

The U.S.-China-Russia Strategic Triangle

As US-Sino relations continue to deteriorate, a debate has unfolded whether or not the increasingly adversarial relationship is “Cold War 2.0”. What both proponents and critics of the Cold War analogy overlook, is that unlike the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union, any long-term global confrontation between Washington and Beijing is likely to be within a tripolar, not bipolar order. The third, albeit much weaker pole would be occupied by Russia. Although Moscow’s long term demographic and economic trajectory is highly unfavorable to sustained great power status, Russia’s military reforms and modernization in the 2010s coupled with an aggressive and risk-tolerant foreign policy virtually guarantees that the Kremlin will continue punching well above its weight internationally.

Instead of witnessing a gradual rise of two superpower blocs, a tripolar order promises to be highly variable. The Sino-Russian rapprochement is unlikely to last, since Moscow has no desire to be Beijing’s perpetual junior partner. By the same token, efforts to recruit Russia into a putative U.S. coalition to contain China is also unlikely to succeed—any reverse “Nixon to China” moment would at best be temporary. Russia, despite being the weakest of the three powers, would seek to upset the balance of power to its advantage. Although Russia is the most likely candidate to occupy the third pole, it is possible that India will also attempt a similar strategy of engaging both with Beijing and Washington to extract concessions from both sides.¹

Tripolar Systems

Unlike unipolar (United States post- Cold War), bipolar (Cold War), or multipolar (Europe before WWI) orders, tripolar systems have been relatively understudied by IR scholars. Kenneth Waltz asserted that tripolar arrangements are highly unstable and quickly revert back to bipolarity when two states gang up on the third. Robert Gilpin was even more pessimistic, arguing that tripolarity was “the most unstable configuration.”² The most detailed work explicitly on tripolarity has been done by Randall Schweller. Schweller makes the case that each pole must “ensure that a hostile coalition does not form against it” usually by forming a coalition with the weaker power. Such balancing is inherently unstable, since it “gravely isolates” the third pole but corrective measures taken up by the isolated state to attenuate the hostile bloc can sustain the tripolar system far longer than believed by Waltz and Gilpin.³

Beijing courts Russia

After Détente collapsed during the Carter Administration, China became a de facto ally of the United States in its struggle against the Soviet Union, forcing Moscow to spend resources it did not have to shore up its eastern borders. Ideological differences and prior hostility precluded an overt alliance between Washington and Beijing, and the Soviets sought out every opportunity in the 1980s to create daylight between the two. Indeed, Sino-Soviet relations normalized once Gorbachev agreed to all of Beijing’s demands in ceasing support for Vietnam, removing troops from Mongolia and the Far East, and withdrawing from Afghanistan. Well aware of Cold War history, China is now courting Russia to be a strategic partner along similar lines.

Feng Zhongping (冯仲平), deputy director of the China Institutes of Contemporary International Relations (CICIR), and a leading Chinese expert on Europe, has succinctly characterized the relations

¹ Modi’s Wuhan summit with Xi Jinping has been interpreted by some analysts as evidence of a minor Sino-Indian “reset”

² Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics*, 1983, 235.

³ See *Deadly Imbalances: Tripolarity and Hitler’s Strategy of World Conquest* by Randall Schweller

between China and Russia as adhering to: “no alliance, no confrontation, not directed at a third party (不结盟，不对抗，不针对第三国).” In other words, Beijing welcomes closer cooperation, especially on economic matters, but the strategic partnership stops short of an outright military alliance.

An alliance has concrete obligations and is usually forged when there is a serious risk of war. A Sino-Russian military alliance could hazard China getting embroiled in a US-Russia confrontation. Moreover, an explicit alliance between Beijing and Moscow would likely cement the perception in Washington that China is a hostile power, triggering a strong immediate response from the United States. Beijing clearly sees that as a losing proposition, especially when the ambiguity of a “comprehensive strategic partnership” suits China’s needs of moving Russia closer to its orbit.

Ji Zhiye (季志业), former director of CICIR and a Kremlinologist, has argued that China has a lot to gain from pursuing closer relations with Russia, particularly in the security domain. In a recent op-ed for [Global Times](#), Ji states that China and Russia are working diligently to maintain global strategic stability, while the U.S. continues to rely on its military strength to seek “absolute security” at the expense of other powers. According to his analysis, both China and Russia are implicitly weaker powers bandwagoning against the stronger United States.

On the matter of “soft-power” and winning friends, Ji has written in the past that China first has to strengthen its hard power before it can have “Chinese style soft power.” Such thinking highlights that for all the official talk of forging “win-win” relations with neighbors and strategic partners such as Russia, Chinese foreign policy experts actually continue to view the world in starkly realist terms.

Expert commentary also shows an awareness that Sino-Russian rapprochement is hardly set in stone and requires active measures by Beijing. Prominent Chinese academics, such as the president of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Xie Fuzhan (谢伏瞻), have issued carefully worded statements to assuage Russian concerns. Xie recently called for a boost in the strategic dialogue between the Kremlin and Zhongnanhai, overcoming “zero-sum” politics between China and Russia, and opposing unilateralism and trade protectionism—a not so subtle jab at the Trump Administration. Furthermore, Xie endorsed promoting “connectivity” between the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the Moscow-led Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), a deliberate nod to Kremlin’s desire to not have the EEU overshadowed by the BRI in Central Asia. All of these efforts to improve Sino-Russian relations have the implicit aim of preventing Moscow and Washington of doing the same.

When Multipolarity means Tripolarity

Official Russian commentary seldom mentions tripolarity, preferring to call for a “multipolar” order. Dmitri Medvedev asserted in 2008 that the results of the Russo-Georgian War heralded a new multipolar world. Since then, references to multipolarity have been ubiquitous. Most recently, the pro-Kremlin commentator [Sergei Markov](#) declared that the U.S. led unipolar world is disappearing and that Russia needs to overcome fears of other countries that “chaos will ensue” by demonstrating that a multipolar world is what needs to be built in its place.

Russian Duma member [Gennadiy Onishchenko](#) recently made similar remarks, adding that it was Russia and China that have shown the world that a multipolar world works. Despite the public statements in support of multipolarity, there is reason to believe what the Kremlin actually prefers is a tripolar order. A multipolar system made up of four to six great powers further erodes Russia’s legacy status inherited from the Soviet Union. In more practical terms, Russia is not interested in a strong, collective EU or ascendant Iran or Turkey to further challenge its influence in the post-Soviet space. It is then unsurprising that privately Russian experts state that the 21st century order rests on a Russo-Sino-American strategic triangle.

United States and Tripolarity

The United States continues to be the predominant global power. Although the relationship with Beijing has markedly deteriorated, it is still less adversarial than the Cold War analogue with the Soviet Union. At the same time, US-Russia relations are at their worst level since the 1980s. Even modest attempts to engage in strategic dialogue with Moscow may be politically impossible. Under these conditions, the United States is best served shoring up existing alliances and focusing on domestic concerns.

With a relative decline in U.S. power and influence in the coming decade, the most likely global configuration is that of tripolarity not multipolarity. Under such a scenario, the United States should not be overly concerned about growing closeness between Russia and China. Contradictions within the Sino-Russian relationship will inevitably emerge, which could be leveraged by skillful U.S. diplomacy. Such a diplomatic gambit would work only if the U.S. lays out clear terms on which to engage Russia (no quid pro quo over Europe) and if there is a sober understanding that any improvement in US-Russian relations is also unlikely to last due to the fundamental nature of a tripolar order.

For China, US-Russian cooperation coupled with fraught relations with Japan, India, and Vietnam is the ultimate nightmare scenario. Beijing would likely offer a wide range of economic and security incentives, not to mention a play on the mutual authoritarian affinity between the two states, to keep Russia from sliding too far towards Washington.

Lastly, although Russia may appear to be a relative winner from a tripolar system, it is important to remember that it is by far the weakest of the three poles. And diplomatic efforts alone, no matter how successful, are not enough to alter the demographic and economic trends working against the Kremlin.