

---

## Russia, China and the United States

### From Strategic Triangularism to the Post-modern Triangle

---

*In collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA)*

**Bobo Lo**

*Winter 2010*



**Security Studies Center**  
In cooperation with the Russia/NIS  
Center, Ifri

The Institut Français des Relations Internationales (Ifri) is a research center and a forum for debate on major international political and economic issues. Headed by Thierry de Montbrial since its founding in 1979, Ifri is a non-governmental, non-profit organization.

As an independent think tank, Ifri sets its own research agenda, publishing its findings regularly for a global audience.

Using an interdisciplinary approach, Ifri brings together political and economic decision-makers, researchers and internationally renowned experts to animate its debate and research activities.

With offices in Paris and Brussels, Ifri stands out as one of the rare French think tanks to have positioned itself at the very heart of European debate.

*The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.*

ISBN : 978-2-86592-664-0

© Ifri – 2010 – All rights reserved

Ifri  
27 rue de la Procession  
75740 Paris Cedex 15 – FRANCE  
Tel : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 00  
Fax : 33 (0)1 40 61 60 60  
Email : [ifri@ifri.org](mailto:ifri@ifri.org)

Ifri-Bruxelles  
Rue Marie-Thérèse, 21  
1000 – Brussels – BELGIUM  
Tel : 32 (0)2 238 51 10  
Fax : 32 (0)2 238 51 15  
Email : [info.bruxelles@ifri.org](mailto:info.bruxelles@ifri.org)

Website : <http://www.ifri.org/>

*Winter 2010*

***Russia, China and the United States:  
From Strategic Triangularism  
to the Postmodern Triangle***

*Bobo Lo*

---

## *Proliferation Papers*

---

Though it has long been a concern for security experts, proliferation has truly become an important political issue with the last decade, marked simultaneously by the nuclearization of South Asia, the weakening of international regimes and the discovery of frauds and traffics, the number and gravity of which have surprised observers and analysts alike (Iraq in 1991, Libya until 2004, North Korean and Iranian programs or the A. Q. Khan networks today).

To further the debate on complex issues that involve technical, regional, and strategic aspects, Ifri's Security Studies Center organizes each year, in collaboration with the Atomic Energy Commission (CEA), a series of closed seminars dealing with WMD proliferation, disarmament, and nonproliferation. Generally held in English, these seminars are structured around the presentation of an international expert.

*Proliferation Papers* is a collection, in the original version, of selected texts from these presentations. An anonymous peer-review procedure ensures the high academic quality of the contributions. Download notifications are sent to an audience of several hundred international subscribers upon publication.

This paper is the result of a cooperation between the *Russia/NIS Center* and the *Security Studies Center*, Ifri.

### ***Editorial board***

Editor : Etienne de Durand

Deputy Director : Corentin Brustlein

Principal Scientific Adviser: Jean Klein

Layout Assistant: Vivien Pertusot

### ***How to cite this publication***

Bobo Lo, "Russia, China and the United States: From Strategic Triangularism to the Postmodern Triangle", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 32, Winter 2010, available at: <http://ifri.org/downloads/pp32bobolo.pdf>.

## About the Author

---

Bobo Lo is Senior Research Fellow at the Centre for European Reform ([www.cer.org.uk](http://www.cer.org.uk)). He was previously Head of the Russia and Eurasia Program at Chatham House and a Visiting Scholar at the Carnegie Moscow Center. Between 1995 and 1999, he served as First Secretary and then Deputy Head of Mission at the Australian Embassy in Moscow. His books include *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing and the New Geopolitics* (Brookings Institution Press and Chatham House, 2008), *Vladimir Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy* (Chatham House and Blackwell Publishing, 2003) and *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era : Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).



# Contents

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>The Nature of Strategic Triangularism</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Evolution of the Russia-China-U.S. Triangle</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Nixon and the Revival of Triangularism</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Yeltsin and the China Card</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>The Re-Emergence of Triangularism</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The View from Moscow</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>The View from Beijing</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>The View from Washington</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>A New Triangularism? Multilateral Strategic Disarmament</b>	<b>27</b>
<b>The Demise of the Strategic Triangle</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>Complex Bipolarity and the Post-Modern Triangle</b>	<b>33</b>





# Introduction

---

The notion of strategic triangularism, popular during the cold war, has made something of a comeback in recent years. The foreign policy failures of the George W. Bush administration and the global financial crisis have encouraged talk about the decline of the United States (U.S.) and a consequent shift in global power to the East.<sup>1</sup> China's spectacular rise over the past three decades and Russia's resurgence under Vladimir Putin have conjured up expectations of a new world order, in which American "unipolarity" is superseded by more equal and fluid arrangements between the great powers. One such arrangement is a new Russia-China-U.S. triangle.

Russia, China and the U.S. appear natural triangular bedfellows. There is a superficial logic to a dynamic interaction whereby the world's second nuclear weapons state (Russia) and its fastest rising power (China) counterbalance the sole superpower (the U.S.). By the same token, Moscow and Beijing would not restrict themselves to a narrow bilateral alliance, but would also seek engagement with Washington—each looking to maximize their respective influence by maneuvering skillfully between the other sides of the triangle.

The strategic case for triangularism is supported by historical precedent. From the beginnings of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in October 1949, the notion of a triangle involving the Soviet Union/Russia, China and the U.S. has figured prominently in the calculus of policy-makers, East and West. The 1970s, in particular, marked a golden age for this idea, following American President Richard Nixon's ground-breaking visit to China in 1972. Although triangularism has not known such prominence since, it has resurfaced at frequent intervals in great power discourse.

This article will argue, however, that the concept of the strategic triangle has had its day. Its value was exaggerated even during the cold war. Today, the utility of triangularism as a tool for understanding great power relations is falling in inverse proportion to China's rise as the next global power. Despite Russia's improved economic fortunes over the past decade, it finds itself in a state of sharp decline vis-à-vis China, not to mention lagging ever further behind the U.S. Unless it can re-invent itself as a modern great power, it will become increasingly peripheral in the world-

---

<sup>1</sup> Kishore Mahbubani, *The New Asian Hemisphere: The Irresistible Shift of Power to the East*, New York, Public Affairs, 2008; Parag Khanna, *The Second World: Empires and Influence in the New Global Order*, New York, Random House, 2008.

view of Beijing and Washington. And the Russia-China-U.S. strategic triangle will be nothing more than a relic of history.

This raises the question, then, of what may emerge instead. The most likely successor to the current U.S.-led international system is not a “multipolar world order,” but a new Sino-American bipolarity. This would be less stark than the bipolarity of the cold war, but world affairs would nevertheless come to be dominated by two superpowers, supported (or undermined) by various second-rank powers and international institutions. In time, a new triangle might even develop, although this would have distinctly post-modern characteristics. Unlike its predecessors, the “third side” would not be a discrete great power, but rather an amorphous mass of formal and informal networks, involving nation-states, multilateral organizations and non-state actors.

# The Nature of Strategic Triangularism

---

It is important to establish what we mean by strategic triangularism. Here, "strategic" covers more than simply nuclear weapons capabilities and their characteristics (strategic posture, strategic deterrence, etc.). It refers, first, to a country's overall influence, which encompasses multiple dimensions. A nuclear arsenal is certainly a strategic asset, but so are international political authority, economic strength, technological prowess, cultural and normative power. Although Germany and Japan are not nuclear weapons states, their strategic impact on the world is unmistakable. Indeed, they are arguably more influential today than Russia, which finds itself marginalized in many areas of international decision-making, most notably in the G-20 process.

When speaking of goals and priorities, strategic implies structural, fundamental and long term. It is the opposite of tactical, which describes short-term considerations that are generally opportunistic and instrumental. Strategic denotes forward thinking and planning, in contrast to ad hoc and reactive policies. It is also used to highlight the status of particular relationships. Russia, for example, routinely declares that it enjoys "strategic" partnerships with China, India and the European Union (EU). Although this expression has become devalued through overuse, it can be helpful as a barometer of bilateral trends. And "strategic", as opposed to "strategic partnership", is certainly appropriate to describe the separate interactions between the U.S. and China, the U.S. and Russia, and Russia and China.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the notion of a strategic triangle extends beyond a triangular nuclear relationship. Indeed, the Russia-China-U.S. *nuclear* triangle is of comparatively little importance, given the huge imbalance in capabilities between the two nuclear superpowers on the one hand, and China on the other. When Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger conceived of strategic triangularism, they had in mind something much broader: a triangle centered on great power balancing and geopolitical calculus writ large.<sup>3</sup>

Nearly all triangles are aspirational rather than actual, let alone strategic. For example, Russia would not only like to exploit the so-called "China card" in its relations with the West, but would also like to use any of

---

<sup>2</sup> A genuine strategic *partnership* suggests similar views of the world (and the partners' respective places within it), a common vision of the bilateral relationship, and shared objectives. None of the three relationships meets these demanding criteria.

<sup>3</sup> See Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1994, pp. 720-731.

Japan, India and the U.S. to counterbalance the rise of China, and Europe to restrain the exercise of American power. But these are stillborn schemes, naïve and impractical. An effective triangle requires three sides that are, if not equal, at least sufficiently powerful and engaged to exert a significant influence on the interactions within it. There is no such example in the contemporary international system.

# Evolution of the Russia-China-U.S. Triangle

---

Strategic triangularism between Russia, China and the United States has its origins in Chinese leader Mao Zedong's decision in 1949 to "lean to one side", towards the Soviet Union against the U.S.<sup>4</sup> Mao's choice was partly ideological and historical, a reflection of the fraternal ties between the Soviet and Chinese Communist parties. His main motivation, however, was practical. The PRC's dependence on Soviet economic and military assistance, and the absence of alternative patrons – least of all, a stridently anti-Communist U.S. – left him little option. Subsequently, the Korean War and China's military intervention on behalf of Pyongyang ensured that the PRC and the U.S. would find themselves at loggerheads over the next two decades.

Sino-American strategic confrontation did not, however, translate into a functional triangularism between Moscow, Beijing and Washington. There were at least three reasons why. First, cold war politics were overwhelmingly centered on U.S.-Soviet bipolarity. The enormous disparity in political-military capabilities between the two superpowers and the other, secondary powers meant that the main condition for a strategic triangle was absent – the existence of an influential third party.

Second, China's acute weakness after a "century of humiliation" at the hands of the foreign powers<sup>5</sup> scarcely allowed it to pursue an assertive – and expensive – foreign policy. Mao's chief preoccupations were necessarily domestic: consolidating Communist rule; rebuilding an economy shattered by decades of civil war and Japanese occupation; and revolutionizing social relations. He had neither the inclination nor the wherewithal to be an active strategic partner of the USSR against the U.S. Even during the Korean War (1950-53), China acted more out of perceived self-interest – security concerns about America's military presence in Northeast Asia, and ideological affinity with the Kim Il-Sung regime – than on Moscow's behalf.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Mao Zedong, "On the People's Democratic Dictatorship", speech commemorating the 28<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Chinese Communist Party, 30 June 1949, available at: [www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4\\_65.htm](http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-4/mswv4_65.htm).

<sup>5</sup> China's "century of humiliation" lasted from the end of the First Opium War in 1842 to the founding of the PRC in 1949. During this period, China suffered terribly from foreign invasion and occupation, civil war, and economic, social and natural disasters.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Fenby, *The Penguin History of Modern China: The Fall and Rise of a Great Power, 1850-2009*, London, Penguin Books, 2009, pp. 366-368.

Third, even during its heyday the Sino-Soviet relationship was problematic. While the PRC depended on Soviet assistance in national reconstruction, there were serious political and personal tensions between Moscow and Beijing. These worsened considerably during the late 1950s, culminating in Nikita Khrushchev's withdrawal of 1,390 Soviet advisors from China in 1960. Chinese suspicions of Soviet motives and Soviet contempt for Chinese backwardness (and ingratitude) eliminated any possibility of effective strategic coordination against the U.S.<sup>7</sup>

The upshot of these contradictions was that, for the first two decades of the PRC, triangularism was a notional rather than practical proposition. If a triangle existed at all, then it was one of mutually repelling poles: for much of this period China, Russia and the U.S. loathed each other in almost equal measure. The likelihood that one party might use the other to pressure the third seemed fantastic.

### ***Nixon and the Revival of Triangularism***

Triangularism only began to acquire genuine substance following Nixon's visit to China in February 1972. The visit reflected a major shift in American strategic thinking. Under pressure from the Vietnam War, the Soviet nuclear arms build-up and huge anti-war demonstrations in the U.S., Nixon saw an opportunity to turn the tide by reaching out to Mao. In particular, he hoped to stretch the USSR on two fronts, forcing it into strategic concessions across the globe, including a reduction of Soviet support for communist North Vietnam, and an early conclusion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT) agreement.<sup>8</sup> Nixon and Kissinger grasped that the Chinese were ready to alter their approach towards the U.S. The disasters of the Cultural Revolution, the escalation of Sino-Soviet tensions (including several border clashes in 1969),<sup>9</sup> and China's need for Western trade, investment and technology – were all factors that supported Beijing's change from isolationism to a more internationalist outlook.

The early to mid-1970s marked the apogee of triangularism. Sino-American rapprochement clearly influenced Soviet policy for the better in some areas. Moscow stopped dragging its feet over the SALT agreement, while it later played a constructive role in developing a pan-European security framework (formalized in the 1975 Helsinki accords). More generally, Soviet-American relations during the 1970s went through a more relaxed and predictable phase: *détente*. The existence of an unofficial "China card" appeared to prove the existence of a strategic triangle, albeit one that remained extremely unequal.

---

<sup>7</sup> There were many sources of Sino-Russian tension, including the exceptional personal antipathy between Mao and Khrushchev. One important substantive disagreement was over the extent to which the USSR should assist the PRC's nuclear weapons program. See Jung Chang and Jon Halliday, *Mao: The Unknown Story*, London, Vintage Books, 2006, p. 559.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, *op. cit.*, pp. 713, 730-731.

<sup>9</sup> Moscow even considered using nuclear weapons in the event of a mass incursion by Chinese forces. Igor Sutyagin, 'The Soviet-Chinese conflict of 1969', in Igor Sutyagin, *The Role of Nuclear Weapons and Its Possible Future Missions*, available at: [www.otan.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/sutyagin/02-03.htm](http://www.otan.nato.int/acad/fellow/94-96/sutyagin/02-03.htm).

However, hindsight suggests that the influence of triangularism during this time has been overstated. First, the impact of Sino-American rapprochement in modifying Soviet behavior was partial at best. It worked – to a point – in strategic arms control and European security, seeing reductions in the number of troops stationed on the Soviet Union's western borders. However, it did little to halt the advances of the North in the Vietnam War, and actually expedited Hanoi's victory by facilitating the early withdrawal of U.S. troops. With the end of the war, Soviet influence across Indochina increased dramatically at the expense of both the Americans and the Chinese. Sino-American interaction also failed to deter Soviet interventionism in Africa, Latin America and, later, Afghanistan. Meanwhile, the USSR gained formal strategic parity as a result of the SALT I treaty.<sup>10</sup>

Second, triangularism may have softened Soviet policy towards the U.S., but the same cannot be said of policy towards the PRC. For example, the downsizing of Soviet forces in Europe was followed by their redeployment to the Chinese border, where their number increased steadily to a peak of 45 divisions by 1980. Admittedly, Sino-Soviet enmity did not escalate again into military confrontation after the clashes of 1969. Yet by the time Nixon visited Beijing, the threat of war had already passed.

Third, it can be argued that Soviet-American détente would have occurred regardless. It might have taken more time to unfold, but the process had started some time before Kissinger's initial visit to China in July 1971. The SALT negotiations had been continuing since 1969, and agreement had been reached on many of the substantive points.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the impact of triangularism on Soviet policy was short-lived. Leonid Brezhnev's decision to invade Afghanistan in December 1979 signaled not only the end of détente, but also underlined how little the China card counted by then in Moscow's larger geopolitical calculations.

In sum, the impact of strategic triangularism during the cold war was limited. This was partly due to its defensive spirit. Moscow sought to minimize the consequences of Sino-American rapprochement, while Washington and Beijing looked to each other to help contain Soviet ambition. But the main reason why triangular diplomacy did not work better than it did was the huge preponderance of military might and international weight among the two superpowers. As a strategic minnow in a bipolar world, China's direct influence was marginal. Sino-American rapprochement might – and did – cause Moscow to think more carefully about its approach to the world, but it could not bring about the significant changes in Soviet policy that the Americans and Chinese sought.

---

<sup>10</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, London, Allen Lane, 2006, p. 212.

<sup>11</sup> Margaret MacMillan, *Nixon and Mao: The Week that Changed the World*, New York, Random House, 2008, p. 291.

### **Yeltsin and the China Card**

The end of the cold war appeared to sound the death-knell of triangularism and even, in the eyes of some commentators, the demise of Realism itself.<sup>12</sup> The advent of a democratic but weak Russia; the seemingly unassailable superiority of the U.S.; and a China focused on domestic modernization suggested that the future of international politics would be more cooperative and less competitive.

However, the 1990s proved to be a rather odd decade. Although the U.S. enjoyed a strategic and normative superiority unprecedented in its history, ideas of geopolitical balancing remained popular. Nowhere was this more true than in the Kremlin, where disappointment at America's refusal to treat Russia as an "equal partner" led to bitter recriminations. Triangularism found growing favor among a political elite dismayed by the collapse in Russia's strategic fortunes.

During this decade the notion of a multipolar world order rose to prominence. This was based on three premises. First, an American-centered world was not only an offence to Russia, but was also inimical to the effective pursuit of its national interests. Second, Russia was too weak to challenge U.S. "hegemony" by itself, and so needed to make common cause with others. Third, Russia's best bet to carve out a significant role in international decision-making was to be at once bridge and counterbalance between East and West, and specifically between China and the U.S.

Such reasoning led the Yeltsin administration to cultivate relations with Beijing. Part of its motivation was intrinsic: to alleviate concerns over an unresolved and contentious border; manage the flow of Chinese migration into the Russian Far East (RFE); and preserve the Russian military-industrial complex through increased arms sales to the PRC. But much the most important driver behind the improvement in relations was Russia's hope that China could be used as a strategic counterweight to the hegemonic power of the U.S. In essence, the "multipolar world order of the 21<sup>st</sup> century"<sup>13</sup> became a means of resurrecting triangularism, while pretending to leave behind the geopolitics of the cold war era.

Moscow's attempts to exploit the China card and revive triangularism were an utter failure. Although Sino-Russian relations did improve, Beijing refused to play the role of compliant partner in the Yeltsin administration's Great Game. Quite the opposite: during this decade China's economic relations with the U.S. made a quantum leap, far outstripping the still modest ties between Moscow and Beijing.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile,

---

<sup>12</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and The Last Man*, London, Penguin Books, 1992, pp. 252-253.

<sup>13</sup> Boris Yeltsin and Jiang Zemin, "Russian-Chinese Joint Declaration on a Multipolar World and the Establishment of a New International Order", Moscow, 23 April 1997, [www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-153.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ga/docs/52/plenary/a52-153.htm).

<sup>14</sup> Despite various crises during the 1990s – such as the 1996 military stand-off over Taiwan, and the 1999 NATO bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade – by 2003 Washington and Beijing were describing the state of the relationship as



Russia progressively alienated the West, while failing to influence Western policies on core issues, such as NATO enlargement.

The triangularism of the 1990s failed for much the same reason as in the 1970s and 1980s – the manifestly unequal relationships between the three parties. The identity of the least influential player might have changed from China to Russia, but the basic flaw had not. The overwhelming superiority of the U.S., Russia's strategic and economic decline, and China's pragmatic focus on growth rather than geopolitical balancing meant that by the end of the century the strategic triangle looked extinct for all practical purposes.

---

the best since 1972, and arguably better than any time in their history. Susan Shirk, *China: Fragile Superpower*, New York, Oxford University Press USA, 2007, p. 239.



# The Re-Emergence of Triangularism

---

In recent years triangularism has re-emerged as a plausible concept for understanding international affairs and, more specifically, relations between Russia, China and the U.S. This renewed popularity grew out of the perception that, by the autumn of 2008, the three countries were more equal than at any time in their shared history. Through its gross mishandling of the Iraq war, the Bush administration conveyed the impression of a hubristic and enfeebled America. Russia benefited from the happy combination of booming oil and commodity prices, rampant anti-Americanism in Europe, a weakened and divided NATO, and the general sense that global power was shifting to the East. For the first time since 1991, it could lay claim to a major role in international affairs.

But more important still was China's accelerated rise,<sup>15</sup> which became reflected in ever more assertive external policies. For much of the 1990s, Beijing had adopted a circumspect approach, focused almost entirely on domestic priorities such as economic modernization and Taiwan's reunification with the mainland. Following the Asian financial crisis of 1997-98, China became more active in regional affairs and intensified a worldwide search for energy resources and commodities, as well as seeking out new markets for its manufacturing exports. However, it was only in the new century that China really started to widen the scope of its foreign policy, and become a genuinely influential member of the international community.

In the circumstances of a weakened U.S., resurgent Russia, and increasingly confident China, it is hardly surprising that ideas of a strategic triangle have resurfaced. What is unclear, however, is whether they retain any validity. To answer this, we need to determine how far triangularism features in the respective foreign policies of Moscow, Beijing and Washington.

## ***The View from Moscow***

Moscow's foreign policy has many objectives, but one overriding aim: to reestablish Russia as a global great power. In practice, this means being an indispensable player on all major international issues, and the "regional superpower" within its sphere of "privileged" interests in the former Soviet

---

<sup>15</sup> Since 2000, China's GDP has grown at generally double-digit rates, reaching a high of 13 percent in 2007, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-01/14/content\\_10658107.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2009-01/14/content_10658107.htm). Even with the impact of the global economic crisis, GDP in 2009 is expected to increase 8-9 percent.

space.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the Putin regime recognizes, in part, that there are considerable limits to Russian influence; its capacity to project power does not begin to approximate that of the Soviet Union even in its decline.

The outcome of such assessments is that during the Putin and now Medvedev presidencies, Russia has sought strategic partners that would help constrain the so-called hegemonic power of the U.S. A world in which American primacy is no longer a “given” is, necessarily, one in which other powers have greater opportunity to advance their agendas. As in the 1990s, the goal of a multipolar world order is a means of enhancing Russian influence. Multipolarity is not only a revised form of bipolarity – America versus the rest<sup>17</sup> – but also an attempt to establish an alternative strategic and normative consensus in which Russia would be a leading player.

Putin, like Yeltsin, has identified China as the most promising collaborator in this enterprise.<sup>18</sup> There are several reasons why this should be so. The first is that China is the most powerful and influential of prospective partners, and this will increasingly be the case as it completes its modernization and transformation into a global power.

Second, China comes across as the most like-minded of candidates. The EU remains too close to (and dependent on) the U.S., too divided, and too insignificant an international political actor to fulfil such a role. India was once seen as a promising option,<sup>19</sup> but New Delhi’s rapprochement with Washington has ruled this out for the foreseeable future. China, by contrast, shares with Russia a jaundiced view of U.S. behavior, and appears to subscribe to many of the same values: a strong state, authoritarian capitalism, and resistance to Western norms and practices. This perceived like-mindedness is especially attractive to Russian policy-makers.

Third, there is a defensive rationale, summed up in the aphorism, “keep your friends close, and your enemies closer”. Although China is certainly no enemy, and Sino-Russian confrontation is improbable, Moscow is concerned about the speed and scale of China’s rise. The self-proclaimed “strategic partnership” provides opportunities to monitor and even moderate Chinese ambitions. Joint efforts in regulating cross-border

---

<sup>16</sup> Leon Aron coined the term “regional superpower” to describe the Yeltsin administration’s approach to the former Soviet space – “The Foreign Policy Doctrine of Postcommunist Russia and Its Domestic Context”, in Michael Mandelbaum (ed.), *The New Russian Foreign Policy*, Washington, Council on Foreign Relations, 1998, pp. 34-42. Medvedev spoke about “privileged interests” in a television interview on 31 August 2009, available at: [http://eng.kremlin.ru/speeches/2008/08/31/1850\\_type82912type82916\\_206003.shtml](http://eng.kremlin.ru/speeches/2008/08/31/1850_type82912type82916_206003.shtml).

<sup>17</sup> Bobo Lo, *Russian Foreign Policy in the Post-Soviet Era: Reality, Illusion and Mythmaking*, Basingstoke and New York, Palgrave, 2002, p. 108.

<sup>18</sup> Notwithstanding attempts to talk up Medvedev’s influence on Russian foreign policy, there is little doubt that Putin continues to make the major decisions.

<sup>19</sup> During a visit to New Delhi in December 1998, then-Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov proposed a Moscow-Beijing-New Delhi axis. The lack of Chinese and Indian enthusiasm ensured that the idea never got off the ground.

traffic have reinforced the security of the RFE, while interaction within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) can help defuse potential Sino-Russian tensions in Central Asia.

It should be emphasized that Moscow's interest in a multipolar world order and triangularism is motivated by perceptions of strategic self-interest, not any particular affection for the Chinese. Although Putin has presided over a substantial improvement in bilateral relations, the nature of China's importance to Moscow remains largely unchanged from the 1990s. Its utility is less intrinsic than instrumental: to counterbalance American power and strengthen Russia's hand in its primary relationships with the U.S. and Europe. Moscow does not seek to abandon the West so much as redefine it – away from the post-modern, law-based and institutionalized model of the EU, to more flexible yet traditional understandings such as a “common European civilization” and a Concert of Great Powers. The West continues to supply the essential points of reference – strategic, political, economic, technological and civilizational. In the longer term, Putin's vision is that Russia will become the third pole in an emergent multipolar, or rather tripolar, world order. It would retain a distinct, “independent” strategic identity, balancing between the U.S. and China, and remaining an essential and equal partner to both. The realization of such a vision would signal the consummation of the strategic triangle in its purest form.

However, between aspiration and realization there are many obstacles. The most significant are China's transformation into a regionally and globally assertive actor, and the widening imbalance in Sino-Russian relations. In Moscow's nightmare scenario, Russia would be relegated to the status of junior partner to either or both the U.S. and China. Chinese pre-eminence would be the worst of all outcomes – for reasons of security (fears about the long-term future of the RFE), geopolitics (Chinese dominance in Central Asia) and psychology (adjusting to a position of unaccustomed inferiority).

Moscow is anxious, too, about the renewed self-confidence of the U.S., which under Barack Obama has regained much of its international standing. The impression of American weakness and Russian strength has largely dissipated since the end of 2008, partly because of the change of administration in Washington, but also because Russia has experienced serious difficulties in the intervening period. Military victory against Georgia in August 2008 was accompanied by diplomatic isolation following the disastrous decision to recognize Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence. Russia's reputation as a reliable energy supplier to Europe suffered badly from the gas stand-off with Ukraine in January 2009. And the global financial crisis has affected it far worse than any other major economy.<sup>20</sup> These developments have shaken Moscow's faith both in itself and the emergence of a multipolar world order with Russia at its core.

---

<sup>20</sup> There are many reasons for the particularly poor performance of the Russian economy. These include an over-dependence on energy and commodity exports that has left it especially vulnerable to price fluctuations.

Finally, the Western-centrism of the Russian elite is a major impediment to effective triangular diplomacy. This bias extends far beyond historical, civilizational or linguistic affinity. Much as Moscow talks up the rise of the East and of China in particular, it continues to believe implicitly in the West's continuing dominance of international affairs. It also proceeds from the assumption that Russia's most vital interests are linked to the West. It is no coincidence that Moscow's current foreign policy preoccupations are almost entirely Western-centric: concluding a new strategic disarmament agreement with Washington; consolidating Russia's dominant position in the former Soviet space; enhancing its role in European security-building; preventing NATO enlargement and missile defense; reinforcing Gazprom's control over westward gas exports and pipelines; and playing a leading role in the Iranian nuclear negotiations as counterpart to the U.S.

### ***The View from Beijing***

Although Beijing shares an interest with Moscow in containing American power, it has little appetite for competitive balancing. This does not reflect a benign view of the world so much as the realization that it has much to lose by indulging in geopolitical games-playing. For the best part of three decades, China has disavowed any intention to compete with the U.S. Successive leaders – Deng Xiaoping, Jiang Zemin and now Hu Jintao – have made a virtue of expanding the extent and quality of engagement with Washington.

There are sound reasons behind Beijing's lack of interest in triangularism. The most important is the belief that a new world order is a distant goal. America's reputation may have diminished and its authority is under greater challenge than before. Yet its *primacy* is not in question – it will remain the sole superpower for the next two decades, if not longer. Consequently, Chinese policy-makers see no benefit in confronting the U.S. or in allowing partnership with Russia to undermine relations with Washington. To act otherwise would limit rather than expand their options. The Chinese position is encapsulated in Jiang Zemin's slogan at the 16<sup>th</sup> Communist Party Congress in November 2002, when he spoke of China's 20-year period of "strategic opportunities".<sup>21</sup> The country's backwardness, the challenges of domestic modernization, and unfamiliarity with playing a prominent role in global affairs mean that Beijing has a particular stake in a "harmonious world" that would enable it to concentrate on its real priorities. Concepts such as "peaceful rise" or "peaceful development" are intended, of course, to portray China in a soft light. But they also reflect the conviction that a positive international environment is vital to a stable, prosperous and influential China.

Beijing is conscious, too, of the limitations of Sino-Russian partnership. Russia and China bring different perspectives, interests and priorities to their relationship. Sometimes their objectives coincide, but often they do not.<sup>22</sup> For

---

<sup>21</sup> *Xinhuanet*, "Full text of Jiang Zemin's report at 16th Party congress (1)," 17 November 2002, available at: [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-11/17/content\\_632330.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2002-11/17/content_632330.htm).

<sup>22</sup> Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the New Geopolitics*, Washington, Brookings and Chatham House, 2008, pp. 3-4.

example, the Chinese leadership understands that Moscow would offer only token political support in the event of Sino-American confrontation. The experience of the past few years has shown where Moscow's true priorities lie. Putin failed to inform, let alone consult with, Beijing before endorsing the American troop deployment in Central Asia post-9/11. He also acquiesced tamely in the U.S. withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002. Generally speaking, Chinese decision-makers and scholars have few illusions regarding the Western-centrism of the Russian elite.<sup>23</sup> Whenever Moscow's relations with the West go through a difficult phase, it plays up "strategic partnerships" with China and other non-Western actors. But during times of renewed engagement with the U.S. – in the aftermath of 9/11 and again today with the Obama administration's "reset" – Sino-Russian relations tend to be pushed backstage.

The issue is not simply one of good faith, but also capacity. Despite the improvement in Russia's strategic and economic fortunes since the 1990s, there is a widespread perception that it is more a lucky power than a great power.<sup>24</sup> The Chinese see Russia as embodying – and being left in – the past. Its failure to develop a competitive, knowledge-based economy has made it increasingly marginal to China's domestic development, except in supplying certain natural resources (timber, oil, non-ferrous metals). Significantly, Sino-Russian cooperation is in sharp decline in once strong areas, such as military technology, space and the civilian nuclear industry.<sup>25</sup>

The Chinese are conscious, too, of the changing balance of strength (and weakness) within the Sino-Russian relationship over the past 10-15 years. The longstanding superiority of Russia/Soviet Union as the senior partner has given way, first to a more equal relationship during the 1990s, then to a situation in which China is the stronger party. Russia has thousands of nuclear weapons, compared to China's few hundred, but in every other dimension of power Beijing holds the major trumps.

The Chinese position may be summed up as "going with strength". Although many in Beijing believe that the U.S., even under Obama, is committed to containing China, they also recognize that it remains the one indispensable partner. It represents by far the largest source of advanced technology; the lion's share of China's global financial assets are invested in the U.S. (an estimated 1.5-1.6 trillion U.S. dollars); it is China's second largest trading partner, just behind the EU; and American ships ensure, indirectly, the security of the sea-lanes through which 80 percent of China's oil imports pass. The Chinese recognize tacitly that a strong U.S. is an important guarantor of international stability, including in Northeast Asia where its presence acts as an important check on a potentially nationalistic

---

<sup>23</sup> This is a frequent refrain of Chinese interlocutors.

<sup>24</sup> Author's conversations with Chinese scholars, Moscow, June 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Arms sales slumped from a high of \$2.4bn in 2005 to \$200m in 2006, since which time there have been no major transfers. Russian involvement in China's nuclear industry is now restricted to one site only, with Beijing turning to the West and especially the U.S. for third-generation technology. Meanwhile, the Chinese space industry has become almost entirely indigenous. Bobo Lo, *Axis of Convenience*, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

Japan, not to mention an erratic North Korea. A confident – but not over-confident – America is key to the “harmonious world” that Beijing desires.<sup>26</sup>

More generally, the Chinese have pursued a policy of strategic inclusion rather than strategic balancing. Their efforts to be “friends with everyone” accord entirely with the logic of a “harmonious world”. They are aware that many are alarmed by China’s rise and fear its ambition.<sup>27</sup> Beijing has consequently striven to engage with the West and non-West, the developed and developing world. The strategic triangle, on the other hand, is too narrow and restrictive a framework for a Chinese foreign policy that favors a comprehensive, multi-vectored approach to international relations. It would draw Beijing into overly committal – and unnecessary – choices at a time when the global system is in flux and China has the luxury of strategic flexibility, with all eager to engage it.<sup>28</sup>

Taking the post-cold war period as a whole, China has been the big winner from the politics of triangularism. Particularly after the deterioration of Russia-West ties post-2003, it has enjoyed far better relations with Moscow and Washington than they have managed with each other. The “strategic partnership” with Russia has continued to expand, but without detracting from a flourishing Sino-American relationship. Geopolitically, Beijing has extended Chinese influence throughout Eurasia, not only in the Asia-Pacific, but also in once no-go areas such as former Soviet Central Asia. The paradox is that it is precisely China’s lack of interest in pursuing triangularism, in playing either the “Russia card” or “U.S. card”, which has enabled it to emerge with most of the dividends of a strategic triangle whilst eluding its dangers.

### ***The View from Washington***

American attitudes towards strategic triangularism encompass indifference, *ennui*, fear and hostility. Although the U.S. did the most to popularize the concept in the 1970s, those days have long passed. The international context has changed beyond all recognition in the intervening decades, and so has American strategic thinking.

The most dramatic development, of course, has been the collapse of the Soviet Union and Russia’s subsequent failure to re-invent itself as a global power. Almost at a stroke, triangularism lost its *raison d’être*. Although Russia remained a nuclear superpower, this mattered far less in a

---

<sup>26</sup> Evan .S. Medeiros, *China’s International Behavior: Activism, Opportunism, and Diversification*, Washington, RAND, 2009, p. 35, available at: [http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND\\_MG850.pdf](http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG850.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> This is perhaps the main reason why Chinese policy-makers replaced the term “peaceful rise” with the more neutral “peaceful development.” Susan L. Shirk, *China, op. cit.*, p. 108; Bates Gill, *Rising Star: China’s New Security Diplomacy*, Washington, Brookings, 2007, p. 8.

<sup>28</sup> Beijing has been careful, for example, not to be drawn by into opposing the U.S. directly in Central Asia.



world in which the very nature of power and influence had become revolutionized.<sup>29</sup>

Washington now saw the threat of Russia in very different terms – no longer as a formidable strategic adversary, but as an increasingly dysfunctional state in danger of imploding. In these circumstances, the chief threats to U.S. and international security lay in Russia's *weakness*: obsolescent nuclear warheads, slack WMD export controls, ultra-nationalist and imperialist revanchism, and erratic foreign policy.<sup>30</sup>

In recent years, Moscow's aggressive behavior in the former Soviet space has deceived some observers into believing that Russia is "back" as an international player. Yet if Russia appears more threatening in some respects, few Americans believe that it resembles the Soviet Union in either ambition or capacity. For whereas the USSR was indubitably a global power, contemporary Russia is at best a regional power with some global interests.

This is not to say that it can be easily dismissed. The Obama administration's decision to "press the reset button" in U.S.-Russia relations reflects a belief that Moscow can still make a constructive contribution in several areas of American concern – strategic disarmament, Iran, Afghanistan, WMD counter-proliferation, and European security. However, the profound limitations on Russia's ability to project power beyond its neighborhood, let alone in ways that could help the U.S., mean that Washington sees no utility (or even possibility) in triangular and other artificial schemes.

The second reason for America's lack of interest in triangularism is the rise of China from regional backwater to incipient superpower. Although China has a long way to go before it catches up with the U.S., many Americans nevertheless view it as the principal "other" in the international system. Some foresee a ratcheting of Sino-American tensions and rivalry.<sup>31</sup> Others, more optimistic, believe that Beijing and Washington can cooperate effectively in addressing regional and global problems;<sup>32</sup> such thinking underpins the much-discussed idea of a G-2. Both these scenarios, however, envisage a predominantly bipolar, not triangular, world. Their underlying assumption is that China will soon become sufficiently powerful and influential to engage with the U.S. as an equal – whether as partner,

---

<sup>29</sup> As Gaddis notes, "the capacity to fight wars no longer guaranteed the influence of states, or even their continued existence, within the international system". John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War, op. cit.*, p. 263.

<sup>30</sup> Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard: American Primacy and Its Geostrategic Imperatives*, New York, Basic Books, 1996, pp. 87-98. Brzezinski observed that the Soviet demise had "created a 'black hole' in the center of Eurasia" [p. 87].

<sup>31</sup> Reflected in such melodramatic titles as Richard Bernstein and Ross H. Munro's *The Coming Conflict with China*, New York, Vintage Books, 1998; and Constantine C. Menges' *China: The Gathering Threat*, Nashville, Nelson Current, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Evan S. Medeiros, *China's International Behavior, op. cit.*, pp. 213-220.

competitor, or both. And this will greatly limit Russia's scope to play the kind of role that might make triangularism relevant.<sup>33</sup>

Third, throughout the post-cold war period, there has been a strong sense in America that old-fashioned strategic balancing is inappropriate. In 1989, Francis Fukuyama's seminal essay, "The End of History", argued that world development was reaching its conclusion with the growing universalization of Western democratic norms and values.<sup>34</sup> Although Fukuyama's original triumphalism has taken a battering in subsequent years, there remains a broad consensus that the world has moved on from the overt great power rivalries that characterized the cold war era. The international system is much more complex and diverse, and simplistic geopolitical schemes, such as traditional bipolarity and strategic triangularism, are viewed as anachronistic. This changed intellectual climate is reflected in contemporary terminology, which emphasizes engagement over competition, interdependency instead of geopolitics, and positive-sum outcomes rather than zero-sum calculus.

But perhaps the most compelling reason for the decline of triangularism in the U.S. is also the simplest – America's domination of international politics after the end of the cold war. As noted earlier, effective triangularism implies a rough equivalence between the three sides, at least to the extent that each can realistically aspire to influence the behavior of the other two. Such conditions have been almost entirely lacking since the demise of the USSR. The extent of U.S. supremacy (and self-confidence) has acted as a huge disincentive to triangular diplomacy in Washington. On the occasions where America has sought to co-opt others in support of its interests, it has looked instead to its allies in NATO or the wider international community.<sup>35</sup>

This remains the case today. Iraq and Afghanistan have badly dented American confidence, and there is a much greater emphasis these days on burden-sharing with allies and partners. However, few in Washington would disagree with the proposition that the U.S. remains the global leader. It has lost its aura of near-invincibility, and its leadership is subject to greater stresses

---

<sup>33</sup> We should note one nuance here: Robert Kagan's thesis of an "association of autocrats" between Moscow and Beijing and the emergence of a neo-authoritarian consensus to challenge the West. Leaving aside the dubiousness of such theorizing, it should be emphasized that Kagan and like-minded thinkers conceive of a *bipolar* paradigm. They foresee a Manichaeian divide of autocracies versus democracies, fighting over norms and values as well as interests. Kagan has little to say about geopolitical maneuvering of the type that informed the Nixon-Kissinger approach to triangularism in the 1970s. Robert Kagan, *The Return of History and the End of Dreams*, London, Vintage Books, 2008, pp. 53-80.

<sup>34</sup> Francis Fukuyama, "The End of History?", *The National Interest*, No. 16, Summer 1989, p. 4. In a similar vein, Gaddis writes of the "globalization of democratization," noting that the number of democracies quintupled in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, *op. cit.*, p. 264.

<sup>35</sup> Even before George W. Bush's notorious "coalition of the willing" during the Iraq war, there was Brzezinski's vision of a Trans-Eurasian Security System (TESS), to be led by the U.S. and supported by other powers, in particular China. Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Chessboard*, *op. cit.*, pp. 208-209.

and strains than any time in the past 20 years. But no-one else is ready to take on its onerous responsibilities – at least not yet. China’s reluctance in this regard is well documented, while the precipitous decline in Russia’s strategic fortunes ruled it out of contention long ago.

The multilateralism of the Obama administration reflects, among other things, a heightened consciousness in Washington that the world has indeed changed and, in some respects, become more “equal”. However, this realization does not equate to a readiness to return to more traditional arrangements – bipolar, triangular or Concert of great powers. On the contrary, the real issue is how the U.S. can operate effectively in today’s highly globalized and interconnected environment. This entails not only more productive relations with great powers such as China and Russia, but also with a multitude of smaller states, international institutions, and non-state actors.



# A New Triangularism? Multilateral Strategic Disarmament

---

It has been suggested that a new triangularism might evolve in the relatively specific area of strategic disarmament.<sup>36</sup> The argument runs as follows: as the U.S. and Russia make deep cuts to their nuclear arsenals, and China simultaneously continues its ambitious nuclear weapons program, the three powers will eventually reach a rough parity. This, in turn, will mean that future disarmament negotiations may no longer be bilateral, as has traditionally been the case, but trilateral and even multilateral (involving other major nuclear weapons states, such as the UK, France and India).

There is a certain geometric logic to this argument. In reality, though, there is minimal prospect of a nuclear-based strategic triangle any time soon. One obvious impediment is that it will be decades before Chinese capabilities approximate – in quality as well as size – the vast stockpiles held by Russia and the U.S. Notwithstanding an intensive building program, China possesses only 35-40 intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs).<sup>37</sup> Counting only *deployed* strategic warheads, China's estimated 186 is dwarfed by Russia's 2,287 (plus 2,047 non-strategic warheads) and America's 2,202 (plus 500 non-strategic).<sup>38</sup>

The second problem is more political and psychological: Beijing insists that it will not accept any curbs on its nuclear weapons development. For the Chinese, such ideas resurrect the bogey of the West (loosely defined) conspiring to “keep China down” and prevent it from realizing its legitimate aspirations, including safeguarding national security. As far as Beijing is concerned, the moral responsibility to disarm falls entirely on the “big two”. Chinese objections are reinforced by the fact that other second-line nuclear powers, France and India in particular, would be extremely unlikely to bind themselves to a multilateral agreement.

---

<sup>36</sup> This was a key theme at an IFRI conference in Paris in June 2009 ('Russian and Chinese strategic postures in 2025').

<sup>37</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, 2009, p. 24, available at: [www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report\\_2009.pdf](http://www.defense.gov/pubs/pdfs/China_Military_Power_Report_2009.pdf).

<sup>38</sup> Shannon N. Kile, Vitaly Fedchenko and Hans M. Kristensen, “World Nuclear Forces,” in *SIPRI Yearbook 2009*, Stockholm, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, 2009, p. 346, available at: [www.sipri.org/yearbook/2009/files/SIPRIYB0908.pdf](http://www.sipri.org/yearbook/2009/files/SIPRIYB0908.pdf).

The Communist leadership is also nervous that any suggestion today of a nuclear triangle would impose on China wider responsibilities for which it is not ready. Although recent Chinese foreign policy has become more confident, insecurities are never far from the surface. Beijing continues to promote the line that China is a “developing country”, for whom others should make allowances. This informs its approach to international climate change negotiations, its response to the notion of a Sino-American G-2, and its handling of commercial negotiations and market access issues. Given China’s reluctance to accept the responsibilities of a great power in these cases, the chances of it doing so on a matter of such existential importance as nuclear security are zero.

There remains the question of how China would respond if Russia and the U.S. were, at some point, to proceed with reductions that went far beyond those currently being negotiated. Beijing’s response to this hypothetical situation is to lay down a series of conditions that allow it maximum room for maneuver. Thus, while Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi has reiterated Chinese support for the “complete prohibition and thorough destruction of nuclear weapons”, this comes with the usual provisos. These include, most notably, demands for “drastic” reductions in the nuclear arsenals of Russia and the U.S.; a commitment to no-first-use by *all* nuclear weapons-states; conclusion of “an international legal instrument on security assurances for non-nuclear weapons states”; and abandonment of missile defense plans and the weaponization of space. Finally, there should be an international convention on the “complete prohibition of nuclear weapons”.<sup>39</sup>

In practice, these conditions enable the Chinese to deflect responsibility for nuclear disarmament onto everyone else. Even in the unlikely event that Russia and the U.S. agree to “drastic” cuts *as defined in Beijing*, China can still point to other “failings” to justify its nuclear build-up: the absence of a no-first-use commitment in Russian and American strategic doctrine; U.S. missile defense plans; and the absence of internationally binding treaties that would constrain not only existing nuclear weapons-states, but also threshold states and other countries with nuclear weapons ambitions.

The Chinese believe the chances of any of this happening are remote. In this connection, Obama’s idea of “global zero” – the eventual elimination of all nuclear weapons—cuts very little ice. After all, the idea itself is hardly new. In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan called for “real and verifiable reductions in the world’s nuclear arsenals and one day, with God’s help, their total elimination”.<sup>40</sup> Yet Reagan did more than anyone to popularize strategic missile defense and the weaponization of space, in the form of the Star Wars program.

---

<sup>39</sup> PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi Expounds on China’s Policy on Nuclear Disarmament at the Geneva Disarmament conference”, 12 August 2009, available at: [www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wshd/t578645.htm](http://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/wshd/t578645.htm).

<sup>40</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

On the other hand, there is little indication that China seeks strategic parity with Russia and the U.S., even in the long term. The build-up necessary to achieve such an ambitious goal would be cripplingly expensive, diverting vital resources from areas of much greater need – economic development, health, education, even conventional military modernization. It would also run completely against the grain of Chinese foreign policy; it is hard to imagine anything more antithetical to the facilitation of Beijing’s “harmonious world.”

What China wants, instead, is to develop capabilities that would definitively rule out a nuclear first strike from the U.S. in the event of Sino-American military confrontation, for example, over Taiwan. That means, at the very least, expanding its arsenal of ICBMs well beyond the (still theoretical) capacity of American missile defense systems to neutralize them. In short, the Chinese are not interested in the fetish of strategic parity – triangular or other – but the substance of strategic deterrence.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> In this respect, China differs markedly from Russia, which associates strategic parity with its continuing status as a global great power.





# The Demise of the Strategic Triangle

---

The global financial crisis has underlined the anachronistic nature of the strategic triangle. Far from precipitating a new multipolar order, it has highlighted both how interdependent the world has become, and how much it continues to rely on a strong America. The myth of Russian and Chinese “decoupling” has been exposed;<sup>42</sup> there is no alternative economic model. This is especially true for Russia. In discussions about a new financial architecture, Moscow has played the most nominal of roles. It has attempted to bandwagon with Beijing in criticizing the international financial system and U.S. culpability in particular, but few believe that it has much to offer by way of solutions. In the meantime, the old geopolitics has been bypassed by an array of contemporary challenges for which strategic triangularism is singularly ill-suited.

The centrality of the U.S. in world affairs has been emphasized with the change of administration in Washington. While this does not, as yet, signal a return to the dominance of the 1990s, the effects of a revived American influence are already evident. Tellingly, Moscow and Beijing attach far greater importance to the U.S. than they do to each other. Although they forecast its inevitable decline, their *actions* indicate that the U.S. will remain at the epicenter of their respective foreign policies for some considerable time.

Indeed, each seeks to be Washington’s preferred strategic partner. Moscow, for example, takes heart from the fact that many of the priorities Obama has identified as urgent – strategic disarmament, Iran, Afghanistan – are ones where Russia (rather than China) is the principal “other” and can hope to make a tangible and *recognized* contribution. It is no surprise, then, that Russian foreign policy has become increasingly America-centric and geopolitical over the past 12 months. With economic trumps in serious doubt, policy-makers raised in a realist strategic culture have reverted to what they know best.

Beijing, too, is drawing the natural conclusions from China’s emergence as a globally influential actor. On the one hand, it attempts to project a benign image, emphasizing “global interdependency” and “win-win solutions”. On the other hand, Chinese foreign policy has become notably more vigorous. The talk today is not just of “peaceful rise”, but “inevitable rise”. The development of Chinese power, against a background of

---

<sup>42</sup> The theory of economic “decoupling” posits that emerging economies, such as China and Russia, have developed to such an extent that they no longer depend on the health of the U.S. economy.

American difficulties, European weakness and division, and Russia's semi-isolation, has fostered a growing sense of strategic entitlement – that China is America's true counterpart in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In short, circumstances point to two trends that are directly antithetical to triangularism. The first is towards a new bipolarity, albeit one very different from the adversarial model of the cold war. The second is multilateralism, reflecting a world that is more complex, interdependent and "democratic" than at any time in history. It is not only the U.S. that has suffered a considerable decline in relative (if not absolute) power. The same can be said of traditional great powers in general. The time when a few empires could co-manage the world, in "concert" as it were, is over. While the great powers will continue to play leading roles, their capacity to influence others is increasingly constrained. In such an environment, the strategic triangle – at least as we have known it – has gone the way of the dodo.

# Complex Bipolarity and the Post-Modern Triangle

---

China's reluctance to assume the burdens of international leadership suggests that there is no early prospect of a new Sino-American bipolarity.<sup>43</sup> Its denials in relation to the concept of a G-2, not to mention adverse reactions from other major actors, indicate that the next few years are likely to see a much greater emphasis on multilateral solutions and mechanisms, constructive internationalism, and global governance. China's transition to the role of second superpower will also face many problems and obstacles – a rapidly ageing population, tightening resource constraints, economic imbalances, challenges from other powers and smaller neighbors. It will certainly not be as smooth or inexorable as some commentators suggest.

That said, it is highly probable that China will become a superpower sometime in the first half of this century. Whereas in the mid-2000s, the expectation was that it would reach the stage of a “moderately developed country” by 2050, most commentators now believe it will catch up with the U.S. by 2030, if not earlier.<sup>44</sup> If indeed China becomes the next global superpower, then the international system would be dominated by two countries whose influence far exceeded that of the leading second-rank powers – Russia, India, Japan, the UK, France, Germany, Brazil.

But the more interesting – and important – question is not whether a new Sino-American bipolarity emerges, but in what form. The common assumption in the West, shared also by some Chinese scholars, is that the U.S. and China are destined to be strategic rivals. This conviction is founded partly in the logic of history, whereby two more or less equal empires (modern or ancient) inevitably compete against one another. But it also derives force from the fact that the U.S. and China represent such different intellectual traditions, values, and indeed civilizations.<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> As the well-known China hand, Clinton Dines, puts it: “China likes to be in the front seat of the car, but does not want to drive” – conversation with the author, Shanghai, May 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Author's conversations in Beijing and Shanghai, May 2009. The scholar Jin Canrong estimates that the global financial crisis has accelerated this timetable by 5-7 years – presentation at the Beijing Forum, November 2009.

<sup>45</sup> See Martin Jacques, *When China Rules the World: The Rise of the Middle Kingdom and the End of the Western World*, London, Allen Lane, 2009.

Such fears may turn out to be correct. There are so many actual and potential frictions that it would be surprising if there were not at least some measure of strategic rivalry, which, from time to time, might escalate to dangerous levels. However, we should not dismiss the possibility that a Sino-American bipolarity could take the more positive form of a strategic condominium.

There are several reasons for optimism. First, the considerable (and growing) interdependency of the American and Chinese economies presents an especially compelling case for Washington and Beijing to cooperate. Despite calling for special drawing rights (SDRs) to supersede the dollar as the international reserve currency, the Chinese know that their economic fortunes depend on the stability of the American financial system, on American markets, and on American technology. And they continue to invest tens of billions of dollars into U.S. treasury securities.<sup>46</sup> Conversely, the U.S. understands that the health of its economy – not to mention political and social stability – relies on China acting in this way.

Second, the consequences of an escalation of U.S.-China strategic tensions are so dangerous that the respective leaderships will be inclined to favor constructive engagement. In this connection, the expansion of relations during the George W. Bush administration offers an encouraging precedent. Notwithstanding a highly ideological, neo-conservative foreign policy agenda, Washington pursued a pragmatic approach towards China – one that built on the progress of the Clinton-Jiang years. If one goes further back, the record of the Nixon White House is similarly instructive; it was the arch anti-Communist Nixon who initiated the breakthrough in U.S.-China relations. On the Chinese side, ideological antipathy did not prevent Mao from seeking and achieving rapprochement with Washington. Another source of stability is that China's imperial – or great power – tradition is essentially introspective and conservative.<sup>47</sup> This is not to say that it does not seek to project power and influence, but historically it has exercised considerable caution in doing so.

But perhaps the most persuasive cause for optimism is that the new bipolarity, if and when it does occur, would be mitigated by many other actors. The interdependency that underpins Sino-American cooperation is buttressed by a much larger interdependency that reinforces the case for engagement over confrontation. Again, the example of the global financial crisis is illustrative. The single greatest truth to emerge from the crisis is not the weakness of the Western-dominated economic order, but the extraordinary extent to which the often very diverse economies of the planet are interlinked.

---

<sup>46</sup> Chinese holdings of U.S. treasury securities increased from \$618.2bn in September 2008 to \$798.9bn in September 2009, available at: <http://www.treas.gov/tic/mfh.txt>.

<sup>47</sup> Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire – and What It Means for the United States*, New York, Basic Books, pp. 2-3.

The U.S. and China will come to dominate the international politics of the future, but they will do so not in some elemental bipolarity, but in conjunction with many others. Geopolitics will retain some importance, but the world that materializes may turn out to be a more benign and positive version of Hobbesian anarchy: not a “state of nature” in which the strong thrive and the weak are crushed, but an environment dominated by proliferating checks and balances. Indeed, we may witness the genesis of a new kind of triangularism – a post-modern triangle – in which the third side is not Russia or some other great power, but the mass of formal and informal networks involving nation-states, multilateral institutions, and non-state actors. Such a system would be somewhat chaotic, but it would more closely approximate the “democratization” of international relations that Moscow and Beijing publicly advocate. And it would be based on a triangularism that was more equal, and arguably more sustainable, than any in the history of this much misunderstood construct.



# Information

---

All published issues of the *Proliferation Papers* series can be downloaded from the Ifri website:

[www.ifri.org](http://www.ifri.org)

The latest contributions include:

- William C. Potter, "In Search of the Nuclear Taboo: Past, Present, and Future", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 31, Winter 2010.  
<http://ifri.org/downloads/pp31potter.pdf>
- Michael Krepon, "Numerology in the Second Nuclear Age", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 30, Fall 2009.  
<http://ifri.org/downloads/pp30krepon.pdf>
- Dennis M. Gormley, "The Path to Deep Nuclear Reductions: Dealing with American Conventional Superiority", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 29, Fall 2009.  
<http://ifri.org/downloads/pp29gormley1.pdf>
- Michael Moodie, "Dangerous Weapons in Dangerous Hands: Responding to the Challenges of Chemical and Biological Terrorism", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 28, Summer 2009.  
[http://ifri.org/downloads/PP28\\_Moodie\\_Summer2009.pdf](http://ifri.org/downloads/PP28_Moodie_Summer2009.pdf)
- Mark Fitzpatrick, "The World After: Proliferation, Deterrence and Disarmament if the Nuclear Taboo is Broken", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 27, Spring 2009.  
[http://ifri.org/downloads/PP27\\_Fitzpatrick\\_Spring2009.pdf](http://ifri.org/downloads/PP27_Fitzpatrick_Spring2009.pdf)
- James A. Russell, "Strategic Stability Reconsidered: Prospects for Escalation and Nuclear War in the Middle East", *Proliferation Papers*, No. 26, Spring 2009.  
[http://ifri.org/downloads/PP26\\_Russell\\_2009.pdf](http://ifri.org/downloads/PP26_Russell_2009.pdf)

For further information on the *Proliferation Papers* series, feel free to contact Ifri's Security Studies Center assistant, Françoise Thomas: [thomas@ifri.org](mailto:thomas@ifri.org).