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## WHAT IS THE AXIS OF EVIL?

This article is devoted to the emergence and transformation of the concept of the «Axis of Evil», which is relatively new in political science and the theory of international relations. There are two stages of its interpretation, in the first of which the Axis of Evil was understood as the political regimes of countries that sponsor international terrorism and develop biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons, in the second – autocracies that began to fan the flames of a new world war with their actions. It is emphasized that the transition from the first stage to the second was caused by Russia's full-scale military aggression against Ukraine, which caused a crisis in the world order.

The author believes that the main actors of the Axis of Evil should primarily include Russia, which started the largest military conflict in Europe since the Cold War, as well as those countries that directly help it achieve its aggressive goals. He includes North Korea and Iran among these. These countries supply Russia with a critical mass of weapons, without which it would not have been able to withstand this war for four years, and North Korea has even sent its military contingent to Russia. This alliance is united by a common goal – to oppose the spread of the ideological, political, and economic influence of Western democracies in the world. However, each of its countries has its own geopolitical goals, which may conflict with those of other participants. The problem of communist China occupies a special position in terms of belonging to the Axis of Evil. On the one hand, the PRC officially declares its commitment to preserving peace, its willingness to adhere to the principles of world order, and openly does not assist other members of this alliance in committing aggression. On the other hand, it economically, technologically, and politically supports aggressor countries. According to the author, China, in the context of the development of the situation in the modern world, is similar to a director who, being behind the scenes, determines for the actors how to play their roles on stage.

The conclusions emphasize that the actions of these states threaten humanity with a new world war. To prevent it, civilized countries, whose combined potential significantly exceeds the combined potential of aggressive autocracies, must join forces to curb the aggressors. Unfortunately, after Donald Trump came to power in the United States, the creation of an alliance to effectively counter the Axis of Evil has become a big problem.

**Keywords:** *Axis of evil, international relations, world order, global confrontation modern aggressive autocracies and their proxies, Russian aggression against Ukraine.*

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One of the most popular definitions of the state of the modern world order is the concept of the «Axis of Evil». Although this concept is widely used not only in journalistic publications, but also in scientific works, it still lacks a thorough understanding. There is no clear understanding of when and why this international community emerged; what unites regimes with different ideologies into a single force; what goals it sets for itself; and, finally, which states are part of this alliance. Proposing answers to these questions is the **aim** of this paper.

**When did this concept arise?** The concept of the Axis of Evil emerged and gained popularity after the annual address to the US Congress by the 43rd President George W. Bush on January 29, 2002, after Islamic fundamentalists from Al Qaeda committed a series of terrorist acts in the United States on September 11, 2001, resulting in the deaths of 2,977 people, the injury of thousands, and damage to infrastructure and property worth at least \$10 billion (September 11 Attacks). In response to this terrorist act, a coalition of states led by the United States, based on the mandate of the UN Security Council of December 20, 2001 (Resolution 1386, 2001), carried out military operations in Afghanistan, as a result of which the theocratic Taliban regime, which had given shelter to Al Qaeda, was overthrown and a transitional government was established. Although Bush's speech focused on this event, he named a number of states that sponsor international terrorism and are attempting to acquire weapons of mass destruction. Bush included North Korea, Iran, and Iraq among these states, because they and their terrorist allies form an axis of evil, arming themselves to threaten world peace (Bush, 2002). Shortly thereafter, speaking at the Heritage Foundation, US Undersecretary of State for Arms Control and International Security John Bolton again named Iraq, North Korea, and Iran as the main actors in the «Axis of Evil», but added that there were other rogue states outside its borders that were seeking to acquire weapons of mass destruction, such as Libya, Syria, and Cuba (Bolton, 2002).

That is, the concept of the «Axis of Evil» arose as a statement of the existence of a set of autocracies that «threaten world peace» because they sponsor international terrorism and are engaged in the development of biological, chemical, and nuclear weapons and their delivery systems.

**A new interpretation of the «Axis of Evil».** A significant change in the essence of this concept occurred after the abolition of Deng Xiaoping's political reforms began in communist China after Xi Jinping came to power in November 2012, and in Russia under Putin, the political regime began to acquire a neo-totalitarian character (Romanyuk, 2022). Both of these regimes had common goals of opposing the democratic world and expanding their influence on the international stage. Both had revanchist intentions: communist China – the integration of Taiwan into the PRC, Russia – the expansion of its territorial space to the borders of the former Soviet Union. The formation of a strategic alliance between Putin and Xi is evidenced by the fact that until 2007, the joint use of the veto right by the PRC and Russia on UN Security Council decisions did not occur. Between 2007 and July 2012, the joint use of the veto right occurred 4 times. After Xi Jinping came to power in China, this happened 10 times. 7 of them were applied in favor of the Bashar Assad regime in Syria, 1 in favor of the North Korean regime, and the last one, regarding ensuring freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, was applied in favor of the Islamist regime in Iran (UN Security Council Meetings & Outcomes Tables).

Although the PRC and Russia had similar foreign policy goals, they used different methods to implement them. In recent years, although the PRC has increased the number of provocations against neighboring countries (military and psychological pressure on Taiwan, as well as on Japan regarding the Senkaku Islands, conflicts in the South China Sea with the Philippines and Vietnam, as well as in the Himalayas with India), it has tried not to start major armed conflicts. Instead, Russia in August 2008 carried out military aggression against Georgia, which resulted in the de facto annexation of almost 20 % of its territory, and in 2014 seized Ukrainian Crimea and began military operations against Ukraine in Donbas. Russia did not dare to start a major war with Ukraine in 2014 and therefore went to negotiations in Minsk. However, during this negotiations, it turned out that Russia and Ukraine were guided by different considerations. By implementing its puppet quasi-states of the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics into Ukraine's political system, Russia wanted to draw it into its sphere of political influence, while Ukraine viewed negotiations as a means of ensuring a peaceful respite to restore and build up its military potential. The main conflict during the negotiations was that Russia insisted on holding local elections in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions first, and then proposed resolving the issue of withdrawing its troops from there,

while Ukraine insisted on the withdrawal of Russian troops and then resolving other issues (Hodunova, 2025).

The Ukrainian leadership's disagreement with Putin's plans prompted him to launch a large-scale military campaign against Ukraine. But fearing to start it on his own, Putin decided to enlist the support of Xi Jinping. On the eve of the start of the war against Ukraine, Putin visited the PRC under the pretext of the opening of the XXIV Winter Olympic Games and on February 4, 2022, held talks with Xi Jinping. It is not known for certain what they agreed on, but a number of prominent analysts (Fiona Hill, Michael McFaul, Anne Applebaum) believe that Xi gave Putin the go-ahead for war against Ukraine, although he asked not to start military action until after the Olympics. The results of this meeting are considered the act of creating a strategic alliance, which was called the «New Axis of Evil».

The term «New Axis of Evil» belongs to American political commentator Danielle Pletka, who on February 12, 2022, in the article «China's Olympics are at the Center of the New Axis of Evil», published in the American conservative editorial magazine «National Review», linked the concept of the modern Axis of Evil with the Axis of fascist and militarist states of World War II, stating that this term is an allusion to the hostile axis defeated by the victorious Allies in 1945. She considered communist China to be the core of the new Axis of Evil. Pletka reported the danger of Xi Jinping's collusion with Putin 12 days before Russia's military invasion of Ukraine. She also included Islamist Iran and «the world's last Stalinist regime» of North Korea in the new Axis of Evil (Pletka, 2022). Naturally, Iraq, which was previously considered one of the main states of the Axis of Evil, was excluded from it due to the fact that a coalition of states led by the USA and Great Britain, having conducted Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, eliminated the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Immediately after the start of Russian aggression, an editorial in the Taiwanese newspaper Taipei Times on March 16, 2022, under the pretentious title “The real ‘axis of evil’ revealed,” noted that the globe is divided into two geopolitical hemispheres: on the one hand, Taiwan, the United States, European countries, India, Japan, and South Korea, and on the other, the authoritarian bloc of China, Russia, Iran, Pakistan, and North Korea” (Taipei Times 2022). As subsequent events have shown, the Taipei Times' reflection on the policies of confrontation in the modern world turned out to be largely correct, except for India and Pakistan. The inclusion of these countries in the analysis of the alignment of forces in the context of the new global confrontation was due to the fact that events were predicted in the context of Taiwan's relations with communist China. Since in the Indo-Pakistani conflict, China supported authoritarian Pakistan, and India was an electoral democracy, this led to this conclusion. However, it ignored India's traditional political, economic, and military-technical ties with Russia, as well as the fact that Pakistan's conflict with India is of a historical regional nature and does not concern the problem of world order.

Russia's large-scale military aggression against Ukraine, which began on February 24, 2022, led to the strengthening of the consolidation of aggressive autocracies, and to some extent exposed the actors of the Axis of Evil. On the one hand, a number of autocracies began to directly help Russia carry out its aggressive plan, and on the other, Russia increased its assistance to their intentions that were dangerous for the world order. However, there is still no clear understanding of which states should be included in this axis.

Although the modern alliance of aggressive autocracies is increasingly associated with the axis of fascist-militarist states of World War II, there are significant differences between them (Zelikow 2024). One is that the Axis of World War II was formalized first in the Anti-Comintern Pact (1936) and then in the Berlin Pact (1940), while the modern Axis of Evil has an informal structure. There is no general document that would indicate the goals and participants of this alliance. This can only be said based on an analysis of the concrete actions of modern aggressive autocracies and bilateral agreements between them. An analysis of the development of events related to the destruction of the world order that was established after World War II and somehow

survived during the Cold War shows that in the structure of the Axis of Evil, it is necessary to distinguish between its main actors and their proxies. The main actors include aggressive autocracies that have a certain geostrategic independence, and the proxies include political regimes and organizations that operate within the strategies of the main actors and are unable to exist without their military, political, and material support.

**Main actors and proxies.** The autocracy that has exemplified the formation of the modern Axis of Evil is **Russia**. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 gave rise to the «Weimar syndrome» in Russia, as a significant part of its political elite and the majority of its population perceived the Soviet Union primarily as a Russian state. These sentiments contributed to the emergence of the idea of restoring a bipolar world, in which the United States and Western democracies would be opposed by a coalition of Eastern states led by Russia. Back during the presidency of Boris Yeltsin, when Russia was considered an electoral democracy, its then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov publicized the idea of creating an alliance of Russia, China, India, Iran, and Iraq to confront the Western world (DeLong 2020: 313). This idea did not receive official support at the time, but after Vladimir Putin came to power, when the process of retotalitarianization of the political regime began in Russia, and its foreign policy began to acquire a revanchist and imperialist character, it began to be implemented. The creation of such an alliance was finally made evident by the Russian-Ukrainian war, during which North Korea and Iran began to provide direct military support to Russian aggression.

Although the Lukashenko regime in Belarus is not usually mentioned among the actors of the Axis of Evil, it is directly involved in Russian aggression. With critical economic dependence on Russia, it has finally become a proxy for Russia after the suppression of political protests in 2020. In February 2022, Belarus provided its territory for the Russian army to invade Ukraine. Although the participation of regular Belarusian troops in the Russian aggression has not yet occurred, despite Putin's pressure, it supplies Russia with its military equipment and ammunition and constantly organizes provocations on the Ukrainian border.

The greatest support for Russian aggression was provided by **North Korea**, whose political regime retains all the main features of classical communist totalitarianism. Russia's rapprochement with North Korea began almost immediately after Vladimir Putin came to power. In July 2000, Putin, visiting Pyongyang, signed the «Treaty on Friendship, Good-Neighborliness, and Cooperation», which signaled Moscow's intention to regain its influence on the Korean Peninsula. A new impetus for rapprochement was given by the Russian annexation of Crimea, which was supported by Pyongyang. North Korea has become the main supplier of weapons to Russia. According to Western intelligence estimates, it has transferred more than 12 million artillery shells to Russia (Mazurenko, 2005). In certain areas of the front, the share of North Korean ammunition in Russian use reaches almost 50%. Moreover, in June 2024, the leaders of both countries signed the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty, which contains a clause on mutual defense, which effectively legalized North Korea's direct intervention in the conflict on the side of the aggressor (DPRK – Russia Treaty on Comprehensive, 2004). According to him, at the end of 2024, an «elite assault corps» of North Korean military personnel numbering from 12 to 15 thousand was transferred to Russia. By February 2026, the number of dead and wounded North Korean soldiers exceeded 6,000. (Balashuk, 2006).

On the other hand, Russia is contributing to a significant strengthening of the military-political power of the North Korean regime, which increases security risks for the Pacific region. In circumvention of UN sanctions, Russian petroleum products and technologies for improving satellites, submarines, and ballistic missiles are being transferred to North Korea. Western intelligence and analysts suggest that in exchange for weapons, Russia may provide North Korea with critical technologies to improve nuclear warheads and missile entry systems into the dense layers of the atmosphere.

The main actor of the Axis of Evil is also **Iran**, which after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 adopted a tough anti-Western position. Russia's military cooperation with Iran began in September 2015 during the civil war in Syria, where the Iranian fundamentalist regime provided military support to the Shiite government of Assad. After the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine, Iran became one of the key suppliers of weapons of mass destruction to the Russian army. In addition to supplying ready-made strike drones and short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, Russia, with the participation of Iranian engineers, has established the production of thousands of Shahed drones. In exchange for drones and missiles, Russia transfers modern technology and defense equipment to Iran and assists Iran in developing satellite surveillance technologies and electronic warfare equipment. In January 2025, Iran and Russia signed a «Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Agreement», which provides for expanded military and technical cooperation, a joint fight against so-called terrorism, and coordination of actions in the event of a threat to the security of one of the parties.

Among all the main actors of the Axis of Evil, Iran is the most openly publicizing its aggressive geopolitical goals: eliminating US influence in the Middle East, destroying the state of Israel, and gaining leadership in the Islamic world. Although officially the Iranian leadership denies the intention to create nuclear weapons, it is actually working in this direction. Iran is the most destabilizing state in the Middle East, but until recently it did so mainly through its proxies. Iran's proxy until recently included the Shiite regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, but it was destroyed in 2024 by Sunni opposition forces operating with the help of Turkey. Today, Iran's proxies include an extensive network of non-state, mainly Shiite, paramilitary groups and political movements in the Middle East that receive financial, military, and ideological support from Tehran. It is coordinated by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and is defined in official documents as the «Axis of Resistance». This network includes Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hashd al-Shaabi in Iraq, Ansar Allah in Yemen, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The common goal of these groups is to establish fundamentalist regimes like Iran in their countries. Although Hamas is a Sunni organization, it receives its greatest support from Iran. In October 2023, by carrying out a bloody invasion of Israel, he initiated a new major conflict in the Middle East. This invasion was supported by Hezbollah, Hashd al-Shaabi, and Ansar Allah, who began firing rockets into Israeli territory. In addition, Hashd al-Shaabi attacked American military bases located in the region, and Ansar Allah intensified shelling of ships of «enemy states» in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. Although the Iranian leadership officially stated that these groups were operating independently, the US and Israel did not believe this and in February 2026 launched a devastating missile and bomb strike on Iran. As a result, the threat of a new world war became even more real.

**China's role.** The inclusion of communist China among the main actors of the Axis of Evil is a debatable issue, as there are arguments both for and against it. On the one hand, the PRC officially declares its commitment to preserving peace, its readiness to adhere to the principles of world order, and openly does not assist other members of this alliance in committing aggression. On the other hand, it economically, technologically, and politically supports aggressor countries.

After the start of Russian aggression against Ukraine, China became Russia's main trading partner, purchasing record volumes of its oil and gas, which provides the Kremlin with foreign currency to finance the war. It illegally supplies Russia with «dual-use» goods, such as microelectronics and chips, components for the production of drones, high-precision machine tools with program control, and nitrocellulose, which is a key ingredient for the production of gunpowder and artillery shells. There is evidence that Chinese companies are providing Russia with high-resolution satellite imagery to guide strikes on Ukrainian targets. Without Chinese economic, and especially food, support, the communist regime in North Korea could not exist. The PRC has become the main «lifeline» for Iran in the face of tough international sanctions against this country.

In political terms, the PRC has strategic partnership agreements with Iran (2021) and Russia (2022 and 2025). As for North Korea, back in 1961, the PRC concluded a «Treaty of Friendship,

Cooperation and Mutual Assistance», Article 2 of which directly obliges the parties to immediately provide military and other assistance by all available means if one of the parties is subjected to armed attack. This treaty is automatically extended every 20 years. The last extension took place in 2021.

Given these circumstances, most serious analysts also consider China to be an actor in the Axis of Evil. Thus, analysts from the Atlantic Council and the Hudson Institute began to use the acronym CRINK (China, Russia, Iran, North Korea) as a synonym for this term (Coxon, 2024), believing that China is not just a participant, but actually acts as the economic and technological core of this alliance. In the context of the development of the situation in the modern world, China is more like a director who, being behind the scenes, determines for the actors how to play their roles on stage.

**Conclusion.** The concept of the Axis of Evil emerged as a reflection of the danger threatening the world from aggressive autocracies that sought to acquire weapons of mass destruction and encouraged international terrorism. In the process of developing the international situation, it has undergone significant transformation. The trigger for changing its content was the full-scale Russian military aggression against Ukraine, which demonstrated an alliance of states trying to destroy the world order. Most reputable analysts believe that these include Russia, Iran, South Korea, and communist China, although the latter tries to hide the true goal of its geopolitical strategy.

The actions of these states threaten humanity with a new world war. To prevent it, civilized countries, whose combined potential far exceeds that of aggressive autocracies, must join forces to curb the aggressors. Unfortunately, after Donald Trump came to power in the United States, creating an alliance to effectively counter the Axis of Evil became a major problem.

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### **ЩО ТАКЕ «ВІСЬ ЗЛА»?**

Розглядається питання виникнення та трансформації концепції Осі зла, яке є відносно новою в політології та теорії міжнародних відносин. Вирізняються два етапи її інтерпретації, на першому з яких під «Віссю зла» розумілися політичні режими країн, що спонсорують міжнародний тероризм та розробляють біологічну, хімічну та ядерну зброю, на другому – автократії, які своїми діями почали розпалювати полум'я нової світової війни. Підкреслюється, що перехід від першого етапу до другого був спричинений повномасштабною військовою агресією Росії проти України, яка спричинила кризу у світовому порядку.

Висловлюється думка, що до головних акторів «Осі зла» слід насамперед віднести Росію, яка розпочала найбільший військовий конфлікт у Європі з часів Холодної війни, а також ті країни, які безпосередньо допомагають їй досягати її агресивних цілей. До них він відносить Північну Корею та Іран. Ці країни постачають Росії критичну масу зброї, без якої вона не змогла б вести війну протягом чотирьох років, а Північна Корея навіть направила свій військовий контингент до Росії. Цей союз об'єднаний спільною метою – протидіяти поширенню ідеологічного, політичного та економічного впливу західних демократій у світі. Однак кожна з його країн має свої геополітичні цілі, які можуть суперечити цілям інших учасників. Проблема комуністичного Китаю займає особливе становище, з точки зору приналежності до Осі Зла. З одного боку, КНР офіційно заявляє про свою відданість збереженню миру, готовність дотримуватися принципів світового порядку та відкрито не допомагає іншим членам цього союзу у здійсненні агресії. З іншого боку, він економічно, технологічно та політично підтримує країни-агресори. Доводиться, що Китай, в контексті розвитку ситуації в сучасному світі подібний до режисера, який, перебуваючи за лаштунками, визначає акторам, як грати свої ролі на сцені.

У висновках наголошується, що дії цих держав загрожують людству новою світовою війною. Щоб запобігти їй, цивілізовані країни, сукупний потенціал яких значно перевищує сукупний потенціал агресивних автократій, повинні об'єднати зусилля для стримування агресорів. На жаль, після приходу до влади у Сполучених Штатах Дональда Трампа створення альянсу для ефективної протидії Осі Зла стало великою проблемою.

**Ключові слова:** Вісь Зла, міжнародні відносини, світовий порядок, глобальне протистояння, сучасні агресивні автократії та їхні проксі, російська агресія проти України.