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## U.S. Adversaries' Trilateral Naval Exercises Reflect Convenience, Not Convergence

*This paper is the first in a new series by the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, G-2, Foreign Military Studies Office that assesses the contours of the emerging alliance of the United States' four primary adversaries: China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea (CRINK). Based on open-source research, this 'CRINK Alliance Project' offers analysis of how this axis is disrupting or reshaping the Operational Environment. Its purpose is to help military leaders and policymakers discern whether, how, and when these countries' interests align and diverge; anticipate potential friction points; and seize opportunities to counter their joint efforts to threaten the United States and its interests.*

### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- The March 2025 "Security Belt-2025" trilateral naval exercises between China, Russia, and Iran were largely intended to signal unity and strength to deter U.S. influence in the Middle East despite the countries' differing priorities and needs, security goals, and aims for the exercises.
- The exercises highlight the enhanced military and naval expeditionary capabilities under development by China, Russia, and Iran, as well as demonstrate the potential for coordination at greater scale and range in future conflicts even though current naval interoperability remains limited.
- Future such multilateral exercises by U.S. adversaries could complicate U.S. operations in key regions and near strategic chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz, because of their focus on creating asymmetric deterrence and strategic ambiguity.

### INTRODUCTION

In early March 2025, China, Russia, and Iran conducted their annual trilateral naval exercise, Security Belt-2025, in the Gulf of Oman, a crucial corridor connecting the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean via the Strait of Hormuz, through which 20 percent of the world's oil passes.<sup>1</sup> These drills—the seventh since their inception in 2019—have typically focused on counterpiracy, maritime security, and rescue operations. However, they have grown in scale to now include simulated strikes and naval maneuvers,

prompting discussions of forming a joint maritime task group. While the exercises are officially meant to strengthen regional security, promote multilateral cooperation, and enhance the capabilities of the participants to “protect world peace,”<sup>2</sup> they also are meant to signal unity and to counter U.S. regional influence. Other, similar joint exercises by U.S. adversaries have grown in frequency, scope, range, and complexity over the past decade, as evidenced by one in summer 2024 near Alaska, where NORAD intercepted Chinese and Russian bombers operating together for the first time.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: Region surrounding the “Security Belt-2025” trilateral naval exercises.

## China: Routine Exercises, Expanding Reach

***China’s participation serves to familiarize the People’s Liberation Army (PLA) Navy with Russia’s and Iran’s operating procedures, as well as signals its strategic ambition to deploy a stronger and more capable blue-water navy that can extend Chinese hard power globally.*** Beijing remains cautious about such cooperation with Iran because of China’s close energy relationship with Iran’s Gulf State rivals, such as Saudi Arabia, as well as China’s sometimes contrasting policy positions with Iran.

- China sent two ships to participate: the type 052D guided missile destroyer Baotou and the type 903A comprehensive replenishment ship, *Gaoyouhu*,<sup>4</sup> both part of the 47th Escort Task Group based in nearby Djibouti.<sup>5</sup> The PLA Navy uses these rotational deployments to Djibouti to conduct antipiracy operations in the Gulf of Aden and along the East African coast.<sup>6</sup>
- China’s messaging regarding its participation in Security Belt-2025 has been minimal, suggesting that PLA Navy participation has become routine. The Defense Ministry described the drills as “conducive to safeguarding security in the region,” while emphasizing search and rescue, maritime target strikes, and joint damage control.<sup>7</sup>

- China did not participate in the 2020 and 2021 exercises, so the recent iteration was the fifth involving the PLA Navy, which advances China’s “far seas protection” strategy, extending its naval presence along vital energy and trade routes.<sup>8</sup>



Figure 2: Chinese Navy replenishment ship Gaoyouhu (996) departs Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam following the conclusion of Rim of the Pacific 2016.

## Russia: Signaling Over Interoperability

***For Russia, the exercises aim to create strategic ambiguity and reinforce the deterrent value of Russia’s partnerships with China and Iran.*** The exercises did not specify an adversary, and the scope could be expanded to include various maritime scenarios. Their timing, as U.S.-Ukraine meetings were taking place in Saudi Arabia, was probably meant to send a signal of defiance.

- Russia deployed the *Rezky* and *Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov* corvettes, along with the *Pechenga* tanker, to join the drills.<sup>9</sup>
- Whereas previous exercises emphasized antipiracy and counterterrorism, Security Belt-2025 sought to elevate the level of coordination to project greater military solidarity and signal that Iran is not isolated. Russian analyst Ilya Kramnik commented that strategic partnerships like these serve to “deter hot heads, preventing brewing conflict.”<sup>10</sup>



Figure 3: Russian corvette Hero of the Russian Federation Aldar Tsydenzhapov.

## Iran: Maritime Signaling in a New Strategic Era

***Iran sees these naval exercises as more symbolic than tactical, with their origins reflecting its broader “Look to the East” policy of growing strategic cooperation with China and Russia.*** In part, the exercises signify Iran’s strategic break with Europe after its failure to help Iran evade sanctions during the first iteration of the U.S.-led ‘maximum pressure’ campaign.

- Iran held the first Security Belt exercises in 2019, just one year after the United States withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action and at the height of the maximum pressure policy, which in 2019 included an oil embargo. Similarly, this year’s exercise came just weeks after the reimposition of a maximum pressure campaign against Iran.
- Speaking at the opening of the 2025 drills, Iranian Navy Commander Rear Admiral Shahram Irani emphasized Tehran’s growing integration into Eastern-led multilateral institutions, such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and BRICS bloc.<sup>11</sup> Iranian state media framed the drills near Chabahar as evidence of Tehran’s commitment to safeguarding maritime routes and forging new alliances.<sup>12</sup>
- Beyond their symbolic importance, the joint naval exercises also highlight Tehran’s growing naval capabilities and reinforce territorial claims in the Persian Gulf region. According to Russian officials, Iran deployed 16 naval ships, two auxiliary vessels, and two helicopters during the exercises.<sup>13</sup>

## North Korea: Absent Yet Aligned

***North Korea’s lack of participation in Security Belt-2025 and other similar exercises probably reflects its limited naval capabilities, given that North Korea’s alignment with China and Russia continues to strengthen outside of the context of these drills.*** North Korea’s state-run media did not report on the exercises, although it is possible that the military-focused *Joson Inmingun* newspaper, which is not publicly accessible, acknowledged them.

- North Korea possesses no blue-water navy, and its fleet is largely obsolete, the result of Kim Jong Un’s focus on strategic missiles and prestige projects like AWACS-style aircraft.
- North Korea’s support for Russia’s war against Ukraine demonstrates its limited expeditionary capability, as Russian forces must organize, equip, and transport North Korean soldiers for the fight.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE U.S. ARMY

***While naval interoperability between China, Russia, and Iran remains limited—nowhere near the scale or sophistication of similar exercises carried out by NATO and its partners—the Security Belt-2025 drills nevertheless provide a potential framework for coordination at greater scale and range in future conflicts.*** Their emphasis on asymmetric deterrence, ambiguity, and signaling could portend a greater risk to U.S. operations in key regions and near strategic chokepoints, such as the Strait of Hormuz. Additionally, the drills show the enhanced military and naval expeditionary capabilities under development by China, Russia, and Iran, including their ability to use rotational deployments to gain experience in multinational operations.

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