer mutiny in Russia, Belarus agreed to host a part of the outfit. More importantly, Minsk agreed to deploy Russian nuclear weapons and delivery means in its territory, ostensibly under dual control. President Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus periodically issues hostile statements against NATO, which are for the most part timed to coincide with regular Russian-Belarusian military drills near the borders with Poland and the Baltic states, imitating a threat to the exposed Suwalki Gap.

As the extension of the war became evident in summer 2022, Russia and Iran initiated a strategic entente, notwithstanding their alternative civilization models and state systems. The kamikaze drones supplied by Iran played a significant role in the partial crippling of Ukraine's power system last winter, and Iran-produced artillery shells and rockets continue to arrive. Moscow and Tehran established a direct sealift "lend-lease" connection across the Caspian Sea. That route facilitates the increasing flow of military hardware and trade commodities between the two actors. It also grants Russia an opportunity to convey its export-import operations to the "Southern exit gate," as other bearings are distant or sealed by the sanctions regime. In exchange, Russia makes concessions to Iran in the Syrian theater, supplies it with sophisticated weapons (such as Su-35 jet fighters and air defense systems) that are required to modernize the Islamic Republic's ageing inventory, invests in

its economy and infrastructure, and possibly supports its nuclear program. Iran's militarized behavior along with its proxy wars partially divert the U.S. and other Western actors' focus from Ukraine.

North Korea, the fourth affiliate of the BRINK coalition, is a hermit state ruled for more than seven decades by the Kim family under conditions of total economic and information isolation. The DPRK's discreet but mounting engagement in the war in Ukraine became apparent after the visit of Kim Jong Un to Russia in September 2023. Both sides agreed to cooperate in the field of Russian missiles and space technology transfers to Pyongyang, in addition to the transfer of food supplies. The "ammunition for nutrition" program is already running, as even more artillery shells and spare cannon barrels from North Korea's immense arsenals emerge in the war zone. North Korea continuously confronts America's regional allies and develops WMD delivery means, thus preventing the U.S. from optimally concentrating on supporting Ukraine's war effort.

Hence, the strategic collaboration of the aforementioned trio with Russia in the format of the ongoing war has shaped the BRINK grouping. This does not, however, address the question of the in-depth motivations that brought such diverse actors together.

United in Enmity: Seven Common Denominators

The associates of BRINK are located in disparate geographies, belong to diverse civilizations, have different state and political systems, and pursue varied and sometimes divergent national interests and agendas. However, generally they share seven common denominators, driving them into at least quasi-symbiotic relations.

One, anti-Westernism and revisionism. The BRINK affiliates confront the values- and rules-based international order and antagonistically perceive the "generic West" led by the United States. The shared vision of a common nemesis and revisionist ambitions fuel resentments, determine confrontational approaches, and induce strategic paranoia. Mentally, Russia and Belarus have been at war with the West for a decade and a half, Iran since 1979, and the DPRK from as early as 1950.

Two, authoritarianism. Although the state and political systems of the BRINK associates vary, their core commonality is the authoritarian and personalist nature of the ruling regimes. To manage elites and society, those regimes apply relatively similar ideologized mobilization models that substitute absent democracy, a functioning state, a viable economy, and a vision of the future.

Three, militarization. Each of the BRINK associates vigorously strengthen their military capabilities. In parallel, they each use instruments of militarization of public conscience (by inducing a "besieged fortress" mentality and a cult of war) to maintain control over their respective societies.

Four, survivability and resilience. The conservation and preservation of the systemic status-quo is the ultimate objective of each of the BRINK associates. They all demonstrate an apparent stamina to withstand domestic troubles and exterior pressures (as has been proven by the regimes of Iran and Belarus, both of which overcame massive popular protests, and by the regime in North Korea that has survived international sanctions for decades). Yet, to nurture their sustainability, the BRINK associates need to channel negative social energies externally through fabricated international conflict settings.

Five, the nuclear dimension. Russia has the largest WMD arsenal in the world; North Korea continues to develop its embryonic nuclear capabilities; Iran is a nuclear-inspired threshold state; and Belarus hosts Russian nukes and delivery means. The strategic deterrence arsenal is a trump card at the disposal of the BRINK quadrant.

Six, patterns of strategic performance. The zero-sum game approach is a fundamental basis of the strategy of each BRINK associate. Practical tools include militarized international behavior (e.g., show of force, threat of use, or the use of force), disruptions, blackmailing, “megaphone diplomacy,” and similar designs. Unconventional means are also put to use, including the “weaponization” of energy, food, and migration—in the case of Iran, this also involves having recourse to a broad proxy network of violent non-state actors. The political will and cohesion of the opponent camp is targeted through cognitive warfare and the influence networks and supporters located in Western societies and politics.

And *seven*, the Chinese connection. All four actors have a close alignment with China. As the war lingers, their dependence on Beijing will grow even more.

Hence, the product of the aforementioned commonalities is a spatially distributed yet geo-strategically connected, non-structured, and non-institutionalized *ad hoc* coalition with non-transparent mechanisms of interaction, based on informal agreements and personal relations between regimes’ leaders.

BRINK Goes Horizontal: Geopolitical Consequences Beyond Ukraine

Given the spatial dimension of the BRINK coalition and its general anti-Western inspiration, there should be no doubts that it has considerable destructive potential in different regions of the globe beyond the Ukraine theatre.

Each of the three BRINK junior associates (Iran, North Korea, and Belarus) has its own distinct agenda. Iran, the Middle Eastern pillar of BRINK, displays a destabilizing show of force in the Persian Gulf and the South Caucasus, wages proxy wars in the Levant, Iraq, and Yemen, and projects a belligerent posture towards Israel. North Korea (the Far-Eastern pillar) challenges the Republic of Korea and Japan with provocative

weapon tests, while Belarus (the Eastern European pillar) saber rattles and sporadically generates a migrant crisis on the EU's border.

Russia, the central pillar of BRINK, progressively tries to encroach into the African continent, despite being bogged down in Syria (and, of course, in Ukraine). That mission is carried out by outsourced expeditionary paramilitary outfits, which provide hybrid security services to several anti-Western military regimes in Africa in exchange for the right to extract natural resources from those countries at sometimes very favorable concessionary rates. Moscow also maintains disrupting levers to activate dormant fault lines in parts of the South Caucasus, Central Asia, and the Western Balkans.

Furthermore, the BRINK also has “part-timers”—i.e., ideologically close regimes that are not directly involved in the war in Ukraine but support Russia politically. That “secondary ring” includes Syria, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Myanmar, Eritrea, post-Soviet para-state “black holes” (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria), the Central African Republic, the emerging African Sahel regional cluster of military juntas (Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso), and violent non-state actors like Hezbollah or Hamas. Russia is trying to enlarge the list of BRINK “part-timers” by tapping into various other parts of the Global South for political support—and the Kremlin is ready to pay for it (an example is Russia's recent cancellation of a total of \$23 billion of debt owed by several African states).

Finally, yet importantly, the BRINK quartet is torpedoing WMD and critical technologies' non-proliferation regimes.

Overall, Russia has an apparent interest in delivering effects that are harmful to the West worldwide—alone or altogether with its BRINK partners—as any other active flashpoint would divert attention from and disperse efforts of the pro-Ukrainian coalition from what Moscow believes is a West-led proxy war against it. This sort of synchronized strategic interaction could indeed cause serious trouble for the West's strategic interests across the globe.

Overlord's Shadow: A Factor of China

All four of members of the BRINK coalition are progressively reliant on their Beijing connection. China is not a participant in BRINK—for now—but watches it carefully. The conflict over Ukraine is a mixed blessing for Beijing: after perhaps trying and certainly failing to avert it, China has tried to capitalize on it. The American and European engagement with Ukraine complicates the West's pursuit of an agenda of strategic competition with China and distracts efforts and resources that otherwise could be committed to the Indo-Pacific theater. This helps to explain why China provides dozed-in dual-use supplies to Russia via third parties (Iran and North Korea) to keep it afloat, in addition to asymmetrically beneficial trade and energy supplies. It also helps to explain why the PRC conducts joint military exercises with Russian forces (such as

air patrolling over the Sea of Japan or naval drills near Alaska). China is also learning valuable strategic, operational, tactical, and technical lessons from the war in Ukraine. Surely, Beijing will incorporate these into its own military doctrines and capabilities for the impending military standoff over Taiwan.

All this means that although BRINK is not China's direct proxy grouping, it is Beijing's "icebreaker" in a global competition (and possible future confrontation) with the West. However, its deepening domestic economic crisis and power contests within the ruling elite's inner circle may prematurely end China's strategic patience and compel it to take more direct oversight over BRINK. The potential transformation of a quartet into a quintet would decisively alter the global strategic equation.

Forthcoming Scenario: An Extended Frozen Conflict?

The summer 2023 Ukraine war dynamics placed a quandary in front of the Western camp: either find an exit ramp or knuckle down for the long confrontation to come. While debates on the West's collective strategy continue to take place, it is clear that, notwithstanding their results, the hostilities will likely extend into 2024 and beyond.

The Kremlin is determined to endure: Moscow is preparing for a protracted conflict that it sees as being of an existential nature. All the preconditions are in place. The Russian economy has adapted to the West's sanctions and export restrictions regime: it is meeting its war needs without having to empty its coffers—the money from oil and gas export still keeps flowing. The military machine builds-up and slowly acclimatizes itself to twenty-first-century warfare. Moreover, immense and mostly compliant human resources are available.

The likelihood of a long external conflict comforts Russia and the other members of the BRINK coalition, as it makes it possible to mitigate their respective systemic internal crises through various means, including mobilization, tightened control, patriotic propaganda, and an "image of the enemy." This state of heightened alert is irreversible, since the members of the BRINK coalition cannot painlessly return to a regular mode of domestic functioning without violating enforced stability and existing systemic balances.

In order to avert or at least delay potential turbulence at home and, thus, safeguard the new internal status-quo, the Kremlin needs to undertake a twofold mission: to respite, recover, rebuild, regroup, and rematch; and to conserve the mental state of conflict in the domestic audience. Its minimum program is an analogous to the 1918 Brest-Litovsk peace treaty, while the best-case scenario is a new edition of the Yalta-Potsdam system and the Berlin Wall 2.0. In such settings, the BRINK grouping is essential for Russia's emerging strategy of elongation and horizontal escalation of the confrontation.

The West, in turn, faces a hard choice between three scenarios: a negotiated compromise (i.e., factual appeasement of Russia), an escalatory approach, or a war of attrition (i.e., frozen conflict). As it appears for now, the latter option is most likely to be chosen, on the grounds that it is the least harmful. To manage the looming slow-motion long war (Cold War 2.0?), the Western camp should take into account the fact that it deals not only with Russia alone but also with its BRINK cohorts (as well as China behind it).

Synopsis

- In the new global settings shaped by the war in Ukraine, the BRINK coalition is emerging as key destabilizing geopolitical construct directed against the West and its interests. Its cornerstone and center of gravity is Russia.
- BRINK's conception and operationalization help Russia to sustain, extend, and internationalize the war at a time when the Western powers' fatigue from the war grows and support for Ukraine appears to be starting to erode.
- Beyond Ukraine, BRINK represents a major spoiler challenge to the West-led value- and rules-based international order.
- For Russia and its associates, a state of conflict becomes a process, not an instrument to achieve end-states. They perverted the Clausewitzian paradigm: now policy becomes a continuation of war by other means, not vice versa. The only ultimate goal of a state of perpetual conflict is the survival and preservation of ruling regimes and existing systems turning into encapsulated modes of autarky. The achievement of such a goal would constitute the Kremlin's true triumph.
- Although China's shadow behind BRINK thickens, Beijing still restrains itself from engaging directly in the conflict over Ukraine. However, the rapidly evolving global environment, especially in the Indo-Pacific region (the Quad and the AUKUS+ coalitions, the IMEC vs. BRI competition, etc.), its relative economic stagnation, and its tumultuous elite dynamic can eventually compel China to abandon its formal neutrality, patronize Russia, and become the group's principal. Such a transformed "BRINK on steroids" would definitively tip the global scales.

The materialization of BRINK evokes the strategic *déjà vu* of the Cold War. The Western camp should realize and admit that it is engaged in a long, open-ended war—at least because the opposite side(s) see it exactly that way. That war should not be lost. The ability to contain and marginalize the BRINK coalition will determine the future place and role of the West in a transforming international system. The success or failure of that quest will depend on the West's cohesion and unity (akin to World War II and the Cold War). Western decisionmakers and the bureaucracies they lead must overcome their strategic myopia and act before it becomes too late for them.